

A Critical Reading Journal Analysis of the Central Theme of Jesus's Teachings

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APOL810: Miracles, the Resurrection and Christian Ministry (B01)

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The focus of this week's material serves twofold purposes. First, we are considering whether Jesus' miracles could be confirmation of God's message. Second, we are analyzing Jesus' ministry to determine his core message. All these concepts are being considered in light of material from Habermas' *The Risen Jesus* and the Gospel of Matthew.

Miracles as Confirmation of Jesus's Message

A thorough reading of the Gospel of Matthew offers the reader a repeated illustration of the miraculous things that serve as ingredients for Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection. Not only was his birth supernatural (succinctly miraculous), but also his entire ministry shows Jesus performing wondrous signs both to the people of Israel and the Romans alike. Of course, all the miracles Jesus performed pale in comparison to the miracle of his resurrection. To return to one of Habermas' original arguments, for miracles to exist, they require supernatural power since they are "more than natural." If Jesus was not capable of supernatural things, there is no way that he could perform the many documented miracles or even some of the unique things he did without a cloud of witnesses¹.

To properly unpack the thoughts presented here, it is important to consider the context in which the Gospel of Matthew was written. It is agreed upon by many authorities that the book was written by Matthew (also known as Levi) who was a devout Jew and held the unpopular profession as a tax collector². Knowing that the target audience for Matthew would be Jews, it makes sense that his gospel would focus on the miracles of Jesus and how his life and

¹ Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 89.

² The Lockman Foundation, *Life Application Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 1578.

experiences were used to fulfill many of the Old Testament prophecies. After all, the average Jew would not be inclined to believe in Jesus as the Messiah without wondrous signs³. If one reads the other Gospels, they will find that although some other instances of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies are present, they are not as clearly delineated as they are in Matthew's Gospel.

As expressed in Matthew, Jesus performed many miraculous signs to the awe and amazement of those who witnessed them. But does this truly establish that Jesus, himself, considered himself divine? While the earlier portions of the Gospel show only minor examples of Jesus even hinting about his divinity, this trend changes as he draws closer to Jerusalem. Once he arrives in Jerusalem, the reader of Matthew can sense Jesus' acceptance of his role and his preparation for the consequences. Some of the most impactful things that Jesus says include him saying that he will sit on God's throne (cf. Mark 14:62-63). But truly, Jesus' most well-known designation of himself as the Son of God or the Son of Man⁴. Scholars have differing opinions as to the exact definition of the Son of Man, but the sources can agree that Jesus considered himself as God's son and servant.

Defining Jesus's Central Teaching

Jesus's ministry was quite short and ended long before word of it spread far beyond the borders of Israel. Yet, this powerful teaching, the rabbi who could somehow take the Holy Scriptures and explain and argue them in a way that made them clear for all, proved to be very dangerous for Jesus and later, his followers. If that is the case, then one must ask what could

³ Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 90.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

possibly be so important that it could cause such huge civil unrest and lead to a (presumed) innocent man to die? Answering that question, once again, requires understanding of the political and social climate of the time in which Jesus lived. The period between the last messages of the Old Testament prophets and the birth of Jesus was well over 700 years and is commonly referred to as the “Intertestamental Period”⁵.

This was a period of tremendous upheaval for the Jewish people as they became subjects of Babylon, Assyria, and eventually Rome. Their temples had been destroyed, their land stripped of much of its resources, and many internal and external political battles. Since there was no longer a temple nor were many of the ordinances of God’s Levitical rules even possible, Jewish rabbis created several documents, laws, and interstitial solutions in an attempt to help the Jews remain holy despite the challenges they faced. While this might have seemed great in theory, it was ultimately used by the religious elite to better their place in society while strangling the freedom of the other Jewish people to near death. Jesus even says that the rules and regulations enacted by the Pharisees were so demanding that it made non-Pharisees “twice the child of hell” (cf. Matthew 23: 15, NLT).

The message of Jesus was focused almost solely on the coming Kingdom of God. The Jews had spent the past seven centuries enslaved in an impossible spiral of attempting to be holy by regulation, failing, and then trying again. It is easy to see how the people might have felt abandoned by God and hopeless. The only guides they had, prior to Jesus, were hypocrites who demanded things that not even they were capable of themselves. Much to the chagrin of the hearers, this kingdom was not an earthly kingdom with a defined land, walls, borders, or a

⁵ Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia Between Persia and Roman Palestine: Decoding the Literary Record* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 28.

physical king. Instead, it was a kingdom as God intended it all along, with no earthly king, and made up of those who wanted to worship God and God alone. Jesus took the entire known world and flipped it on its head because he wanted to show that his message was the message God had been trying to tell his children for years⁶.

The fact that Jesus was willing to speak things considered blasphemous by the religious leaders is only one piece of this assault on beliefs. This man, who was despised by the people who were supposed to be godly, even performed miracles – something no Pharisee ever did. In fact, Jesus presented several prophecies to the Pharisees at different times and showed them how he fulfilled those prophecies and they all miraculously occurred⁷. Habermas was able to use his material to illustrate the fulfillment of each of these items as historically accurate and the miracles were found in multiple sources that fit Habermas' historical guardrails for authenticity.

Analysis of Habermas' Arguments

In Habermas' assessment, Jesus' central teaching was the Kingdom of God and very few scholars argue against this statement⁸. When considering the miraculous signs that Jesus performed while he walked the earth, it all points back to leading mankind back to God's original plan, a kingdom where God and God alone rules. The fact that Jesus also spends a considerable amount of time showing how he fulfills the prophecies set forth by God, and in a

⁶ Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 123.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

way that no one else could possibly accomplish, it lends plenty of support to Habermas' evidence.

Although Habermas provides many examples of Jesus's teaching as evidence for furthering God's Kingdom, the miracles also illustrate this. God's plan will not make sense to someone who views things from the world's view or someone who takes a purely naturalistic approach. If the world does not allow for any action beyond the box of the known world, there is no way that Jesus could be anything but a heretic who led the world astray. But to this, Habermas offers what seems like the most resonant argument against this, 'By raising Jesus from the dead, God would especially be emphasizing Jesus's primary message, for He would not have raised a heretic from the dead⁹.' God allowing Jesus to do all the things needed to exhibit God's power seems to be solid enough proof that Jesus' message was true, and God mandated it.

Conclusion

The entire life and ministry of Jesus serves as a highly defensible support that Jesus was God's son and that Jesus's life was intended to bring about God's plans in the most effective way possible. God wanted to bring His wayward children home in some way, shape, or fashion. What better way to do so than by sending Jesus, armed with God's power but fully surrendered to the will of the Father? Jesus was delivered into this "box" of the world by a supernatural means. Upon his arrival, God was able to use him as the direct key for Him to interact in the world through the Son He sent. Jesus showed the box how to escape the box and all future generations can celebrate that fact.

⁹ Habermas, *The Risen Jesus*, 131.

Bibliography

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