Trends in miracle research

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the main trends in research on the miracles of Jesus, from approximately the start of the form-critical era to the present time. Attention is given to the form-critical approach, the historicity of the miracles, the redaction-critical approach, the history of religions approach, the functionalist approach, miracles as parables, miracles and faith, the narrative approach and hermeneutical problems. In the conclusion avenues for future research are indicated.

1 INTRODUCTION
The aim of this article is to point out the main trends in miracle research, from approximately the start of the form-critical era, although some of the trends may have their roots in earlier research. It is, of course, impossible in an article of this scope to pay attention to everything that has been published on the miracles, as there is a constant flow of publications in the form of books, theses and articles on this topic. Therefore, philosophical and scientific investigations of the miracles could not possibly be included. The idea with this article is merely to bring to the attention of the reader the different ways in which the miracle stories of the New Testament have been investigated in the past and are being investigated at present. No pretence is made of being exhaustive, as I have concentrated on the main trends, pointing out what I see as the most important publications. Also, no detailed critique of the different areas of research or the works discussed under each is intended, partly because of a lack of space and partly because the purpose of this article is to point out the most important writings on the miracle stories, rather than assessing them in detail. This does not mean, however, that an assessment is not given here and there.

To start with, attention should be drawn to two fairly recent research articles on the miracles. The first is that by Kertelge (1976), and the second is that by Weder (completed in 1982, published in 1984). Although the present article covers a longer period of time than these, it is unavoidable that there will be some repetition of much of the material covered by Kertelge and Weder.

Before we go any further, however, it is necessary to define our topic more clearly. It is a well-known fact that many miracles, performed by different persons, are described in the Old as well as in the New Testament. Exactly what a miracle is can be defined in different ways, and it is not our intention to give attention to its proper definition here. Suffice it to say that a
miracle is something out of the ordinary that seems to defy the laws of nature (to the present-day reader, anyway). In the Old Testament, Moses, Elijah and Elisha especially, are described as miracle workers, while in the New Testament Jesus, his disciples and Paul perform miracles. Jesus' miracles in particular receive considerable attention in the Gospels. Not only does He heal people and free them from demons, but He also brings the dead back to life; He also performs deeds that involve nature and seem to transgress the laws of nature. The miracles ascribed to Jesus have always interested scholars, and it is on this research that we wish to concentrate.

It is rather difficult to select the order and divisions in which the material should be reviewed. Kertelge (1976) distinguishes three main areas of research:

1. The historical-critical and hermeneutic approach: The historical-critical approach includes the formgeschichtlich and traditionsgeschichtlich investigations, which in turn include the investigations of the historicity of Jesus' miracles, while the hermeneutic approach includes the understanding of "miracle".

2. The religionsgeschichtlich approach, which investigates the influence of contemporary religions on the origin of the New Testament miracle stories.

3. The interpretative and theologiegeschichtlich approach, which includes the redaktionsgeschichtlich investigations.

Although this classification is perhaps incomplete, especially in the light of certain developments since 1976, I shall use it as a starting point and base the contents of this article on this schema to a certain degree, although in a somewhat different order.

2 FORMGESCHICHTE

In regard to research on the miracles, the work done by Dibelius [1919] (1971) and Bultmann [1921] (1967) on Formgeschichte is indispensable. Apart from pointing out the stylistic characteristics of the miracle stories, they also pay attention to the factors that led to the rise and transmission of these stories. Dibelius classifies the stories about Jesus' miracles in a few cases as "Paradigmen" (paradigms) of the proclamation of the early church (such as Mk 2:1-12; 3:1-6), but in most cases as "Novellen" (tales) that originated as religious propaganda in a Hellenistic environment. Bultmann uses the classification "miracle story" for most of the stories about Jesus' miracles; only a few are classified as "apophthegms", that is, sayings of Jesus set in a brief context. This means that they do not have the pure form of a miracle story but rather a mixed form of, for instance, a controversy and a miracle (cf Mk 2:1-12 and 3:1-6). As far as the miracle stories themselves are concerned, Bultmann distinguishes between miracles of healing and miracles of nature. This classification has persisted in most of the literature to the present day,
although a distinction between healings and exorcisms has come to be accepted by most scholars. Apart from these classifications, one of the most important contributions of Formgeschichte is that it has helped to distinguish between "miracle event" and "miracle story".

After the form-critical investigation of the miracles was pushed into the background for a number of years in favour of the redaction-critical investigations, more recent contributions along form-critical lines were made by Theissen (1974), Betz (1978) and Funk (1978), among others. Of these, Theissen's book on the early Christian miracle stories, recently translated into English (1983), has received most attention. He sets for himself the aim "(um) Methoden klassischer Formgeschichte durch Analyse einer synoptischen Gattung weiterzuentwickeln" (1974:11). In the process he makes use of the results of linguistics and structuralism, as well as of sociological theories. His work is divided into three parts, namely synchronic, diachronic and functionalist, in which the miracle stories are respectively described as "strukturierte Formen", "reproduzierte Erzählungen", and "symbolische Handlungen".

In the first part (synchronic approach), which is a structuralist analysis of the miracle stories, he distinguishes three fields which can be combined in various ways to form a miracle story: these are the characters, motifs and themes. He expands Bultmann's list of motifs extensively. He also expands the list of themes (Untergattungen), by distinguishing between healings, exorcisms, epiphanies, saving miracles, gift miracles and norm miracles (the healings on the sabbath). In the second part (diachronic approach) Theissen sheds more light on the genesis of the texts, by paying attention to the different motifs in the miracle stories (such as faith and acclamation), and to their Sitz im Leben in the early church. In the last part of the book, he discusses the function of the miracle stories in the early church, with regard to social, religionsgeschichtlich and existential aspects.

Theissen's book has been reviewed extensively, not always in the most positive way (cf e.g Achtemeier (1978) and Boers (1978)). On the appearance of the English translation, one reviewer had the following to say about the book:

Theissen's book is a sophisticated example of where a "Bible as Literature" approach can lead if it is forgotten (or denied) that one of the Bible's functions is to point outside of itself to events of history (Woodhouse 1984:25).

This is not the place to give a critique of the book. Suffice it to say that the book is, to my mind, one of the major (if not the most important) contributions in recent decades, as indicated by its influence on relevant literature since its appearance.

Since Theissen's book was published it has become increasingly clear that the era of form-critical investigation is not yet over. It continues to influence the study of the miracle stories among both Protestant and Catholic
scholars (cf Brown 1984:272, who intends investigating the relevance of the form-critical method in a sequel to his 1984 study).

3 HISTORICITY OF THE MIRACLES

A question which is often connected, correctly or incorrectly, with the form-critical aspect of research is that concerning the historicity of the miracles. This question has received much attention in the literature on the miracles, and yet Weder (1984:32) is of the opinion that the historical problem is neglected in many studies favouring the formgeschichtlich, literarkritisch and redaktionsgeschichtlich questions. Admittedly, the ipsissima verba of Jesus have received much more attention than the ipsissima facta. The question seems to be, however, whether it is possible to say more about the historicity of the miracles than has already been said.

Schmithals, for example, would probably feel that the question of historicity is irrelevant, judging by the following verdict:

Die neutestamentlichen Wundergeschichten berichten nur scheinbar von merkwürdigen Ereignissen aus dem Leben des irdischen Jesus. In Wahrheit verkündigen sie, was Gott durch Jesus als den Christus, das heisst durch den gekreuzigten und auferstandenen Herrn der Gemeinde, an dieser Gemeinde tat und an der Welt tun will (Schmithals 1970:25).

But for many researchers the question is not irrelevant, and of late there seems to be a renewed interest in this question (cf for instance Brown 1984; Wenham & Blomberg 1986). The general conclusion of the scholars interested in the historicity of the miracles is, in most cases, that Jesus indeed was a miracle worker, who performed miracles of healing and exorcism and probably also raised people from the dead. This does not imply that all the miracles took place exactly as described in the Gospels, as one should distinguish between "miracle event" and "miracle story". The stories were formed according to a specific schema, but this fact does not deny that Jesus in fact healed people and freed them from demons. As far as the so-called "nature miracles" are concerned, there is generally much more scepticism with regard to their historicity. This distinction between the historicity of the "healing miracles" and the "nature miracles" dates back to Bultmann ([1926] 1983:119), and still persists in most recent studies. Evangelical scholars, however, believe that the historicity of even the nature miracles can be proved (cf for instance Blomberg 1984 and 1986).

As in the case of the ipsissima verba of Jesus, criteria to establish the ipsissima facta of Jesus were proposed, notably by Lentzen-Deis (1968), Pesch (1970) and Mussner (1972). These criteria include agreement between the words and attitude of Jesus (Pesch), the "Umweltreferenz" of Jesus' attitude (Mussner) and discrepancy and coherence (Lentzen-Deis). Application of these criteria usually does not bring one any further than seeing Jesus as a healer and an exorcist (cf, for instance, Kertelge 1976:84). Blomberg (1984
and 1986), however, uses the criterion of coherence between Jesus' parables and the nature miracles to conclude that the latter, too, are historical (see section 6 further on).

When the historicity of the miracle stories of the Gospels is examined, they are divided into three groups by some scholars. In the first group a historical core can be detected, and the details of the stories may be ascribed to either the early church or the evangelist; in the second it is impossible to judge the historicity of a story (cf Annen (1976) concerning the Gerasene demoniacs), and in the third stories about other miracle workers have been transferred to Jesus (cf Kratz (1979) concerning the stilling of the storm or the walking on the water).

The establishment of the historicity of a miracle story should be seen not only as a means in itself, but also as a step towards a better understanding of what the story has to say (cf Weder 1984:29f). It is historically fairly certain that Jesus understood his exorcisms and probably also his healings in the light of the kingdom of God. The fact that Jesus connected eschatology and miracle-working is unparalleled in other religions (cf Theissen 1974:277).

As was noted earlier, the question of the historicity of the miracles seems to have found renewed interest among scholars. It is not unlikely that much future investigation will centre on the relationship between Jesus' words and deeds, and also on the historicity of the nature miracles.

4 JESUS AND OTHER MIRACLE WORKERS (RELIGIONSGESCHICHTE)
For a long time it has been acknowledged that there are Old Testament/Jewish and Hellenistic analogies and parallels to the miracle stories of the New Testament. Bultmann (1921) paid special attention to this fact, making use of the work of Weinreich (1909) about miracles among the Greeks and Romans. Strangely enough, the Old Testament/Jewish background of the New Testament miracles has, with the exception of a few scholars such as Richardson (1941), been neglected among scholars until very recently, whereas the Hellenistic background has received much more attention.

Particularly in the latest commentaries on the Gospels it becomes clear what an important role the miracles of Moses, and especially those of Elijah and Elisha, played in the characterisation of Jesus (cf for instance Pesch's commentary on Mark 1977). The Old Testament motifs in the New Testament miracles have long been neglected in favour of the Hellenistic background. For the understanding of Jesus' exorcisms it is important to realise that the influence of demons and evil spirits was just as much believed in a Jewish milieu as in a Hellenistic one. Also important for understanding the New Testament miracles is the contemporary rabbinic-pharasaic understanding of miracles. Although there was some reserve on the side of the Pharisees with regard to miracles, and miracle workers were easily interpreted in terms
of demonology or magic, some rabbinical miracles were nevertheless transmitted. It is notable that not a few of these were punitive miracles, something which is almost completely lacking in the New Testament. Van Cangh (1984) has examined the miracles of two Galilean rabbis contemporaneous with Jesus, namely Honi and Hanina, and has come to the conclusion that the relationship between their miracles and those of Jesus was minimal, if not non-existent. This is not to say, however, that these miracles do not throw light on the understanding of Jesus’ miracles. Vermes (1973) has pointed out the affinities between Jesus and Honi and Hanina. Lastly, another area with regard to the Jewish background of the miracles which has been investigated is Josephus’ understanding of miracles (cf Betz 1974).

As far as the Hellenistic background is concerned, the following themes have received particular attention among scholars: the Hellenistic divine man (θεῖος ἄνθρωπος), with particular focus on Apollonius of Tyana, and Hellenistic magical practices.

The Hellenistic era knew many divine men, renowned for their wisdom (σοφία) and power (δύναμις). The standard work on this subject is still perhaps that by Bieler [1935/36] (1967). Among these divine men Apollonius of Tyana of the first century was one of the best known, due to his biographer Philostratos. Apollonius was especially renowned for his miracles, many of which were quite similar to those ascribed to Jesus. Petzke (1970) has written a very interesting study on the similarities and differences between the development of traditions about Apollonius and those of the New Testament. In a later essay, Petzke (1973) suggests that a religionsgeschichtlich comparison can throw no light on the historicity of a miracle story. It merely proves the existence of a widespread belief in miracles in the ancient world. A religionsgeschichtlich comparison should, however, not in the first place aim to prove (or disprove) the historicity of miracle stories, but rather try to establish what these stories say (cf Weder 1984:38).

Because of the similarities between the miracles of Jesus and those of the divine men in the Hellenistic world, the question has arisen whether Jesus was pictured as a θεῖος ἄνθρωπος, that is, just another charismatic miracle worker (like so many others) at some stage of the transmission of the Synoptic material. Some scholars have indeed argued in favour of this thesis, among them Betz (1968) and Köster (1971), who see in the Gospels traces of divine-man Christology, particularly on account of the miracle stories and the title Son of God. The divine man of early Christianity is then seen as the product of the divine man of the Hellenistic world and Old Testament Jewish heroes (cf Brown 1984:272).

This thesis has been called into question more and more, however, and today most scholars would be rather hesitant to speak of a θεῖος ἄνθρωπος Christology (cf for instance Polhill 1977:389-392). Betz (1972:231) expressed
it in the following words: "I must confess that I hesitate to follow the 'Divine Man' on his glorious way into the New Testament."

Tiede (1972) and Holladay (1977) have also examined the idea of the divine man, both pointing out that θεῖος ἀνήρ is an imprecise idea, not originally associated with miracle working. Holladay (1977:237) stresses that the expression θεῖος ἀνήρ is capable of at least four interpretations, which makes it less possible simply to speak of a θεῖος ἀνήρ Christology (cf also Kingsbury 1981).

The other area of research regarding the Hellenistic background to the miracles of Jesus, is that of Hellenistic magic. Although it is not an important theme in Jesus' miracles, there are some motifs in certain miracle stories which are reminiscent of the Hellenistic view of power and the resulting magical practices. These motifs include actions such as Jesus putting his fingers into the ears of the deaf-mute and spittle on his tongue (Mk 7:33), the laying on of hands (Mk 5:23; 6:5) and the use of foreign words (Mk 5:41; 7:34).

Hull (1974) examined the traces of magic in the New Testament, and his study seems to have been the start of a new interest in this subject. He found that Mark and particularly Luke are closer to the world of Hellenistic magic than Matthew. The former two saw Jesus as a Master-Magician and sought to involve the figure of Jesus as miracle worker with the expectations of the people. Matthew saw the danger in this and tried to avoid all allusions to magic. Against Hull's conclusions it has been pointed out that in the writings of Luke, whom Hull sees to be most influenced by magic, magicians and exorcists are presented as enemies of Christ and the Spirit in Acts 8:19-24; 13:4-12, and the conversion of the Ephesians resulted in the mass burning of books of magic in Acts 19:18f (Brown 1984:274).

The next work in this area which caused considerable reaction, even if mostly negative, is the book by Smith (1978) on Jesus as a magician, which was translated into German in 1981. While Hull merely claimed that the Gospel narratives were influenced by magical motifs, Smith went further and claimed that involvement in magic is the key to understanding the life of Jesus and the Jews' rejection of Him. From his study of Christian and Jewish sources Smith deduces that Jesus was pictured as a magician in hostile sources, and attributes the absence of this portrayal in Christian sources to censorship. Yet he sees many parallels between the Gospels and magical practices.

Although Smith sheds some valuable light on the sociological background to the life, work and self-understanding of Jesus, he has been severely criticised for seeing Jesus as a heathen magician. If any category fits Jesus, it is rather that of the Jewish charismatic (cf Buhner 1983). The sources on which Smith builds his hypothesis belong to different ages, all considerably later than the Gospels, with the result that Smith was criticised as being historically anachronistic (cf Kee 1983:211,288; Brown 1984:276). Even Aune
who agrees with Smith to a large extent, stops short of seeing Jesus as a magician:

However, it does not seem appropriate to regard Jesus as a magician. ... it would be problematic to categorize Jesus as a magician, since those magical activities which he used can be more appropriately subsumed under the role of messianic prophet.

Recently Kee (1986) has paid attention to magic (in combination with medicine and miracle in New Testament times), illustrating the different understandings of the human condition and remedies for ills that prevailed in the time of Jesus and the apostles, while Yamauchi (1986) has examined the question of miracle or magic with regard to diseases, demons and exorcisms. Both Kee and Yamauchi disagree with the findings of Hull, Smith and Aune. Yamauchi (1986:142) formulates his critique as follows:

... the characterization of Jesus as a magician by Hull, Smith and Aune often relies on either hostile or inappropriate sources, and on the debatable assumptions that touch is necessarily a magical act, that spittle is always materia magica, and that exorcism inevitably involves magic.

It seems that the last word in this debate has not yet been spoken.

5 THE MIRACLES INTERPRETED BY THE DIFFERENT EVANGELISTS (REDAKTIONSGESCHICHTE)

Since the start of the redaction-historical investigation of the New Testament in the fifties, interest in the miracles has also reflected this shift in research. As early as 1961 Held published an extensive essay on Matthew as interpreter of the miracle stories. This was followed by a number of investigations on the interpretation of the miracle stories by Mark, Luke and John. We shall pay attention briefly to each of the four evangelists and try to point out the most important areas of research in each Gospel, as well as the scholars who made the most important contributions in the different fields.

5.1 Matthew

As far as Matthew is concerned, it is clear that he situated most of his miracle stories in chapters 8 and 9 of his Gospel with a specific purpose. According to Held (1961:234) it points to Matthew's representation of Jesus' double function (Doppelamt) as Messiah of the word (Mt 5-7) and Messiah of the deed (Mt 8 and 9). For Matthew the miracles of Jesus are thus, in the context of his teaching, proof of his Messiahship. Moiser (1985) also stresses the connection between the Sermon on the Mount and the miracles in chapters 8 and 9, suggesting that Matthew's arrangement of miracle stories in chapters 8 and 9 is based on the structure of the Sermon on the Mount. Burger (1973:287), on the other hand, sees the purpose of chapters 8 and 9 as Matthew's legitimation of the realities of the early church, thereby understanding these two chapters as the ἵερος λόγος or Gründungslegende of the Christian church.
Not all the miracle stories in Matthew are, however, found in chapters 8 and 9. There are several other stories as well, scattered throughout the Gospel. The danger exists that these other miracle stories might be neglected in favour of those in chapters 8 and 9. One of the advantages of redaction criticism is that it has made us aware that we should be dealing with the text in its totality, not only with separate smaller parts.

5.2 Mark

Mark, as first interpreter of the miracle stories, has received most attention in research to date. This started with Tagawa in 1966, and was followed by Kertelge (1970), Schenke (1974) and Koch (1975), not to mention numerous investigations of separate miracle stories or larger units containing more than one miracle story.

Most interpreters share the opinion that Mark primarily interpreted the miracles Christologically. The main question with regard to Mark's understanding of Jesus' miracles seems to be the relation between the miracles and the passion of Jesus. The question has been raised by Koch (1975) as to whether Mark contains a double Christology. Even if this is not the case, it is still a fact that one finds a positive as well as a negative view of the miracles in Mark. The answer seems to be that the miracles are important in Mark's view

weil und insofern sie das Thema der Offenbarung Jesu auch in seinen irdischen Taten entfalten,

but he also treats them critically because

... nicht aufgrund der einzelnen Taten desirdischen, sondern erst aufgrund von Kreuz und Auferstehung ist Jesu Würde als Gottessohn voll aussagbar (Koch 1975:192).

Although Mark found traces of both these views towards the miracles in tradition, he was himself responsible for putting the miracle stories into the concept of the Messianic secret. Thus Mark was able to present the passion as well as the earthly works of Jesus as the works of the Son of God (Koch 1975:190).

A question which has also received attention in the field of Mark's use of the miracle stories is whether Mark used a pre-Markan collection, or even more than one collection, of miracle stories. This is a strong possibility, especially in light of the fact that researchers accept almost unanimously that there were certain collections of traditions before Mark. Not only did Mark have knowledge of these collections, but he used them when writing his Gospel. Thus, it is almost certain that Mark used a pre-Markan passion narrative as well as pre-Markan collections of controversy stories and parables (cf Kuhn 1971). As far as a collection of miracle stories is concerned Kuhn acknowledges the possibility of such a collection in Mark 4-6, but he is hesitant to accept it for certain. Achtemeier (1970 and 1972) has argued strongly in favour of two parallel pre-Markan collections, but this argument is

Lastly, it may be mentioned that the reports in Mark, containing summaries of the works of Jesus, have been the object of an investigation by Egger (1976). He assigns thirteen units to the class of summary reports, namely Mark 1:14-15,21-22,32-34,39,45; 2:1-2,13; 3:7-12; 4:1-2; 6:6b,30-34,53-56; 10:1. On the distinction between redaction and tradition, Egger is of the opinion that only Mark 1:32-34 and 6:53-56 are traditional units, while 1:14-15,39,45 and 2:1 are informed by the technical vocabulary of the missionary church. The rest of the summaries are all redactional. The picture of Jesus which emerges from the summaries is that of a preacher and teacher rather than a miracle worker or prophet.

5.3 Luke

The way in which Luke interpreted the miracle stories was investigated by Court (1971) and Busse (1977), while Achtemeier (1975) also devoted an essay to the subject. As in the case with Matthew, Luke also took most of his miracle stories from Mark. These he interpreted as the heilsgeschichtlich acts of God through his anointed (Lk 4:18). According to Court the miracles in Luke-Acts serve the purpose of pointing to the renewed presence of God in the time of Jesus and the church, after He has been absent for a long time. Thus Court (1971:265) suggests a new heilsgeschichtlich schema, contrary to that of Conzelmann, namely:

1. The period of God’s presence and activity among Israel.
2. The period of God’s absence or hiddenness.
3. The period of God’s renewed eschatological presence in both Jesus and the church.

Such texts as Luke 17:20-37; 21:5-38; 23:43, however, show that Lukan eschatology also has a future dimension that should not be denied.

Busse (1977) paid attention not only to the Redaktionsgeschichte of the miracle stories in Luke, but also to Redaktionskritik. He concludes that Luke succeeded in integrating these stories into the Gospel in a very clever way. Luke used the miracle stories to convey theological ideas. With regard to the function of the stories, Busse distinguishes three types:

Der Haupttyp illustriert das in Jesu Wirken gegenwärtige Heil Gottes, die zweite Form unterstreicht mehr den den Wundern innewohnenden Zeichencharakter, der auf das messianische Wesen Jesu hindeutet. Die dritte Ausprägung hingegen greift die Aussagen des Haupttypes auf und aktualisiert sie in Hinsicht auf eine Jüngerbelehrung, die ihr nachösterliches Verhalten in gewisser Weise mitnormieren soll (Busse 1977:461f).

Busse is also of the opinion that Luke interpreted the miracle stories throughout with heilsgeschichtlich categories, and that Luke avoided the secrecy motif of the Markan source (1977:485).
5.4 John

In many circles it is taken for granted that the fourth evangelist employed a source or sources for the composition of his Gospel. There is, however, still no agreement about the number of sources employed or the exact contents of the proposed source or sources. Since the appearance of Bultmann’s commentary on John (1941), in which he suggested that all the miracle stories in the fourth Gospel were taken from a source which he called the *Semeia-Quelle*, it has become common practice to accept a signs source underlying John’s Gospel. The research on the miracles in John seems to centre on the difference between the understanding of the *semeia* in this hypothetical source and those in the Gospel. Among others, Becker (1969/70) and Nicol (1972) followed Bultmann in accepting that all the miracle stories in the Gospel were taken from the signs source, although they all differ with regard to the amount of additional material they ascribe to the source.

Fortna (1970) and Teeple (1974) also accept an underlying source, but go further than the previously mentioned scholars, in arguing that the source also entails an account of the passion. The source thus becomes more than a collection of miracle stories: it is in fact a simple gospel.

Apart from the signs source theory, other theories have been proposed where more than one source is detected behind the Gospel. Some of these multiple source proposals include a signs source and some do not.

Critique against the hypothesis of the *semeia* source has been expressed by Neirynck (1983 and 1984). This critique coincides with the question of synoptic influence on John’s Gospel. Two further studies which criticise the signs source hypothesis along the same lines as Neirynck are those by Dauer (1984) and Heekerens (1984). With regard to the miracle story in John 4:46-54 Dauer (1984:121) comes to the following conclusion:

*Die vor-joh Fassung ist eine freie Wiedergabe von Mt 8:5-13 unter Verwendung von Erzählzügen aus Lk 7:1-10.*

Heekerens suggests that, instead of all the miracles described in John, only those in John 2, 4 and 21 could have come from a common source, which he calls the *Zeichen-Quelle*. This is proposed as an alternative signs source containing only three miracles, that is, Spitta’s hypothesis of the three Galilean miracle stories. Further, Heekerens speculates that these three miracle stories had only been incorporated into the Gospel by the author of John 21.

In John the miracles are signs of the eschatological mission of Jesus and of the salvation that Jesus brings through his earthly works. The issues of the role of witness and of signs in relation to faith are closely interrelated in the Gospel. The miracles sometimes lead to faith (cf Jn 2:11; 20:31; cf also 4:48), an idea which the Synoptic Gospels do not stress. Hoeferkamp (1978) has recently investigated the relationship between the *semeia* and believing in John, pointing out the inconsistencies between these two concepts in the Gospel. He attributes these inconsistencies to John’s reworking of the
One does get the idea that the fourth evangelist was uncomfortable with the kind of faith evoked by miracles. But how he revised the view of his source materials is something that redaction critics do not agree on (cf Kysar 1985:2441f).

From this brief overview on the redaktionsgeschichtlich investigations regarding the miracle stories in the Gospels, it is obvious that this method of investigation is alive and well. In the case of the Synoptic Gospels, Redaktionskritik more than Redaktionsgeschichte with regard to the miracles should probably be under further discussion in future, as the two-source theory seems to be well established. As far as John’s Gospel is concerned, however, it seems that none of the proposed source theories approaches the status of widespread acceptance (cf Kysar 1985:2398-2402). Therefore further debate can be expected with regard to the sources employed and the utilisation thereof.

6 FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH

The question of the function of the miracle stories in the early church has long been neglected in favour of questions of an historical-critical kind. Once this was realised, the question of function began to receive attention, not only as far as the miracles in the life of the earthly Jesus are concerned, but even more in the life of the early church.

Theissen (1974) made an important contribution in this regard in his book about early Christian miracle stories. He sees the miracle stories to be symbolic acts of the early church, as becomes clear from the following quotation:

*Texte sind spezifische Formen menschlichen Handelns; sie sind symbolische Handlungen, die sich mehrdeutiger Zeichen bedienen und daher der Interpretation bedürfen* (Theissen 1974:37).

As symbolic acts the miracle stories can be examined with regard to functionalist aspects, of which Theissen (1974:38) distinguishes three. They are:

... ihre soziale Funktion in Urchristentum und antiker Gesellschaft, ihre religionsgeschichtliche Funktion innerhalb der religionsgeschichtlichen Entwicklung und ihre existenzielle Funktion innerhalb antiker Lebenswelt.

Under the religionsgeschichtlich function he includes the Christological function (262ff), which in the opinion of some scholars should rather be seen as a separate function (cf Weder 1984:40).

The social function as pointed out by Theissen has in particular attracted attention. Theissen himself has worked it out in more detail with regard to the story of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-30 (Theissen 1984). Weder (1984:39) welcomes this approach in many recent works as it leads to the discovery of "eine überraschende Mehdimensionalität der Wunderüberlieferung". Theissen has, however, also been criticised in some
other circles for understanding the historical life-context of the miracle stories as the context in which the stories came into being, and not as the life of the historical Jesus. One reviewer puts it as follows:

_The stories are considered "forms of human action", and it is the sociological function of this human action that is on view. Here conclusions are determined by presuppositions_ (Woodhouse 1984:25).

Brown (1984:366f) also sounds the following word of warning:

_While the sociological approach has a positive contribution to make, over-concentration on the sociological function of the New Testament writings is open to the same methodological pitfalls of form criticism, that is, making passages answer questions that seem socially and devotionally appropriate to the church in later ages at the expense of neglecting the religious and social context of the event narrated._

Nevertheless, in the view of a number of scholars the sociological approach has an important contribution to make towards a better understanding of the writings of the New Testament, and in this case the miracle stories. Kee (1983) has - apparently not under the influence of Theissen, because he does not refer to him - devoted a book to the study of the miracle stories, in which he acknowledges his disappointment with the history of religions methods, and propagates the sociohistorical method.

7 MIRACLES AS PARABLES
The idea that miracles can be seen as parables is not new, but seems to go back as far as 1886 when Bruce suggested that

_The miracles of Jesus might be viewed as parables ... not ... that they did not happen or that an original parable had been transformed into event through the wishful thinking of the early church, but as "intimations of redemption" (cf Brown 1984:162)._  
The idea was once again utilised by Richardson (1941) and more recently by Blomberg (1984 & 1986).

The latter, who is primarily concerned with proving the historicity of the miracles, is of the opinion that

_an parabolic approach to the miracles of Jesus provides exciting opportunities for returning to the interpretation that the gospel writers themselves seem to stress most and for achieving agreement with a growing consensus of commentators of many theological perspectives (1984:426)._  

He mentions three exegetical observations to support this stance. First, from Jesus' answer to John the Baptist's disciples in Matthew 11:5/Luke 7:22 he deduces that the miracles both reveal and conceal, just like the parables. Second, even the disciples misunderstand the miracles, so that they get the type of reply that Jesus used when they misunderstood his parables, and third, the synoptists link Jesus' miracles with his proclamation of the kingdom of God. Miracles, like parables, are therefore metaphors of the kingdom. In the light of the fact that some scholars accept the historicity of the healings and
exorcisms, but not of the nature miracles, he then proceeds to argue that the nature miracles are "enacted parables of the powerful inbreaking kingdom of God" (Blomberg 1984:428). Discussing four nature miracles briefly, namely the cursing of the fig tree, the changing of the water into wine, the feeding of the five thousand and the stilling of the storm, he concludes that these miracles depict in symbol the inbreaking kingdom of God. Seeing that the teaching of Jesus about the inbreaking kingdom, especially in his parables, is the most demonstrably authentic core of historical information about Jesus in the Gospels, the miracle stories should therefore be recognised as factual accounts of deeds of the historical Jesus.

In his later essay (1986) on the same topic, Blomberg expands his thesis, this time discussing six nature miracles, and again he comes to the same conclusion. His thesis basically rests on the criterion of coherence. Whether this is enough reason to make the conclusions he makes and whether he has paid enough attention to the form and redaction of the stories are questions that probably merit some future discussion on this topic.

8 MIRACLES AND FAITH

Even a quick glance at many miracle stories reveals that there is a certain relationship between miracles and faith. Quite often faith is mentioned in miracle stories, albeit not always that of the person who needs help, but sometimes that of a helper or a relative. Jesus often responds to faith and sometimes refers to it before or after performing a miracle. This makes it seem as if there is a connection between the faith of the person in need, or his helpers or relatives, and the miracle that takes place. But it is not possible to find this tendency throughout the Gospels. Not only has each evangelist his own way of depicting faith, but sometimes it is explicitly mentioned that there was disbelief or unbelief rather than faith present when a miracle took place (cf, for instance, the unbelief of the disciples during the stilling of the storm in Mk 4:40). Many other times there is no mention of faith at all when a miracle takes place.

There have been attempts to see faith as the real miracle (cf Schmithals 1970:95-99), and also attempts to see faith as a factor contributing to the performing of a miracle. The latter, however, cannot be upheld, because many a time faith is either not mentioned or absent, as mentioned above. Also, in the Gospel of John one sometimes gets the idea that faith is something following a miracle rather than being a contributing factor to the performance of the miracle. Kertelge (1976:102f) sketches the relation between faith and miracle in the following way:

In den Evangelien ist der Glaube nicht eine eigenständige Leistung des Menschen, sondern die durch die Begegnung mit Jesus geweckte Disposition, durch die der Mensch sein Angewiesensein auf die göttliche Hilfe
erkennt und eingestehst. In diesem Sinne bilden Wundermacht und Glaubenskraft eine konvergente Einheit.

It is improbable that the evangelists (or Mark for that matter) introduced the motif of faith into the miracle stories. Apparently they found this motif in the traditions within which they wrote. It is, however, questionable whether this can be taken back as far as the historical Jesus, as some contend, or whether it should be ascribed to the early church. Söding (1985) has investigated faith in Mark, and the other evangelists’ utilisation of this theme may be expected to receive more attention.

The theme of faith with regard to the miracles will probably remain topical in years to come, as far as both the Synoptic Gospels and John’s Gospel are concerned. It seems that consensus has not been reached in either.

9 NARRATIVE APPROACH
With the current interest in the Gospels as narratives it was evident that the miracle stories would also be investigated with regard to their narrative elements. This is what Praeder has discussed in an article (1986), as well as in her forthcoming book on miracle stories in Christian antiquity. In her article she discusses the following five narrative elements of miracle stories taken from the New Testament, noncanonical narrative literature and patristic literature:

1. *Characters*, which can be portrayed in a role of responsibility, a role of reception or a role of participation.
2. *Events*, among which are the causes of miraculous events and the various classes of miraculous events.
3. *Person*, where she establishes that almost all Christian miracle stories are told in third-person narration (the exception of first-person narration appears in the New Testament only in Acts).
4. *Voice*, which includes explanation and interpretation.
5. *Perspective*, which consists of external and internal perspective (external focusing on actions, occurrences and statements, and internal focusing on emotions and thoughts).

In her conclusion (1986:54) she suggests several topics for further study in the New Testament and noncanonical narrative literature, including the reasons for limited authorial voice, the possible effects and purposes of character voice, and the reconsideration of supposed authorial or editorial control and identification in character voice. Whether she has pursued these issues in her book is unknown to me at the time of writing this article.

This type of approach to the miracle stories will probably attract considerable attention, and should be popular in the years to come.

10 HERMENEUTIC PROBLEMS
Leon-Dufour (1977) is of the opinion that, since the miracle stories have been examined dogmatically, critically and literarily, we are now in the hermeneutic era of investigation. Weder (1984:46), who concurs, sees the present era as the "Ära der Interpretation, die ihr besonderes Augenmerk auf die Beziehungen zwischen den Wundergeschichten des Neuen Testaments und der "Rationalität" der Gegenwart richtet, beziehungsweise sich der Frage zuwendet, unter welchen Bedingungen die Wundergeschichten sagen können, was sie zu sagen haben.

He then points out that the most important hermeneutic acknowledgement is that the miracle stories are open to multi-dimensional explanation, instead of a one-dimensional approach. It has become clear that when texts such as Mark 5:1-20 are subjected to semiotic examination, they have different levels of meaning. The multi-dimensional approach to the miracle stories includes, among other things, the psycho-analytical examination of a text. A text such as Mark 5:1-20 (the Gerasene demoniac) lends itself to this type of investigation (cf Beirnaert 1977).

Some questions of a hermeneutic nature are pointed out by Weder (1984:49). In the light of the fact that miracle stories are often seen as the proclamation of what the risen Christ means for the believer, the danger of transforming the miracle stories into their supposed meaning exists. This brings to the fore the question of the replacement of a specific form of speech by another. This question becomes even more interesting when demythologising comes into the picture: are miracle stories replaceable by non-mythological language? Weder (1984:49) suggests that it is possible that the embarrassment that historical-critical exegesis experiences with regard to the miracle stories could perhaps be seen in the light of the Aristotelian philosophy of language, where the Abbildungsfunktion of language is accepted. It is possible that the miracle stories are not adequately understood under the Abbildungsfunktion of language.

Es wäre denkbar, dass die Geltung der Wundergeschichten nicht durch das in ihnen Abgebildete zustande kommt, sondern ausschließlich durch das, was sie zu sagen haben. Dies könnte jedoch nur zum Verstehen kommen, wenn die Abbildtheorie der Sprache entscheidend modifiziert würde.

11 CONCLUSION

From this survey it has become clear that in very few, if any, of the areas of research consensus exists or the last word has been spoken.

To start with the historicity of the miracle stories: It is claimed by some that an increasing number of scholars believe that antisupernaturalism is philosophically and scientifically indefensible and that a solid core of the gospel miracle stories is undeniably factual (cf Blomberg 1984:427). This indeed seems to be the case. That Jesus was a healer and an exorcist is now
very widely accepted, but whether the nature miracle stories are historically reliable will surely be the topic of much further discussion. The view of the miracles as parables, and the concept of coherence between Jesus’ words and deeds, have a role to play in this discussion.

Form-critical and redaction-critical investigations with regard to the miracle stories are definitely not something of the past. There are still some questions which they might answer, such as whether the nature miracles really form a separate class of miracle stories, and what the role of miracles is in the totality of the separate Gospels. There is also the relationship between miracles and faith (and witness in John’s Gospel).

Narrative analysis of the miracle stories has just begun to receive attention, and the same might be true of the functionalist and also the hermeneutical investigations of the miracle stories.

As far as the religionsgeschichtlich background of the miracle stories is concerned, I have an idea that we shall not much longer be bombarded with the Hellenistic background of these stories, but that the Jewish/Old Testament background will continue to be stressed. Two views of Jesus in his role as miracle worker might now be laid to rest, namely viewing Him either as a θεός ὁ υἱός or as a magician. There have been conclusive studies to counter these views. Widely divergent views have, however, become typical of New Testament studies.

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