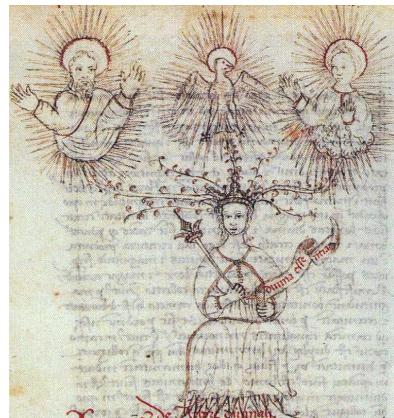


**Fear and Ecstatic Reaction to the Miracle Stories in the Synoptic Gospels**

**Maravilhamento e êxtase religioso como reação aos milagres nos Evangelhos Sinóticos**

**Furcht und ekstatische Reaktion in den Wunderberichten der Synoptiker**



Paulo Augusto de Souza Nogueira<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Universidade Metodista de São Paulo.

The Synoptic Miracle Stories have been interpreted with suspicion by modern exegetes. If compared to Jesus' preaching and to the death and resurrection account they never received a true religious appreciation. In fact, the insertion of the Miracle Stories in the Synoptic Gospels has been considered as a kind of concession by the evangelists: they narrate them, but they show also that the popular reaction to the miracles, even if positive, is dominated by misunderstanding (1). Jesus is showed as not ready to accept this kind of worship caused by miracles. This is why Jesus asked people to be silent after his healings or exorcisms.

The non reliable aspect of the Miracle Stories also reveals itself in the fact that no function in the life of the Early Christian communities has been recognized in them. Miracle Stories should be restricted to the mission. They are directed to outsiders (2). They have a propagandistic function. More precisely: they are considered as a kind of preparation for the mission, that means, they anticipated the arrival of missionaries (3). So the exegesis seems to distinguish very sharply between someone that narrates miracles from somebody that performs them.

I think that both positions - of considering the gospels' redaction as opposite to the miracles and to restrict their context only to the mission - are expressions of the same tendency: of cleaning the Christian origins of magic practices and of centering their religiosity in the world of the announcement. By means of miracles, performed by Jesus or by a wandering Early Christian missionary, we come only to a kind of irrational marveling, a pre-religious one, anyway pre-evangelic, that will be followed or not by a genuine conversion experience through the kerygma acceptance.

In this paper we want to develop the following hypothesis: The Miracle Stories cannot be understood only from a unique *Sitz im Leben*: the Early Christian missionary activity. There are also links in the texts that lead these narratives to the context of their readers and hearers, specifically in their cultic meetings, where new miracles have been told and done. The link between the foundational account (the miracles of Jesus) and the miracles performed in their worship manifests itself in expressions of fear, awe and ecstasies in the Miracle Stories. Their center is the experience of revelation of God in the account. This is the reason why these ecstatic reactions can be understood as genuine religious reactions to an epiphany.

The Synoptic miracle stories present, usually, reactions of people who had witnessed a miracle of Jesus (4). For instance, after the manifestation of Jesus appeasing the storm, the disciples "were overcome with awe (*ephobetesan phobon*

*megan)* and said to one another, ‘Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him’” (Mk 4, 41). Or after the expelling of a legion of demons in Mark 5, 15: “They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there – the man who had had the legion in him – properly dressed and in his full senses, and they were afraid (*ephobethesan*)”. A reaction of fear we meet also in the narrative of the wonderful fishing in Luke. Peter said: “Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man’. For he and all his companions were completely awestruck ...” (Lk 5, 8-9).

There is no reason to reject a priori these reactions of fear as an expression of misunderstanding Jesus.

There is another group of narratives in which the reactions of fear and admiration are expressed in an emphatic way, qualifying them as an epiphanic reaction. That is the case of the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage. According to Mk (5, 33), after the question of Jesus about who had touched him the woman “came forward, frightened (*phobetheisa*) and trembling (*tremousa*) because she knew what had happened to her, and she fell (*prosépesen*) at his feet and told him the whole truth”. The Lukan version adds that she “explained (*apeggeilen*) in front of all the people why she had touched him and how she had been cured at that very moment” (Lk 8, 47). This conclusion of the narrative is much more close to a cultic prostration followed by a confession than to a misunderstood reaction to the miracle.

That is the case also of the crowd reaction to the healing of the paralytic of Capernaum in Mark 2, 1-11. After having picked up his stretcher and going home, the people “were all astonished (*eksisthasthai*) and praised (*doksaizein*) God saying: We have never seen anything like this” (2, 11). Once again Luke stresses this drawing it as a kind of collective trance: “They were all astounded (*ekstasis elaben hapantas*) and praised God (*edoksazon ton theon*) and were filled with awe (*eplesthasan phobou legontes*), saying: We have seen strange things today (*eidomen parádoksa semeron*)” (Lk 5, 26). And also in that case it is not possible to state that this is a reaction of misunderstanding in relation to Jesus. On the contrary: this pericope deals with the theme of authority for the forgiving of sins. People react to Jesus who gives forgiveness in a healing session followed by conversion and cultic recognition. And this reaction of the people contrasts with that of the scribes that get scandalized with Jesus prerogatives (Mk 2, 6-7). It is possible that we consider this kind of reaction negatively, because we can’t understand a true experience of conversion unless as an individual process.

The Synoptic comparison allows us to see that the “fear” elements are always present in Mark (fear + *eksistemi* + worship elements like “glorify” and “fall to knees”). The reaction to the miracle is always stressed by Luke. Matthew, on the other side, intentionally omits them. Luke develops the thematic in his exclusive material, as in the case of the resurrection of the Naim widow’s son. This narrative concludes with: “Every one was filled with awe and glorified God saying: A great prophet has risen up among us, God has visited his people.” (Lk 7, 16). Does it not refer to a qualified christologic confession? Luke emphasizes the reactions to miracles so much that in Acts he inserts one of them as happening inside the Temple of Jerusalem. After Peter has healed the lame in the Temple: “Every one could see him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the man who used to sit begging at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. They were all astonished and perplexed at what had happened to him” (At 3, 9-10). Ekstasis is the word used by Luke to indicate the reaction of Paul and Peter to their visions in chap. 10 and 22. It has a positive sense.

We can understand better the fear and ekstasis reactions to the miracles in the Synoptic if we don’t center the focus on the supernatural aspect (5). What does define a happening as a miracle in the ancient world? Reactions of fear and ekstasis follow exorcisms, healings, as well as the transfiguration and the empty tomb narratives, because the emphasis is put on the divine manifestation made visible to mankind. According to Mark 16, 8, the women went out of the tomb “frightened out of their wits” (*eichen gar autás trómos kai ekstasis*). The account doesn’t refer to a miracle, but to an “ecstatic admiration before a divine epiphany that happened in Jesus” (6). Similarly an implicit epiphanic element behind the miracle stories is what gives origin to the reactions of fear. It is interesting to notice that Mark describes them with the same words. Here magic religiosity and the world of apocalyptic revelation meet each other.

Epiphanic fear reactions follow also the account of Jesus transfiguration. Peter didn’t know what to say, because “they were so frightened” (*ekphoboi gar egeneto*, Mk 9, 6). This time Matthew gives a detailed account of the fear reactions of the disciples making it even more explicit. After hearing the heavenly voice they “fell on their faces, overcome with fear” (Mt 17, 6). Luke, on the other side, could have given a cultic context to the transfiguration when he points out that they went up to the mountain in order to pray. Cultic and ecstatic elements are found also in Peter’s Apocalypse version of this account. The narrative presents the transfiguration of Jesus in such a form that relates it to visionary accounts of heavenly journey. The transfiguration happens short before Jesus’ ascent to heaven and Elija and Moses are

presented as glorious angelic beings that accompany him in his journey back to the heavens. When Peter saw Jesus' ascent and heard the heavenly voice he is taken by fear and trembles (17). After that the heaven opens itself and the travelers were received with heavenly songs. They can be seen till they reach the second heaven, then "the heaven is taken by great fear and terror". The disciples prayed and went down the mountain praising God. An atmosphere of worship of the returning and exalted Christ overcomes the disciples as well the angels. The parallelism between praise on earth and in heaven is well known in apocalyptic texts.

If our reading of the texts is correct – that reactions to the miracles can be ecstatic, almost cultic - we have to make a further question: are there indications that Early Christian communities performed healings and any other kind of miracles in the worship?

In the Pauline communities we can suppose that healings and exorcisms have been performed as part of cultic meetings. According to Acts 20, 7-12 we have an account of a resurrection performed by Paul in an eucharistic celebration. Paul was preaching in a cult of the church of Troas "in the first day of the week". The worship that included "breaking of bread" happened in the third floor. The young Eutichus, who sat on the window, slept and fell to the ground dying. Paul broke off his preaching, went down and said: "There is no need to worry, there is still life in him". After that he went upstairs, "broke the bread" (a technical term for the Eucharistic meal[7]) ate and carried on talking till he left at daybreak. The community was "greatly encouraged" (12).

Could not this miracle account – though its exceptional character – be understood as a reflex of the practice of healing ceremonies in the cultic meetings of Pauline churches? Even if it reflects much more the time of Luke, it gives information about the imagery of healing practices in Post-Pauline churches.

In fact, healing seems to have been practiced in the communities of Pauline Christianity. It has been included in the list of "gifts of the Spirit" in 1 Cor 12: "... to another faith, from the same Spirit; and to another, the gifts of healing, through this one Spirit; to another, the working of miracles; to another prophecy ..." (9-10). And again: "And those whom God has appointed in the Church are, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers ... after them, miraculous powers, then gifts of healing ..." (12, 28).

Not only in Paul's communities miracles seem to have been performed during the worship. This is also the case in the letter of James, where we find a community's exhortation: "Any one of you who is in trouble should pray;

anyone in good spirits should sing a psalm. Any one of you who is ill should send for the elders of the church and they must anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick person and the Lord will raise him up again; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. So confess your sins to another, and pray for one another to be cured; the heartfelt prayer of someone upright works very powerfully ...” (5, 13-16). The relationship between singing psalms and being anointed with oil by the elders brings us to the context of the worship.

The fact that the consequence of the healing is the forgiving of sins makes us remember the Synoptic miracle of Mk 2, 1-12. The same happens with the expression “the Lord will raise him up again”, that could also remit to Mk 5, 41 (“Little girl, I tell you to get up”) or to Lk 17, 19 (“Stand up and go to your way. Your faith has saved you”, the link: stand up + to be saved, be forgiven). It is also very interesting to see that the text follows referring to Elija (James 5, 17-18), Jesus’ model of healer. Though we don’t intend to see in this text a direct relationship to the Synoptic miracle narratives, it is possible to reconstruct from it a pattern from which new miracles have been performed in community and cultic contexts. There is no reason to separate the miracles of Jesus from those practiced by Early Christians. On the contrary, Jesus’ miracles have offered models for them.

Anyway we don’t find only the pattern of wandering missionaries showing power through the operation of miracles and healings, as a kind of charismatic confirmation of the preaching. However, it seems that the ideal image of the wandering Jesus, Peter and Paul, as successful missionaries, has led us at the cost of every day life of the first Christians to think erroneously of the mission as the only context for miracles in the Synoptic tradition.

We should not avoid considering contemporary analogies, above all from Third World religiosity which organizes its world by means of magic and millenarian symbolic references. In that world lots of communities are seeking for the irruption of the divine through miracles, exorcisms and any kind of revelations. It is the case of pentecostals in Brazil (or elsewhere), where in each cultic session miracles and exorcisms are performed, because they believe that God has to visit his people powerfully every day. We are not trying to say that it is the same religious phenomenon or that the Early Christians experienced their religiosity in the same way. But it could serve as a corrective for our approaching to biblical texts as a simple conjunction of literary forms and traditions.

There are two conceptions of miracles at play. The first conceives it as a charismatic demonstration for the sake of religious propaganda, the second one considers it a way of magic manipulation of power making it emerge in everyday community's live. There is no reason to exclude the second form, because it is the way miraculous religiosity becomes socially relevant.

## Notes

- (1) See fear as negative reaction to the miracles in Theissen, G. *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten*. Gütersloh, 1987, S. 283ss. See e.g. Kertelge and Klein with affirmations like that the function of the Miracle Stories as “die Leser nachdrücklich von dem Mirakelglauben zu warnen” in Theissen, G. *Wundergeschichten*, p. 289.
- (2) Theissen, G. *Wundergeschichten*, p. 257ss.
- (3) *Idem*, p. 260.
- (4) See “Admirationsmotive und Admirationsterminologie im Markusevangelium” in Pesch, R. *Das Markusevangelium* (HthKzNT), vol. I, Freiburg, 1977, p. 150-152.
- (5) See Berger, K. *As formas literárias do Novo Testamento*. São Paulo, 1998, p. 276ss. Even the form Miracle Storie derives from a modern understanding of “miracle” that is not necessary the same of biblical times. See also the understanding of Faktizität in relationship to miracles in Berger, K. *Historische Psychologie des Neuen Testaments*. Stuttgart, 1991, p. 106-111.
- (6) Pesch, R. *Das Markusevangelium*, vol. II to this text.
- (7) Schneider, G. *Die Apostelgeschichte* (HthKzNT), vol. II, Freiburg, 1982.