

Chapter 3: Credentials of the Liberator

Given the prominence of miracles in the Gospels, it seems strange at first that Jesus rebuked those who asked him to show them one. In the Gospel of Mark, with a bluntness characteristic of that book Jesus says that his generation will be given “no sign.”¹ Versions of this saying found in Matthew and Luke deny that any sign will be given except for some kind of resemblance between Jesus and the prophet Jonah. John’s Gospel records Jesus’ complaint that the people will not believe unless they see “signs and wonders.”²

Some scholars infer from these sayings that Jesus never intended his works to be viewed as miracles and that he did not see himself as the divine figure his adherents later claimed him to be. Even rabbinic tradition did not necessarily associate miracle-working with the expected Messiah. The *International Jewish Encyclopedia* says that “No superhuman qualities were ascribed to him and he was not expected to perform miracles. In fact, the performance of such miracles was not considered by the rabbis as proof of Messiahship.”³

But it is hard to imagine that the author of Mark, whose Gospel contains the starkest version of the “no sign” remark, would have failed to see the contradiction between such an understanding and the rest of his narrative. Early in Mark Jesus calls attention to his ability to heal a paralytic as proof that he also has the power to forgive sins.⁴ Jesus’ authority to teach the meaning of divine law is in the very next chapter authenticated by his healing of a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath.⁵ Also in the third chapter of Mark, Jesus cites his ability to exorcise demons as proof that he can overcome Satan.⁶

Although John and Luke are the only evangelists to use the word *semeion*, “sign,” to describe Jesus’ powerful works, all four Gospels effectively present those works as proof of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, God’s beloved Son.⁷ If Jesus in fact performed signs, how then do we explain his insistence that “no sign” would be given? Part of the answer lies in Jesus’ disinclination to perform feats on demand as if he were a paid entertainer. In all the Gospels the challenge to produce a sign comes from Jesus’ enemies.⁸

There is also the question of the kind of sign would have been most popular with Jesus’ audience. Jewish society in the first century was a volatile mixture of nationalism and religious fervor born of the Jews’ unique history. Widespread poverty kept this brew simmering near the flash point, as did the frequently harsh and sometimes

barbarous tactics of the Roman occupying force. The plight of first century Jews is graphically demonstrated by what archaeologists found when they excavated four tombs north of Jerusalem in 1968. Most sensational was the recovery of the bones of a crucifixion victim whose ossuary is inscribed with the name “Jehohanan” (in English, “John”). Like Jesus, he was executed sometime in the first century.

The case of Jehohanan demonstrates that the Romans did occasionally release the bodies of crucifixion victims for interment. It also testifies to the horror of the times. Of the thirty-five individuals whose remains were found with those of Jehohanan, nine had died violently, including a teenage boy who had been burned to death on an iron rack, an elderly woman who had been bludgeoned and a four-year-old who had been shot through the head with an arrow—all presumed victims of suppressive action on the part of the Romans. Other remains bear witness to less dramatic but no less agonized deaths, like that of a young woman who had died in childbirth and three children who had simply starved.

Jehohanan himself bore the stamp of suffering from his birth. His malformed skull, twisted face and cleft palate likely resulted from a combination of his mother’s malnutrition during pregnancy and injuries he sustained during a difficult childbirth. He and those buried with him leave little doubt as to why the slow torture of crucifixion was for the Romans an indispensable tool of social control. The threat of quick death under a Roman sword may have been less than intimidating for people so deeply immersed in misery.

Given the historical circumstances of Jesus’ ministry, it is easy to understand what kind of miracle many Jews of the first century were looking for and why the works of Jesus fell short in their eyes. The Hebrew Scriptures promised that the Messiah would gloriously triumph over Israel’s enemies and inaugurate an era of prosperity. Never had the realization of the messianic prophecies been more desperately longed for than they were under Roman rule. Compromise with the Roman occupiers was the order of the day for all but the most brazen of zealots, but only an oligarchy at the top of Jewish society actually relished it.

The vast majority of Jews, rich and poor, would have applauded a Messiah who could with a display of heavenly power rid them of the Roman presence. The caustic demand of one of the

criminals crucified alongside Jesus, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” was in a way that of the greater part of the nation.⁹ And the taunt of Jesus’ enemies, “He is the king of Israel; let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in him,” is in the same spirit as the demand for a sign. “If your power is not greater than the enemy’s legions,” they seemed to say, “then as Messiah you are a fraud.”

Such sentiments were not unanimous, of course. To those who put faith in Jesus, the force of his words along with his mighty works testified that he was the Anointed who in God’s time would rule the world. It was not that they lacked experience with teachers and healers. Sages, healers, mystics and self-proclaimed prophets were commonplace throughout the ancient world. From these Jesus stood out. He taught as no one else taught and healed as no one else healed, or at any rate that is what the Gospel writers would have us believe.¹⁰ It did not matter to the disciples, as it does to critics, that the Hebrew Scriptures nowhere say that the Messiah would begin his career as an itinerant preacher.

Apart from the question of whether miracles identify Jesus as the Messiah, the number of scholars who are prepared to treat Jesus’ exorcisms and healings as pure fantasy is smaller than might be expected. Consider for instance the opinion of Uta Ranke-Heinemann, author of *Putting Away Childish Things*, a book that in a jacket blurb promises to debunk “the virgin birth, the empty tomb, and other fairy tales you don’t need to believe to have a living faith.”¹¹

It would be hard to find within the field of Biblical studies anyone with less respect for the Bible than Ranke-Heinemann, as is apparent from a sampling of Scriptural commentary in her book: “sea of fables”; “the stupidest of miraculous fairy tales”; “hopeless muddle of pseudofacts”; “anti-Jewish manipulation”; “theology for butchers”; “historical nonsense”; “vile gossip and hostile propaganda.”¹² Yet even as partisan a voice as hers is forced to acknowledge that “in the case of the miraculous cures and related exorcisms, we can . . . accept a certain core of the narratives as historical.”¹³

In *Gospel Fictions* Randel Helms cites with approval the opinion of German higher critic Ernst Kasemann, who proclaimed in the early 1960s that “theological science” had determined that the “great majority” of Gospel reports of Jesus’ miracles are no more than

“legends.” Only healings such as that of Peter’s mother-in-law from a fever and the cure of “so-called possessed persons,” in other words exorcisms, ought still to be regarded as historical, he says. Kaseman calls these accounts “harmless” in that they are easy to explain in naturalistic terms.¹⁴

A common view among scholars and historians is that Jesus had a gift for making people feel better psychosomatically, which was misinterpreted at the time as exorcism of demons and supernatural healing of the sick.

Jesus and Moses

To understand what typology can contribute to our understanding of Jesus’ powerful works we must first turn to the Old Testament figure to whom Jesus is most frequently and most closely compared, Moses. So prominent is Moses as liberator and lawgiver that he is distinguished from the prophets who followed, as in the common New Testament phrase, “Moses and the prophets.”

All four Gospels parallel Jesus and Moses in various ways, and at least one strand of Jewish tradition holds that the Messiah will resemble Moses. The key Hebrew text in this regard, from Deuteronomy, quotes Moses as saying that in order to set Israel apart from the nations that “practice sorcery or divination” God “will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”¹⁵

The verse of Deuteronomy about the coming prophet anticipated the prophetic office filled by Joshua, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha and others. But an ultimate fulfillment in terms of the general line of prophets is ruled out by another passage in Deuteronomy that states that “since then [the days of the wilderness wandering], no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do.” “No one,” it continues, “has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.”¹⁶

At the time this epilogue to the story of Moses was written, long after the prediction had been made about a prophet “like Moses,” no such man had yet appeared. According to the Scripture only a

deliverer who communed with God “face to face” and performed signs like those of Moses would qualify. If we carry the comparison with Moses to its logical end we must envision a prophet who functions as emancipator, lawgiver and covenant mediator as well.

What concerns us most at the moment are those miraculous powers that Moses was endowed with specifically to corroborate the claim that he had been sent by God. Three signs were to serve that purpose according to the story of the burning bush. God speaks to Moses out of the bush and gives him the mission to liberate the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. When Moses asks how he will prove to his people that he has been sent by God, he is told to throw his shepherd’s staff to the ground. The staff instantly becomes a snake. “Reach out your hand,” God tells him, “and take it by the tail.” When Moses does so, the snake changes back into a staff. “This,” says God, “is so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has appeared to you.”

Yahweh further instructs Moses to put his hand inside his cloak. When Moses withdraws it again, the hand is white with leprosy. When Moses puts the hand inside his cloak a second time, the leprosy vanishes and the hand is restored. “If they do not believe you or pay attention to the first miraculous sign,” God says, “they may believe the second. But if they do not believe these two signs or listen to you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground. The water you take from the river will become blood on the ground.”¹⁷

The revered Jewish rabbi Maimonides once denied that Moses appealed to miracles. “The Jews did not believe in Moses, our teacher, because of the miracles he performed,” he claims in one of his treatises. “Whenever anyone’s belief is based on seeing miracles, he has lingering doubts, because it is possible the miracles were performed through magic or sorcery.”¹⁸ Maimonides was probably attempting to counter Christian claims based on Gospel accounts of Jesus’ miracles.

Maimonides’ learned opinion notwithstanding, Exodus says that Moses was given miraculous abilities expressly to prove to Israel that God had sent him. And the signs described in Exodus chapter four had their intended effect, for when Moses and his brother Aaron performed them, the narrative says, “the people believed.”¹⁹

Decoding the Signs

The first two powers are demonstrated and paired together as “these two signs,” and then a third is given if necessary to settle the issue. At a glance the signs resemble magician’s tricks. Once the possibility of a connection to Jesus is raised, a symbolic interpretation suggests itself. Moses’ rod in this episode has a meaning derived less from its association with law than from its long serpent-like shape. The rod becomes a serpent when thrown to the ground and can be controlled by Moses. In the New Testament the devil is portrayed as a great serpent who is cast down to the earth along with the demonic angels who serve him.²⁰ The first sign may be described as “power over the serpent,” meaning ability to overcome Satan and his forces, and could correspond to Jesus’ power to subdue evil spirits and free people from demonic oppression.

The second sign, by which Moses causes his hand to become leprous and then instantly heals it, might be described as “power over disease.” In the Bible leprosy refers to skin ailments generally and is considered the most loathsome of diseases. The Mosaic Law contains more instructions about leprosy than about all other sicknesses put together. Some characters in the Bible, including Moses’ sister Miriam and one of Israel’s kings, Uzziah, were stricken with leprosy as a punishment for their sins. Leprosy therefore makes a fitting symbol for disease in general, which springs from the spiritually unclean condition of mankind. Jesus’ authority to forgive sins is associated in the Gospels with his power to cure diseases of all kinds, including leprosy.²¹

On occasion Jesus miraculously fed crowds, raised the dead and controlled the physical elements, but exorcism and healing were the “wonders” he was known to do nearly everywhere he went. Passing through Perea east of the Jordan on his way to Jerusalem Jesus summarizes his activities by saying, “I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.”²² When Jesus sends out the apostles as his representatives, he gives them “authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.”²³

There appears to be a good fit between the first two signs of

Moses and the two types of miracles Jesus most commonly performed. And we might discern a connection as well between the third sign—water turning to blood as it is poured out—with the pouring out of Jesus’ own blood. The question now is whether a closer look will support these impressions.

Subduing the Snake

We begin with the figure of Satan. As difficult as it is for the modern secular mind to take the devil and demons seriously, in the Bible evil spirits are presented not only as real but as superior to humans in capabilities and intelligence. The Scriptures imply that Satan, the most powerful of the demons, was once an angel whose pride led him into rebellion and the desire to incite others against God. Satan “fell” in the sense that he lapsed into sin. But falling or being thrown down also is a metaphor for being hindered, humiliated or even destroyed. In English the term “downfall,” for example, describes not a physical fall but a defeat.

Satan has fallen more than one time in more than one way. During Jesus’ ministry the devil was overcome both morally by Jesus’ integrity and physically by Jesus’ power of exorcism. An intriguing passage on the subject is found in Luke, when Jesus welcomes back his disciples at the end of a preaching mission. The disciples excitedly report to him that “even the demons submit to us in your name.” Jesus replies, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” He goes on to tell them, “I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”²⁴

Jesus’ comment on the success of the disciples resonates with the first sign of Moses. Just as Moses can grasp the serpent by the tail to render it harmless again, Jesus along with his representatives have authority to neutralize “all the power of the enemy.” Jesus leaves an identifier by referring to the devil’s forces as “snakes and scorpions.” He also says that the defeat of occultic power amounts to Satan taking a fall, much as the rod of Moses is thrown to the ground in the course of being transformed into a serpent.

Jesus’ reference to “trampling” likewise calls to mind “casting

down” because the terms are associated with each other in the Bible. In Daniel chapter eight, for example, the two terms are alternated in such a way as to demonstrate their equivalence as metaphors for domination.²⁵ The words for “casting down” in that passage are the same as those used of Moses’ rod in the Hebrew Masoretic and Greek Septuagint texts of Exodus, while the Greek term for “trample” in the Septuagint text of Daniel is a form of the same word used by Jesus in Luke 10. A comparison of other Scriptures confirms that the meaning of the two expressions is the same when used metaphorically.²⁶

Luke’s narrative concerning the fall of Satan and the trampling of demonic spirits is a key identifier in its own right. It also leads on to still other identifiers by pointing back to a passage from the book of Isaiah:

How you have fallen from heaven,
 O morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth,
 you who once laid low the nations!
You said in your heart,
 “I will ascend to heaven . . . ”
But you are brought down to the grave,
 to the depths of the pit. —Isaiah 14:12-15

A previous verse says that this passage is about the “king of Babylon,” yet Jesus echoes its language when he says that Satan has “fallen like lightning from heaven.” The Greek word *astrape* usually means lightning but can refer to any bright light. Similarly, the Hebrew for “morning star” in Isaiah 14:12 literally means “shining one” and is rendered “Lucifer” or “light bearer” in Latin. Scholars who reject an application of the Lucifer passage to Satan overlook what is apparent from our investigation so far, namely, that more than one layer of meaning may be present in a Biblical passage.

Isaiah chapter fourteen relies on a type of descriptive allusion that is still used today. When a dictator is referred to as a “little Hitler” we understand the expression to say something about the egomania of the individual so described as well as that of Hitler himself. The city-state of Babylon, in what is now the nation of Iraq, became dominant in the seventh century BC under rulers who enthroned themselves “in heaven” by subjugating a large part of the ancient world. As an imperial power in the ancient Near East,

Babylon was preceded by Egypt and Assyria and succeeded by Media-Persia, Greece and Rome. The rulers of these nations with few exceptions were prideful and ruthless, and therefore bore comparison with the devil, whom Jesus calls the “ruler of the world.”²⁷

Evil as Assyria was, in the eighth century BC it unknowingly acted as God’s agent—the “rod of his anger”—by punishing the northern state of Israel for its corruption. God saved Jerusalem, capital of the southern kingdom of Judah, from the Assyrian army to give the remainder of his people time to repent. When Judah’s moral condition instead deteriorated it was delivered the following century into the hands of Assyria’s successor, Babylon, which likewise is called a “rod.”²⁸ During several centuries and by means of various prophets God foretold doom upon the Israelites, upon Israel’s neighboring enemies such as Philistia, Moab and Edom, and on the great powers Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. The idolatry, sexual license, injustice and violence of the time would generate rushing tides of war in which strong and weak nations alike eventually would founder.

The fourteenth chapter of Isaiah contains three prophetic condemnations arranged poetically in order of significance rather than chronologically. The first of these says, as we read above, that Babylon will rise like a star in the pre-dawn sky only to fall back to earth. The second, in verses twenty-four through twenty-seven, foretells that Assyria, after spreading devastation through much of the ancient world, will itself be crushed.

The third prophecy, in verses twenty-eight through thirty-two, is about Philistia on the coast of Palestine, a warlike nation and traditional enemy of Israel. “Do not rejoice,” the Philistines are warned, “that the rod that struck you is broken; from the root of that snake will spring up a viper, its fruit will be a darting, venomous serpent.” Here is something peculiar: the “rod” that punished Philistia becomes a serpent in mid-verse, a shift of metaphor that calls to mind the transformation of Moses’ rod into a snake. The rod in this case refers to Assyria. When the Philistines resisted Assyria’s control of their territory, the empire-builder Sargon II responded by razing Ashdod, one of Philistia’s three great coastal cities.²⁹

Sargon was later ambushed and killed while on a campaign in Persia. Sargon’s heir, Sennacherib, who called himself “king of the world,” was assassinated by two of his own sons.³⁰ With the passing

decades political intrigue and civil war loosened Assyria's grip on its western vassals and ultimately led to the empire's collapse.

A century after Sargon's campaign against Ashdod, the Philistines may have thought that at last they were free to pursue their national ambitions. But in southern Mesopotamia, the land from which the earliest Assyrians had migrated, Babylon was rising like a star through the military brilliance of Nebuchadnezzar II. Nebuchadnezzar swiftly subdued the western reaches of what had been Assyria's empire. He dealt with the Philistines in much the same way Sargon had, by destroying the jewel of Philistia, the wealthy port of Ashkelon.³¹ In vindication of Isaiah's warning the Mesopotamian stock from which the Assyrian "rod" or "serpent" sprang had produced in its place an even more deadly enemy, Babylon.

The Babylonian power that by implication is called a "darting" or "flying" snake in verse 29 of Isaiah fourteen is just a few verses earlier referred to as the "shining one," "Lucifer," fallen from heaven to earth. As noted above, the image of a great serpent thrown forcefully down is repeated in the New Testament book of Revelation: "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray."³²

The defeat of the king of Babylon mirrors what is said about Satan, for whom the venomous tyrants of Assyria and Babylonia are ideal representatives. God used the dynasties of both of those nations as retributive "rods" by allowing them to bring other corrupt nations to ruin before they themselves came to an end. Likewise in the New Testament, wrongdoers are "handed over to Satan" for punishment in that they are at their own insistence deprived of divine protection and abandoned to the corrosive vices and random cruelties of the devil's world.³³

The Casting Down of the Serpent in Ezekiel

The passages we have analyzed from Isaiah, Luke and Revelation confirm what we suspected about the meaning of Moses' first sign. The identifiers, once spotted, are as easy to follow as footprints in wet sand. They lead us to yet another Old Testament prophecy, this one concerning the king of the island city of Tyre:

You were anointed as a guardian cherub [angel],
for so I ordained you.
You were on the holy mount of God;
you walked among the fiery stones.
You were blameless in your ways
from the day you were created
till wickedness was found in you.
Through your widespread trade
you were filled with violence,
and you sinned.
So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God,
and I expelled you, O guardian cherub,
from among the fiery stones.
Your heart became proud
on account of your beauty,
and you corrupted your wisdom
So I threw you to the earth;
I made a spectacle of you before kings.

—Ezekiel 28:14-17

Tyre lay off the coast of the verdant, garden-like territory of Lebanon. Prosperous and nearly invulnerable to attack, during its heyday Tyre felt free to intimidate neighboring peoples.³⁴ Nebuchadnezzar partly carried out God's judgment on the city by demolishing its mainland quarter and subjecting the island stronghold to a punishing siege. Several generations later Tyre was captured and destroyed by the armies of Alexander the Great.

The translators of ancient Greek and Syriac versions of the Hebrew Bible modified portions of Ezekiel chapter twenty-eight to avoid describing the king of Tyre as a "cherub," apparently finding it hard to understand how a human king could be called an angel even as poetic hyperbole. We saw in Isaiah fourteen, though, that the proud kings of the pagan world may serve as representatives of the devil, and that Satan may be prophetically addressed through them. A dual application to the Tyrian king and to the devil—who was worshiped by Tyre's inhabitants as a form of the god Baal—is the only way that Ezekiel's prophecy makes sense.

That identification in turn draws our attention to the phrase "I threw you to the earth" in verse seventeen. The verb there for "throw" and the noun for "earth" are the same as those used of Moses "throwing" his rod to the "ground" to transform it into a serpent. Both

Gospel Mysteries / 3-12

the Hebrew Masoretic Text and the Greek Septuagint (abbreviated “LXX”) manifest this correspondence of terms:

Moses threw [*salak*] it on the ground [*erets*]. —Exodus 4:4, MT.

I threw [*salak*] you to the earth [*erets*]. —Ezekiel 28:17, MT.

He [Moses] cast [*rhipto*] it on the ground [*ge*].
—Exodus 4:3, LXX.

I have cast [*rhipto*] you to the ground [*ge*].
—Ezekiel 28:17, LXX.

In Revelation twelve where Satan the “old serpent” is similarly “hurled down to the earth,” we find not the Greek verb *rhipto* but the slightly more forceful word *ballo*. Nevertheless, we can demonstrate that in Biblical usage these words are synonyms by comparing two Gospel versions of a saying of Jesus.

In Mark Jesus says that anyone who tempts a young believer into sin would be better off having a millstone hung around his neck and then be thrown, *ballo*, into the sea; in Luke the same saying is reproduced almost verbatim but with the verb *rhipto* in place of *ballo*.³⁵ The interchangeability of these terms proves that the throwing down of the rod/serpent is the rhetorical equivalent of the casting down of the devil. It also provides a linguistic link to Jesus’ expulsion of demons, since the word most often used in the Gospels to describe that action is *ekballo*, an expanded form of *ballo* meaning literally “to out-cast.”

The coding of the first sign of Moses to Jesus’ power over demonic forces will be corroborated further if we can make a case for the coding of the other two signs as well. In the next chapter, therefore, we will look closely at the miracles of the leprous hand and water turning to blood.

- 1 Mark 8:12.
- 2 John 4:48.
- 3 *The International Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Ben Isaacson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 208.
- 4 Mark 2:3-12.
- 5 Mark 3:1-5.
- 6 Mark 3:22-27.
- 7 John 3:2; 4:54; 12:18; Acts 2:22.
- 8 Matt 12:38; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16; John 2:18.
- 9 Luke 23:39.
- 10 Matt 7:28-29; Mark 2:12; John 7:46; 9:25, 32.
- 11 Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Putting Away Childish Things*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).
- 12 *Ibid.*, 95, 96, 98, 106, 116, 116, 287.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 88.
- 14 Ernst Kaseman, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1964), 48, 50-51.
- 15 Deut 18:14-15.
- 16 Deut 34:10-12.
- 17 Exod 4:1-9.
- 18 Maimonides, *Foundations of Torah*, ch. 8.
- 19 Exod 4:30-31.
- 20 Rev 12:9.
- 21 Mark 1:40-42; 2:9-12.
- 22 Luke 13:32.
- 23 Matt 10:1; cf. Mark 6:13.
- 24 Luke 10:19-20.
- 25 Dan 8:10-13.
- 26 Cf. Luke 21:6, 24; Rev 11:2.
- 27 John 14:30.
- 28 Isa 14:5-6.
- 29 Isa. 20:1.
- 30 Isa 37:38.
- 31 Jer 25:9, 20.
- 32 Rev 12:9.
- 33 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20.
- 34 Ezek 26:17.
- 35 Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2.

Gospel Mysteries / 3-14

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