

Miracle Story Form

Introduction

Miracle stories are one of the most common literary forms in the gospel and occur with frequency in Tanak⁵ as well (Moses: Exod 12:8-15; Elijah: 1 Kgs 17:17-24). They are examples of tales which narrate singular and remarkable occurrences. They are passed down in popular folklore, in histories or biographies, or in the cultic therapeutic records (votive and official) of the healing gods (e.g., Asclepius in Epidauros).

Cures were understood in antiquity to be the work of God(s). In the case of Jesus, miracles are presented in the New Testament as signs or mighty deeds which testify to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. There is a constant tension in all the gospels between the crowds' desire for "signs" and Jesus' attempt to help them see beyond the signs to the larger gospel message (Matt 12:38-45).

Structure

Element	Example (Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26)
1. Narrative Setting	¹⁸ While he was saying these things to them,
2. God(s) Approached and Petitioned (sometimes there is a period of incubation in the sanctuary or Temple)	an official came forward, knelt down before him, and said,
3. Description of Illness	"My daughter has just died. But come, lay your hand on her, and she will live." ¹⁹ Jesus rose and followed him, and so did his disciples ²³ When Jesus arrived at the official's house and saw the flute players and the crowd who were making a commotion, ²⁴ he said, "Go away! The girl is not dead but sleeping." And they ridiculed him. ²⁵ When the crowd was put out, he came and took her by the hand, and the little girl arose.
4. Cure	²⁶ And news of this spread throughout all the land.
5. Public Acknowledgment	

Content

The four standard elements—petition, description of illness, cure, and public acknowledgment (usually amazement and awe)—may vary in order and in detail. For example, the approach to the God may involve a period of incubation or dwelling in the sanctuary in anticipation of healing (see John 9). Also, the gospel author may amplify the description of the illness to render the cure more remarkable ("...A woman afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years, who [had spent her whole livelihood on doctors and] was unable to be cured by anyone...", Luke 8:43). The author may describe the curative gestures, although often in gospel miracle stories there are no explicit gestures on Jesus' part (see the miracle story that is spliced into the story above at Matt 9:20-22).

Function

Ultimately, the function of the healing stories is to strengthen the believer's faith and awe in the healing power of God. But the tales were also entertaining, for they satisfied both the natural human curiosity in illness and the religious belief that God desires human wholeness (see Matt 8:16-17; Luke 4:16-22). The originating locations for such stories were temples or worship services and popular folklore.

For Further Practice

Matt 8:28-34
Matt 9:32-34

Matt 9:1-8
Matt 12:9-14

Matt 9:27-31
Matt 14:22-33

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- 1 Sometimes Jesus commands that the miracle not be reported; see Matt 8:1-4. This motif is so common in Mark's gospel that it has been referred to as the "messianic secret."