Miracles and Methods

Per Bjarne Ravnå

Abstract

Prominent scholars in the field of historical Jesus research have argued that historians should be willing to accept all sorts of miracles that are convincingly attested to in the sources. The present article agrees with this view in principle but argues that, if analysed with the ordinary source-critical methods of conventional historical scholarship, there are significant and systematic differences in the source-critical strength of the stories. Miracles that fit inside a modern scientific worldview seem to have a stronger foundation in the sources than miracles that do not. The difference is quite clear when one compares the stories about how Jesus raised the dead, but it is also visible when one compares stories of other miracles. There are at least two ways of explaining these differences. One is that they are created by the scepticism of the modern scientific worldview of this writer. The other is that the differences exist in the sources because some of the miracle stories go back to memories of real events, while others do not.

Key words: biblical miracles, source critical method, scientific worldview, raising the dead, walking on water, healing the sick

The miracles are central to all understanding of Jesus. Stories about miracles play a central role in the Gospels, belief in the miracles is central to Christian faith, and the miracles pose a central problem for scholars who try to reach a historical understanding of Jesus of Nazareth. How do historians cope with events that are inherently implausible when the discipline of history itself is built upon questions regarding what is plausible? Scholars in historical Jesus research treat the miracles in different ways, but two traits are widespread: most scholars are willing to accept some of the miracle stories as based on memories of real events, while many scholars emphatically declare that some of the miracle stories cannot be accepted because history as a discipline cannot accept divine agents (Eve 2005: 24; Keener 2017; Twelftree 2004: 206). In recent years, a significant number of scholars have argued that this approach is faulty (Geivett & Habermas; Keener 2011; Levine; Licona; Twelftree 1999: 52; 2014: 324–25). They claim that it is philosophically untenable to say a priori that miracles cannot happen because we do not know, and will never know, everything about how the world works (Twelftree 2004:

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Recently, I have come to believe that they are right. Historians should accept whatever the sources can attest beyond a reasonable doubt. One problem with my newfound openness to miracles, however, is that this stance changes nothing when it comes to my view of the miracles of Jesus. I do believe that historians should be open to miracles—but I still can find no reason to believe that Jesus commanded powers that do not fit inside my scientific and godless worldview. Instead, when I investigate the historical foundations of the miracle stories with the same source-critical methods I use in ordinary secular Roman history, I find a peculiar correspondence between how well-attested the miracle stories appear to be in the sources and how easily they fit into a scientific worldview. The picture is not totally clear, but it seems as though the stories that can be explained by forces known by science tend to stand out as source-critically strong, while the stories that do not have a scientific explanation tend to stand out as source-critically weak. To be honest, I do not know what this means. Does it mean that the miracles that are easy to explain scientifically are more likely to be historical than the ones that are not? Or, does it mean that my source-critical methods are biased—and only let through the kind of miracles that do not threaten my atheistic worldview?

This article will first discuss the correspondence between the source-critical strength and scientific acceptability of some of the miracle stories, and then ponder the question about what this might mean. This is not a rhetorical question. I do realize that the last alternative is a real possibility. Our world views will always influence our research, no matter if we are atheists or believe in Christianity or any other religion.

As a secondary objective, it is my hope that the discussion can serve as an example of how methods from ordinary secular history can be of use in historical Jesus research. There is currently underway a substantial methodological shift in the field of historical Jesus research, inspired by the so called demise of the authenticity criteria (Allison; Hägerland; Andrew). The situation has much in common with what happened with ordinary secular history from around 1980 and onwards as historians reacted to theorists like Hayden White and Alun Munslow, who argued that historians cannot reach “the real past”, they can only construct narratives that represent their own understanding of it (White; Munslow). As discussions raged back and forth, historians came to realize that there is no such thing as historical truth or historical facts. Many were worried that the discipline of history itself would lose its meaning, but as the years have gone by it has become apparent that these worries were unfounded. Historians still go about their work with the sources in much of the same way as they did before the advent of postmodernism. What has changed is not so much the way we do history, as the way we regard the results. Historians today do not usually discuss if a presentation of the past is authentic, but which presentation - out of many possible presentations - is the most plausible, given the sources we possess. As will be shown, discussions of historical plausibility will often use tools that have much in common with the authenticity criteria of traditional historical Jesus research, only without the expectation of authenticity (Bock). Historical Jesus research has developed the finest source-critical knowledge base in existence anywhere in historical studies. As scholars in the field reconsider the concept of authenticity, the study of the historical Jesus has the potential to be a much needed meeting point between New Testament Studies and the wider academic historical disciplines (Arnal; Crook).

### Miracles in Historical Jesus Research

The correspondence between source-critical strength and scientific acceptability of the miracle stories is seldom mentioned in research literature. Eric Eve comes close in his book *The Healer from Nazareth. Jesus’ Miracles in Historical Context*, in which he shows how the nature miracles in Mark play a less central role for Jesus’ mission than the stories about healing and exorcism (Eve 2009). Instead, the nature miracles are central to understanding his Christological identity; the text of Mark indicates that these stories are to be understood symbolically (Eve 2009: 114, 168). Eve seems to understand this to indicate that the stories of healings and exorcisms are necessary to understand the historical impact of Jesus, while the stories about nature miracles, or what Eve calls “anomalous miracles,” are dispensable and therefore more likely to be fabricated with inspiration from Old Testament stories (Eve 2009: 159–60). Nevertheless, his opinion that anomalous
miracles cannot be a part of scientific historical research renders meaningless a comparison between the source-critical strength of anomalous and non-anomalous miracles (Eve 2009: 148). The lack of interest in such a comparison is widespread.

Even Graham Twelftree and John P. Meier, who have produced the two most thorough works on miracles in relatively recent years, do not seem to take much of an interest in the correspondence between source-critical strength and scientific acceptability (Meier 1994; Twelftree 1999). Meier makes a thorough assessment of the miracle stories in volume 2 of *A Marginal Jew*. Although he tries to reach a disinterested evaluation of the possible connections between each story and the life of Jesus, he does not compare the source-critical foundations of the so-called nature miracles with the foundations of the stories about healing or exorcisms. Likewise, Twelftree, in *Jesus the miracle worker*, performs penetrating examinations of the historical sources, but he does not compare the strength of the sources for the more and less scientifically explainable miracles—nor would one expect him to, since he prepares the ground for discussion with a forceful defense of the possibility of miracles from a philosophical, theological, and scientific point of view (Twelftree 1999: 52). According to Twelftree, all miracles are possible, and this makes discriminating between possible and impossible miracles useless.

On the other hand, scholars who hold that some of the events described in the miracle stories could not have happened because they are inherently impossible also seem to be uninterested in comparing the source-critical strength of possible and impossible miracles. They are usually keen to state that the so-called nature miracles have to be regarded as unhistorical because history, as such, cannot incorporate events that do not fit inside a scientific worldview (Ehrman: 143–51). One variant of this is Meier’s view that a historian can only consider whether the stories of miracles go back to events in the life of Jesus, but not if an event actually was a miracle in the sense of being caused by an act of God (Meier 1994: 512–15). This distinction might work well enough when it comes to healings or exorcisms, which might have been healings of what we would have recognized as mental disorders. When it comes to stories about walking on water or changing water into wine, however, such a distinction simply will not work. These kinds of acts cannot have any explanation inside our current scientific understanding of the world. If we conclude that the stories about walking on water originated in a real event in the life of Jesus, it will automatically follow that the event must have been caused by forces we do not know. This is as close to saying that it was a miracle as to make no difference. Whatever variant this attitude comes in, it would make assessing the reliability of the sources behind these miracles meaningless. In this manner, both believers and non-believers are kept from comparing the scientific acceptability and source-critical strength of the miracles. The result is that this operation has simply not been done yet.

**Miracles and Historical Method**

Two central concepts for this article are *miracle* and *source-critical strength*. The concept of a miracle is the easier to define. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines a miracle as:

> An extraordinary and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore attributed to a divine agency [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/miracle].

This definition will not work for a discussion of the miracle stories in the Gospels because it builds on modern concepts of “natural or scientific laws.” Such a modern definition leaves out too many of the healing stories because they can be explained scientifically as based on therapies that utilize the placebo effect. A simple solution is to remove “natural or scientific laws” and substitute a more open formula. My best suggestion is:

> An extraordinary and welcome event that is not explicable by known human capabilities or other ordinary forces and is therefore attributed to a divine agency.

This would make it possible to discuss the source-critical strength of both the miracle stories that can be explained by natural or scientific laws and the miracle
stories that cannot. The distinction between these two kinds of miracle stories corresponds well with the way Eric Eve prefers to use the term anomalous miracles instead of the more traditional nature miracles. According to Eve, an anomalous miracle is an event that will constitute a breach with the way the world, to the best of our current knowledge, works (Eve 2009: 148). A non-anomalous miracle would then be an event that is unusual and surprising, but that can be explained in a way that does not constitute any breach of the way the world, to the best of our current knowledge, works.

To define the concept of source-critical strength within the limits of an article is much more challenging than defining miracles. The concept of source criticism in ordinary secular history is less clear and less systematized and therefore also broader, more flexible and versatile than what seems to be the case in biblical studies. It is impossible to delve fully into the question within the scope of this article, but it is important to note that there are differences between the scholarly traditions of New Testament Studies and traditions prevalent in what one could call conventional history (Meggitt: 458–59). The use of authenticity criteria in historical Jesus research exemplifies one side of the differences. Such a phenomenon as a fixed set of authenticity criteria is just not conceivable in a conventional historical field. The reason for this is not the criteria, but rather the problems connected to the concept of authenticity in history. It is now widely recognised that the search for authentic information about Jesus—or any other historical figure—is futile (Hägerland: 43–47; Rodriguez; Allison). The aim of ordinary historians in secular history is not to establish what is authentic, but simply to construct as plausible a picture of the past as possible. To do this, it is necessary to assess the relative plausibility of information provided by sources and build our constructions on the most plausible information. The techniques and methods used to make these assessments will differ. For questions connected to the historical Jesus, many of the old authenticity criteria may still be useful, not as criteria for authenticity but as general principles for assessment of the relative source-critical strength of specific pieces of information (Hägerland: 62–63).

For ordinary historians working in conventional fields of history, the term source criticism encompasses all kinds of judgments that help us decide how much or how little we can trust the information we are able to glean from sources. In this article the term source criticism refers to these varied and flexible practices of assessing the usefulness and reliability of sources, and not to the more specific use of this term prevalent in New Testament Studies. Source-critical strength will, when understood like this, usually be synonymous with the broad expression historical plausibility. When we are working with miracle stories, it is, however, better to avoid this expression because it often incorporates assessments of what can or cannot happen—and this is a sort of assessment we want to abstain from when dealing with miracles. One way to describe what I will do in the following is to say that I will do my best to assess the historical plausibility of the miracle stories without making judgements about what is possible or impossible. To avoid confusion, I will use the expression source-critical strength instead of plausibility. It is important to note that I will not try to determine whether or not the stories are true. The only purpose of the assessment is to see if there are differences in source-critical strength between the stories, and whether these differences correspond with differences in the anomalousness of the miracles described in the stories. This kind of operation is easiest to perform with the stories about Jesus raising the dead.

Raising the Dead

The canonical Gospels contain three stories about Jesus raising the dead. The raising of Jairus’ daughter is first told in Mark, the raising of the widow’s son in Nain is only told in Luke and the raising of Lazarus is known only from John. The raising of the dead is also mentioned in a Jesus-word, as part of the Q material. If one follows the majority view that Q was an independent text, the phenomenon of raising the dead has a fairly broad source-critical base (Howes: 58–61; Kloppenborg). If we hold that John is independent of the Synoptic Gospels (Smith: 234–41), the phenomenon is based in four different traditions—Mark, Q, special Luke and John. Even if we hold that John knew about, and sometimes may have used the synoptics as a mirror for his own writing (Crossan: 111–14), the concept of raising the dead still has relatively strong attestation.
kind of miracle is also attested in more than one type of material—both miracle stories and in a Jesus-word—the attestation gets even stronger. This reasoning builds on the source-critical principle that lies behind the so-called ‘criterion of multiple attestation’. As Eve has argued, multiple attestation does not guarantee authenticity, (Eve 2005). However, it also corresponds with a much-used principle in historical source critique—that sources written down closer to the events described are usually regarded as more reliable than sources written down later in time. If a story is found in many traditions, it most likely entered the written traditions at a relatively early date. Overall, compared to other information accepted as plausible in ancient history, that Jesus was remembered as someone who was able to raise dead people to life has a strong position in the sources. A closer look at each story, however, reveals that the amount of source-critical strength is not evenly distributed. The story with most source-critical strength is less anomalous, while the most obviously anomalous story is source-critically weaker.

The story of Jairus’ daughter is first told in Mark 5: 35–43. This means it has support from only one strand of tradition. This is the oldest extant tradition and so it is somewhat stronger than special Luke or John as a single strand of tradition, but this may not mean much. Added to this assessment, however, are some traits of this story that indicate an origin close to the life of Jesus. This is one of very few instances where the direct speech of Jesus is reported in Aramaic. As Aramaic most likely was Jesus and his followers’ main spoken language, this raises the probability that the story actually reports something that was remembered by eyewitnesses (Casey: 108, 268–69; Porter: 134). This also fits well with other considerations connected to the words quoted. *Thalita coum* may be as close as we ever get to anything that can be characterised as *ipsissima verba Jesu* and, as such, the words are outright disappointing. Here we have the Messiah busy performing the fantastical feat of reversing death! Would we not expect him to have something more important to say than “Little girl, get up”? As a gospel writer, Mark was an adept theologian, but it is very hard to find any convincing theological purpose behind this utterance. The rest of the story is also remarkably bereft of grandiosity and theological potency.

When Jesus sees the grief of the mourners, he tells them that the girl is not dead—she is only sleeping. Is this not a weak point in the story, from an early Christian point of view? Does not this part of the story give non-believers like myself the chance to say: “Ha, ha—the girl was not dead, she was only comatose!” Overall, it is hard to imagine that the early Christians would make up a story like this if they wanted to construct a story about their Lord out of nothing. The story reads more like a simple report of a real event, put down in writing in a hurry and without much thought for theological implications. This is perfectly possible. Any one of the three disciples that followed Jesus into the house could have told the story to someone who could write—such as Matthew the tax collector (Casey: 87). Like all parts of the Gospels this story has a long and varied history of very advanced historical and theological critique and interpretation (Zwiep). When I read it with the same source-critical frame of mind that I use for sources for Roman political history, however, I cannot help noticing these simple traits that combine to give the story more source-critical strength than many other stories about Jesus. The use of Aramaic, the lack of potent theological one-liners and the remark about the girl not being dead at all, make it more plausible that this story originated close to Jesus—possibly in the memory of a real event witnessed by his closest disciples. I also find it likely that it was put into writing and so stabilized very early—before Christological considerations were able to make too much of an imprint on it (Casey: 62–78). This does not in any way mean that the story is authentic or true, but it does make it more plausible than stories about Jesus that do not make use of Aramaic, lack informal and mundane statements, and contain obvious theological points. For the purpose of this article, this is enough. The question is not whether or not the story is true, but whether it is source critically stronger than the other stories about Jesus raising the dead.

The story about Jairus’ daughter is source-critically strong. It also fits a scientific worldview. The patient had not been considered dead for long, and Jesus said she was not dead but sleeping. J. Keir Howard suggests several possible diagnoses that could have left the girl so deeply unconscious that her family might have feared she was dead (Howard: 95–100). The story does not contain enough precise descriptions of the symptoms
to allow certainty, but there are enough possibilities to choose from to make it acceptable within a scientific worldview. The way the story ends, with Jesus telling the girl’s parents to give her something to eat, also makes sense. If she had been unconscious for a while, it would have been prudent to stabilize her blood sugar. Meier believes this is inserted into the story to prove that the girl did not come back as a ghost (Meier 1994: 780). It is, however, important to note that the story does not actually say that the girl ate—and so the mention of food does not prove anything. If the sentence about food was inserted as a proof of the miracle, one would expect it to state explicitly that the girl really did eat. Altogether, the remark strengthens the simple and informal feeling of the story, and it is not difficult to imagine an incident like this in a society without modern medical knowledge.

The next story to consider, on a sliding scale from perfectly non-anomalous to very anomalous, is more difficult to fit into a modern view of medicine. It is also source-critically weaker. The story about the widow’s son in Nain, in Luke 7:11–17, is part of the special material of Luke which was written down, in the form we know it, relatively late. At the outset, this gives stories from special Luke a somewhat weaker foundation than stories from Mark, but in this case the difference may not be very significant. The story about the widow’s son in Nain is among the parts of Luke where it is possible to see traces of Hebrew language (Edwards: 292–93). It is therefore possible that Luke found this story in an earlier text written in Hebrew. The curious fact that the story implies that Nain had a gate, something Luke probably would not have known, also supports the supposition that the story itself may be older than Luke’s gospel. For all we know, it might have been written down as early as, or even earlier than, Mark. However, traces of Hebrew do not indicate the same degree of closeness to the cultural and social milieu of Jesus as do traces of Aramaic. Most likely Hebrew was more of a literary, or at least a specialist, language than an everyday language in Galilee (Meier 1991: 262–64; Porter: 134). This makes the story about the widow’s son in Nain weaker than the story about Jairus’ daughter, but not by much.

In further assessing the story, the possibility of a version earlier than Luke makes no difference. Since we have no reliable way of reconstructing a pre-Lukan version, we have to judge both the source-critical strength and the amount of anomalousness from what we can read in the extant version. When we have a closer look at the story as it is presented in Luke, the differences between this story and the story of Jairus’ daughter get more significant. The idea of a widow’s only son being raised from the dead by a Man of God in Galilee was not new. Elisha had done the same feat in the town of Sarepta, which was in the same area as Nain. The parallels between the stories should not be overdone, but there are some common traits—like the situation of the widow, the way the prophet handed the newly raised young man back to his mother, and the realisation that the wonder-worker must indeed be a prophet from God (Meier 1994: 790–97). One should also note that the story fits the theological agenda of Luke, with special emphasis on the salvation of the poor remarkably—as not to say suspiciously—well (Twelftree 1999: 307).

At the same time, the story lacks the practical traits that help to give the story about Jairus’ daughter a relatively firm source-critical standing. There are no hints that the young man was not truly dead, no one ridicules Jesus, and there are no mundane suggestions about getting the newly resuscitated something to eat. Last, but not least, there are no theologically neutral, and apparently quite trivial, Aramaic quotes. While the story about Jairus’ daughter does not look like something the early Christians would have cared to make up, the story about the widow’s son does exactly that. Taken together, the likeness to the story about Elisha raising a dead boy, and the lack of mundane or potentially embarrassing details, makes the story about the widow’s son less plausible as a story based upon memories of real events than the story about Jairus’ daughter (Meier 1994: 297). This fit in well with the amount of anomalousness in these two stories.

While the daughter of Jairus was recently declared dead, the widow’s son had been dead long enough for the preparations for burial to be completed. How long this would have been is difficult to say. In the climate of the Middle East, it was important to bury the dead early. Jews were allowed to visit graves of deceased family members up until three days after death occurred, possibly in order to be able to rescue anyone who might wake up from a coma after having been buried by mistake (Casey: 240). This might indicate that people believed there was a
danger that the dead could be buried too early. If this belief came from practical experience, it follows that the story of the raising of the widow’s son is not totally outside the limits of a scientific worldview. It is possible that the young man in question was comatose, and that a thorough shaking from Jesus woke him up. While this story is not completely impossible, it is far less likely than the story about Jairus’ daughter. A patient reviving after blacking out for a few minutes is more likely than a patient coming back after being comatose for days.

The story about the widow’s son in Nain is source-critically weak but not hopeless—and scientifically unlikely but not impossible. The third story about raising the dead is source-critically very weak and scientifically impossible. The story about the raising of Lazarus, in the version we have access to, is in fact so far out of reach of every possible non-anomalous explanation that the author must have intentionally written it this way. I take this as a sign that the author of the Gospel of John knew about the synoptic tradition, found their stories about raising the dead feeble and unconvincing, and set out to write a story that would leave no doubt (North: 122–23). He made a good job of it, theologically, but when it comes to source criticism, the story raises even more questions than the story about the widow’s son. The story about Lazarus is known only from John, which was probably written later than both Mark and Luke—but as with the story in Luke, this does not mean much. There is wide agreement among commentators that John might have utilised an earlier story (Meier 1994: 798–832; North: 128). It is therefore impossible to say that the origin of the Lazarus story is significantly later than the story of Jairus’ daughter or the widow’s son. When we look more closely at the story, however, there are quite a few other significant differences.

As with the widow’s son, there is no way to know what the earlier story might have looked like. We must make our judgments of source-critical strength and anomalousness from the way the story is written out in John, and this version demonstrates clear differences in source-critical strength when compared to the other two stories about raising the dead. First of all, the story about Lazarus lacks all the details that make the story about Jairus’ daughter historically convincing. There are no Aramaic words spoken, no sign of ridicule, and no down-to-earth suggestions about food. Instead, we get all the lofty theological declarations the story of Jairus’ daughter lacks. There is also a lot more theology than Luke saw fit to put into the story of the widow’s son. Jesus announces:

I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die [John 11.25].

And Lazarus’ bereaved sister Martha answers:

Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world. [John 11.27].

As theology this is very powerful, but—precisely because it is so theologically convenient—it is not historically convincing. What takes away all source-critical strength from this story, however, is the way John writes out the story as a spectacular public event. It is a masterfully written literary scene. There is heightened drama with tears and shouts until the dead man comes walking out of the tomb with the linens still wrapped around him. Everything is witnessed by a huge crowd from Bethany and Jerusalem, and many come to believe. All this is wonderful literature, but the very idea of such a spectacular public scene makes it impossible to regard it as history. If a huge crowd had seen a dead man walking out of his grave with his burial shroud flapping, presumably with the stench of corpse still about him, everyone in Jerusalem would have heard about it by the end of the day. With that kind of publicity, why is the story not told in any of the other Gospels? Why would Mark bother to tell a rather unconvincing story about a girl that might have been sleeping, if he had known about a four-days-dead, stinking corpse striding out of the tomb (Anderson, Just, & Thatcher: 241)? This marks the Johannine story about Lazarus as source-critically weak. The story seems to have been written precisely to avoid the non-anomalous interpretations that were possible with the story about Jairus’ daughter. All chances of doubt about the deadness of the patient are removed, and, while he was at it, the author infused the story with fitting theology and made it into a moving piece of literature. The story of Lazarus is one of the
few cases where a source-critical analysis can establish with virtually no doubt that a story about Jesus is, in the version we have available to us, legendary. It is also obvious that the miracle does not fit inside a modern scientific worldview.

To sum up the assessments of the three stories, there are not many differences when it comes to basic evaluations of attestation and closeness in time. A closer analysis of the stories with the same broad approach to source criticism as is used in secular history, however, reveals significant differences. The story of Jairus’ daughter is told with many mundane details and is connected to the cultural milieu of Jesus by the Aramaic phrase thalita coum, which is difficult to connect to any theological agenda. The story of the widow’s son and Lazarus lacks both Aramaic and mundane details, and Luke’s story is dubious because it is partially based on an Old Testament model, while John’s story is even more suspicious because it is infused with theological messages. What finally distinguishes the Lazarus story as the by far least trustworthy of the three stories, is the fact that such a spectacular event was not reported in any of the other Gospels. When the stories are assessed according to a wide range of different parameters of trustworthiness, as sources usually are in ordinary secular history, they range rather clearly from quite convincing for the daughter of Jairus, through possible but not convincing for the widow’s son, to totally unconvincing for the story about Lazarus.

Healing the Sick and Defying Gravity

The stories about raising the dead are easily compared on an individual level. There are only three stories, and they show the same kind of miracle, but there are significant and easily recognisable differences when it comes to possible explanations. To compare other miracle stories on an individual level is not as easy. There are many healing stories—they tell about the healing of different conditions, and it is difficult to establish significant differences in possible explanations. To do a thorough comparison of source-critical strength and anomalousness of all the miracle stories within the limits of an article is impossible. It should be possible, however, to test whether the general trend from the stories about raising the dead also can be seen in other miracle stories. I will do this by comparing the source-critical strength of a small sample of stories from the opposite end of the anomalousness scale.

Among the various miracle stories, there are some that are impossible to fit into a modern scientific worldview, while others get along with science without any problems. The most problematic should be the so-called nature miracles. When one looks closer at these stories, however, it turns out that not all of them are absolutely anomalous. Finding a coin in the mouth of a fish might be statistically rare, but not impossible, and fig trees can wither, even if it is not likely to happen overnight. The feeding of the five thousands can be described as a non-anomalous social miracle rather than a nature miracle, if one allows for people to have brought some of their own food for the outing. It is even possible to explain the stilling of the storm as a meteorological coincidence. Stilling of storms and other weather miracles have, moreover, also been claimed about preachers in the modern world (Keener 2017: 56–58). The most obviously anomalous miracles, and, therefore, the best examples for an assessment of source-critical strength, are the stories about Jesus walking on water and turning water into wine. These two miracles simply cannot have any kinds of scientific explanations. Choosing these two miracle stories as examples of anomalous miracles is simple since they actually are the only candidates. Choosing the best examples from among the non-anomalous miracle stories is not as straightforward. The criteria for choosing the examples will inevitably influence the outcome of the comparison.

I have chosen from two criteria that have no connection to the question of source-critical strength. First, we
should choose stories that are as simple to explain according to modern scientific principles as possible. Second, we should choose stories that compare to the anomalous stories in length and amount of detail, thus making a fair comparison possible. Two non-anomalous stories that fit the length and amount of detail of the two anomalous stories are the story about the blind man in Bethsaida and the story about the lame man in Capernaum. Both these healings can be explained according to modern medicinal knowledge, and both stories contain practical details that are well suited to assessments of historical plausibility. The comparison starts by looking at the degree of anomalousness. 

According to consistently observed regularities of chemistry and physics, there is no way clear water can transform into wine, and a human being cannot walk on the surface of water. There have been attempts to explain the walking on water as Jesus really walking on a sandbank, walking on ice or balancing on a floating log, but none of them are remotely convincing (Madden: 14–18). The stories about walking on water and turning water into wine are equally impossible according to a scientific understanding of how the world works. The healing of the blind man in Bethsaida and the lame man in Capernaum reside at the other end of the anomalousness range. According to Howard the story of the blind man in Bethsaida reads as a remarkably accurate description of a person who got his eyesight improved by getting misplaced lenses of the eyes couched back into the right position (Howard: 110–11). This medical procedure is known from recent times and serves perfectly well as a scientific explanation for this miracle. The lame man in Capernaum fits what Howard characterizes as conversion disorders. Conversion disorders are physical conditions caused by psychosomatic issues (Casey: 256–58; Howard: 59–60). Patients with such issues can be helped if the underlying psychological stress is removed. For soldiers who broke down with hysterical illnesses during the First World War, the cure could consist of therapies that helped them cope with feelings of guilt and despair. In the deeply religious environment of first-century Galilee, it is not difficult to imagine that feelings of being sinful and religiously inadequate could lead to psychosomatic disorders. Patients with these kinds of problems could be cured if someone were able to convince them that the weight of their sins had been removed. The question is, then, whether these differences in degree of anomalousness correspond to equally significant differences in source-critical strength.

An initial comparison of multiple attestation and time of writing does not establish any significant difference between the two sample groups. The story about changing water into wine is known only from John, which is most probably later than Mark, but this is balanced by the story about walking on water, which is known from both Mark and John. This means the story existed before Mark was written—and that it was widely enough dispersed, in written or oral form, that both Mark and John knew about it. The stories about the blind man in Bethsaida and the lame man in Capernaum cannot be traced with any certainty to any earlier or wider traditions than Mark’s Gospel. According to Casey, however, the story about the lame man in Capernaum shows traces of a translator’s dilemma (Casey: 259–60). If this is so, it might indicate that Mark found this story in a written Aramaic source, but this supposition is too vague to make much of a difference. It therefore appears most prudent to proceed with the assumption that the anomalous and non-anomalous samples of miracle stories are about equally well attested. If we should allow for any differences, it would actually go in favor of the anomalous stories, since walking on water is attested in two traditions usually regarded as independent. When we look more closely at the stories themselves, however, the balance changes.

Both the anomalous stories include details that create problems for their overall source-critical strength. The story about changing water into wine serves up a number of historically unlikely pieces of practical information. For a start, Meier has noted that the figure of a master of the feast, who seems to function as a head waiter while he is also familiar with the groom, is out of place in a Jewish Palestinian setting (Meier 1994: 948). Another problem is that the amount of wine, somewhere between 546 and 818 liters, seems quite a bit too copious for a feast that was already well underway. The most problematic part of the story, however, is that the picture of Jesus’ relationship with his family is contrary to the picture painted in the synoptic Gospels. In John’s story, Jesus’ mother and his disciples are with him at
the same wedding feast, and after the feast they travel back to Capernaum together. The only instance where Jesus communicates with his family in Mark is in Mark 3:21, where they approached him because they thought he was “out of his mind” and Jesus refused to receive them (Guijarro 2001: 233). This picture appears more credible than the story in John for two reasons. First, such bad relations between Jesus and his immediate family must have been potentially embarrassing for the early Christians, and it is difficult to imagine that someone should invent it if it were not already a part of widely shared memories. Second, it ties in well with the general impression of an itinerant preacher travelling about with his closest followers without much contact with his family or his hometown (Guijarro 2004: 117–18). The outcome of this is that the story about Jesus turning water into wine has low source-critical strength.

The story about Jesus walking on the sea fares no better—but for different reasons. The main problem with that story is not that the details are unrealistic but that they seem to be lifted from Old Testament stories and imagery. Meier has shown how the theme of Jesus walking on the sea is parallel to passages in the Old Testament where Yahweh is pictured as Lord and conqueror of the forces of chaos by walking on the sea. The Greek terminology used in Mark and John when Jesus is walking on the sea is almost exactly the same as that used in the Septuagint translation of Job 9:8. The picture of Yahweh walking on, or controlling the sea in other ways, is also used in a number of passages that describe epiphanies of the Lord of the Israelites (Crossley: 96; Meier 1994: 914–19). The words of Jesus as he draws near the scared disciples is nearly the same in Mark and John—and a distinct echo of the way Yahweh calms down his frightened worshippers when he reveals himself in all his majesty and splendor. This is of course not the only instance where early Christian authors used allusions to or parallels from the Old Testament, but in this case the parallels are pointed out in a commentary to the story. Rather, the parallels are the story. Traits as theologically convenient as these put the story under strong source-critical suspicion, and, as a result, its source-critical strength is weakened. When we move on to the healing stories, the situation is different.

There is no doubt that Mark also made clever theological use of the healing stories, but the core of these stories is often filled with practical details without clear theological significance. The healing of the blind man in Bethsaida might be read as a literary picture of how the disciples gradually gained sight in a theological sense, but at the same time it contains information that apparently has no theological function. Jesus spits in the eyes of the patient and lays his hands on him, but the man is not healed until he has tried a second time. One could argue that the two-step cure is a literary device used to underscore that the disciples understood Jesus only gradually, but it is hard to see theological reasons for including a gross detail like Jesus spitting in a blind man’s eyes. The astonishing feature of this story, however, is the patient’s description of how the treatment worked. When Jesus asks if he can see anything, the man answers: “I see men, but they look like trees, walking” (Mark 8:24). If one looks at the story from a strictly theological viewpoint, this utterance is just absurd—but it does make sense from a practical medicinal point of view. According to Howard the statement is consistent with what would happen to a patient that received manual treatment for misplaced optical lenses (Howard: 110–11). With some severe eye conditions, the lenses can be misplaced and cause reduced eyesight. In such cases it is possible to press the lenses back in the right position by manipulating the eyeball with the fingers. Howard argues that such treatment can improve eyesight, but that the patient’s perception of size would be distorted for a while—so that humans could seem to be as tall as trees. In fact, the comment about “trees walking” is so specific that it is hard to see how it could have entered the tradition if it was not based on memories of a real healing (Howard: 112). This makes it more likely that the story grew from eyewitness memories of a healing, and gives the story additional source-critical strength.

The story about the paralytic in Capernaum in Mark 3:1–12 is too complex for an in-depth treatment within the limits of this article, but it is possible to touch upon some main points. As the story contains a discourse on the authority to forgive sins, it is obviously infused with copious amounts of theology. At the same time, it contains practical detail with no obvious connections to the theological ideas. Jesus was teaching in a private
house in Capernaum, and the place was so crowded that the four men carrying the patient on a bed could not get near Jesus—so they climbed the roof and made an opening to lower him down into the room below. These details fit the archaeological knowledge of Capernaum remarkably well. The houses were courtyard-houses where one entered the courtyard through a gate, and then entered individual rooms through doors from the courtyard. Houses and courtyards were modest in size, and a gathered crowd could have blocked the access both by the main gate and at the door from the courtyard. Moreover, it would have been easy for the four men to make an opening through the roof since the roofs were made of thatched reeds laid across wooden beams (Reed: 159). Luke's version of the story shows that these circumstances would not have been obvious to all gospel writers. Luke changed the story to say that the men made the opening by removing tiles, but there are no traces of tiles in Capernaum, so Mark's version is closer to the local circumstances. Together with what Casey viewed as signs of translation from Aramaic, these practical details give the story a closer connection to the environment Jesus lived in (Casey: 259–62). It does not prove that the story is historical, but it does provide it with more source-critical strength.

To sum up the comparison between two anomalous and two non-anomalous miracle stories, there are no significant differences between anomalous and non-anomalous when it comes to how far back the traditions can be traced. When we look more closely at the details of the stories, the differences are more substantial. The story about changing water into wine contains practical details which are very difficult to reconcile with widely accepted information about the life of Jesus and cultural conditions in Palestine at the time. The story about Jesus walking on the sea seems to be largely built upon imagery and language from Old Testament descriptions of the power of Yahweh. Both these stories are, then, relatively source-critically weak. In contrast, the practical details of the healing stories make them source-critically stronger. The story about the blind man in Bethsaida has practical traits that are difficult to explain without assuming they represent memories of a real healing, while the story about the paralytic in Capernaum contains details that must go back at least to practical knowledge about the environment Jesus lived in. None of this can prove that walking on the sea and changing water into wine did not happen, or that healing the blind man and the paralytic did, but to me it seems clear that the healing stories are source-critically stronger than the two anomalous miracle stories.

One problem with this comparison is the selection of examples. The choice of anomalous miracles is straightforward, but the choice of non-anomalous stories is more problematic. The two stories I have used here fit well when it comes to length and amount of details—but it is no doubt possible to find two healing stories with fewer convincing details and less source-critical strength. Nonetheless, I will still argue that the comparison is valid as an example. The corresponding trend between source-critical strength and compatibility with a scientific worldview is clear with the stories about raising the dead, and it is possible to see the same trend when comparing at least some of the other miracle stories. To establish whether the trend is universal for all miracle stories would require a larger and more thorough investigation, but the trend visible in the small sample examined in this article nonetheless demands an explanation—and, if the non-anomalous miracle stories have more source-critical strength than the anomalous miracle stories, what does that mean?

What Do Differences in Source-critical Strength Mean?

One possibility is that stories about healings can be better attested in the sources than the stories about anomalous miracles quite simply because healings and exorcisms happened, while walking on the sea and changing water into wine did not. Another possibility is that the correspondence I see between source-critical strength and scientific adaptability is a result of my atheistic world view tampering with my source-critical assessments. And, a third possibility is that the whole source-critical operation is stacked against anomalous miracles because the discipline of history presupposes that divine intervention in our world is not possible. We will start by looking more closely at this third possibility.

The discipline of history is a product of the same cultural and philosophical development that produced
the modern godless scientific worldview. It might very well be the case that source-critical methods in and of themselves discriminate against anomalous miracles. Historical analysis does not include divine entities. Christian historians do not use divine dislike for the Nazis to explain the outcome of World War 2, even if it makes perfect sense that a Christian God would want to rid the world of such an ideology. If history as a discipline avoids the thought of divine intervention in obvious cases like this, how could historical analyses be able to include divine intervention in a hike across a lake in Galilee? Is the reason I do not see the work of God in the stories about Jesus simply that the historical methods I use to analyze them do not allow me to see? I do not think so. Even if history as a discipline is prejudiced against divinity, that view is not necessarily ingrained in source-critical methods. Such prejudice is more likely a part of the professional culture of historians, and we can choose to ignore it if we want to. The proof of this is right under our noses in the field of historical Jesus research. The most significant anomalous miracle of them all—the resurrection of Jesus—has been investigated by both Christian scholars and atheistic scholars using source-critical methods, and the investigations have yielded both positive and negative conclusions. According to Gary Habermas, the ratio of studies in scholarly publications is 3 to 1 in favor of the conclusion that Jesus was in fact raised from the dead (Habermas: 139–40). Would this be possible if the methods used in the discipline of history was stacked against the belief in divine forces?

In my opinion, the scholarly debate about the resurrection and historical fact proves that the discipline of history is not inherently stacked against divine interference. At the same time, it indicates strongly that something other than sources and methods—presumably the worldviews of the researchers—weighs heavily on the outcome of the research. This also suggests that historical methods do not promote any specific worldview but tend to sustain the worldview of the particular researcher. In other words, it is quite likely that because I am an atheist, my source-critical evaluations have been skewed to produce answers that will not force me to reconsider my worldview. I realize that this is a possibility, but I also think this possibility can be tested. If the differences in source-critical strength between anomalous and non-anomalous miracle stories are only a result of my atheistic worldview, it should be fairly simple for a Christian scholar to show the opposite—that there is, in fact, no such correspondence between source-critical strength and anomalousness. On the other hand, if this proves difficult, we are left with the possibility that the non-anomalous miracle stories have a stronger source-critical foundation because they originated closer in time to the life of Jesus than the anomalous stories.

Summary

There is a correspondence between how easily a miracle story fits into a modern scientific world view and the strength of its source-critical foundation. When traditional historical source-critical methods are applied to the miracle stories, the stories about actions that can easily be explained in a scientifically acceptable way tend to show more traits that are usually connected to historical reliability than those stories about actions that cannot be explained scientifically. The correspondence between source-critical foundations and the degree of scientific acceptability demands an explanation. I see two possibilities: either the correspondence is a result of my own atheistic preferences or the non-anomalous miracle stories have a stronger source-critical foundation—and therefore a stronger claim to be taken seriously in historical constructions of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. It is possible to test this. If scholars with a Christian worldview find that there is no such correspondence, then I will accept that the patterns I see are a result of my own worldview. If scholars with a Christian worldview also see the same correspondence, then we should agree to keep the anomalous miracles out of our constructions of the life of Jesus—not because of the assumption that miracles are impossible, but because historical investigation does not indicate that they occurred.

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