

Historical Evidence of Jesus' Miracles

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Introduction

Three historical events convinced the early Church that Jesus was not only the Messiah, but also who He said He was—the exclusive Son of the Father (whom the Church recognized as “the Son of God”):

1. His Resurrection—transformed in Divine Glory,
2. His gift of the Holy Spirit (through which the Apostles worked miracles in His name),
3. His miracles by His own authority during His ministry.

We have discussed the evidence for Jesus' Resurrection in Glory in a previous article on this landing page (“contemporary evidence for Jesus' Resurrection”). In this article we will discuss the other two events—Jesus' miracles (Section I) and Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles and the Church (Section II).

I.

Jesus' Miracles

For Jesus, miracles are not merely an indication of divine *power*; they are the initiation of God's kingdom in the world. He performs miracles to vanquish evil and to bring the kingdom so that we may be saved. In this respect, Jesus' ministry of exorcism, healing, and raising the dead is unique in the history of religions. In order to understand the significance of this unique ministry, we will consider four major areas of contemporary scholarship:

1. The Purpose and Distinctiveness of Jesus' Miracles (Section I.A.).
2. A Brief Consideration of the Criteria of Historicity (Section I.B.).
3. The Historicity of Jesus' Exorcisms and Healings (Section I.C.).
4. The Historicity of Jesus Raising the Dead (Section I.D.).

Why be so concerned with the historicity of Jesus' miracles? As noted above, miracles (“deeds of power”) are the initiation of God's Kingdom in the world, which entails vanquishing Satan and evil. This is clearly manifest in Jesus' response to his critics' accusations that he casts out demons by the Prince of demons: “If by the finger of God I cast out the demons, the *Kingdom of God* has come upon you” (Luke 11:20). The establishment of this Kingdom is not only the entryway, but the passageway to our salvation – and when our journey is complete, it is the fullness of eternal life with the unconditionally loving God. Inasmuch as Jesus' miracles initiate God's Kingdom in the world, they initiate the pathway to our salvation – and so their historicity is of immense importance.

Jesus differentiates himself from all other Old Testament prophets by accomplishing his miracles through *his own* authority and power, meaning that he possesses this divine authority and power (see below Section I.D.3). This possession of divine authority and power not only

enables him to initiate the kingdom, it also validates his claim to be the exclusive beloved son of the Father during the time of his ministry. This is precisely the question we are attempting to answer in this volume – making the historicity of the miracles integral to our quest to discover whether Jesus is Emmanuel.

Throughout the last century of New Testament scholarship, several objections have been raised against the historicity of Jesus' miracles.¹ Some of these objections are quite superficial, manifesting almost complete ignorance of the historical biblical scholarship throughout the last six decades -- e.g. "the miracles are just a bunch of stories that Jesus' friends and disciples invented." These objections fly in the face of ancient non-Christian testimony to Jesus' miracles, the Jewish polemic against his miracles ("it is by the power of Beelzebul"), and the basic application of historical criteria to the miracle narratives. The historical analysis given below will make this point abundantly clear.

Some objections focus on Jesus' raising the dead – "perhaps Jesus did some healings and exorcisms, but raising the dead sounds like an early Christian contrivance to prove Jesus' divinity during his ministry." John P. Meier has made a 200-page rigorous investigation into the historicity of Jesus' raisings of the dead in the second volume of his series *A Marginal Jew*.² This evidence is sufficiently strong to respond to the above objection (see below Section I.D.).

Other objections center on the conviction that ancient people were unable to identify a "real miracle" (violating a law of nature) because they were ignorant of both natural laws and natural science. This objection erroneously associates "recognition of miracle" with "understanding of natural science." As most historians recognize, the people of first-century Palestine were quite capable of recognizing the super-ordinary and supernatural when they saw instantaneous cures of leprosy, withered limbs, deafness, and lifetime blindness (see below I.E).

In the forthcoming historical analysis, we will respond to these and other objections to the historicity of Jesus' miracles, and in so doing, show the strong likelihood that Jesus exorcised, healed, and raised the dead by his own authority and power – indicating not only that

¹ Extreme naturalistic positions ruling out the possibility of miracles (such as the one advanced by David Hume and appropriated by late 19th and early 20th century liberal theologians), are unjustifiable, because natural laws are not inviolable in the sense that their violation implies logical impossibility. For example, a violation of $E=Mc^2$ is not logically impossible (an intrinsic contradiction); it is a logical possibility which we assume will not occur. Now, inasmuch as natural laws are not inviolable, and inasmuch as "miracle" is defined as a supernatural intervention in the natural order, and inasmuch as a supernatural power is neither governed nor conditioned by the natural order (and therefore the natural order cannot prevent a supernatural power from affecting it), then "miracle," as defined, is neither impossible in principle nor impossible in our natural order. Hence, any *a priori* denial of miracles must be *a priori* unjustified. Though 1st century Jewish thought did not have a formal conception of miracles similar to the one given above, its view of miracles was commensurate with it. See N.T. Wright 1996, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Vol 2. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press) p. 186 and see Anthony Ernest Harvey, 1982, *Jesus and the Constraints of History: The Bampton Lectures, 1980*. (London: Duckworth) pp. 101ff.

² See John P. Meier 1994, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 2. *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*. (New York: Doubleday) pp. 623-840.

he had initiated God's Kingdom in the world, but revealed himself to be the exclusive beloved Son of the Father.

I.A. The Purpose and Distinctiveness of Jesus' Miracles

There is considerable evidence for the historicity of Jesus' miracles. They are mentioned in non-Christian polemical sources,³ and by adversaries during His ministry (who did not challenge the fact that he worked miracles, but attributed them instead to the devil or sorcery⁴). N.T. Wright notes in this regard:

...we must be clear that Jesus' contemporaries, both those who became his followers and those who were determined not to become his followers, certainly regarded him as possessed of remarkable powers. The church did not invent the charge that Jesus was in league with Beelzebul; but charges like that are not advanced unless they are needed as an explanation for some quite remarkable phenomena.⁵

The importance of this charge should not be underestimated, because it cannot be imagined that Mark (or the other Evangelists for that matter) would have dared to mention that Jesus was in league with the devil or was doing miracles by the power of the devil unless they believed it was absolutely necessary to respond to a charge which was *really* being leveled against Jesus (see below, Section I.B. on the criterion of embarrassment). It can hardly be thought that Jesus' harshest critics would concede to His having supernatural power unless there was wide contemporaneous acknowledgement that Jesus was doing exorcisms and healings. Therefore, his "deeds of power" are almost certainly historical.

Furthermore, miracles are an integral part of every stratum of the New Testament. They are mentioned in the earliest *kerygmas*, in the writings of Paul and 1John, and are manifest in every tradition constituting the Gospel narratives. Whatever one might believe about the interpretation of miracles by the evangelists, it seems unreasonable to suspect that Jesus did not perform a large number of "extraordinary deeds of power" before multiple witnesses in multiple places throughout the course of His ministry.

Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost makes miracles almost commonplace in the apostolic Church -- so much so that they are openly discussed by Paul, Acts, and the Gospels

³ There are three credible early non-Christian sources attesting to Jesus. Though Tacitus does not mention Jesus' miracles, Flavius Josephus and the Babylonian Talmud do. Most scholars agree that this external testimony is historically accurate and, in the case of the Babylonian Talmud, corresponds to the Jewish polemic against Jesus during his ministry -- "he casts out demons by the power of Beelzebul." See Spitzer 2016 *God So Loved the World* (Ignatius) Chapter 2, Section III.

See Raymond Brown 1994 *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*. (New York: Paulist Press) pp. 62-63, 373-376, Johnson 1991, pp. 113-114, and Meier 1994 *A Marginal Jew* Vol 2, pp. 592-593.

⁴ Raymond Brown notes: "[Jesus' enemies] attributed [His extraordinary deeds] to evil origins, either to the devil (Mark 3:22-30) or in 2d-century polemic to magic (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 2.32.3-5)" Brown 1994 *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*. pp. 62-63.

⁵ Wright 1996, p. 187.

without hesitation.⁶ Though Jesus performed miracles by his own power, his disciples did so through His name. The adversaries of the Church do not dispute this fact, and were therefore forced to find other grounds to attack the apostles and the young Church.

Perhaps more interesting than the consistent documentation of Jesus' miracles, is the unique way in which they are presented. They are *not* similar to the presentation of miracles in Hellenistic writings or in the Old Testament and, as noted above, are not portrayed as *direct* manifestations of Jesus' divine power, but rather, as the initiation of the Kingdom of God and the vanquishing of Satan. Raymond Brown describes five unique, consistent features in the presentation of Jesus' miracles in all four Gospels:⁷

- 1) Jesus does miracles by His own authority.
- 2) Jesus' miracles have the purpose not of showing His glory, but of actualizing the coming of the Kingdom and the vanquishing of evil.
- 3) Jesus is not a wonderworker or magician in either the pagan or Jewish sense.
- 4) Jesus combines teaching with his miracles.
- 5) The faith/freedom of the recipient is integral to the miraculous deed.

We will discuss each point in turn.

1) Jesus does miracles by His own authority. As will be seen below, Jesus exorcises, heals, and raises the dead by *his* own power, and by *his* own word. The Old Testament prophets did not do anything like this, but believed themselves to be only *mediators* of *God's* power, and so they had to petition God to help them and work through them. Indeed, the greatest prophetic miracle workers of the Old Testament – Elijah and Elisha -- would not have dared to make the claim that the power of God resided in *them*. As Brown notes:

...granted that Jesus did perform acts of power, does that tell us more about him than that he was a prophet like Elijah or Elisha who were thought to have performed many of the same miracles? Yes, precisely because in the tradition Jesus connects them with the coming of the kingdom, a definitive eschatological context.... The lines of demarcation between Jesus and God...are very vague. The kingdom comes both in and through Jesus. The power to do the healings and other miracles belongs to God *but also to Jesus*.⁸

2) Jesus' miracles have the purpose not of showing His glory, but of actualizing the coming of the kingdom and the vanquishing of evil. As noted above, Jesus' miracles actualized the kingdom of God. They did so by vanquishing the power of Satan in the world. This interpretation is not only integral to virtually every miracle story in the Gospels, but also explicitly mentioned in the primitive Church's *kerygmas*:

God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him (Acts 10:38).

⁶ See below Section II.

⁷ Brown 1994 *Introduction to New Testament Christology*, pp. 60-70.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 65.

As Brown notes, “Jesus is accomplishing something no one has ever done before since Adam’s sin yielded to Satan’s dominion over this world.”⁹ Inasmuch as Jesus is accomplishing something totally unique, the Gospel writers are totally unique in writing about it.

3) Jesus is not a wonder-worker or magician in either the pagan or Jewish sense.

Bultmann contended that Jesus’ miracles were meant to show that Jesus was competitive with the so-called pagan miracle-workers.¹⁰ Brown responds to Bultmann by advancing two more probable contentions. First, though it is popularly believed that there were a large number of miracle-workers at the time of Jesus, there is little evidence for this.¹¹ Secondly, among these few miracle-workers, none resembles Jesus in either style or purpose. With respect to pagan miracle-workers, Brown notes:

The most popular pagan parallel offered for Jesus is Apollonius of Tyana (1st century AD) for whose activity we are largely dependent on a life written 200 years later by Philostratus, a life that some serious scholars regard as largely fictitious. The miracles attributed to that figure, some of which may be influenced by knowledge of the stories about Jesus, have the *purpose* of causing astonishment and bringing about adulation – quite unlike the Gospel presentation of Jesus’ miracles.¹²

The Gospel writers not only avoid the portrayal of Jesus as a worker of “astonishing deeds,” Jesus Himself is portrayed as shunning such a purpose. Indeed, when Herod, the Pharisees, and the devil ask Jesus to work a miracle for no other purpose than to show off His power, He refuses to do so.

John P. Meier (in conjunction with David E. Aune) adds to this conclusion by noting that Jesus was not in any sense a magician (as conceived by His contemporary Jewish audience). He was not even accused of magic by His adversaries. The New Testament was aware of the notion of magic designated by the term “*magos*” (Acts 13:6,8), and the Jewish authorities were certainly aware of the charge of practicing magic, but as Meier notes, this term is never used to describe Jesus’ activity by His disciples, the Jewish authorities, the early Church, Jesus’ fiercest critics, or Jesus Himself.¹³

Some contemporary exegetes have suggested that the accusation of being in league with Beelzebul is similar to the charge of magic, but as Meier points out:

...that is a move made by modern scholars engaging in model-building at a high level of abstraction. It does not reflect the precise vocabulary and immediate

⁹ Ibid. p. 66.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 64, n. 82.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 63.

¹² Ibid. p. 63.

¹³ Meier 1994, *A Marginal Jew* (Vol. 2) p. 551. See also Aune 1980, pp. 1523-1524, notes 67, 68, and 69.

reaction of Jesus' fellow Jews in his own day or in the decades immediately following his death.¹⁴

Furthermore, if Jesus were to have been accused of magic, it would have carried a very pejorative connotation within the Jewish culture of His time, and even after His death. However, the New Testament accounts militate against this interpretation by continuously noting that Jesus' miracles are greeted with amazement and praise by His Jewish audience (while magic would have been viewed quite negatively).¹⁵

Finally, Meier notes:

An amoral or antinomian magician, unconnected with the eschatological fate and ethical concerns of Israel, is not the historical Jesus that emerges from the most reliable traditions of his words and deeds.¹⁶

As will be seen, the contrary is very much the case.

4) Jesus combines teaching and miracle. Unlike both the pagan and Jewish miracle-workers of the time, Jesus integrated teaching into his miraculous deeds. He did not simply heal the sick (which is a good purpose in itself, and a vanquishing of Satan); He included lessons about faith, the forgiveness of sins, seeing through the eyes of faith, giving thanks, the kingdom of God, salvation for the Gentiles, and even the Holy Eucharist. Jewish miracle workers, in contrast, were not portrayed this way. As Brown again notes:

...that combination [of miracle and teaching] may be unique. The two most frequently cited Jewish wonder-workers are Honi (Onias), the rain-maker (or circle-drawer) of the 1st century BC, and the Galilean Hanina of the 1st century AD. Almost all that is known of these men comes from much later rabbinic literature, and by that time legendary and theological developments had aggrandized the portrayal.... Almost certainly in the earliest tradition they were *not* rabbinical teachers...¹⁷

In contrast to the Jewish miracle workers, Jesus is not only a rabbinical teacher, but also one who integrates His teaching with the deed of power. Thus, the first effect of Jesus' miracles is to vanquish Satan and simultaneously actualize the kingdom of God; the second effect is *to teach* about faith, love, and the kingdom of God. The last effect is to manifest His possession of Divine power pointing to His Divine authority and origin.

5) The faith/freedom of the recipient is integral to the miraculous deed. Unlike pagan and Jewish miracle-workers of the time, Jesus used miracles to both teach about and call forth faith. The oft-repeated lines, "Go now, your faith has saved you," or "Do you believe that I can do this?" move the recipient of the miracle beyond a physical healing to faith and ultimately

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 551.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 552.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 451.

¹⁷ Brown 1994 *Introduction to New Testament Christology*, p. 63 (*italics mine*).

toward salvation. Notice that this call to faith involves the highest use of the recipient's freedom. Jesus wants the recipients in their freedom to enter into a *life* of salvation through the vehicle of His deed of power. The miracle-workers of Jesus' time do not have this intention.

These five unique aspects of Jesus' miracles reveal that the Gospel writers are not "competing" with other miracle-workers, or even trying to "show off" the astonishing power of Jesus. Rather, they were trying to convey *Jesus'* intentions in a remarkably restrained and humble way.

There is always a temptation when talking about a "deed of power" to emphasize power instead of the coming of the kingdom, and the importance of the miracle-worker instead of the importance of the recipient. The Gospel writers did not succumb to this temptation, but rather restricted themselves to certain sets of deeds which were well-known and attested, and presented them in subdued ways. They did not feel a need to multiply raisings of the dead, to add to or supplement the regular features of Jesus' miracles, or to exaggerate their narratives as did the later Gnostic writers.¹⁸ This last point merits some discussion.

The New Testament miracles are almost free from frivolous elements, needless exaggerations, and punitive actions. In stark contrast to this, the Gnostic gospels are full of them. With respect to frivolous miracles, for example, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas has the child Jesus making clay sparrows fly to prove to His Father that He has the right to violate the Sabbath.¹⁹ The Gnostic Gospel of Philip has Jesus going into the dye works of Levi and turning seventy-two different colors into white in order to show that "the Son of Man [has] come as a dyer."²⁰ We find in the Gospel of Peter (for which we have only fragmentary evidence) a gratuitous elaboration of Matthew's reference to "darkness covering the whole land" (Mt 27:45) -- the sun had already set at the noon hour, causing people to stumble and take out lamps in order to see.²¹

With respect to punitive miracles, the Gnostic Gospels portray Jesus as punishing His critics. For example, in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas the child Jesus curses a child to death who disperses water He has just collected, saying:

¹⁸ The gnostic gospels are a set of apocryphal works attributed falsely to Jesus' disciples and friends. They were written several decades after the four canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) during the second half of the second century to the fourth century. Their authors are not accepted authorities within the apostolic Church (as the four canonical gospels), but rather spiritual writers who were heavily influenced by gnostic philosophy (which attempts to achieve spiritual freedom through special knowledge or enlightenment). The so-called "Christian Gnostics" who wrote these texts departed from apostolic Christianity by advocating salvation not only through Jesus Christ, but through enlightenment proposed by its spiritual leaders. As can be seen from their miracle stories, their view of salvation and miracles was considerably different from that of Jesus, and in some cases, are ridiculous and fantastic.

¹⁹ See Andrew Bernhard, 2006 "The Infancy Gospel of Thomas" in *Other Early Christian Gospels: A Critical Edition of the Surviving Greek Manuscripts*. (T&T Clark Biblical Studies) Ch. 2, verses 1-7. Available through <http://www.gospels.net/translations/infancythomastranslation.html>

²⁰ Wesley W. Isenberg 1990. "The Gospel of Philip." In *The Nag Hammadi Library*, revised edition. Ed. by James M. Robinson. (San Francisco: HarperCollins). Available through <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gop.html>.

²¹ See M.R. James, M.R., trans. 1924. "The Gospel of Peter," in *The Apocryphal New Testament*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press). Available through <http://www.gnosis.org/library/gospete.htm> fragment I, V, 15-19.

You godless, brainless moron, what did the ponds and waters do to you? Watch this now: you are going to dry up like a tree and you will never produce leaves or roots or fruit.²²

In another instance, He curses a child to death for accidentally bumping into Him, and strikes His neighbors blind when they complain.²³

The four canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) stand in stark contrast to this tendency. Aside from the discussion surrounding Matthew 17:24-27 (the coin in the fish's mouth) and Mark 11:12-14, 20-21 (Jesus cursing the fig tree), there is a virtual absence of frivolous and punitive miracles in the four canonical Gospels. Given the apologetical appeal and fascination intrinsic to wonder-working and blatant (but useless) displays of power, the almost total absence of such exaggerations in the four canonical Gospels is striking.

When we think of how the Evangelists could have been tempted to put the emphasis on the deed of power (instead of the deed of compassion) in order to make Jesus look more powerful, glorious, and successful; when one thinks about the temptation to appeal to the baser nature of an audience of potential converts, it seems remarkable that the evangelists resisted that temptation in almost every form and in every miracle story. Their light shines on the need of the petitioner and Jesus' compassionate response, the gentleness of the healing, and the admonition to tell no one. This approach is quite unique among miracle stories in the ancient world, and seems to put the need and faith of the petitioner on the same plane as Jesus' power to vanquish evil and bring the kingdom.

The four evangelists assiduously avoid aggrandizement, frivolousness, retribution, and virtually anything which does not fulfill a need of a suffering or grieving person. This editorial restraint points to the thought and care used to respect the words and actions of their Lord – an implicit indication of their historical accuracy.

I.B. A Brief Consideration of Historical Criteria

Before proceeding to an examination of the historicity of Jesus' miracles, we should briefly show how historical scholars assess historicity. We have already used some of these historical criteria in our earlier assessment of the historicity of Jesus' miracles:

1. The presence of Jesus' miracles in all independent sources of the gospels, exemplifying the criterion of *multiple attestation*.
2. The Jewish polemic against Jesus' miracles ("It is by the power of Beelzebul that He cast out demons..."), exemplifying the criterion of *embarrassment*.
3. The uniqueness of Jesus' miracles, exemplifying the criterion of coherence with the unique style of Jesus.

²² Bernhard 2006 "The Infancy Gospel of Thomas," Ch. 3, v. 2.

²³ Ibid. Chapters 4 and 5.

We also noticed the considerable editorial restraint on the part of the gospel writers which differentiates them from those of the apocryphal gnostic gospels.

We will now formally consider these three historical criteria along with three others used by contemporary exegetes to assess the historicity of the miracle narratives:

1. The presence of Semitisms.
2. The presence of identifiable names and places that can be checked by readers and hearers within living memory of Jesus.
3. Coherence with Palestinian customs during the time of Jesus.

A brief description of each criterion will be helpful in examining the historicity of Jesus' exorcisms, healings, and raisings of the dead.

The Criterion of Multiple Attestation. Multiple attestation refers to the principle that the more often a story or saying appears in *independent* traditions, the more probable its historicity. Note that the converse statement cannot be deduced from the former ("the less often a story or saying appears in independent traditions, the less probable its historicity"). This is the logical fallacy of negating the antecedent.²⁴ Appearance in a multiplicity of independent traditions strongly suggests that those traditions go back to a common source, which would presumably be either the early Palestinian community and/or Jesus Himself. However, an absence of multiple attestation does not *necessitate* non-historicity, because sometimes the author(s) of particular traditions may not have heard about a particular story/saying or may have chosen to ignore it (for theological or apologetical reasons).

Prior to the extensive use of literary, form, and redaction criticism, it was commonly thought that each Gospel represented a separate tradition, and therefore multiple attestation consisted merely in repetition in the four Gospels. However, since the time of literary criticism (leading to form and redaction criticism), this simplistic view could no longer be sustained. These methods showed that Mark was very likely the first Gospel, and that Matthew and Luke relied very heavily upon it. Furthermore, it was also shown that Matthew and Luke shared a common source (which Mark did not use or know) -- namely, Q (referring to "*Quelle*," meaning "source" in German). "Q" is an early collection of Jesus' sayings translated into Greek.²⁵ Luke and Matthew had their own special sources which are not found in either Mark or Q. We know that these sources are not mere inventions of the evangelists because many of them have the characteristics of an oral tradition developed prior to *any* literary tradition, and many of them do not follow the literary proclivities of the evangelists (e.g., some of Luke's sources write in a far less sophisticated and stylized way than Luke himself -- and the fact that Luke does not correct them indicates that he is being respectful of his sources). The Johannine source has long been recognized to be independent of the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Thus, contemporary

²⁴ Since the time of Aristotle, it has been widely known that negating the antecedent is fallacious. It takes the following form: "If A, then B. Not A. Therefore, not B." This applies to the following syllogism: "If multiple attestation, then historically probable. Not multiple attestation. Therefore, not historically probable." This conclusion is fallacious, because it negates the antecedent.

²⁵ Most scholars believe that Q is a single written source, though some hold that it is a plurality of sources. We do not know who the editor(s) was.

biblical criticism has been able to identify five *independent* traditions for the four Gospels, namely, Mark, Q, M (Matthew special), L (Luke special), and J (the independent Johannine tradition). We may now retranslate our principle to read, “The more often a story appears in the five *independent* Gospel traditions, the more probable its historicity.” Thus, if a story appears in all five traditions, it is very probable that it originated with a very early common Palestinian oral tradition and/or Jesus’ ministry itself. If it appears in three or four independent traditions, it is still quite probable. Recall that if a story appears in only one or two traditions, it does *not* indicate non-historicity.²⁶

The Criterion of Embarrassment. This refers to actions or sayings which the early Church would have found embarrassing, apologetically unappealing, disrespectful to Jesus, or disrespectful to the apostles. Evidently, no evangelist would want to include such statements in the gospels (which are written to instruct and edify the community and potential converts), because they undermine the gospels’ purpose. Therefore, we assume that they are included in the gospel, only because they are true. For example, in the previous article on this landing page (“Evidence of the Resurrection”), with respect to the empty tomb, Matthew reports the accusation of the religious authorities that the disciples of Jesus stole his body. Why would Matthew have reported such an accusation – with all of its severely negative implications, unless it were true? Again, as we saw above, the gospels report that the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons through the power of Beelzebul. Why would they do this unless the charge had really been leveled against Jesus, was known by many in the general public, and required a response?

Coherence with the Environment of Palestine at the Time of Jesus. Béda Rigaux in 1958²⁷ recognized that the evangelists’ accounts conform almost perfectly with the Palestinian and Jewish milieu of the period of Jesus, as confirmed by history, archeology, and literature. Latourelle summarizes several of Rigaux’s examples as follows:

[T]he evangelical description of the human environment (work, habitation, professions), of the linguistic and cultural environment (patterns of thought, Aramaic substratum), of the social, economic, political and juridical environment, of the religious environment especially (with its rivalries between Pharisees and Sadducees, its religious preoccupations concerning the clean and the unclean, the law and the Sabbath, demons and angels, the poor and the rich, the Kingdom of God and the end of time), the evangelical description of all this is remarkably *faithful* to the complex picture of Palestine at the time of Jesus.²⁸

The environment of the early Church, with its post-resurrection faith and extensive ministry to the gentiles, became progressively detached from the ethos of Palestine at the time of Jesus, and by the writing of the gospels, much of this ethos was obscure to many Christians. Remarkably, the gospel narratives preserve not only the customs and actions of Palestinian Judaism, but also expressions (such as “Son of David” or “Rabbi” or “He is

²⁶ See Harvey K. McArthur 1969, 1969(b). “Basic Issues, A Survey of Recent Gospel Research.” In *In Search of the Historical Jesus*. Ed by H.K. McArthur. (London: Charles Scribner’s Sons).pp. 139-140.

²⁷ Béda Rigaux 1958. “L’historicité de Jésus devant l’exégèse récente.” In *Revue Biblique*, 68, pp. 481-522.

²⁸ Renee Latourelle 1979, *In Search of the Historical Jesus*, p. 227.

a prophet”) that would have been superseded by other more suitable titles or expressions in the post-resurrection Church. This speaks to the historicity not only of the gospels in general, but of the specific narratives within the gospels where these anachronisms occur.

Coherence with the Unique Style of Jesus. Some expressions, attitudes, and actions of Jesus depart significantly from those of the milieu in which he lived, and constitute a style which is distinctive or unique to him. For example, the way in which Jesus worked miracles is completely different from that of Jewish or Hellenistic miracle workers (see above Section I.A.). This unique style of miracle working is present in all five independent sources which leads to the question – “If the evangelists did not derive this *unique* style from the teachings, expressions, and actions of an original common tradition about *Jesus*, how could it occur so consistently in every independent tradition?” This leads to the inference of a common source for this common tradition – the most probable of which is Jesus Himself.

Criteria of Semitisms. The New Testament gospels were written in Greek; however, the oral and written traditions underlying their many narratives were formulated in Aramaic. If these traditions can be identified from the Greek text, it shows a probable origin within a Palestinian community near the time of Jesus. Aramaic does not translate perfectly into Greek, so when linguists identify strange or awkward Greek expressions, they look for possible underlying Aramaic traditions. Much of the time, a *strange Greek* expression reveals a very *common Aramaic* expression of Palestinian origin.

Additionally, there are Palestinian expressions which are virtually unknown to Gentile audiences, and so their occurrence in, say a gospel written by a gentile for gentile audiences (e.g. Luke), show an earlier Palestinian origin.

Specific Identifiable Names and Places. Many gospel narratives, including miracle narratives follow what is termed, “a standard form.” These forms are general and tend to avoid specific details about people, places, and times. When these details (going beyond the standard form) are present in a narrative, they are probably retained from an earlier tradition – because details are frequently lost during a traditions transmission, and so their inclusion indicates a retention of them (from a previous source) instead of a subsequent addition of them. Moreover, many of these details can be checked by individuals within living memory of Jesus, because the people mentioned are known within the community. Furthermore, a spectacular event such as raising the dead or curing blindness or a paralytic would certainly be known and remembered by people in a particular small town or village. This too can be verified within living memory of Jesus.

I.C

The Historicity of Jesus’ Exorcisms and Healings

Exorcisms and healings may be viewed as two extremes on a single continuum. For Jesus, healing was a form of dispelling evil (even though a demon is not driven out). Likewise, exorcisms are a form of healing, because when demons leave, people regain their sanity, capacity for speech, relief from convulsions, etc. Both actions result in the kingdom of God being

actualized in the world. The key distinction between exorcisms and healings is the explicit presence of a possessing demon in the former and the presence of God's redemptive love in the latter. Thus, exorcisms accentuate the vanquishing of evil while healings accentuate the presence of God's redeeming love – both of which actualize God's kingdom in the world.

For Jesus, the kingdom of God is both present and future. He follows Jewish eschatology in announcing the future kingdom – the kingdom in its fullness and completion. However, he departs from Jewish eschatology by announcing the arrival of the kingdom “here and now” in his person. He saw himself as bringing not only an entryway into the future kingdom of heaven, but a passageway that connected the present kingdom to the future kingdom.²⁹ His exorcisms, healings, and raising the dead are part of the establishment of that kingdom, but these actions alone do not fully establish it – they anticipate Jesus' Eucharist, passion, death, resurrection, and gift of the Spirit which complete Jesus' mission to build the “conduit” between earth and heaven. Since exorcisms, healings, and raising the dead represent the initial actualization of the Kingdom, we will want to be sure of their historicity, and so we will discuss each in turn.

In the next two sections (I.C. and I.D.), I rely closely on John P. Meier's thorough historical study of Jesus' miracles in *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus – Volume Two: Mentor, Message, and Miracles*.³⁰ Since Meier's work is the most comprehensive exegetical analysis of the miracle narratives currently available, I have summarized some of its high points to show readers how extensive and probative the historical evidence is for Jesus' miracles and the individual accounts of them.

I.C.1. Exorcisms

According to Meier, there are seven non-overlapping accounts of exorcisms in the Synoptic Gospels (John recounts no exorcisms, but this is his theological proclivity):

- 1) The Possessed Boy (Mark 9:14-29),
- 2) A passing reference to the exorcism of Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2),
- 3) The Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5:1-20),
- 4) The Demoniac in the Capernaum Synagogue (Mark 1:23-28),
- 5) The Mute and Blind demoniac in the Q tradition (Matt 12:24/Luke 11:14-15),
- 6) The Mute Demoniac (Matt 9:32-33), and
- 7) The Syrophenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30/Matt 15:21-28).

Meier concludes as follows about the historicity of Jesus' exorcisms:

That there should be seven individual ‘specimens’ of a very specific type of miracle, namely, exorcism, supports the view that exorcisms loomed large in Jesus' ministry.³¹

²⁹ See Spitzer 2016 *God So Loved the World* (Ignatius), Chapter 6, Section II.

³⁰ *A Marginal Jew* 1994, pp. 650-870.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 648.

These seven distinct instances are complemented by many *sayings* (about exorcisms) as well as references to exorcisms within *summary texts*.

There is multiple attestation of sources – though Mark is responsible for most of the extended exorcism narratives (which are used by Matthew and Luke).

- L (special Luke) gives a passing reference to the exorcism of Mary Magdalene: “...some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out...” (Lk 8:2);
- Q has one narrative (Matt 12:22-24/Luke 11:14-15) – the mute and blind demoniac;
- M (special Matthew) recounts one narrative (Matt 9:32-33 – Jesus exorcises a mute demoniac).

When we combine the Marcan narratives and the Q *sayings* with the above three other sources, we see a strong confluence of attestation which Meier summarizes as follows:

Q sayings join Marcan sayings and Marcan narratives in providing multiple attestation for the existence of exorcisms in the ministry of the historical Jesus.³²

In addition to multiple attestation, the criterion of embarrassment (narratives or sayings that undermine the reputation of Jesus or his teaching) also plays a significant role for ascertaining the historicity of exorcisms. We have already mentioned the Pharisees accusation of Jesus’ “association with the devil” -- “It is by the power of Beelzebul that he *casts out demons*” which reveals his adversaries’ belief in his power to exorcise evil spirits.

The criterion of coherence (continuity with the unique style of Jesus) also comes into play because exorcisms are integral to the proclamation of the kingdom. Inasmuch as the kingdom is central to Jesus’ *unique* mission, and exorcisms are integral to the actualization of the kingdom, exorcisms are likely to be as historical as Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom.

Moreover, Jesus does not cast out demons by invoking the name of God or by asking God to work *through* him. Recall that Jesus distinguishes himself from other Jewish miracle workers by acting through his command and word alone. See, for example:

- “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “*I command* you, come out of him and never enter him again” (Mk 9:25).
- The demons *begged Jesus*, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.” *He gave* them permission (Mk 5: 12-13).
- “Be quiet!” *said Jesus sternly*. “Come out of him!” The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek (Mk 1: 25).

³² Ibid. p. 648.

In conclusion, there is more than ample evidence to support a belief in the historicity of Jesus' exorcisms. Indeed, the evidence suggests that they played a frequent and prominent role in His ministry, particularly in the region of Galilee.

I.C.2. Healings

The evidence for Jesus' healing miracles is even stronger than the evidence for His exorcisms, and this is reflected in the fact that the early Church remembered Jesus more as a healer than as an exorcist.³³ As noted above, Jesus' healings have a connection to his exorcisms, because they were thought to be an overcoming of evil. Recall that physical infirmity was associated with evil or sin in the Judaism of Jesus' time. However, healings do not have an element of direct struggle with spirits or Satan. Instead, they focus on the *need* of particular persons and the *plea* of those persons or a concerned petitioner. Jesus sees faith (trust in His desire and power to heal) in these cries for help and is moved by compassion to heal the sick person.

As with exorcisms, Jesus accomplishes healings by his own authority and power (without making recourse to God or prayer), and in so doing initiates the Kingdom, and reveals His possession of divine authority and power. Inasmuch as Jesus was aware of possessing divine authority and power, and aware that *possession* of this power was categorically different from *all* the Old Testament prophets, he must have also been aware of his divine status (which he termed "Sonship") that made his possession of divine power possible (see below Section I.D.3).³⁴

What can be said about the historicity of healings? First, with respect to multiple attestation, there is a large number of healing miracles in four out of five independent sources: Mark, Q, special Luke, and John. Special Matthew alone lacks an independent healing narrative. There are 15 distinct (non-overlapping) accounts of healing miracles in the Gospels, plus the general Q list in Matt 11:2-6 and Luke 7:18-23. This totals 16 non-overlapping references to healing miracles in the Gospels. The breakdown is as follows:

- Mark relates *eight* miracle accounts: two concerned with cures of paralytics (2:1-12 and 3:1-6), two concerned with cures of blindness (10:46-52 and 8:22-26), one concerned with the cure of leprosy (1:40-45), and three concerned with various diseases mentioned only once (fever of Peter's mother-in-law in 1:29-31, the woman with a hemorrhage in 5:24-34, and the deaf-mute in 7:31-37).³⁵
- Q relates only *one* account of a healing miracle which is the cure of a centurion's servant (at a distance). Matthew calls this a cure of a paralytic, but Luke calls it a cure of someone with a grave illness. Curiously, John agrees with Luke instead of Matthew, meaning that Matthew has probably changed the Q source (instead of Luke). The presence of this miracle in both Q and John indicates multiple attestation of sources for a single healing account. Q also has a list of miracles (Matt 11:2-6/Luke 7:18-23) which include healing of the blind, the lame, lepers, and the deaf.

³³ Ibid. p. 679.

³⁴ Spitzer 2016 *God So Loved the World*, Chapter 6.

³⁵ This reflects Meier's list given in Meier 1994, *A Marginal Jew* (Vol. II) p. 678.

- L (special Luke) relates *four* healings: one paralytic (13:10-17), one concerned with leprosy (17:11-19), and two cures of various ailments mentioned only once (the man with dropsy in 14:1-6 and the ear of the slave of the high priest in 22:49-51).
- John relates *two* healings: one concerned with the cure of a paralytic (5:1-9) and one concerned with the man born blind (9:1-41).³⁶

Evidently, healings enjoy wide multiple attestation. Furthermore, healings of paralytics, the blind, and lepers also enjoy independent multiple attestation.

Healings are mentioned in a variety of other contexts outside of narratives. For example:

- Allusions to miracles which are not narrated in full (e.g., Mark 6:56 – “And wherever He came, in villages, cities, or country, they laid the sick in the market places, and besought Him that they might touch even the fringe of His garment, and as many as touched it were made well”);
- In sayings implying His fulfillment of prophetic expectation (Luke 4:16-21 – “He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me...[to give] recovery of sight to the blind...’”);
- The disciples performing or failing to perform miracles (Luke 9:6; 10:17-20; Mark 3:15; 9:18; 28, 38);
- Various sayings in which Jesus refers to His miracles;
- The Scribes’ accusations that He performed miracles by the power of Beelzebul;
- Giving the power to heal to the disciples (Matt 10:1 parr.);
- Several summary statements.

When these are combined with the disciples’ power to heal through the Holy Spirit *in the name of Jesus* (after the resurrection), it becomes evident that healings were a common and central part of Jesus’ ministry.

This strong conclusion is corroborated further by applying additional historical criteria (see above I.B) to seven *particular* miracle stories:

- The cure of the centurion’s servant (Matt 8:5-13, Luke 7:1-10/royal official’s son in John 4:46-54),
- The blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:45-50 parr.),
- The paralyzed man let down through the roof (Mark 2:1-12 parr.),
- The paralyzed man by the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9),
- The blind man of Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-26),
- The man born blind (John 9:1-7), and
- A cure of a deaf-mute (Mark 7:31-37).

³⁶ Ibid. p. 678.

In order to use additional historical criteria, we must first identify the typical form of a healing story so that we will be able to recognize departures from that form and details added to it. The standard form is as follows:

1. A sick or infirm person (or a concerned friend or relative) approaches Jesus and begs for a cure (sometimes Jesus notices the sick person and is moved to heal without being asked).
2. An indication of the faith of the petitioner (generally in the way they ask for a cure).
3. Jesus is moved by the person's need and/or faith.
4. He heals by touching or by his command alone.
5. The immediate cure is noted and confirmed.
6. The crowd is amazed and spreads word about Him.

We are now ready to apply historical criteria to the above seven healing stories, summarizing Meier's extensive analysis of these narratives.³⁷

The cure of the centurion's/official's son/servant (Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 7:1-10, and John 4:46-54). There is here multiple attestation of a single miracle story (Q and John). Despite the fact that Q (represented by Luke) speaks of a *centurion's* servant (which Matthew changes to "son"), while John speaks of an *official's* son, the similarities among the stories are too great to be explained by any means other than a common primitive tradition. Meier ridicules the alternative explanation of John redacting Q by noting:

We would have to imagine the Fourth Evangelist spreading out copies of Mark, Matthew, and Luke in front of him on his desk and proceeding to pick out a verse here and a verse there from each of the Synoptics, at times without any discernible reason or pattern.³⁸

Though Q and John received different oral traditions, those traditions undoubtedly refer back to a common earlier tradition which was probably grounded in a single historical incident. This is corroborated by a considerable number of underlying Semitisms detected by Uwe Wegner,³⁹ and the placement of the incident (in both Q and John) at Capernaum. Furthermore, the miracle has a very unusual characteristic – Jesus cures the sick boy *at a distance*. The convergence of this evidence makes a "primitive tradition linked to a source incident" quite probable.

The blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52 parr). This story presents one of the most unique convergences of historical data in the Gospels. It is full of Semitisms – two Aramaic words ("*Bar Tim'ai*" and "*Rabbouni*") and a very ancient reference to Jesus ("Son of David" -- a Jewish rather than a Christian title for Jesus). This title would certainly have had no place in the earliest Church community, and undoubtedly dates back to Jesus' ministry where very probably Bartimaeus uses it to refer to the one whom he thinks is merely a miracle-worker in the image of

³⁷ Ibid. pp. 680 – 700.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 724.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 725.

“Solomon the miracle-worker.”⁴⁰ It is most unlikely that a Christian interpreter would have invented these details and outmoded expressions as a way of reflecting on the risen Christ.

The story is also filled with details that fall outside the standard form and have no apparent apologetical or catechetical purpose. As Meier notes, it possesses:

...the naming of the direct recipient of a miracle performed by Jesus; the tying of this named individual to a precise place (the road outside Jericho leading up to Jerusalem), to a precise time of year (shortly before Passover), and to a precise period of Jesus’ ministry (his final journey up to Jerusalem along with other Passover pilgrims)....⁴¹

These details indicate a report from an eyewitness (how else could they have come to light?). This might suggest that the conveyors of the tradition had some acquaintance with the eyewitness himself. Could the eyewitness have been Bartimaeus? Meier notes here:

If Bartimaeus was a resident of Jericho, and especially if he did actually follow Jesus up to Jerusalem, it is hardly surprising that the earliest Christian communities in Jerusalem and Judea would have preserved this story from one of their earliest members and most notable witnesses.⁴²

The combination of historical indicators gives us a veritable treasure chest of evidence of historicity – (1) an independent verification of Jesus’ healing power, (2) His well-known reputation as a healer in the district of Jericho and Jerusalem (beyond his home district of Galilee) that causes Bartimaeus to recognize him as a healer and cry out for his help, and (3) a possible link between the eyewitness source of this story and the recipient of the miracle – Bartimaeus himself.

The paralyzed man let down through the roof (Mark 2:1-12). This narrative is very lengthy and indicates several decades of development in its oral tradition. This implies that the core story is quite ancient and may go back to the time of Jesus. There are also several details in the story falling outside the standard form that have no apologetical, catechetical, or instructional purpose. These details also indicate the reminiscence of an eyewitness – e.g. four individuals going up to a roof, digging out a hole in the roof, and lowering the man down to the amazement of Jesus. This story also manifests coherence with the unique style of Jesus -- Jesus heals the man by His own authority and power, and uses the occasion to forgive his sins.

The paralyzed man by the pool (John 5:1-9). Though the final form of this story was completed several decades after the actual incident, it appears to be faithful to its historical circumstances. Recent archeological findings concerning the portico and the pool reveal that the description in the story is accurate to great precision.⁴³ Such accurate geographical detail does not have apologetical, catechetical, or instructional relevance, and indicates the presence of a

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 690.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 690.

⁴² Ibid. p. 690.

⁴³ See Meier 1994, p. 681.

witness. Moreover, there are a considerable number of details falling outside the standard form which have no apologetical, catechetical, or instructional purpose (and would seem to require an eyewitness) – such as the paralyzed man’s ambivalence about being healed, his lack of gratitude, and his reporting of Jesus to the authorities.⁴⁴ Finally, as Meier notes, the Evangelist has to “tack on” the themes of Sabbath and sin, because they are absent from the core of the story, indicating that that core was more primitive and had to be woven into the Gospel.⁴⁵

The blind man of Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-26). There are a considerable number of unusual facts in this story that fall outside the standard form and have no apparent apologetical, catechetical, or instructional purpose. Moreover, they do not further Mark’s redactional agenda, and they have no Christological significance -- Jesus spits directly into a blind man’s eye; seems to have only partial success in curing the blindness (which is quite distinct from any other miracle he worked except the cure of a deaf-mute in Mark 7:31-37); He has to ask the blind man what he can see; and finally achieves success on a “second try.”

The criterion of embarrassment applies to these highly unusual facts because Jesus’ partial success and His technique’s similarity to that of a Hellenistic wonderworker (i.e. spitting in the man’s eye) would have been difficult to explain from both an apologetical and catechetical perspective. These difficulties provoked Matthew and Luke to completely omit the narrative. Inasmuch as Mark would not have invented such a story, we can infer a primitive underlying tradition which Mark left unaltered. Given that this story would not have been invented by either Mark or the formulators of its oral tradition, it probably reflects a real (though unusual) way in which Jesus performed miracles in his Galilean ministry.

The man born blind (John 9:1-41). This story mentions specific identifiable places. For example, Siloam is mentioned, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. In light of the story’s geographical accuracy, it suggests a time of writing prior to 70 AD before the writing of John’s Gospel). Additionally, Jesus makes a paste out of His saliva mixed with mud. This is the only miracle story which recounts such a paste (although two Marcan miracles do attest to Jesus’ use of saliva). Furthermore, the miracle does not occur instantly, but only after the blind man obeys Jesus’ request to wash in the pool of Siloam. These unusual features do not seem to serve an apologetical purpose or an obvious catechetical purpose. For these and other reasons, Meier believes that the historicity of the core story can be reasonably affirmed.⁴⁶

The healing of the deaf mute (Mark 7:31-37). This story contains evidence of historicity in three areas. There are several elements falling outside the standard form (and may be considered unique among all healing stories in the Gospels): Jesus puts His fingers into the man’s ears, puts His saliva on the man’s tongue, looks up to heaven, and groans inwardly. These elements do not have apologetical, catechetical, or instructional purpose, and therefore are not likely to be either additions to the oral tradition or Marcan redactions. This is confirmed by the fact that one of the special features (saliva on the tongue) could be interpreted as magic which is an embarrassment to the early Church. Matthew and Luke deliberately leave it out of their Gospels for this reason. Finally, there is an obvious Semitism -- the Aramaic word for “be opened” – *ephphatha*. Notice

⁴⁴ See Meier 1994, *A Marginal Jew* (Vol. II) p. 681.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 681.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 697-698.

that it is accompanied by the Greek translation instead of being replaced by it. The combination of these factors supports the very likely historicity of the core story – particularly the way in which Jesus carries out his cure.

In conclusion, there is ample evidence to support reasonable belief in the historicity of Jesus' healing miracles. Multiple attestation abounds – not only for healings in general, but even for the particular story of the centurion's son. Furthermore, the criterion of embarrassment applies to several stories; Semitisms, place names, personal names, and unusual details are prevalent in most of these stories; and there is even the possibility of seeing a link between the recipient of a miracle and its transmission to the Jerusalem Church (Bartimaeus). There are very few facts of ancient history that are better attested than the healing miracles of Jesus.

Recall that the purpose of healings in Jesus' ministry was to initiate the kingdom of God in the world (and in so doing to vanquish Satan and evil). He performs these acts in a unique way – not to demonstrate his supernatural power, but rather to respond in compassion to the needs of petitioners.⁴⁷ He works miracles through the faith (trust) of the petitioner, and links it to a spiritual teaching which is relevant for both the petitioner and bystanders. He performs healing miracles by his own command (by his own authority and power), and does not pray to God for the power to perform them. Each miracle puts an end to evil and brings the kingdom evermore deeply into the world. These same unique characteristics are even more manifest in Jesus' raising of the dead.

I.D **The Historicity of Jesus Raising the Dead**

Unlike healing miracles (of which there are fifteen full non-overlapping stories and dozens of other references in lists, summary statements, etc.), there are only three non-overlapping stories about raising the dead, and fewer non-narrative references than the healing miracles. However, these three stories all come from *different* traditions that can be traced to their very probable early Palestinian origins.

The three traditions of “raising the dead” are the Marcan tradition (the raising of Jairus' daughter – Mark 5:21-43), the special Luke tradition (the raising of the son of the widow of Nain – Luke 7:11-17), and the Johannine tradition (the raising of Lazarus – John 11:1-46). To these three narratives we should add a saying from a list in Q: “The blind see and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, *the dead are raised*, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them” (Matt 11:5). Thus, raising the dead is mentioned in four out of five non-overlapping traditions. Special Matthew is the only source that does not specifically make mention of it. Though raising the dead is infrequent, it enjoys almost complete multiple attestation.

Curiously, despite the spectacular character of the “raisings,” none of the Gospel writers felt a need to multiply them. Mark, Matthew, and John limit themselves to one, and Luke limits

⁴⁷ The blind beggar Bartimaeus cries out “mercy” (“*Eleos*”) which is a near perfect explanation of Jesus' interior disposition in His ministry of healing. In His radical openness to the petitioner, Jesus manifests not only His saving heart for that petitioner, but His saving will for the world. The same word is used to describe the compassion of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:37), which describes Jesus' state of mind when he sees the sick, poor, and sinners.

himself to two. The fact that the evangelists do not multiply these stories indicates a mature editorial restraint and respect for the truth.

The three stories about *raising* the dead must be distinguished from Jesus' *resurrection*. All three stories about raising the dead are really a restoration of a person to his or her former *corporeal* existence. However, Jesus' resurrection is not a restoration to former corporeal existence, but rather is a transformation of former embodiment to a spiritual and divine-like (glorious) form (see the previous article on this landing page – "Contemporary Evidence of Jesus' Resurrection"). Moreover, raising the dead is not permanent, but spiritual resurrection is eternal. Despite the important differences between a temporary raising of the body and an eternal spiritual resurrection, we should not diminish the importance of Jesus raising the dead. These miracles indicate that Jesus has within himself power over life and death (a power reserved to Yahweh), which strongly testify to the coming of God's kingdom through Jesus. We may now examine each distinct tradition of Jesus raising the dead.

I.D.1.

The Raising of Jairus' Daughter (Mark 5:21-43 & parallels)

There is good reason to believe that the original story of the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-43) was written in Aramaic, but that story cannot be reconstructed today. Nevertheless, we can uncover a primitive tradition even if we cannot know its original Aramaic words. Meier believes that this primitive tradition follows the three-part standard form of a story about raising the dead with multiple additions to the first part.⁴⁸

1. Jairus, a synagogue leader, petitions Jesus to come and heal his sick daughter. Jesus agrees to come with him, but on the way there, news comes that the daughter has died. And yet Jesus persuades him to continue on. Thus, a story of healing becomes a story of raising the dead.
2. The miracle proper – Jesus touches the little girl and utters the Aramaic expression, "*talitha koum*," which causes the little girl to get up and walk around.
3. The reaction of the bystanders – great astonishment.

The first part takes on new material going beyond the standard form. Jesus hears the weeping and lamenting and asks the crowd why they are weeping – "The child is not dead but sleeping" (Mark 5:39). This leads to ridicule and scorn, which in turn provokes Jesus to literally throw the mourners out.

In the second part, there are *two* confirmations of the miracle -- the little girl gets up *and* Jesus asks that she be given something to eat. Though somewhat unusual, Meier believes that this probably belongs to the original tradition because it may have been a way of staving off the thought that the girl might be a spirit.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 780-781.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 781.

Meier and others believe that there is a strong basis for the historicity of this narrative for six reasons:

1. As noted above, personal names are quite unusual in the New Testament. Jairus and Bartimaeus are the only named petitioners for miracles; and Bartimaeus seems to have had continued influence in the Church. The presence of the name throughout the lengthy development of the oral tradition situates it and makes it “checkable.” The fact that Jairus is named as a synagogue official, giving him a position of high status within the region of Galilee, situates the story in Galilee’s history even more – making it easier to be checked within living memory of Jesus.⁵⁰
2. The identification of Jairus as a synagogue ruler was objectionable to many early Christians living in Jerusalem and its environs, because they experienced ostracization and considerable pressure from the synagogue and its leaders. Matthew (who was preaching to a Jewish church) found this so personally and apologetically unappealing that he not only drops the reference to the synagogue, but also the reference to Jairus, who is subsequently reduced to “a ruler” (Matthew 9:18). This is an excellent example of the criterion of embarrassment, meaning that it would be highly unlikely that the name of Jairus and his profession would have been added by early Christians to the oral tradition prior to the Marcan narrative. Why would the authors of the oral tradition and the Marcan gospel mention it when it was so apologetically unappealing? If it weren’t true, it would be inexplicable.⁵¹
3. There is another example of embarrassment in the Marcan narrative which manifests a very early tradition, namely, the mourners laughing Jesus to scorn and then Jesus literally throwing the mourners out of the house (the Greek: *autos de ekbalōn pantas*). The idea of Jesus being laughed to scorn would have been disturbing to members of the early Church, and the portrayal of Jesus literally throwing grieving people out of the house would have been embarrassing. One can scarcely imagine the author of the oral tradition or Mark himself adding this disturbing incident to the narrative. Therefore, it seems likely that the entire incident of the mourners was part of a primitive story probably dating back to the ministry of Jesus.⁵²
4. The story also contains a rather unique Semitism, namely, “*talitha kour*.” As noted above, Semitisms reveal an early Palestinian origin of the stories in which they are contained. In the case of the Jairus story, the Semitism is *popular* Aramaic (*talitha kour*), as distinct from formal or written Aramaic (“*talitha kouri*”). It is highly unlikely that a scribe or author of the oral tradition would have preserved this incorrect way of speaking (like “ain’t”) without a good reason, such as, the expression’s origin being Jesus Himself.⁵³
5. In addition to the direct Aramaic expression, “*talitha kour*,” the Marcan version of the narrative manifests six other Semitisms underlying the unusual construction of the Greek text. Gérard Rochais has identified these six candidates which reveal highly unusual or impossible constructions in Greek, but are regular constructions when

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 784-785.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 785.

⁵² Ibid, p. 787.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 785.

Aramaic is translated into Greek.⁵⁴ Once again, we can see an early Palestinian origin for the story.

6. Meier notes the very unusual absence of a Christological title in a story which portrays Jesus as having the power over life and death. This kind of story should be a perfect candidate for demonstrating Jesus' divinity, and therefore for adding a post-resurrection Christological title (such as "the Lord"). However, the title used to refer to Jesus is quite ordinary -- "teacher" (in Mark and Matthew). Luke appears to have been concerned about the ordinariness of the title and so elevates it to "Master" ("*epistata*").⁵⁵ This indicates Mark's and Matthew's fidelity to an earlier Palestinian tradition, and a decision not to embellish it.

In sum, the historicity of the Jairus story⁵⁶ is well founded, including, the highly unusual naming of Jairus (who is a person of high position probably known to many in the Galilean region – a detail which can be checked within living memory of Jesus); the retention of embarrassing and disturbing elements of the narrative, including the reference to the synagogue leader, the mourners laughing Jesus to scorn, and Jesus throwing them out of the house; the abundance of Semitisms (indicating a Palestinian origin of the story), including a popular (incorrect) use of "*talitha kum*"; and the complete absence of a Christological title within a narrative which would be a perfect candidate for it. The combination of these unusual factors attests to the likelihood that this narrative not only has an early Palestinian origin, but retains elements dating back to the public ministry of Jesus Himself. The historical basis of the Palestinian narrative is further strengthened by the spectacular nature of the story, the large number of mourners, and its early circulation among Christians which made it falsifiable at the time of its initial circulation. It does not seem to have been falsified because it was kept in its original state and included in the Marcan Gospel.

In view of the above, we may conclude that this narrative, standing by itself, provides significant evidence that Jesus did raise people from the dead. When it is combined with the Lucan narrative (the raising of the son of the widow of Nain) and the Johannine narrative (the raising of Lazarus), the case for Jesus raising the dead becomes quite strong.

I.D.2.

The Raising of the Son of the Widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17)

The story of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17) comes from the special Lucan source, and so does not overlap with the Marcan or Johannine sources. The story has relatively simple lines for which there is significant evidence of a primitive source, and it follows the basic three-part standard form of a narrative of raising the dead:

1. It begins with Jesus moving toward the gate of a small town a few miles south of Nazareth in Galilee. As Jesus approaches, He notices a dead man being carried on a bier who was the only son of a widow. She was weeping. When Jesus sees her, He feels a

⁵⁴ Meier cites and summarizes Gérard Rochais' six candidates in Meier 1994, *A Marginal Jew* (Vol. II) p. 849, n. 57. See also Rochais 1981, pp. 54-73, 104-112.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 786.

⁵⁶ Ibid, pp.780-788.

very visceral compassion for her (*esplagchnisthe*), and in a very uncharacteristic move (falling outside the standard form of this kind of story), He does not await a request. Indeed, He does not seem to expect one because a request for a “raising to life” would have been quite beyond the imagination of His audience. Instead, He asks the mother not to weep, and then touches the bier, which incites the bearers to come to a halt.

2. The miracle proper. The commissioning of the miracle recounts another uncharacteristic feature. Jesus does not touch the man. Instead, He works the miracle by His word alone. The words are important here, “Young man, to you *I say*, Arise.”⁵⁷ And immediately, the dead man sits up and begins to speak, and Jesus gives him to his mother.
3. Conclusion. Fear grips the crowd and they glorify God. The exclamation of the crowd is interesting. First they call Jesus “a great prophet,”⁵⁸ and then say that God has visited His people. The story concludes with a notation that word “spread through the whole of Judea and the surrounding country,” which is unusual because it goes beyond the Galilean locale.

Meier discusses four major indications of a primitive Palestinian story upon which the Lucan narrative is built. First, Luke’s mention of the town of Nain is inexplicable if he is not being faithful to the tradition given to him. As Meier notes, this town is very small and remote, and is never mentioned in the Old Testament, the New Testament (beyond this unique reference), the pre-Christian pseudepigrapha, Philo, Josephus, or the Mishna.⁵⁹ Considering that Luke did not have a good grasp of the geography of Israel, we might ask how he had an intimate knowledge of this remote village, how he knew it had a gate (a fact which has only recently been confirmed by archeology⁶⁰), and why he would have selected it for one of the greatest of Jesus’ miracles. Answer: he didn’t *select* Nain – it was really the place at which Jesus’ miracle occurred. The possibility of Luke inventing this town out of thin air is so remote that we should have confidence that he inherited it from a tradition whose author might have known where the town was.

We would then want to ask the further question, “Why would any formulator of an oral tradition choose this remote town as the site for one of Jesus’ greatest miracles if that miracle had not in fact occurred there?” If one were going to make up a miracle of this magnitude, why not place it in a better known Galilean town, say, Capernaum? Indeed, why get so specific? After all, if you choose a really small, remote town, just about everyone in that village is going to know that that miracle either occurred or did not occur in the locality. It does not make any sense from the vantage point of apologetics or falsifiability to select a small, remote town as the location for a spectacular miracle, if that miracle had not really occurred there. The fraud could be easily exposed.

⁵⁷ The emphasis on Jesus calling attention to Himself saying the command “Arise” will become important in the forthcoming comparisons to the Elijah and Elisha stories, and will also demonstrate the distinctiveness of Jesus’ way of healing and raising the dead – that is, by His own authority.

⁵⁸ Though this may have been an accolade to Jesus during His ministry, it certainly does not represent the status of Jesus in the post-resurrection Church, and so Luke very subtly introduces the high Christological title “the Lord” just three verses before; but interestingly, he does not change the title “great prophet” which he undoubtedly inherited from an earlier narrative.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 795.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 795.

Meier's second indication concerns Semitisms. He relies on Gérard Rochais' analysis of Semitisms underlying the Greek text.⁶¹ The most obvious Semitism is the presence of parataxis (stringing together multiple simple sentences with "and") throughout the narrative. Luke, as a very fine Greek stylist, probably abhorred the style, and certainly tried to eliminate it when appropriate. It can scarcely be imagined that he would have introduced this intentionally into his own freestanding work. Secondly, the clause *kai autē ēn chēra* -- "and she was a widow" (Lk 17:12) -- corresponds closely to a circumstantial clause in Aramaic,⁶² but much less so in Greek. Thirdly, the Greek verb "*exerchomai*" (which means literally, "to go out") is not used to refer to a report spreading; the only way of making sense of this is to see *exerchomai* used as a translation of the Hebrew verb *yāsā* or the Aramaic verb *nēpaq* (which occurs in the Septuagint).⁶³ As Meier notes, none of these Semitisms by themselves can be considered definitive of an Aramaic substratum; however, when all of them are combined (along with other minor Semitisms), the Aramaic backdrop is almost undeniable. It seems likely, therefore, that Luke inherited a tradition which had a very old Palestinian background, and which referred to the town of Nain, which very probably went back to the ministry of Jesus (for the reasons mentioned above).

Meier's third indication of an older pre-Lucan narrative concerns the title used for Jesus after the miracle is complete: "He is a great prophet."⁶⁴ This expression would have been quite appropriate for a Jewish audience during Jesus' ministry which had little knowledge of Jesus beyond this spectacular miracle. They may well have seen Him in light of Elijah or Elisha who were designated as "great prophets." However, this designation is completely surpassed two years later after Jesus' resurrection and gift of the Spirit, the formation of the Church, and the Church's proclamation of Him as "the Lord." "Great prophet" doesn't come anywhere near what the early Church thought of Jesus. Nevertheless, Luke leaves it on the lips of the audience, indicating his respect for and fidelity to the underlying Palestinian tradition.

Meier's fourth indication of a pre-Lucan narrative concerns Luke's avoidance of literary doublets. This proclivity is shown by his refusal to use both of Mark's stories for the feeding of the four thousand and the feeding of the five thousand, preferring to keep only the second. It is also shown by the fact that he does not add his special narrative of the anointing of Jesus' feet to Mark's narrative, but instead replaces Mark's narrative with his own narrative.⁶⁵ This proclivity is carried out in other ways throughout the Lucan Gospel, which provokes the question, "Why would Luke have added this 'raising of the dead' narrative to his Gospel when he intended to also include the Marcan narrative of the raising of Jairus' daughter one chapter later?" Given his proclivity to avoid doublets, why would Luke have created a doublet when in virtually all other circumstances he eliminates them? The answer very likely is that he felt that the narrative tradition he inherited was true, he noticed the differences between it and the Jairus narrative, and felt that these differences warranted a doublet.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 795 and 857, n. 94; and Rochais 1981, pp. 21-30.

⁶² Ibid, p. 857, n. 94; and also Rochais 1981, pp. 21-30.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 795; and also Rochais 1981, pp. 21-30.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 796.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 797.

When one considers the totality of the evidence for a pre-Lucan narrative, particularly the naming of the remote small village of Nain, the multiplicity of Semitisms, the use of the outmoded title, “great prophet” for Jesus, and the addition of a doublet (rather than the elimination of one), it seems highly unlikely that Luke invented this narrative. It can hardly be thought that Luke would have known about the town of Nain (or its gate), that he would have used parataxis and other awkward Greek expressions instead of his elegant Greek style, that he would have invented a completely inadequate Christological title, and that he would have added a doublet simply to repeat a “raising the dead” narrative of his own making.

The above evidence does not stop at indicating a pre-Lucan narrative. It proceeds further back to the public ministry of Jesus Himself. This is indicated first by the naming of the town of Nain, which no Christian author (of an oral tradition) would have invented as the place for one of Jesus’ greatest miracles (because of the town’s smallness, remoteness, obscurity, and capacity to produce falsifiability); and secondly, the use of a completely inadequate Christological title for Jesus (which only makes sense on the lips of a Jewish audience at the time of Jesus’ public ministry). These reasons alone are sufficient to build a strong circumstantial case in favor of the historicity of this miracle.

Before proceeding to the raising of Lazarus, we will want to revisit an important point made above with respect to exorcisms and healings – namely, that Jesus performs the miracle by his own command (through his own authority and power). When Jesus raises the dead, he does not pray to God for power, he simply makes a command – in the Lucan narrative, he says, “Young man, I say to you arise.” This stands in stark contrast to all Old Testament prophets – even the two greatest miracle workers – Elijah and Elisha. Both prophets raised the dead (Elijah – 1Kings 17:17-22; and Elisha 2Kings 4:18-37). Notice that Elijah and Elisha spend considerable time praying and even pleading to God for help. They then put themselves into a position to mediate *God’s* power by making bodily contact with the corpse – including lying on it. Jesus neither prays to God for help nor makes bodily contact with the corpse; his word alone is sufficient to raise the young man to life.

In the Lucan narrative, there is an additional interesting feature – the use of the emphatic *egō*. In Greek it is not necessary to use the pronoun “*egō*” with a verb because it is implicit in the verb’s conjugation. Thus Jesus could have said to the boy, “*legō*” (“I say”), and it would have been sufficient. The addition of the extra “*egō*” is emphatic and calls attention to the person making the command – particularly His authority. Jeremias discovered that this is a very distinctive (if not unique) characteristic of Jesus’ commands – not only when exorcising, healing, and raising the dead, but also when modifying or fulfilling Torah, missioning his disciples, and creating new doctrines.⁶⁶ It is probably derived from Jesus’ Hebrew/Aramaic “Amen I say to you.” The fact that Luke uses this distinctive expression indicates a likelihood that it originated with Jesus. Even without the emphatic *egō*, Jesus’ raising the dead by his command (without the need for prayer to God or mediation of God’s power by touching) indicates that Jesus’ word is God’s power over life and death, and that he possesses this power in himself. It is hard to imagine that Jesus was not aware of his possession and command of divine authority and power

⁶⁶ Jeremias 1971, *The New Testament Theology* (Vol I) pp. 253 and 35-36.

when exorcising, healing, and raising the dead by his own command. As such, he probably saw himself as sharing in His Father's power and life.⁶⁷

We may now proceed to the third narrative of raising the dead – namely, the Johannine account of the raising of Lazarus.

I.D.3. The Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45)

John's Gospel contains several layers of tradition as well as favored Johannine teachings and redactions. The Lazarus story is no exception, detailing everything from Jesus' love for Lazarus and his family, to the Johannine theology of Jesus as the resurrection and the life. After twenty pages of assiduous exegesis (peeling back redactions and accretions to the oral tradition), Meier proposes a probable pre-Johannine narrative about the raising of Lazarus. His textual and exegetical rationale for this early narrative may be found in Volume Two of *A Marginal Jew*.⁶⁸ We may begin with the primitive tradition as Meier has uncovered it -- square brackets indicate Meier's uncertainty about whether particular words or phrases belong to that tradition:

Once there was a sick man, Lazarus of Bethany, the town [in which] Mary his sister [also lived]. His sister sent [a message] to Jesus, saying: "Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick." When Jesus heard that he was sick, He then remained in the place where He was for two days... When Jesus came [to Bethany], He found him already four days in the tomb. Many of the Jews had come to Mary to comfort her over her brother. [Mary was sitting at home.] When she heard [that Jesus had come], she arose quickly and came to Him. [Jesus had not yet come into the town.] When the Jews who were with her in the house and were comforting her saw that Mary had quickly arisen and went out, they followed her, thinking that she was going to the tomb to weep there... When Mary came to the place where Jesus was, seeing Him she fell at His feet, saying to Him: "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When He saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, Jesus groaned in spirit. And He said: "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him: "Lord, come and see..." Jesus came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay over its entrance. Jesus said: "Take the stone away." They therefore took the stone away. In a loud voice Jesus shouted: "Lazarus, come forth." The dead man came forth [with his feet and hands bound with burial cloths, and his face wrapped in a handkerchief.] Jesus said to them: "Untie him and let him go." Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and had seen what He had done believed in Him.

There are four major indications of historicity. First, it is evident from Meier's exegetical work that the Johannine story (John 11:1-45) has undergone a very lengthy development. Many

⁶⁷ From Jesus' vantage point, sharing in power is similar to sharing in life (implying divine Sonship). McKenzie notes that the OT does not distinguish between life as a principle or power of vitality – and life as living (the concrete *experience* of vitality), and so he states, "Its language is concrete rather than abstract, and life is viewed as the *fullness of power*" (See McKenzie 1965, *Dictionary of the Bible* p. 507).

⁶⁸ See Meier 1994, *A Marginal Jew* (Vol. II) pp. 798-818 for the methodology and exegesis leading to Meier's rendition of the pre-Johannine narrative.

of these developments were made by the evangelist, but, as Meier makes clear, many were also part of the development of the pre-Johannine tradition.⁶⁹ This multi-layered complex development must have taken place over a considerable number of years, and so it is reasonable to assume that the above primitive narrative was formulated close to the time of Jesus.

Secondly, as far back as the tradition can be reconstructed, it seems to have been firmly anchored in Bethany.⁷⁰ Such an historical detail seems quite gratuitous (if it is not true) because it falls outside the standard form and does not advance any apologetical, catechetical, or instructional purpose. Its preservation seems to be dependent on the belief of the early formulators of the tradition that it was true.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the early formulation of the tradition includes the names of Lazarus and Mary. When one considers that John (and the Synoptics) do not generally preserve the names of the recipients of miracles (with the exception of Jairus and Bartimaeus in Mark and Luke, respectively), it is quite striking that not one, but two names are preserved. The preservation of Mary's name is truly unusual, because she is not the recipient of a miracle, but only the sister of Lazarus and a friend of Jesus. Again, these personal names fall outside the standard form of the story and do not advance any apologetical, catechetical, or instructional purpose. Therefore, it seems very unlikely that they would have been added during the lengthy development of the Lazarus tradition. So, why were both names preserved? Because they were historically accurate, and more importantly, Lazarus and his sister Mary were probably disciples of Jesus and known in the early Church. If this were not the case, it would be difficult to explain Mary's extended presence in the early narrative. If this is the case, then the tradition would be linked back to the recipient of the miracle (Lazarus) and his sister Mary (an eye witness). Meier notes in this regard:

I think it likely that John 11:1-45 goes back ultimately to some event involving Lazarus, a disciple of Jesus, and that this event was believed by Jesus' disciples even during his lifetime to be a miracle of raising the dead.⁷¹

The silence of the Synoptics about the Lazarus tradition may seem somewhat perplexing, but if one remembers that the Synoptics did not have access to many of the Johannine sources, it would not be surprising if they had not even heard of it. Furthermore, even if the Synoptics had heard about it, they were not in need of another narrative about raising the dead because they already had the Jairus account, and it was not their proclivity to multiply miracles of this kind.

In view of all this, it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus raised His disciple Lazarus from the dead in Bethany, and that Lazarus' sister Mary was an eyewitness, and that this miracle was well known in the region of Bethany, and rapidly became a story which experienced a very lengthy development leading to the above-mentioned pre-Johannine narrative, and finally, to the fully expanded Johannine narrative.

⁶⁹ Ibid, pp. 798-818.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 831.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 831.

One final point should be made. In the earliest constructible pre-Johannine narrative, we see once again that Jesus gives the command to raise the dead by His own authority.⁷² We saw this in the previous two narratives – Jesus commands “*talitha koum*” – “little girl, get up” (Mark), and “Young man, I say to you, arise” – using the “emphatic *egō*” (special Luke). Now we see Jesus giving a command for the dead Lazarus to come out of the tomb after the stone had been rolled away. Unlike Elijah and Elisha, He does not make recourse to prayers, and does not act as an intermediary for the working of *God’s* power. Rather, He manifests divine power and authority (the power of life and death) in Himself.

It is difficult to imagine an early formulator of the tradition making such a radical claim without some grounding in history. Most impressive is the fact that this radical claim enjoys multiple attestation not only through three sources (Mark, special Luke, and John), but also through the primitive traditions standing behind these three sources.

It should be noted that the three *primitive* traditions of Jesus raising the dead were formulated by three *different* authors grounding their stories in three *different* historical incidents originating in three *different* locations. All of them reveal the same important difference from the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament -- namely, that Jesus raises the dead by His own command (authority and power). The probability of this significant difference occurring in three gospel sources derived from three different traditions with three authors from three locations by pure chance is quite miniscule. Reason dictates that there must be a common source – but what could that common source be except Jesus or the apostles who witnessed Jesus on all three occasions? The datum that reveals most lucidly Jesus’ divine power and authority contains within itself the validation of its historicity.

I.E. Conclusion to Section I.

Some skeptics have contended that Jesus’ healings may have been nothing more than alleviation of psychosomatic problems, that his exorcisms were nothing more than the healing of epilepsy and grand mal seizures, and that his raisings of the dead were nothing more than alleviation of suspended animation. Though there were no medical experts with appropriate equipment on the scene to make scientific diagnoses, it is safe to assume that the apostles’ testimony about the blind, the lame, the lepers, the mute, etc. was accurate, because most blind people are physically blind, and the same with deaf people, mute people, people with atrophied limbs, and lepers. Furthermore, most dead people are really dead; they are not cases of extended suspended animation without signs of respiration. The signs of death, blindness, deafness, leprosy, etc., were able to be detected by ancient people – not just modern ones. Semitic people at the time of Jesus could also surmise that when individuals were *instantaneously* cured of

⁷² Note that in the fully expanded version of the Lazarus narrative, the Johannine author has added the passage that Jesus prayed to the Father, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me” (Jn 11: 41-42). This Johannine addition concerns verification of one of his favorite themes – that the Father has *sent* Jesus. It should not be interpreted to mean that Jesus had to pray for the power to raise the dead. As is clear from the primitive tradition (uncovered by Meier), Jesus makes the command for Lazarus to “come out” by *his own* authority and word.

physical maladies which either lasted a lifetime or took years to cure, something was “out of the ordinary” – even super-ordinary.

Exorcisms are a different case, because there is no physical test for spiritual possession. All scientific tests are devised to detect physical causes (not spiritual ones). Thus, cases of demonic possession (and exorcism, which rectifies it) can only be judged to have occurred by someone who believes in demons and demonic possession (as Jesus certainly did). Even if we concede that every exorcism was a cure of epilepsy or grand mal seizures (or some other physical malady), we have simply shifted the categorization of the *miracle* – from exorcism to healing. Though this may be satisfying to materialists, I do not think it is accurate. There is a long history of demonic haunting and possession that continues to this day.⁷³ Most Christian churches acknowledge the existence of evil spirits and Satan (the leader of the evil kingdom), and the Catholic Church has exorcists assigned to most dioceses throughout the world. The vanquishing of Satan is central to Jesus’ mission of bringing the kingdom to the world.

We now arrive at our conclusion. There is considerable evidence for the historicity of Jesus’ miracles, including:

1. Testimony in two non-Christian sources written near the time of Jesus (e.g. Flavius Josephus and the Babylonian Talmud).
2. The Jewish polemic against Jesus (“It is by the power of Beelzebul that he cast out demons”) implying that his adversaries acknowledged his miraculous power.
3. Attestation in many apostolic *kerygmas*.
4. Multiple attestation of exorcisms and healings in all five independent sources (Mark, Q, special Luke, special Matthew, and John), and attestation to raising the dead in three independent sources (Mark, special Luke, and John).
5. Jesus’ unique style of performing miracles which is unlike any other miracle worker in the ancient world and unlike the performance of miracles in the apocryphal gnostic gospels.
6. Mention of particular places and people in miracle narratives which could have been checked within living memory of Jesus – particularly true for the narratives concerned with raising the dead.
7. The presence of Semitisms in narratives concerning exorcisms, healings, and particularly, raising the dead – indicating reliance on an early Palestinian tradition.
8. Coherence with Palestinian titles, expressions, and phrasing that would have been used in Israel at the time of Jesus’ ministry, but would be anachronistic after his resurrection and gift of the Spirit.

In view of the above, it is reasonable and responsible to hold not only that Jesus performed exorcisms, healings, and raisings of the dead, but did so by his own authority and power – showing that he possessed God’s authority and power in himself. The apostolic Church saw in this a confirmation of Jesus’ divine Sonship during his ministry.

⁷³ There is an interesting book by the psychiatrist M. Scott Peck (M. Scott Peck. 2005. *Glimpses of the Devil: A Psychiatrist’s Personal Accounts of Possession, Exorcism, and Redemption* (New York: Simon and Schuster). that gives a detailed analysis of the distinction between severe mental illness and demonic possession in two well-documented cases. According to the Vatican guidelines issued in 1999, “the person who claims to be possessed must be evaluated by doctors to rule out a mental or physical illness.”

If we accept this, then we also must accept that Jesus knew about his divine Sonship during his ministry; for raising the dead by his own command requires it. If he really did not possess the power and authority of God (power over life and death) within himself, he would have suffered the terrible embarrassment of saying, “Young man, I say to you arise,” only to find that the young man remained dead.

Jesus not only knew that he possessed divine power and authority in himself through his ministry of miracles, he used that power and authority to bring the Kingdom of God, to vanquish evil, to modify and fulfill the law, to initiate the New Jerusalem, and in doing all this, to complete the mission reserved to Yahweh alone.⁷⁴

II. The Holy Spirit in the Apostolic Church

In a previous article on this landing page (“Contemporary Evidence of Jesus’ Resurrection). we investigated what differentiated the Christian messianic movement from those of John the Baptist and other proclaimed messiahs between the first century B.C. to the first century A.D. (such as Judas the Galilean, Simon, Athronges, Eleazar ben Deinaus and Alexander, Menahem, Simon bar Giora, and bar-Kochba). We concluded with N.T. Wright and E.P. Sanders that Christianity’s remarkable success and growth, by comparison to the failure of all the other messianic movements, required some sufficient cause. This extraordinary and unprecedented success and growth could not be attributed only to the strength of Jesus’ preaching or even Jesus’ miracles because Jesus had suffered public humiliation and public execution after these events. Not just any cause was required, but a powerful one, and this very probably was Jesus’ resurrection in glory.

Though this would explain how the Christian messianic movement received its remarkable jumpstart – with its certainty, exuberance, hopefulness, strong proclamation, uniform doctrinal proclivities, and its large number of missionaries (who, as we saw, were very likely recipients of resurrection appearances among the 500+ and the apostles), it does not completely explain how this Christian messianic movement accelerated and received such an open reception among both Jewish and Gentile communities (many of whom had not even heard about Jesus or the Jewish background from which He came). This seems to require another sufficient cause which John P. Meier identifies as the apostles’ power to perform healings and miracles in a similar fashion to Jesus (with the important exception that Jesus performed miracles by His own authority while the apostles performed them in *His name*):

...[T]here was a notable difference between the long-term impact of the Baptist and that of Jesus. After the Baptist’s death, his followers did not continue to grow into a religious movement that in due time swept the Greco-Roman world. Followers remained, revering the Baptist’s memory and practices. But by the early 2d century A.D. any cohesive group that could have claimed an organic connection with the historical Baptist seems to have passed from the scene. In contrast, the movement that had begun to sprout up around the historical Jesus

⁷⁴ See Spitzer 2016 *God So Loved the World*, Chapter 6.

continued to grow – amid many sea changes – throughout the 1st century and beyond. Not entirely by coincidence, *the post-Easter “Jesus movement” claimed the same sort of ability to work miracles that Jesus had claimed for himself during his lifetime.* This continued claim to work miracles may help to explain the continued growth, instead of a tapering off, of the group that emerged from Jesus’ ministry.⁷⁵

Though these miracles are performed in the name of Jesus, the power which is used to perform them (in His name) is attributed to the Holy Spirit, who works through individuals and the Church to bring about the salvation of the world.

II.A. Jesus’ Gift of the Holy Spirit

The early Christians characterized the Holy Spirit as “the power of God” (“*dunamis tou Theou*”) which was uniquely possessed by Jesus during His ministry, and continued to flow from Him in the life of the Church. As their understanding of the Holy Spirit developed through experience, they became progressively aware of Its *personal* presence flowing through Jesus. McKenzie succinctly describes this more developed theology as follows:

The spirit is basically the divine and heavenly dynamic force; it is conceived as peculiarly existing in Jesus (and specifically in the risen Jesus), as pervading the body of Jesus which is the Church, and as apportioned to the members of the Church. Jesus is the son of David in the flesh but the son of God in power according to the spirit (Rm 1:3); the unique possession of the spirit by Jesus and the unique power which flows from this possession reveal His true reality, which is the reality of the spiritual sphere, i.e., the divine and heavenly sphere.⁷⁶

We can trace the development of the early Church’s experiential understanding of the Spirit through its exposition in Luke-Acts (Section II.A.1), and later exposition in Saint Paul (Section II.A.2).⁷⁷ Let us begin with the earlier exposition.

II.A.1. The Visible Manifestation of the Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke recounts three kinds of powerful experiences which the early Church community attributes to God, or more specifically, to “the Spirit of God” or “the power of God”: (1) healings and miracles, (2) prophesy, and (3) ecstatic experiences (such as glossolalia and visions).

⁷⁵ Meier 1994 *A Marginal Jew* (Vol. II), p. 623.

⁷⁶ McKenzie 1965, *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 843.

⁷⁷ I am indebted to the work of James Dunn (*Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament*: Philadelphia: The Westminster Press from which I have derived the majority of the following materials on early apostolic miracles and charisms (See Dunn 1975).

Though all three of these areas merit consideration, an overview of the first will be sufficient to show (1) that the early Church saw the charisms as explicit manifestations of God's power and God's Spirit, and (2) that the risen Jesus is seen to be the source of this power/Spirit (because the Spirit works through His name).

Luke recounts a large range of healings and miracles performed by Peter, Paul, and others in the Acts of the Apostles:⁷⁸

- the healing of the lame man at the temple (Acts 3:1-10)
- healings and exorcisms performed by Philip in Samaria (Acts 8:4-8)
- Paul's healing from blindness (Acts 9:18)
- the healing of Aeneas' paralysis (Acts 9:33f)
- the raising of Tabitha from the dead by Peter (Acts 9:36-41)
- the healing of a cripple in Lystra (Acts 14:8-10)
- Paul's restoration of Eutychus (Acts 20:9-12)
- the healings performed by Paul in Malta (Acts 28:8f)

There are some unconventional healings and miracles also recounted in Acts, for example:

- healings through Peter's shadow (Acts 5:15)
- healings through cloths touched by Paul (Acts 19:11)
- Peter's liberation from prison (Acts 5:19-24, 12:6-11)
- Paul's liberation from prison (Acts 16:26)

There can be little doubt that such healings and miracles occurred in the earliest Church communities, as they are recounted not only by Luke, but also by Paul⁷⁹ (who is writing to the actual witnesses of the events) and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews. With respect to the first category of healings (those worked through the personal intercession of the apostles), few scholars doubt that Luke either had firsthand experience of these miracles (the "we" passages) or reliable firsthand sources. Dunn notes even with respect to the raising of Tabitha by Peter:

"It is quite likely that the tradition goes back to a genuine episode in the ministry of Peter."⁸⁰

If one accepts that such healings and miracles were quite frequent within the early Church community, and that the members of that community viewed them as extraordinary and powerful (in contemporary terminology, falling outside normal boundaries of natural causation), then it will not be difficult to understand why they thought that the "power of God" / the "Spirit of God" was in their midst. When this is combined with Luke's contention that the Spirit's power arises out of the name of *Jesus* (or the disciples' ministry on behalf of Jesus), it seems reasonable to conclude that the primitive Church experienced the *risen Jesus* as the ongoing source of the Holy Spirit (the power of God) in the world.⁸¹ Dunn notes in this regard:

⁷⁸ See the more complete list in Dunn 1975 *Jesus and the Spirit*, pp. 163ff.

⁷⁹ See Rom. 15:19; 1Cor. 12:10, 28; 2Cor. 12:12; Gal. 3:5; Heb. 2:4. See also Dunn 1975 *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 163.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 165.

⁸¹ This key insight is justified in a detailed way in Ibid, pp. 163-165.

Where Jesus healed in his own right, by the immediate power and authority of God (cf. Acts 2:22; 10:38), his disciples healed in the name of Jesus. It would appear that from the first they recognized that their power to heal was somehow dependent on Jesus and derivative from him (cf. Luke 10:17). Whereas he had been the direct representative of God in his healing ministry, they saw themselves primarily as representatives of Jesus. They healed by the same power, but that power was now linked with the name of Jesus.⁸²

The frequent occurrence of the charismatic manifestation of the Spirit arising out of the name of Jesus provides an *experiential* ground (within the early Church) for the association of Jesus with the source of divine power.

II.A.2. Visible and Interior Manifestations of the Spirit in Paul

Though St. Paul's letters were written before the Acts of the Apostles, Luke saves and recounts traditions about "the power of the Spirit and the name of Jesus" which *predate* Paul's theology of the Spirit. An exploration of Paul's theology of the Spirit reveals his awareness of these earlier traditions and his *personal experience* of the visible and tangible manifestations of the Spirit emphasized by Luke.

Paul's experience of the Spirit, as Fitzmyer notes, is "God's gift of his creative, prophetic, or renovative *presence* to human beings or the world...[italics mine]."⁸³ This "presence of God" is more than merely "the power of God" viewed as a blind supernatural force; it has a subjective (indeed, intersubjective) quality. The Spirit not only searches the hearts of human beings, but also searches the depths of God the Father, having a comprehensive knowledge of Him: "For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (1 Cor 2:10b).

When Paul refers to either the visible gifts of the Spirit, he generally uses the term "*charismata*" (a specific instance of "*charis*" – a gratuitous gift for the wellbeing of another – which, in this case, is God's gratuitous gift of salvation). When Paul looks at the *charismata* from the vantage point of agency, he refers to them either as "*phanerōsis tou pneumatos*" (manifestation of the Spirit – e.g., 1 Cor 12:7), or as "*dunamis tou Theou*" (the power of God – e.g., 1 Cor 1:24), or as "*onomati tou kuriou*" (what is given in the name of the Lord/Christ – e.g., 1 Cor 6:11). As Dunn, referring to Gunkel's longstanding work, notes:

...[S]o far as Paul was concerned charismata are the manifestation of supernatural power. Charisma is *always* God acting, *always* the Spirit manifesting himself. ...[F]or Paul, *every* charisma was supernatural. *The character of transcendent otherness lies at the heart of the Pauline concept of charisma.* ... The "infinite

⁸² Ibid, p. 164.

⁸³ Joseph Fitzmyer 1990. "Pauline Theology." In *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Ed. by Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall). p. 1396 (82:65).

qualitative distinction” (Kierkegaard) between divine and human means that every expression of grace is always something *more* than human.⁸⁴

We may now explore the vast array of Paul’s and others’ experience of the supernatural power of the Spirit, beginning with the public charismatic gifts and concluding with the interior gifts (in the next Section II.A.3).

It is noteworthy that Paul is writing to communities and individuals who have witnessed the powerful visible manifestations of the Spirit multiple times. It is therefore reasonable to assume that these gifts were virtually commonplace in the early community as Luke indicates in the Acts of the Apostles. Dunn mentions further:

...[I]t is worth pointing out that in 1 Cor. 12.9, 28, 30 we have firsthand testimony to the fact that there were cures and healings experienced in the Pauline communities for which no natural or rational explanation would suffice – they could only be put down to the action of God.⁸⁵

So what do the visible gifts consist in? From the list given in 1 Cor 12:8f, three may be easily identified:

- 1) Healings (*charismata iamatōn* – gifts of cures),
- 2) Miracles (*energēmata dunameōn* – workings of power), and
- 3) The gift of tongues (*genē glōssōn* – kinds of tongues).

There are two other gifts which the community thought to be supernatural and public (as distinct from interior), namely, prophesy and revelation. As Paul recognizes, there are false prophets who can lead the Church astray, and so there is need to discern the quality of prophesy within the early community. I will give a brief description of the first three gifts as an illustration of why the community believed that the Holy Spirit was the power of God, that Jesus was the ongoing source of that Spirit, and therefore, that “Jesus is Lord.”

Healing. Paul uses the plural “*charismata*” (in contrast to using the singular in referring to the other gifts) because he probably believed that there was a special charisma for every kind of illness.⁸⁶ From this, we may infer that Paul witnessed different kinds of healings, and that those healings probably resembled those recounted by Luke in Acts, and in the Gospels with respect to Jesus’ ministry. There can be little doubt that Paul views these as arising solely out of the power of God (that is, not occurring in nature, but only through supernatural power).

Miracles. Paul’s distinct listing of miracles next to healings would seem to indicate that they included supernatural acts other than cures. Exegetes suspect that these would be of two

⁸⁴ Dunn 1975 *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 255. See also H. Gunkel 1888, *Die Wirkungen des heiligen Geistes nach der populären Anschauung der apostolischen Zeit und nach der Lehre des Apostels Paulus*. Göttingen, pp. 82f.

⁸⁵ Dunn 1975 *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 210.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 210-211.

sorts: exorcisms⁸⁷ and nature miracles.⁸⁸ Clearly, Paul was familiar with Jesus' exorcisms, and even though they do not figure as prominently in Paul's ministry as in Jesus,' Paul certainly was involved in exorcisms.⁸⁹ Paul may also have in mind nature miracles, such as cures taking place through his handkerchief (Acts 19:18) or other "signs and wonders" (*en dunamei sēmeiōn kai teratōn* – by power of signs and wonders – Rom 18:19) which he evidently worked from Jerusalem to Illyricum.

The working of miracles (*energōn dunameis*) factored prominently into Paul's ministry in new communities, and in encouraging converts among people who had not yet heard the Word. In Galatians 3:4ff, Paul uses the history of miracles worked in the community through the Holy Spirit as a proof of why the Galatians should remain faithful to him:

Did you experience so many things in vain? If it really is in vain. Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and *works miracles* among you, do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?⁹⁰

Given that Paul is writing to those who have directly experienced "*dunameis*," it can hardly be doubted that the experience of these persuasive outward signs is not only common to Paul's ministry, but continues after Paul has left (presumably through people with that charism), and is sufficiently powerful within the community to persuade it of the veracity of Paul's words years after his departure.

The power to heal and to work miracles does not belong to the human agent working them. The power is distinctly that of God (the Spirit of God) done through the name of "the Lord Jesus Christ" (e.g., 1Cor 6:11). That power is meant not for the benefit of the healer or miracle-worker, but for the benefit of one *in need*, or for the good of the *community*. The healer/miracle-worker is purely the instrument of God.

Despite the incredible persuasiveness of healing and miracles in the early community, Paul believes that they must be put in perspective to allow for the prominence of gifts which produce deep conversion of the heart. In this respect, Paul is distinct from Luke, who gives clear prominence to powerful visible gifts of the Spirit.

Speaking in Tongues. Paul views this ecstatic charism as a proof of the Spirit, an aspect of his ministry of initial conversion, a spiritual benefit to individual believers,⁹¹ and an occasional benefit to the community (when there is an authentic interpreter of the tongues).⁹² However, Paul views speaking in tongues as the lowest of the "deeds of power," because it does not directly

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 210.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 210.

⁸⁹ See Acts 16:18 – "Turning to the Spirit, Paul said, 'I charge thee, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out from her;' and it came out in the same hour." See also, Acts 19:17 "And diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them."

⁹⁰ Though *dunameis* here may include healings, it certainly should not be restricted to them, for Paul would have used the more appropriate term "*charismata iamatōn*" if he meant it in the restricted sense. Therefore, he probably meant it to include exorcisms and possibly even nature miracles.

⁹¹ See Dunn 1975 *Jesus and the Spirit*, pp. 230-231.

⁹² As Paul notes in 1Cor 14:18: "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all...."

serve either to deepen conversion, or to build up the community's understanding of God, Jesus, or even itself. Hence, in 1Cor 14:6, Paul warns the community not to seek speaking in tongues as an end in itself, and to prefer prophecy (which builds up the community and leads to its deeper conversion) over glossolalia:

Now brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how shall I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? ... So with yourselves; since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the Church. ... I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all; nevertheless, in church, I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others [prophecy or revelation] than ten thousand words in a tongue [1Cor 14:6-7, 12, 18-19].

I will not discuss prophecy and revelation here because the above points on healing, miracles, and speaking in tongues are sufficient to establish my central conclusion which is explained below.

II.A.3 Conclusion to Section II.A.

The conclusion may be set out in three parts:

1. There were frequent “deeds of healing and power” in the early Church (as there are today) which are difficult, if not impossible, to explain by natural causation.
2. These extraordinary occurrences were reasonably interpreted by the early Church to be the power (Spirit) of God, and
3. The ongoing source of this spiritual power was attributed to Jesus, for it came through the use of His name.

The frequent occurrence of these healings and miracles through the power of the Holy Spirit and the name of Jesus, allowed the Church to engage in a remarkably expansive missionary effort, because it substantiated the apostles' claim that Jesus was raised in glory and is the exclusive beloved Son of the Father. This gave rise to the post-Easter churches' titles for Him – “the Lord” and “the Son of God.”⁹³

In many respects, the Holy Spirit is just as active today as in apostolic times. One does not have to look far to see the millions of testimonies to the charismatic manifestation of the Spirit (with literally millions of internet search results devoted to the Holy Spirit, healings, miracles, prophecy, and tongues) which resemble those recounted by Luke and Paul almost 2,000 years ago.⁹⁴ Additionally, several scholars have chronicled hundreds of modern, medically

⁹³ See Spitzer 2016 *God So Loved the World*, Chapter 6, Section III.

⁹⁴ A simple Google search on the internet for “Holy Spirit healing” currently yields 11,200,000 results; for “Holy Spirit Miracles” there are 7,220,000 results; for “Holy Spirit prophecy” there are 5,480,000 results; and for “Holy Spirit tongues” there are 3,490,000 results.

documented miracles occurring through the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name.⁹⁵ With so many accounts of visible manifestations of the Holy Spirit (i.e. modern miracles) in the *United States*, how much greater would be the accounts of the *interior* gifts of the Holy Spirit; and how much greater still when both the charismatic and interior gifts of the Spirit are seen throughout the entire world? It seems evident that the Holy Spirit is truly alive and well in any individual or culture that wants the Spirit's help, guidance, inspiration, peace, and above all, love.

II.B. The Interior Gifts of the Spirit According to St. Paul

Though Paul saw the importance of the powerful visible manifestations of the Spirit in initial conversion and in initiating and sustaining communities, he prefers to address the *interior* gifts of the Spirit. The reason for his preference for the interior over the exterior gifts arises out of his belief that the interior gifts have a more profound and lasting effect on the believer and the community. The interior gifts not only lead to initial conversion (as do the powerful visible gifts) but also to a deeper conversion of the heart in imitation of Christ.

It was noted above that Paul did not believe the Holy Spirit to be a blind force, but rather, a conscious and sensitive power capable of knowing the heart of the Father. This conclusion was grounded in Paul's (and others') *experience* of these interior gifts, which include prayer, hope, trust, love, zeal, peace, and joy.⁹⁶ Though these gifts may not be immediately recognized as supernatural power or be manifest in a group or public setting (as powerful visible gifts), they do lead to the build-up of the Church through the deepening conversion arising out of them. Since these gifts are more subtle and difficult to recognize as divine, Paul takes pains not only to exhort his communities to them, but also to point to their origin in the Holy Spirit and the risen Christ. I have addressed several of these themes in Volume One of my Quartet – *Finding True Happiness: Satisfying Our Restless Hearts*:

- Inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Chapter 8, Section I).
- Discernment of spirits (Chapter 8, Section II).
- Guidance by the Holy Spirit (Chapter 8, Section III).
- The Holy Spirit in the Church Community (Chapter 6).
- The Holy Spirit in Contemplative Prayer (Chapter 7).
- The Holy Spirit in Deepening Faith, Hope, and Love (Chapter 9).

⁹⁵ See for example the two-volume work of Craig Keener. 2011. *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Publishing).

⁹⁶ Paul gives one list of interior gifts as “fruits of the Spirit” in Gal 5:22-3: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control....” He includes many of these gifts under the general gift of love in 1Cor 13:1-5.