BibleJourney 4.5:
Miracles in the First Century, in the Synoptic Gospels, and Today

A Behind-the-Text Assignment

Goals:

- To read primary sources on the subject of miracles in and around the 1st century AD
- To understand Jesus’ (and the early Church’s) miracles in light of the primary sources, noting similarities and differences
- To consider the reasons for Jesus’ miracles in light of what the Synoptic Gospels say

Assignment:

Read the primary sources, below, and then answer the questions that follow in 1-2 pages.

Primary Sources Used For This Assignment (Jewish and Graeco-Roman):

  A book written by an early 2nd century author describing the lives of the first twelve emperors of the Roman Empire, from Julius Caesar to Domitian.
  A book written by the Greek intellectual Philostratus (writing around AD 225—well into the Christian era) about a late first century AD teacher and miracle-worker named Apollonius. Lucian (2nd c.) refers to him negatively (Alexander the False Prophet, 5) and Origen (Christian writer, 3rd c.) quotes Moiregenes that he was a magician, philosopher, and swindler (Contra Celsus 6.41.5-10).
Miracles and Signs at the Birth of a Royal or Important Person

A. Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*:
1. "He [Julius Caesar] was fifty-five years old when he died, and his immediate deification, formally decreed by the loyalists in the Senate, convinced the City as a whole; if only because, on the first day of the Games given by his successor Augustus in honour of this apotheosis, a comet appeared about an hour before sunset and shone for seven days running... ([Julius Caesar], 88).

2. Suetonius, *Augustus*, 94:
   "At this point it might be well to list the omens, occurring before, on and after the day of Augustus's birth, from which his future greatness and lasting good fortune could clearly be prognosticated."
   a. Centuries before Augustus' birth, soothsayers in his town of birth, Velitrae, interpreted lightning striking the wall as an omen that a native from the city would one day rule the world.
   b. "According to Julius Marathus, a public portent warned the Roman people some months before Augustus's birth that Nature was making ready to provide them with a king; and this caused the Senate much consternation that they issued a decree which forbade the rearing of any male child for a whole year. However, a group of senators whose wives were expectant prevented the decree from being filed at the Treasury and thus becoming law--for each of them hoped that the prophesied King would be his own son." (Cf. Herod's murder of the children in Bethlehem, Mt. 2.)
   c. "...in the book called *Theologumena*, by Asclepias of Nendes. Augustus's mother, Atia, with certain married women friends, once attended a solemn midnight service at the Temple of Apollo, where she had her litter set down, and presently fell asleep as the others also did. Suddenly a serpent glided up, entered her, and then glided away again. On awakening, she purified herself, as if after intimacy with her husband. An irremovable coloured mark in the shape of a serpent, which then appeared on her body, made her ashamed to visit the public baths any more; and the birth of Augustus nine months later suggested a divine paternity. Atia dreamed that her intestines were carried up to Heaven and overhung all lands and seas; and Octavius, that the sun rose from between her thighs."
   d. "Augustus's birth coincided with the Senate's famous debate on the Catilinarian conspiracy, and when Octavius arrived late, because of Atia's confinement, Publius Nigidius Figulus the astrologer, hearing at what hour the child had been delivered, cried out: 'The ruler of the world is now born.' Everyone believes this story."
Various dreams are recorded about Augustus' future greatness.


B. Philostratus, *Life of Appolonius*:
   a. "When his [Appolonius'] mother was still carrying him, she had a vision of an Egyptian spirit, Proteus, whom Homer describes changing into different shapes. She was not frightened at all, but asked him who her child would be. He replied: 'Me.' 'Who are you?' she asked, and he said, 'Proteus, the Egyptian god.' (1.4).

   b. "His mother was near her time when she was told in a dream to go to a meadow and gather flowers. When she got there her servant girls wandered over the meadow with their minds on the flowers, while she lay down in the grass and fell asleep. As she slept, some swans that fed there formed a circle around her, and raising their wings in the way they do made a sudden noise, for there was a slight breeze in the meadow. The sound made her jump up and give birth, any excitement being enough to cause birth even before the due time. The local people also say that the moment Apollonius was born a bolt of lightning which seemed just about to strike the earth hung poised in the air and then disappeared upwards; no doubt the gods were giving a revelation--an omen of his brilliance, his exaltation above earthly things, his closeness to heaven, and all his other qualities" (5).

Miracle Stories

A. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*:
"Vespasian, still rather bewildered in his new role of Emperor, felt a certain lack of authority and of what might be called the divine spark; yet both these attributes were granted him. As he sat on the Tribunal, two labourers, one blind, the other lame, approached together, begging to be healed. Apparently the god Serapis had promised them in a dream that if Vespasian would consent to spit in the blind man's eyes, and touch the lame man's leg with his heel, both would be made well. Vespasian had so little faith in his curative powers that he showed great reluctance in doing as he was asked; but his friends persuaded him to try them, in the presence of a large audience, too--and the charm worked. At the same time, certain soothsayers were inspired to excavate a sacred site at Tegea in Arcadia, where a hoard of very ancient vases was discovered, all painted with a striking likeness of Vespasian" (*Vespatian 7*; Penguin, pp. 278f).

B. Philostratus, *Life of Appolonius*:
   1. "Besides that, there came a man of about thirty, who was lame; he had been an expert lion-hunter but had been attacked by a lion and had dislocated his hip, and so was lame in one leg. But the Wise Man massaged his hip and thus restored the man to an upright walk. Someone else who had gone blind went away with his sight fully restored, and another man with a paralysed arm left strong again. A woman,
too, who had had seven miscarriages was cured through the prayers of her husband as follows. The Wise Man told the husband, when his wife was in labour, to bring a live hare under his cloak to the place where she was, walk around her, and immediately release the hare: for she would lose her womb as well as the foetus if the hare was not immediately driven out" (III.39; Penguin, p. 84).

2. A mad dog bites a boy in Tarsus who himself becomes mad (rabies). The people do not know which dog bit the boy. Apollonius arrives and says, "Damis, it is a white, shaggy sheep-dog, the size of the Amphilochoian kind, and it is standing by such-and-such a fountain' (which he named) 'trembling because it both desires and fears water. Bring it to me by the river bank where the wrestling grounds are. You need only say that Apollonius is summoning it.' When Damis had dragged the dog along, it lay at Apollonius's feet, groaning like a suppliant at an altar; and Apollonius made it even tamer by stroking it with his hand. He then made the boy stand nearby, bringing him close so that the crowd could see a great miracle, and then said, 'The soul of Telephus the Mysian has entered this boy, and the Fates require the same treatment for him.' So saying, he told the dog to lick the bite, so that the boy's wound should also be his healer. Immediately the boy turned to greet his father, recognized his mother, spoke to his friends, and took a drink from the Cydnus. Apollonius did not neglect the dog, but after a prayer to the river told the creature to swim across. When it had crossed the Cydnus, it stood on the bank and barked, which does not happen at all when dogs are rabid; and it bent back its ears and wagged its tail, in the knowledge that it had been cured, since water is the medicine for rabies if the victim has the courage to drink it" (VI.43; Penguin, p. 168f).

C. Inscriptions about Healings at Epidaurus (a temple of Asclepius in Achaia, Greece):
1. Cleo, pregnant for 5 years, sleeps in the abaton and immediately delivers a 5 yr. old.
2. Ambrosia, blind in one eye but doubting the miracles of Asclepius, dreams that the god appeared to her and "cut open her defective eye and poured in some drug", telling her to offer a silver pig as a votive to commemorate her stupidity in doubting. She was cured.
3. A dumb boy and his father came to offer sacrifices for healing. The acolyte asked, "Will you promise, if you get your wish, between now and the end of the year to bring the offering you owe as a fee for the healing?" The boy answered, "I promise," and was made whole from that moment.
4. Pandarus slept in the sanctuary in order to be healed of branding marks on his forehead. He dreamt the god bound up the brand marks with a bandage. Next day he took off the bandage and found that the marks had been transferred to the bandage.

D. Jewish Miracle Stories from the Mishnah:
1. Taanit (Mishnah) 21:
Nahum was a very pious man chosen to send a gift of gems in a jeweled box to the Roman emperor. An inn-keeper replaced the gems with sand while Nahum slept along the way. The emperor was going to have Nahum executed when
Elijah, disguised as a Roman patrician, said that there is a Jewish tradition that Abraham, short of ammunition, once threw sand at the enemy and it smote them like a sword. They postponed the execution and tried the sand at a town which resisted surrender to the Romans. It worked, and Nahum was spared and rewarded. The inn-keeper, hearing the story from Nahum on the return journey, took a wagon-load of sand to the Emperor. This sand did not work, and the inn-keeper was executed for deceiving the Emperor.

2. *Taanit* 23:
   Honi prays for rain during a drought, and it comes.

3. *Taanit* 23:
   Honi sleeps for 70 years after asking, "Is it possible that seventy years should be like a dream?" (a reference to Ps. 126.1).

4. *Taanit* 24:
   R. Hanina ben Dosa works miracles: stops and starts the rain; prays that vinegar mistakenly placed in the lamp instead of oil would burn, and it does; has a prayer answered that if his goats were not, as believed by others, doing damage, they would each bring in a wolf on their horns, and they do.

5. *Berakoth* (Mishnah) 34:
   The son of R. Galamiel fell ill. R. Hanina ben Dosa was asked by two scholars to pray for the son. He did, and said, "Go, the fever has left him." He said that he knew from experience that if his prayer was fluently spoken it was accepted, otherwise not. The scholars returned to R. Gamaliel and found the boy recovered.

**Stories of Demon Possession and Deliverance**

A. **Flavius Josephus:**
   42 Now the sagacity and wisdom which God had bestowed on Solomon was so great, that he exceeded the ancients;… 45 God also enabled him to learn that skill which expels demons, {c} which is a science useful and wholesome to men. He composed such incantations also by which distempers are alleviated. And he left behind him the manner of using exorcisms, by which they drive away demons, so that they never return; 46 and this method of cure is of great force to this day; for I have seen a certain man of my own country, whose name was Eleazar, releasing people that were demonic in the presence of Vespasian, and his sons, and his captains, and the whole multitude of his soldiers. The manner of the cure was this: 47 he put a ring, that had a root of one of those sorts mentioned by Solomon to the nostrils of the demoniac, after which he drew out the demon through his nostrils; and when the man fell down immediately, he warned him to return into him no more, making still mention of Solomon, and reciting the incantations which he composed. 48 And when Eleazar would persuade and demonstrate to the spectators that he had such a power, he set a little way off a cup or basin full of water, and commanded the demon, as he went out of the man, to overturn it, and thereby to let the spectators know that he had left the man… (*Antiquities of the Jews* 8:42a, 46-48).

B. **Philostratus:**
"In the middle of this conversation, the Wise Men were interrupted by the messenger bringing some Indians who needed cures. For instance, he brought forward a woman praying to them on her son’s behalf. He was sixteen years old, she said, but had been possessed for two years by a spirit with a sly, deceitful character. One of the wise men asked what her evidence was, and she said, 'This boy of mine is rather handsome in appearance, and the spirit is in love with him. He will not allow him to be rational, or go to school or to archery-training, or to stay at home either, but carries him off into deserted places. My boy no longer has his natural voice but speaks in deep, ringing tones like a man; his eyes, too, are more someone else's than his own. All this makes me weep and tear my hair, and I scold my son as you would expect, but he does not recognize me. But when I decided on this journey, which I did a year ago, the spirit confessed who he was, using my son as a medium. He said he was the ghost of a man who formerly died in war, still very much in love with his wife; but the woman broke their marriage bond three days after his death by marrying another man, and from that time, he said, he had loathed the love of women and had transferred his affection to my son. And he promised that if I did not accuse him before you he would give many wonderful presents to the boy; and this rather made me change my mind. But he has been keeping me waiting for a long time now, acting as sole master of my house, with his wicked, deceitful ways.' The Wise Man then asked her if the boy was with her, but she said, 'No: I did everything to make him come, but that spirit threatened me with mention of 'cliffs' and 'abysses', saying he would kill my son if I accused him here.' 'Don't worry,' said the Wise Man; 'he will not kill him when he has read this,' and he brought a letter out of his pocket and gave it to the woman; it was addressed to the spirit, and contained threats and warnings" (Life of Appolonius, III.38; Penguin, pp. 83f).

Resuscitation

Philostratus:

"Apollonius performed another miracle. There was a girl who appeared to have died just at the time of her wedding. The groom followed the bier, with all the lamentations of an unconsummated marriage, and the city of Rome mourned with him, since the girl was from a family of consular rank. Apollonius appeared on the scene and said, 'Put the bier down. I will stop you crying for the girl.' Immediately he asked her name, which made most people think he was going to declaim a speech of the kind delivered at funerals to raise lamentation. But Apollonius merely touched her and said something secretly over her, waking the girl up from her apparent death. Immediately the girl spoke, and went back to her father's house like Alcestis brought back to life by Hercules....He may have seen a spark of life in her which her doctors had not noticed, since apparently it was drizzling and steam was coming from her face; or he may have revived and restored her life when it was extinguished; but the true explanation of this has proved unfathomable, to me no less than to the bystanders" (Life of Appolonius, IV.45; Penguin, p. 107).
Life After Death (Not Resurrection)

Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius*:

"The next day he called Damis and said, 'My defence will occur on the appointed day, but you must take the road to Dicaearchia,...because I will appear before your eyes there.' 'Alive,' asked Damis, 'or how?' Apollonius laughed and said, 'To my way of thinking, alive, but to yours, risen from the dead'" (VII.41; Penguin, p. 197).

Later, the dead Apollonius appears to a boy in a dream who does not believe in the doctrine of the immortality of the soul (VIII.31).

**Questions:**

In 1-2 pages, answer the following questions:

1. What strikes you as similar and different between the nature of these miracles and what we read in the Gospels?
2. What do Jesus’ miracles indicate? The presence of the Kingdom, the divinity of Jesus, the presence of the Spirit, the prophetic authority of Jesus, Jesus’ compassion, etc.?
3. Given your answers in 1 and 2, is there any reason *from the Gospels* to believe that the miracles did not occur, that they might only occur when performed by Jesus or the first disciples, or that we should expect miracles today, both Christian and non-Christian?

Keep your answers to these questions focussed on what you find in the Synoptic Gospels themselves and in the primary sources?

**Marking:**

*Discussion focussed on texts, both those listed above and in the Gospels*
*Accurate descriptions*
*Perceptive analysis and critical strengths*