

Miracles miraculously repeated

// Gospel Miracles as duplication of Elijah-Elisha's.

Philippe Guillaume - Geneva

While the Gospel of Thomas doesn't contain any miracle and the Q source only held the healing of the Capernaum centurion's servant¹, Mark's Gospel records over fifteen individual miracles and several miracle summaries (1,34; 3,10-11; 6,13). The evangelist insists on presenting Jesus as thaumaturge, and yet, each of the miracles described in his Gospel seems to come from the Elijah-Elisha cycle in I and II Kings. As for Matthew and Luke, although they don't insist so much on Jesus' miraculous powers, they, miracle of miracles, also follow the list of I and II Kings.

After presenting a list of parallels in Elijah's, Elisha's and Jesus' ministries, we will analyse a few of those parallels to see how the evangelists treated their model.

Synopsis of Elijah's, Elisha's and Jesus' ministries.

I Kings	Mark	Matt.	Lk.
13,4-7 Jeroboam's hand paralysed and healed	3,1-6 Healing a paralysed hand	#	#
13,10 Return by another way	0 Maggis departed another way	2,12	0
13,30 Layed his body in his own grave	0 <i>Idem</i>	27,60	0
17,2-7 Fed by the ravens in the desert	1,13 In wilderness with beasts	0	0
17,8f Widow's oil and flour multiplied	6,36f Multiplication of bread	14,16	#
17,16 τὶ ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί;	5,7 <i>Idem</i> (+ John 2,4)	8,29	8,28
17,17f Raising the Widow's son	5,21f Jairus' daughter	#	#
	0	0	7,11 Nain
19,4-7 Cake and water for dying prophet	14,18 Last supper ?	#	#
19,8f Theophany	9,2f Transfiguration	#	#
19,19-21 Calling of Elisha	1,20 Calling disciples	#	#+9,62;14,26
II Kings			
1,8 A hairy man girt with a leather belt	1,6 John had a leather belt	3,6	0
1,9f Soldiers send to arrest Elijah	14,43f Arrest at Gethsemane	#	#
2,4f I will not leave you	0 I will follow you wherever ...	8,19	9,57
2,18 Crossing Jordan dryfoot	6,45 Walking on the lake	#	0
2,11 Taken up in a whirlwind	0 Ascension	0	24,51
2,14 Magical coat	5,28 + 6,56 Healing coat	#	#
2,15 Spirit of Elijah resting on Elisha	16,14f Spirit of John on Jesus	#	#
2,19f + 4,38-41 Healing spring and pottage	9,50 Salt of the earth	#	#
2,23f Two she bears tore children to pieces	10,13f Let children come to me	#	#
3,16f Trenches filled with red water	14,22 This is my blood?	#	#
4,1-7 Multiplication of the widow's oil	8,4 Second multiplication	16,34	0
4,8-10 A great woman from Shunem	0 Women ministered unto him	0	8,3
4,18-37 Raising the Shunamite's son	1,30 Mother-in-law's fever	#	#
4,29 Take my staff...salute not	6,8 Take nothing save a staff	0	10,4 Salute not
4,41-44 Multiplication of breads	6,30-44 <i>Idem</i>	#	#
5,1-19 Naaman's leprosy	1,40 Lepers	#	#
5,9-27 Guehazi's leprosy	0 Ananias and Saphira	0	Acts 5
6,6 An axe head floating	6,48 Walking on the sea	#	0
6,19 Follow me !	1,17 Come after me !	#	0
6,17-20 Eyes opened	0 Paul's eyes opened	0	Acts 9,18
6,32 The King sent for Elisha's head	6,27 Herod sent for John's head	#	0

There is nothing new in this table. Most of the parallels are duly recorded in the margins of Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece*. But a few examples will illustrate how the "Old" Testament can enlighten the New. Being aware of the model underlying a Gospel story allows

¹Cf. KLOPPENBORG, J., *Q Parallels*, Polebridge Press, 1988, p.50.

the interpreter to pinpoint the redactional activity of the evangelist, what was left behind, what was transformed, in order to get a deeper understanding of the author's intention.

1 Puzling details: Why was Jesus with wild beasts during his temptation? Because Elijah was fed by ravens at the Kerith brook.

Why weren't the seventy disciples of Lk.10,4 allowed to greet anyone on their way? Because, their mission, like Guehazi's, could suffer no delay.

Why could the twelve disciples in Mk. 6,8 take a staff while Matthew and Luke forbid every kind of gear for the journey, even staves? Because Mark remembered that the staff was not a walking stick or a protection against highwaymen but the symbol of Elisha's healing power to be placed on the child's face to anticipate the prophet's arrival. Mt. and Lk. may have had to drop the stick in order to avoid confusion with the disciples of the cynic philosophers².

Why couldn't the disciples heal the lunatic (Mt.17,16)? Because they played Guehazi's part who could not bring the Shunamite's son back to life (II Kings 4,31).

Why are we told to close the door of our room before praying (Mt.6,6)? Because Elisha compelled the son of the prophets' widow to shut the door before pouring the oil (I Kings 4,4-5). Miracles and prayer are nobody else's business.

2 The doublets riddle:

Why did Mark record two very similar multiplications of bread? He found in his model not only the multiplication of the barley loaves (II Kings 4,42f) which he copied, but also two multiplications of flour and oil (I Kings 17,16; II Kings 4,6). By multiplying the multiplications of bread, he thus made sure to identify Jesus with both Elisha and Elijah. But he didn't record two raising of dead children while Luke, who avoids the repetition of the multiplication of breads, compensates by duplicating this miracle in 7,11-17 (Widow of Nain's son) and 8,51 (Jaïrus' daughter). He felt entitled to do so as he found it duplicated in I Kings 17,22 and II Kings 4,35.

Therefore, all the synoptics felt compelled to stick fairly closely to the number of miracles indicated by their pattern. The main novelty in the gospels is the addition of exorcisms (five or six per gospel) to their list of miracles. But, surprisingly, in spite of this addition, the total number of miracles and exorcisms (around twenty per gospel) comes close to the twenty-five miracles in I and II Kings. In this way, the evangelists stressed that Jesus was as strong as Elijah and Elisha put together.

3 Facelifted miracles and nonmiraculous items:

But there are limits to this identification process, some of Elia's and Elisha's mighty deeds became unacceptable in christian times:

Jesus healed a man who's hand was already dried while Elijah first paralysed Jeroboam's hand before healing it.

Instead of calling fire from heaven to consume the soldiers coming to arrest him (II Kings 1,9-12), Jesus heals the cut off ear of the high priest's servant and rebukes the Boarneges for their too literal reading of Elijah's life (Mk.3,17; Lk.9,54).

The two she-bears tearing up forty two children from Bethel were completely out of fashion. Therefore Mark depicted Jesus blessing children and scolding his disciples for their boorish manners. There, Jesus is seen as an anti-Elijah.

Floating axe-heads didn't seem to impress anyone anymore, therefore Jesus had to grind his own axe on the sea of Galilee.

These instances reveal the limits of the identification of Jesus as a new Elijah.

4 A non-dogmatic reading of the Eucharist:

We could reassess our understanding of the communion cup in light of II Kings 3,9-23: a providential cup for a dying army, a spring gushing out a trench dug in the desert, turning red as blood to defeat the enemy. Not serious enough for dogmaticians, but spiritually refreshing.

²Cf. THEISSEN, G., *Histoire sociale du christianisme primitif*, Labor et Fides, Genève, 1996, p.32.

5 Escaping activism:

Understanding Jesus' "Δότε αὐτοῖς φαγεῖν" (Mk.6,37) as a straight repetition of II Kings 4,42 would limit the misuse of this text. Jesus merely repeats Elisha's command to his disciples in order to reveal their inadequacy for the task, before performing the miracle himself. He is not asking us to feed the world in spite of all the humanitarian activists justifying their ideology with this text.

The image of Jesus as miracle worker goes against another trend within the Gospels themselves which shows Jesus' resistance to his contemporaries' thirst for miracles³. The fact that the Gospel of Thomas contains no miracles and that Q only relates one, seems to confirm this resistance, or at least reveals the presence of different ways to understand Jesus' ministry. According to Theissen,

"The miracle stories are not permeated by the ethos of the primitive Christian wandering charismatics, they lack the idea of discipleship and the ethical demands connected with it"⁴.

Even if we refuse Gospel of Thomas' and Q's historical antecedence, we are forced to admit the sharp divergence between their portrait of Jesus and the synoptics'. Theissen puts forward the hypothesis that belief in miracle-workers could have been a reaction of subjugated eastern cultures:

"The politically inferior proclaims and propagates his superiority on the level of miraculous activity"⁵.

The 1st century BC witnessed a general increase in the intensity of belief in miracles⁶ related to the concentration of power in Rome. Historically, we can postulate the existence of at least two parties. One ignoring or resisting this intensification on the miraculous by putting in Jesus' mouth a sharp criticism of the attachment to miracles. Another party is accepting this general increase of the miraculous by presenting Jesus as thaumaturge. Naturally, Mark turned to the best Old Testament miracle collection for his model. He just had to show that Jesus was greater than Elijah and Elisha put together.

Whether or not Jesus performed miracles remains an open question. We can easily imagine that the stress on the miraculous depended on the audience. But the literary faithfulness of the evangelists towards their «Old» Testament model is striking. If the evangelists did use Elijah's and Elisha's miracles as literary pattern, New Testament scholars would be wise to display the same attention to the Old Testament. Studying New Testament miracle-accounts in isolation from their Old Testament model is an attitude similar to the Bethel's children: Elisha cursed them in the name of the Lord and two she bears came out of the woods to tear forty two of them.

RELATED ARTICLE

BRODIE, Thomas L., *Not Q but Elijah: the Story of the Life-giving Command (Luke 7:1-10) as systematic Adaptation of I Kings 17:1-16*, Aquinas Institute of Theology, St Louis in 1990 SBL Abstracts /345

³Cf. Mk 8,11f; Mt 12,38ff; 16,1ff; Lk 11,16ff.

⁴THEISSEN, G., *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, T. & T. Clark Limited, Edinburgh, 1983, p.262.

⁵Idem, p.257.

⁶Idem, p.274.