



Healing 3: Miracle-workers and the Early Church

By Craig Millward

Miracles were as controversial in the first two centuries as they are today.

Highly profitable religions could be founded on a good trick which was staged well. In fact, doing so became so common in the first century that the Greek philosopher Plutarch started a campaign against such money-making scams. In the Second century AD Lucian of Samosata describes a very successful religion begun by Alexander the Prophet when he planted a bronze tablet in a temple of Apollus. The tablet foretold that Apollus and his son Asclepius would take up residence in Abonuteichos - which just happened to be Alexander's home town. When the spoof tablet was 'discovered' the townspeople started building a temple for them. Meanwhile, Alexander emptied a goose egg and inserted a baby snake through a small hole and secretly hid it in the foundations which were being dug for the new temple. He then feigned a fit of madness which drew crowds to him and during this fit he produced the goose egg and broke it open to let the snake out – declaring it to be a sign of the healing god Asclepius.

Alexander then set himself up as the prophet of Asclepius in a dimly-lit room with a large live snake on which he had placed a human head with a speaking tube inside. Lucian writes that a servant would hide himself in another room and would speak eerily through the tube, thus drawing followers to consult him – at a price of course! Alexander was said to have made about 70,000 drachma a year through this deception.

In Acts 8, we read about another magician who was equally adept at fooling people. Simon had learned to perform various magic tricks which the people in Samaria regarded as miracles, the result of which was that he was believed to be the agent of 'The Great God'. On Philip's arrival it seems that Simon's customers quickly deserted him for the more impressive acts performed by the disciple of Christ. With his own eyes Simon saw Philip expel demons and heal the paralysed and lame. As Simon made his own investigations he was shocked to discover that Philip wasn't claiming any glory for himself and was a simple 'deacon' - which was the Greek word for a servant who waited at tables; which, of course, is exactly what he was. What amazed Simon even more was that Philip, and later Peter and John, claimed to be doing these things in the name of Jesus - who apparently had been raised from the dead.

It seems to me that these simple insights into the world of the First Century help to explain why Jesus was so wary about using unexplained signs to draw attention to his ministry. The 1st century was just as sceptical as our present age and it is almost as if, each time he performed a miracle, compassion outweighed Jesus' better judgement. The earliest Church Fathers were also loathed to mention the miraculous side of Jesus' ministry in the knowledge that non-believers would be more impressed by his humility and self-sacrifice.

Discussion Questions

- How would you define a miracle?
- What accounts for the differences in style between Alexander and Phillip?
- What would you rather be known for - having abilities that raise you above others or your humility and compassion?

(Many of the details in this post are taken from *Judging Jesus' Miracles and Magic and Miracles* – sermon outlines on Matthew 8:1-18 & Acts 8:4-25 by the rabbinic scholar Dr David Instone-Brewer from his website www.visualsermons.co.uk).