

DO MIRACLES NECESSITE DIVINITY?

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Description: A look at the miracles of Jesus which Christians claim to prove his divinity.

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Some associate Jesus with  divinity because he performed miracles. Many Unitarian Christians and all Muslims point out that Jesus did indeed perform miracles, but by the will of God and not through any divine powers of his own. To repeat the quote of Acts 2:22:

“Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves also know” (italics mine)

In conformity with both the Bible and Holy Quran, Muslims contend that the miracles of Jesus were performed by the power of God. As the Holy Quran states,

Then will Allah say: “O Jesus the son of Mary! Recount My favor to you and to your mother. Behold! I strengthened you with the holy spirit, so that you spoke to the people in childhood and in maturity. Behold! I taught you the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel. And behold! You made out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, by My leave, and you breathed into it, and it became a bird by My leave, and you healed those born blind, and the lepers, by My leave. And behold! You brought forth the dead by My leave. (Quran 5:110)

The Islamic perspective is that miracles can be God-given signs of prophethood, but don't imply divinity. *Hadith* (narrations of the words, deeds, appearance, and tacit approvals of Muhammad) relate numerous miracles of Muhammad with greater historical authenticity than found in biblical manuscripts. While the science of *hadith* authentication is regarded as a wonder of historical recordkeeping, the Bible doesn't satisfy many of the most basic standards of historical accuracy.* For example, the authors of most of the books of the Bible (gospels included) are unknown, the time period in which they were written is ill-defined, and the source of much of the information is ambiguous. These issues will be discussed later at greater length, but just as a small teaser, let's examine the story of Judas' betrayal of Jesus to the chief priests. Who was the author, and why should we believe him? Was he present at the betrayal? If not, then where did he get his information? And if so, and he didn't alert Jesus, then isn't he a partner to the crime? And what kind of a gospel author would *that* be?

Sounds silly? Maybe. But then again, isn't it sillier to trust salvation to a compilation of gospels and letters of unknown origin and authorship?

The Jesus Seminar is perhaps one of the most objective and sincere attempts of an ecumenical council of Christian scholars to determine the authenticity of the recorded acts and sayings of Jesus. Yet their methodology involves casting votes! Two thousand years after the ministry of Jesus, nearly two hundred scholars are formulating a collective Christian opinion regarding the reliability of the quotes and historical reports of Jesus by casting colored beads. For example, as regards the reported words of Jesus, the definitions of the bead colors are as follows:

Red—Jesus said it or something very close to it. Pink—Jesus probably said something like it, although his words have suffered in transmission. Gray—these are not his words, but the ideas are close to his own. Black—Jesus did not say it; the words represent the Christian community or a later point of view.^[1]

Other Christian committees have attempted to authenticate Bible texts by similar methodologies. The editors of the United Bible Societies' *The Greek New Testament: Second Edition* are alphabetically minded:

By means of the letters A, B, C, and D, enclosed within "braces" {} at the beginning of each set of textual variants the Committee has sought to indicate the relative degree of certainty, arrived at the basis of internal considerations as well as of external evidence, for the reading adopted as the text. The letter A signifies that the text is virtually certain, while B indicates that there is some degree of doubt. The letter C means that there is a considerable degree of doubt whether the text of the apparatus contains the superior reading, while D shows that there is a very high degree of doubt concerning the reading selected for the text.^[2]

Bruce M. Metzger describes using similar methodology in his *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. "In fact," he writes, "among the {D} decisions sometimes none of the variant readings commended itself as original, and therefore the only recourse was to print the least unsatisfactory reading."^[3]

Now doesn't *that* give us a warm, secure feeling in trusting the Bible with the salvation of mankind?

But I digress. The point is that these ranking systems are probably about the best possible, given the limitations of the biblical record, but what a sad comment that is! Compared to the exquisitely refined system of *hadith* authentication, these colored-bead and A-B-C-D classification systems are a bit wanting, to say the least.

The historical record keeping is relevant, for when a person hears a story—even a credible story at that—the first question is usually "Where did you hear that?" Any reasonable set of historical standards includes the identification and verification of sources. The Holy Quran and many *hadith* traditions satisfy the highest degrees of authentication. But the majority of Bible verses don't.*

How does this relate to the issue at hand? Simple. The miracles that occurred through Muhammad are no less numerous or impressive than those of Jesus, and are witnessed by an unimpeachable historical record that puts all others of similar time period to shame. So just as the miracles of Moses, Elisha, and Muhammad don't imply divinity, neither do those of Jesus.

Let's look at a few examples:

- 1. Jesus fed thousands with a few fish and loaves of bread.** But Elisha fed a hundred people with twenty barley loaves and a few ears of corn (2 Kings 4:44); granted a widow such an abundant flow of oil from a jar that she was able to pay off her debts, save her sons from slavery, and live on the profits (2 Kings 4:1-7); and gave increase to a handful of flour and spot of oil such that he, a widow and her son had enough to eat for many days, after which "The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry ..." (1 Kings 17:10-16). So what does that make Elisha? The historical record of Muhammad feeding the masses with a handful of dates on one occasion, a pot of milk on another, and enough meat for a small party on still another are equally miraculous. Likewise are the stories of his watering the masses (1,500 people on one occasion) from a single bowl of water. Yet no Muslim claims divinity for Muhammad.
- 2. Jesus healed the lepers.** Likewise, Elisha healed Naaman (2 Kings 5:7-14). For that matter, the disciples were bidden to such service in Matthew 10:8. What does that make them?
- 3. Jesus cured a blind man.** Elisha not only struck his enemies blind, but restored vision to the blind through prayer (2 Kings 6:17-20). Muhammad reportedly cured blindness through prayer as well.
- 4. Jesus raised the dead.** Once again, Elisha beat him to it, having raised two children from the dead (1 Kings 17:22 and 2 Kings 4:34). Furthermore, the disciples were bidden to raise the dead (Matthew 10:8). So once again, what does that make them?
- 5. Jesus walked on water.** Had he been around in the time of Moses, he wouldn't have had to.
- 6. Jesus cast out devils.** So did his disciples (Matthew 10:8). So did the sons of the Pharisees (Matthew 12:27 and Luke 11:19). So, for that matter, do the wayward followers whom Jesus will reportedly disown (see Matthew 7:22)—a disconcerting thought considering how many priests and ministers perform such theatrics, even if real.

So if we seek evidence of Jesus being divine, we are forced to look beyond miracles.

The above excerpt is taken from Dr. Brown's forthcoming book, *MisGod'ed*, which is expected to be published along with its sequel, *God'ed*. Both books can be viewed on Dr. Brown's website, www.LevelTruth.com. Dr. Brown can be contacted at BrownL38@yahoo.com

Footnotes:

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For more in-depth study, the reader is referred to *Hadith Literature: Its Origins, Development and Special Features*, by Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi (Islamic Texts Society, London, 1993), and *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature*, by Muhammad Mustafa Azami (American Trust Publications, Indianapolis, 1977).

[1]

Funk, Robert Walter. 1996. *Honest to Jesus, Jesus for a New Millennium*. Polebridge Press. p. 8.

[2]

Aland, Kurt, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger & Allen Wikgren (Editors). 1968. *The Greek New Testament*. Second Edition. United Bible Societies. pp. x-xi.

[3]

Metzger, Bruce M. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. Introduction, p. 14.

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Whereas hadith are preserved work-for-word, "there are more differences among our [biblical] manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament" – Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus*. p. 10.

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