

The Signs Of Jesus, Part One

By
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One of the first and most obvious differences between the biographies of Jesus found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as opposed to those of some great king, statesman or president, are the reports of his miracles. Unlike the story of "the Great Houdini" or some other person who did things which amazed the world, the marvelous feats of Jesus are offered to readers as proof "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." The modern age tells us to regard these stories as mere myths invented by the later church, but an enormous slice of mankind is unmoved by this argument, opting instead to believe every single word of the records, as well as the conclusions drawn by those first Christians.

I am happy to say that I am one of those people. I believe every word of the report as given in the gospels. Beyond this, I accept fully the conclusion "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Believing the first leads inevitably to the second. It did in apostolic times, and it does today. The reverse is also true, however. If one rejects the integrity of the "signs," he is led, without fail, either to give up the notion "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," or else to reinterpret all the terminology of the phrase so that its power is vitiated or his (Jesus') person is lowered to the level of an ordinary but exceptional human being.

That is not an acceptable position for a Christian to hold. John explains the reason for his telling the story of Jesus in the Gospel that bears his name:

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may

believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

John brings out a number of points which are worthy of our consideration in this enlightening text:

1. Jesus did many signs. John's Gospel offers seven major miracles, beginning with the water which he turned to wine at Cana of Galilee (2:11) and ending with his resurrection in chapter twenty. Most of these reports are independent of the "synoptic" records in Matthew, Mark and Luke, which tend to cover essentially the same material. Scholars usually conclude from this that John's Gospel was the last one written. He already had seen their documents and intended to supplement the history as left by them. Still, at the conclusion of John's record, he suggests that there were yet "many other signs" of Jesus which the disciples had witnessed, but for the sake of brevity they would not be covered.

That the story could never fully have been written, is evidenced by these simple lines in Matthew: "And Jesus went about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of disease and all manner of sickness among the people. And the report of him went forth into all Syria: and they brought unto him all that were sick, holden with divers diseases and torments, possessed with demons, and epileptic, and palsied; and he healed them" (Matt. 4:23-24); and, again, in Luke: "And all the multitude sought to touch him; for power came forth from him, and healed them all" (Lk. 6:19).

We probably know about only a small fraction of those who were helped by him. Jesus' signs were many!

2. Some of his signs were recorded for posterity in writing. Four men left records of his life in written form. John was one of the four. He speaks of those things which he had seen with his own eyes, and so as a witness: "This is the disciple that beareth witness of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his witness is true" (Jn. 21:24). Luke, on the other hand, interviewed eyewitnesses and wrote as a historian reporting accurately these happenings "even as they delivered them unto us, who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Lk. 1:2-3). Matthew was an apostle; like John, he wrote as one who had seen much of what he reported. The Gospel of Mark, on the other hand, is the report of Peter as told through his translator, John Mark: "After the death of Peter and Paul, Mark delivered to us in writing things preached by Peter" (Irenaeus). Jesus had promised them divine guidance in their remembrance of what they would later report to the world about him (Jn. 14:26).

3. These signs were written down in order to instill faith in the readers. The Gospels and their signs are not written as mere historical records of events. The writers are evangelists, preachers, intent upon converting their readers: they write in order "that ye may believe" (Jn. 20:31).

The miracles of Jesus are set forth for the examination by the readers that they might pass judgment upon these incidents and make up their minds one way or another. Either Jesus is the Christ, Son of God, or he is not. The miracles help the reader to decide in favor. For example, in John 11 the story of the raising of Lazarus of Bethany is recorded. The man was most certainly dead. His sisters interred him in the family tomb. They would not have made a mistake on this. The body was in the grave for four days before the arrival of Jesus. When Christ arrived, he instructed them to open the tomb. They didn't want to do it because they knew by now the body was decaying. Jesus called to the dead as

you or I would call to someone in another room of our house: "Lazarus, come out!" (NIV). Here was an opportunity to either demonstrate his divinity or show himself a fraud. You know the outcome. - to be continued