

Stefan Alkier and Annette Weissenrieder (Eds.)
Miracles Revisited

Studies of the Bible and Its Reception



Edited by

Dale C. Allison, Jr., Volker Leppin, Choon-Leong Seow,
Barry Dov Walfish, Eric Ziolkowski

Volume 2

Miracles Revisited

New Testament Miracle Stories
and their Concepts of Reality

Edited by
Stefan Alkier and Annette Weissenrieder

DE GRUYTER

ISBN 978-3-11-029592-4
e-ISBN 978-3-11-029637-2
ISSN 2195-450X

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2013 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston
Logo: Martin Zech
Printing: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen
♻️ Printed on acid-free paper
Printed in Germany

www.degruyter.com

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Stefan Alkier, Annette Weissenrieder

Preface

Es kommt alles wieder, auch die Wunder, grade die Wunder.
Sie haben ihre Gesetze.

Kurt Tucholsky 1927

Through the study of miracles, the contributors in this volume show how unique perspectives to the history of antiquity are made possible with many consequences: as the first argument, miracles allow us to establish new directions in the debate about concepts of reality in antiquity and beyond. Since David Hume if not earlier, the interpretation of miracle stories has been dominated in the West by the binary distinction of fact vs. fiction. Even in the latest research this modern opposition is accepted as self-evident. The resulting ontology continues to underly the form-critical study of New Testament miracle stories, leading to interpretive nuances that presuppose the distinction of fact vs. fiction but have no basis in either the texts in question or their concepts of reality. Thus many scholars distinguish between stories with a historical basis and therefore a claim to facticity (e.g. healings interpreted in terms of psychosomatic therapies, or exorcisms in terms of social therapy) and stories invented out of whole cloth as fictional expressions of childlike desires (e.g. miraculous gifts or favors).

In order to overcome an impediment to research presented by this opposition of terms, between fact and fiction, supernatural and natural events, the authors in this volume ask about the changing use of miraculous events in religious as well as secular systems of thought and knowledge.

In the second argument, miracles allow us to thematize and historicize the social constitution, assumptions of normality and boundaries in and between epistemic systems. Reality and epistemology were not first disputed in modernity, but scathing criticism of miracles and sympathizing skepticism appeared in close proximity to each other already in antiquity, for example in *De morbo sacro* of the *Corpus Hippocraticum*. And in the third argument, miracles allow us to substantiate anew already-illuminated theoretical issues.

In addition, there is a recent debate in New Testament studies which introduces Ecology. At the same time, we should not allow miracles to follow the predominance of form criticism, which dominated the debate not only in New Testament. Not only did it lead to confining the miracle-discourse to the question of historicity, but a restriction to individual pericopes accompanied this, so that the macro-texts were neglected. The authors of this volume not only inquire into the macro-context more strongly than has been customary in research, but also expand the miracle-discourse to genres such as letters, histories, and apocalypses,

while some authors exceed the boundaries between visual and textual sources. In order to do justice to these extraordinary perspectives, which occur alongside the interface of epistemic systems, we sought an interdisciplinary conversation that goes beyond the limits of antiquity to identify further traces.

The greater part of the published studies date back to discussions at a conference on 'Healing Stories and Concepts of Reality from Antiquity to the Middle Ages' at San Francisco Theological Seminary, November 16–18, 2011. The conference was designed collectively by Annette Weissenrieder and Stefan Alkier and made possible through the cooperation of San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Fachbereich Evangelische Theologie at the Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main. We also thank the association of friends and benefactors of the Goethe University for their generous support. Specifically, we thank the vice-president of the Goethe University, Prof. Dr. Rainer Klump, who made it possible for the students of the Goethe University to attend the conference.

We hold the opinion that interdisciplinary discourse opened new perspectives during the conference in a delightful way and with the addition of the conference papers in the present volume this can be introduced now to international miracle research. We thank Lukas Walker, the doctoral students Phil Erwin, Thomas Soden, Katy Valentine, Michael Rydryck and Prof. Polly Coote for helpful support in proofreading. A special word of thanks goes to Alena Schulz and Michael Rydryck (Fachbereich Evangelische Theologie, Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main) for their invaluable assistance in preparing the index. In addition, we thank the editors for the acceptance of our volume in the new series, which will support the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (EBR). Thanks also to the staff of De Gruyter Verlag, first and foremost Dr. Albrecht Döhnert, for the same friendly as well as professional collaboration.

Stefan Alkier and Annette Weissenrieder, July 2012

I Rereading New Testament Miracle Stories

Stefan Alkier

“For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37)

The Reality of “The Feeding the Five Thousand”
(Luke 9:10–17) in the Universe of Discourse of Luke’s
Gospel

1 Fact – Fiction – Friction

It is not always easy to classify a text as a miracle story. A short semantical analysis of Luke 9:10–17 cannot fail to notice that this text does not contain any of the terminology one commonly finds in miracle stories. Not only are terms like *δυνάμεις* (*dynameis*), *έργον* (*ergon*), *παράδοξον* (*paradoxon*), *σημεῖον* (*semeion*), *τέρας* (*teras*), *θαῦμα* (*thauma*) missing, but the text also fails to narrate the kinds of common reactions we find in other New Testament miracle stories. Despite the fact that there are more than 5,000 men on the scene, nobody wonders about the feeding of so many with only five loaves and two fish. Nobody praises God or his prophet, nobody gets frightened, nobody is beside themselves, nobody gets wild, and nobody even remarks: “We have seen strange things today” (Luke 5:26b).

Most modern exegetes have not been astonished either. They are used to asking: “How can we explain what *really* could have happened?” No one seems to have a problem with the deficient form of this miracle story. Why are exegetes so sure that the feeding of 5,000 is a miracle story? Why have they so easily classified this text as a miracle story in spite of the semantic, pragmatic and syntactical problems noted above?

The text confronts the readers with the obvious discrepancy between only five loaves and two fish in the hands of the disciples of Jesus and the large crowd of men that were fed with them. The text narrates that 5,000 men were fed with 5 loaves and two fish and that 12 baskets of broken pieces of bread were left over. The text does not, however, say frankly how this was done. With this implicit question the author directs the reader to find the right answer by remembering what he has already read in Luke’s Gospel and what he will find by continuing to read. This is a way of reading that follows the strategies of the text itself. In some reception theories the reader who is in tune with these strategies is called

the implied reader (Wolfgang Iser¹). Other theorists talk about the model or the ideal reader (Umberto Eco²).

But real readers have a choice among very different readings, and following the strategies of the text is not the way most often chosen by real flesh and blood readers. Since the form-critical method taught exegetes to ignore the syntactical, semantic and pragmatic network between the micro- and the macro text, the common practice has been to isolate the stories and to explain the miraculous in the light of the concept of reality that the real reader finds convincing.

Since historical-critical exegetes decided to criticize the biblical texts in light of the empirical conception of reality that can be constructed in terms of cause and effect and analogy and repetition, they became more and more convinced that miracle stories are a product of religious fiction. Such fiction uses the miraculous as a code to express something that, by definition, is not miraculous but real. For David Friedrich Strauß,³ the reality of the miracle story is the idea. For Rudolf Bultmann,⁴ the self-understanding of existence formed the reality of the account. For Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,⁵ Christian propaganda stands at the center. For Gerd Theißen⁶ – who has transformed good old demythologizing into psychotherapy – the desires of the poor and depressed are the reality behind the miracle story.

There is, however, a significant difference between Bultmann's hermeneutical concept of demythologizing and Gerd Theißen's psychological transformation of this program. Bultmann's concept was created in opposition to the explanations of rationalism. Theißen's approach tries to combine the two.

1 Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *Der implizite Leser: Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett* (Munich 1972); Hannelore Link, *Rezeptionsforschung: Eine Einführung in Methoden und Probleme* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart et al. 1976).

2 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, Ind. 1979).

3 Cf. David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu* vol. 1 (Tübingen 1835), 75.

4 Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christus und die Mythologie*, in: id., *Glauben und Verstehen* vol. 4 (4th ed.; Tübingen 1984), 141–89, esp. 146. Cf. Konrad Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann: Eine Biographie* (2nd rev. ed.; Tübingen 2009).

5 Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miracles, Mission, and Apologetics*, introduction to *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity*, by id. (University of Notre Dame Center for the Study of Judaism and Christianity in Antiquity 2; Notre Dame, Ind. 1976), 2.

6 Cf. Gerd Theißen, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten: Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien* (StNT 8; Gütersloh 1974), 44.

Rationalism, from H. E. G. Paulus⁷ up to Theißen, often appeals to a trick or a forgery. In Theißen’s, *The Shadow of the Galilean (Der Schatten des Galiläers)*, rich women support Jesus. Johanna, one of these wealthy women, explains: “When I or others send him (Jesus) food, bread, fish or fruits and my servants suddenly get it out, for the crowd it seems to be a miracle. These poor people have never seen that much food at one time. Thus, if one desires it, for that person a real miracle happens.”⁸

In this explanation of the “miracle,” the 5000 were poor people who did not notice the rich women and their servants. Their conclusion is, therefore, that Jesus himself and not the rich women fed them by a miracle. But this rationalistic explanation of what “really” happened pays a high price for its demythologizing of the miracle stories. Jesus is no longer a miracle worker and he becomes not a shaman – as some contemporary scholars like to say about Jesus⁹ – but a charlatan who lets the people think of him in ways that are not true. Moreover, Jesus has effectively stolen the thanks from those to whom it should have been given – the wealthy women. Theißen’s genre of “gift miracles”¹⁰ with its rationalistic explanation of how Jesus’ miracles occurred, leave a bad taste in one’s mouth.

The common problem of the rationalist hermeneutic and other such attempts to explain miracles is that they fail to read the microtext carefully. Specifically, they fail to read the particular account together with its meaning generating relations to other parts of the macro text. They bring their concept of reality to the isolated miracle stories because, from David Hume¹¹ to Gerd Theißen, they are

7 Cf. Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus, *Philologisch-kritischer und historischer Kommentar über die drei ersten Evangelien, in welchem der griechische Text, nach einer Recognition der Varianten, Interpunctionen und Abschnitte, durch Einleitungen, Inhaltsanzeigen und ununterbrochene Scholien als Grundlage der Geschichte des Urchristenthums synoptisch und chronologisch bearbeitet ist*, 3 vols. (Lübeck 1800–1802).

8 Cf. Gerd Theißen, *Der Schatten des Galiläers: Historische Jesusforschung in erzählender Form* (13th ed.; Gütersloh 1993), 168: “Wenn ich oder andere ihm Lebensmittel schicken, Brote, Fische und Früchte, und meine Leute holen sie plötzlich heraus, dann erscheint es der Menge wie ein Wunder. Diese armen Leute haben oft noch nie so viel Lebensmittel auf einmal gesehen. Wenn man so will, geschieht auch tatsächlich ein Wunder.” Cf. also the English version Gerd Theißen, *The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form* (updated ed.; Augsburg, Minn. 2007).

9 Cf. Bernd Kollmann, *Neutestamentliche Wundergeschichten: Biblisch-theologische Zugänge und Impulse für die Praxis* (Stuttgart et al. 2002), 22; Bernd Kollmann, *Jesus und die Christen als Wundertäter* (FRLANT 170; Göttingen 1996).

10 Cf. Theißen, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten*, 111ff.

11 David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principals of Morals* (repr. from the 1777 edition and Analytical Index by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd rev. ed. With notes by P. H. Nidditch; Oxford 1975), 109–31.

convinced that miracle stories are an expression of an irrational, childish state of humanity. The investigation of New Testament miracle stories in the tradition of the historical-critical paradigm, therefore, depends on a binary logic that understands the miraculous of the miracle stories merely as religious fiction. Most important are the oppositions of fact and fiction and rational/irrational. The miraculous of the miracle stories belongs in this paradigm to the irrational and fictional.¹²

A semiotic-critical point of view provides an alternative to this binary way of thinking. To put the point briefly, my proposal is that the miraculous of the miracles is better understood in terms of a third way: The miraculous is neither fact nor fiction, but *friction*. The miraculous represents a break in the binary logic of the everyday experience. It is an aspect of reality that resists all the worldly explanations that cannot think something really new, truly contingent, creatively creative.¹³

What the miraculous is depends on the conscious and unconscious concepts of reality that always work in the background when we talk about miracles. Or, to put it the other way round: When we talk about miracles, we always talk about reality. What we call a miracle is not the same as what biblical texts call δυνάμεις (*dynameis*), παράδοξον (*paradoxon*), σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα (*semeia kai terata*), and so on. I hope to elucidate a frictional concept – or concepts – of miracles by becoming a disciple of the biblical texts. If we take miracles as utterances of other experiences, other ways of thinking and world views, they could help us see what

12 Gerd Theißen, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten*, 42: “Nun ist das ganze Urchristentum Zeichen eines tiefgreifenden Wandels, in dem sich die antike Kultur einem ‘neuen’ Irrationalismus zuwandte”; and 45: “Natürlich hat es wunderhafte Phänomene gegeben: unwahrscheinliche Heilungen und Wundercharismatiker. Aber erst durch symbolische Steigerungen wurden diese wunderhaften Phänomene in ein paradoxes Handeln göttlicher Wesen verwandelt. Vergleichbare symbolische Steigerungen der Realität charakterisieren aber das ganze Neue Testament.”

13 This concept of the miraculous as friction does not only work in theology, but in philosophy and the arts, too: Cf. André Michels, *Zwei Rationalismen? Zur epistemischen Bedeutung des Wunders*, in *Wunder: Kunst, Wissenschaft und Religion vom 4. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart, Katalog zur Ausstellung der Deichtorhallen Hamburg und der Siemens Stiftung, kuratiert von der Praxis für Ausstellungen und Theorie* (ed. Daniel Tyradellis, Beate Hentschel, and Dirk Luckow; Hamburg 2011), 249: “Wunder nennen wir ein Ereignis, das rational (noch) nicht erklärbar ist. Von den Religionen als Zeichen Gottes verstanden und gedeutet, weist es auf einen Bruch in der Rationalität, die Grenzen der rationalen Erklärbarkeit hin. Diese können zwar immer wieder verschoben werden, wie es sich im Laufe der Jahrhunderte gezeigt hat, bleiben aber letztlich unaufhebbar. ‘Wunder’ wäre demnach der Name für diesen unaufhebbaren Rest, für das Reale, das dem Rationalen, so spitzfindig, ausgeklügelt oder perfide seine Mittel auch sein mögen, Widerstand leistet.”

we do not see with our common sense explanations. I want to read the biblical texts as depictions of other worlds that I do not know.¹⁴ To aid in this task I shall use two interwoven methodological concepts: Charles Sanders Peirce’s idea of a “universe of discourse” and Umberto Eco’s notion of an “Encyclopedia”.

2 The Semiotic Concepts of the Universe of Discourse and the Encyclopedia¹⁵

Signs are not reducible to formal relational entities. A sign functions only through its use in sign connections such as conversations, texts, pictures, buildings, traffic laws, television broadcasts, pop concerts, scientific congresses, and so forth. These relevant sign connections, however, constitute an entire given culture, which is therefore to be understood not as monadic and monological, but rather as relational and dialogical. Cultures are based on the communally conventionalized, creative, and often contradictory use of signs. Cultures are connections of signs.

A sign thus requires at least two relationships in order to function: it must belong to a currently perceptible sign structure and, at the same time, to a culture as the whole of its virtual sign connections. In dependence upon and through a modification of Peirce’s conceptuality, I shall call the concretely perceptible sign connection the “universe of discourse.” With Umberto Eco I refer to this all-embracing cultural sign relation as the “Encyclopedia.”

2.1 The Universe of Discourse

Semiotic grammar works out a formal sign model that describes which components must be combined so that a sign process in general, *semiosis*, can come about. It makes possible the explanation of which formal conditions a sign must fulfill and to which type of sign (more precisely, type of signs) it belongs (more precisely, can belong). It says nothing, however, about the communicative conditions of the use of signs. This task falls to semiotic rhetoric.

¹⁴ Cf. Stefan Alkier and Bernhard Dressler, “Wundergeschichten als fremde Welten lesen lernen,” in *Religion zeigen: Religionspädagogik und Semiotik* (ed. B. Dressler and M. Meyer-Blanck; Münster 1998), 163–87.

¹⁵ Cf. Stefan Alkier, “New Testament Studies on the Basis of Categorical Semiotics,” in *Reading the Bible Intertextually* (ed. R. B. Hays, L. Huizenga, and S. Alkier; Waco, Tex. 2009), 223–48.

Within this formulation of the question, Peirce's concept of the universe of discourse plays a fundamental role. James Jakób Liska defines it aptly: "The universe of discourse is what an utterer and interpreter must share so that communication can result."¹⁶

The concept of the universe of discourse does not develop out of the hermeneutic tradition or from a new text theory, nor did Peirce bring it to expression in the framework of his semiotic thought. It belongs much more to the discussion of logic in the nineteenth century. Boole formulated it in 1857 as follows: "In every discourse, whether the mind is now concerned with its own thoughts or the individual is communicating with another, there is an assumed or explicit border, inside of which the objects of its use are enclosed ... this universe of discourse is in the strictest sense the last *object* of the discourse."¹⁷ Helmut Pape comments aptly: "The concept of the universe of discourse is used to solve the semantic problem of a suitably limited connection to the object [Gegenstandsbezug]."¹⁸

Peirce develops the logic of "Existential Graphs" in the framework of his semiotic philosophy. It concerns "a new conception of the relationship of reality, experience, and logic."¹⁹ Later he comments: "The semantic conception of the EG [Existential Graph] is the idea that every logic must be related to a type of situation or universe of discourse. A given sign can consequently only function as a sign if it is ordered to a world – to the universe of discourse of the sign connection and context [Zeichenzusammenhang] – inside of whose conditions it can generate meanings."²⁰

This foundational idea can be formulated for the concerns of every science. The universe of discourse of a given sign connection is then the world that this sign-connection establishes and assumes, so that what is told by or claimed by the sign-connection can plausibly function. *Alice in Wonderland* refers to a different world than the nature reports that the television program *Wonderful World* shows, and the latter would lose its credibility if it were to show marvellous creatures that we naturally are ready to accept and indeed expect in Alice's wonderland.

¹⁶ James Jakób Liska, *A General Introduction to the Semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Indiana and Bloomington, Ind. 1996), 92.

¹⁷ G. Boole, *An Investigation into the Laws of Thought*, 1857, 42, quote in: Charles S. Peirce, *Semiotische Schriften* vol. 3 (1906–13) (trans. and ed. C. Kloesel and H. Pape; Frankfurt a. M. 1993), 46.

¹⁸ Helmut Pape, introduction to *Semiotische Schriften* vol. 3 (1906–13), by C. S. Peirce (trans. C. Kloesel and H. Pape; Frankfurt a. M. 1993), 7–74, here: 49.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

The communicative problem of the universe of discourse consists, however, precisely in the fact that there are different worlds with different laws and we must indicate in every act of expression that to which our statements relate. On this point we assume the common knowledge of the respectively indicated world between us and our conversation partner, and we must do that in order to be able to say more than one sentence a day.

The act of reference to a commonly recognized world belongs to the economy of human sign usage. The theory of the universe of discourse limits the validity of statements to a defined realm; it designates the scope of statements.

2.2 The Encyclopedia

The concept of the universe of discourse is always related to a concrete sign connection and context, be it a text, an archaeological site, a picture, or a coin. In contrast, the encyclopedia, which is necessarily virtual and impossible to grasp fully, due to its complexity, encompasses the conventionalized knowledge of a given society and thus breaches the boundaries of individual sign relations by virtue of the concept of the universe of discourse. Each act of sign production and sign reception must be related to at least one encyclopedia of culturally conventionalized knowledge.

Human communication functions with the use of many media and, at the same time, makes use of different sign systems. We speak, sing, paint, dance, form objects and design clothing, hairstyles, buildings, objects, and public and private spaces. No one communicates only in texts; no text functions without a connection to other sign systems. An encyclopedia consists not only of linguistic knowledge, but also of the knowledge of forms of address, norms of behavior, technical and practical knowledge, and so forth. The differences of cultural encyclopedias should not be obscured by the forces of increasing standardization in Western and North American culture. To see this, one need only imagine a German going for coffee and biscuits in Norway for the first time without the encyclopedic information that one has coffee and biscuits in Norway in the late evening and not in the afternoon as in Germany.

Whatever applies for the contemporaneity of various cultures is true in a compounded and amplified manner for the diversity of world knowledge in cultures that are not contemporaneous. The world of early Christianity is not our world, and it is to its enduring credit that historical-critical research has drawn attention to this irreducible difference. But the world of early Christianity, like any other world, does not consist only of texts and linguistic signs. The sign processes that have relevance in various ways for the preaching of Jesus, the composition of

New Testament writings, and the process of canonization must also be considered in working out an early Christian encyclopedia. They can only be considered, however, in so far as there are present remnants in our current time that can take on a sign function. To this, however, belong not only the texts that have come down to us but also the remnants of material culture. These sign complexes must be explored in the light of their respective universes of discourse with the appropriate diligence and care. Viewing these universes of discourse together enables the approximate concretization of a virtual encyclopedia of early Christianity.²¹

With that, the entries into the virtual encyclopedia of early Christianity are to be understood as cultural semantic units that can be provided with various indices – for example space and time – in order to take into account in an appropriate manner the diversity, but also the inconsistency, of this encyclopedia. It is thus not a question of an onthology of origin that could digest everything that falls under the name of early Christianity into a homogenous early Christian stew. It is rather a question of taking into account in an appropriate manner the complexity, heterogeneity, inconsistency, and diversity of early Christian sign production and reception.

The early Christian encyclopedia records not only early Christian sign production, but also its reception. It does not ask the question, “What is genuinely Christian?” Rather, it asks: “What is relevant for early Christianity?” For this kind of encyclopedic research, social-scientific and cultural-anthropological investigations are of decisive importance.

Just as relevant, however, is the question of the arrangement of space in cities and villages in which early Christian sign-production took place, even if these spaces were not arranged by Christians. Relevant also are questions concerning the technology for work and tools for agriculture and fishing. These culture-specific pieces of knowledge should be regarded and formulated as semantic segments of early Christian worlds of significance, which commonly provide a sound basis for the interpretation of individual sign complexes, be they texts, coins, pictures, or archaeological sites. Therefore, semiotic exegesis demands interdisciplinary cooperation in all areas of research that expands our knowledge of the (early) Christian encyclopedia.

It will be necessary not only to study the encyclopedia(s) of early Christianity, but also those of their recipients and of our own time. In this way, the important

²¹ Cf. Stefan Alkier and Jürgen Zangenberg, “Zeichen aus Text und Stein: Ein semiotisches Konzept zur Verhältnisbestimmung von Archäologie und Exegese,” in *Zeichen aus Text und Stein: Studien auf dem Weg zu einer Archäologie des Neuen Testaments* (TANZ 42; Tübingen and Basel 2003), 21–62.

insight of historical criticism regarding the differences between “world views” can be more precisely described and more effectively used for the interpretation of texts. One can then largely avoid applying fallacious, anachronistic assumptions concerning reality from one’s own encyclopedia to early Christian texts, as often happens with the interpretation of miracles.²²

3 A Reading of Luke 9:10–17 in the Universe of Discourse of Luke’s Gospel

The story about the feeding of the 5,000 (Luke 9:10–17)²³ is part of the Gospel of Luke, and as such it participates in the universe of discourse of Luke’s Gospel. Because of this fact, the question of the plausibility of feeding 5,000 men is not to be explained by an appeal to modern or rationalistic assumptions that come from outside of the text. Its plausibility is instead a function of the story’s relationship to other parts of the macro text in which it occurs (i.e., the Gospel of Luke as a whole).

The microtext (Luke 9:10–17) begins with Luke 9:10a: “On their return”. This opening comment marks the following text as a sequel to all that has already been narrated in the Gospel of Luke. Without knowledge of Luke 1:1–9:9 it is not possible to understand the scene in Luke 9:10–17. And, as we will see, the theological plausibility of the miracle in 9:10–17 depends upon reading the Gospel to its end.

With regard to the hermeneutics of what we are used to classifying as “miracle stories,” we can learn that it makes little sense to cut the miracle stories out of their macro texts – here, the Gospel of Luke – because full meaning, plausibility and conclusiveness of the micro text can only be generated in relation to other parts of the macro text. To put the matter differently, a miracle story without its context is underdetermined.

22 Cf. Stefan Alkier, “Wen wundert Was? Einblicke in die Wunderauslegung von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart,” *ZNT 7/Themenheft Wunder und Magie* (2001): 2–15.

23 Cf. Ulrich Busse, *Die Wunder des Propheten Jesus: Die Rezeption, Komposition und Interpretation der Wundertradition im Evangelium des Lukas* (Stuttgart 1979), 232–48; A. J. Farrer, “Loaves and Thousands,” in *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S. 4 (1953): 1–14; Richard H. Hiers and Charles A. Kennedy, “The Bread and Fish Eucharist In the Gospels and Early Christian Art,” in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 3 (1976): 21–48; Bas Van Iersel, “Die wunderbare Speisung und das Abendmahl in der synoptischen Tradition (Mk VI 35–44 par., VIII 1–20 par.),” *Novum Testamentum* 7 (1964): 167–94; Michael Pettem, “Le premier récit de la multiplication des pains et le problème synoptique,” in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 14 (1985): 73–83.

The opening of 9:10–17 hints at what has happened before. The very formulation of the text presupposes readers who know what has been narrated in 1:1–9:9. Readers who want to understand the feeding story must know who the apostles who have returned are and what they have done. Luke 9:10 informs us that the deeds of these individuals must have been extraordinary because they tell Jesus “what great things they have done” (ὅσα ἐποίησαν / *hosa epoiesan*). We find the needed information in 9:1–6. In these verses we notice and understand the emphasis implicit in the syntagma ὅσα ἐποίησαν (*hosa epoiesan*): “Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power (δύναμις / *dynamis*) and authority (ἐξουσία/ *exousia*) over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” Luke 9:6 testifies that the apostles have done what Jesus told them and enabled them to do. Importantly, these deeds are the kinds of things that he has already done before chapter 9 and that he will continue to do in the feeding story: “to proclaim the kingdom and to heal with δύναμις (*dynamis*) and ἐξουσία (*exousia*).” No wonder, then, that the returning apostles immediately tell Jesus that they themselves have done the same kinds of great things that they have seen Jesus doing. By relating 9:1–6 to 9:10 we notice that the expression ὅσα ἐποίησαν (*hosa epoiesan*) as miracle terminology. The same expression – ὅσα ἐποίησεν (*hosa epoiesen*) – describes the glorious thing that Jesus did to the Gerasene demoniac in 8:39.

Jesus reacts in 9:10b. His reaction indicates that he believes what the apostles have told him. He himself knows that it takes a lot of effort to act with δύναμις (*dynamis*) and ἐξουσία (*exousia*) (cf. 6:18; 8:46). This is why he wants his returning apostles to rest just as he himself rests after he has done great things (cf. 5:16; 9:18). But as so often is the case the crowd disturbs their rest and silence and Jesus must again assume the role of teacher and healer until the end of the day (cf. 9:11–12a).

But what have the apostles done the whole day? Did they rest? It seems so because in v. 12b they are strong enough to begin to act again: “the twelve came to him and said, ‘Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place’.”

Jesus did not call them or ask them to give him advice. They decided by themselves that Jesus needed advice because in their eyes he is not doing what the situation demands. They reverse the teacher/disciple relationship and begin speaking to him in the position of the teacher. They address Jesus as a disciple who does not really know what he is doing. They tell him how things are and what he should now be doing.

Jesus responds with a counteraction. With his ἐξουσία (*exousia*) / authority as the real teacher he gives the upstart miracle workers an order: “You give them

something to eat!” (9:13a). The emphasis in this sentence rests on “YOU.” Jesus denies the authority of his apostles to give him advice and declares with this emphatic YOU that they must do and will do what he, the real source of authority, wants them do.

The tension between the ἐξουσία (*exousia*) of the apostles and that of Jesus does not come to an end here because the apostles do not accept the authority of Jesus. They calculate with the rational logic of limited resources and human possibilities. Their answer to Jesus’ order is pure irony. They want to make Jesus understand that the order he has given is not rational but absurd. What Jesus has commanded stands against everything a sane mind knows. They ignore their own previous frictional experiences of δύναμις (*dynamis*) and ἐξουσία (*exousia*) and even their experiences of the δύναμις (*dynamis*) and ἐξουσία (*exousia*) of Jesus, their teacher: “We have no more than five loaves and two fish – unless we go and buy food for all these people” (9:13b). The narrator adds: “For there were about five thousand men.” (9:14).

The irony of the apostle’s answer does not only result from the statements about the lateness of the day and the problem of organizing such a great amount of food, it also stems from the immense costs involved with feeding 5,000 men. Careful readers of Luke’s Gospel know that at this point in the story the apostles have no money. Moreover, such readers know that the apostles know that Jesus knows that they have no money on hand. It was after all Jesus’ own order in 9:3: “He said to them: Take nothing on your journey, no staff, no bag, neither bread, nor money.”

But Jesus ignores the ignorance and irony of the apostles and continues his program of making them disciples again, people who accept his ἐξουσία (*exousia*) / authority and the frictional possibilities of divine power. To accomplish this he gives them a new order: “Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each.” Because the story up to this point shows that the disciples do not want to do what their teacher says, the narrator declares: “They did so and made them all sit down.” (9:14b–15a). Now the ignorant miracle workers are acting as disciples again.

Now that Jesus has won the battle of authority on earth he contacts the divine power in heaven: “And taking the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd.” (9:16).

By obeying Jesus the disciples are enabled to follow his first order and give the crowd something to eat. They give them the five loaves and two fish, but now these few items have been changed. When Jesus looks into heaven and blesses the bread from the earth and fish from the sea, heaven and earth are brought together. The materiality of bread and fish has become an effective sign of all the

dimensions of God's creativity. In Luke this creative activity does not function as pure symbolism, but in a very materialistic way: "And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces." (9:17)

Importantly, the abundance of the blessed and broken bread and fish is not only a sign of the eschatological dimension of the feeding story or of the Lord's Supper. The twelve baskets are also an ironical answer to the ignorant irony of the miracle working apostles who could not follow the logic of God's powerful creativity because they were bounded by the rational logic of supply and demand. The twelve baskets mean that from the five loaves and two fish each one of them has now received his own basket.²⁴

4 Jesus is not a Shaman or: How the Feeding of the 5000 Worked according to the Gospel of Luke

Why is the story of feeding the 5,000 in the Gospel of Luke not merely a nice fairy-tale? Why is the story so prone to be misunderstood by us in terms of Gerd Theißen's category of "Geschenkwunder"? We find the answer in Luke's Gospel itself: Luke did not want to tell fairytales like the one about Jesus the charlatan and his rich women that one can read about in Theißen's *The Shadow of the Galilean*. Luke wanted to be a historian (cf. Luke 1:1–4). As an ancient historian his Gospel provides an answer concerning the plausibility of the feeding stories when we take him at his word and follow his "orderly account."

Careful readers notice that 9:17 fulfills what Mary sang in 1:53: "He has filled the hungry", and what Jesus prophesied in 6:21: "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied". The plausibility of these fulfillments comes from God's presence in the story of the Gospel of Luke, especially as this presence is represented in Jesus: "Jesus himself symbolizes God's presence among the people because he is so closely identified with the father (10:21–22)."²⁵

²⁴ Bas van Iersel, "Die wunderbare Speisung und das Abendmahl," 190ff, notices the relation of the feeding story to Lord's supper and the importance of the functionality of the term "twelve." He does not, however, see the irony in the text.

²⁵ Carl Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Nashville, Tenn. 2005), 180. Cf. also C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (BZNW 139; Berlin and New York 2006).

But God’s presence²⁶ does not appear for the first time in the narrative of Luke’s gospel, but in Luke’s own reflection on what he thought he had to do as an historian. Thus he sets out to retell a story that others before him have already told. Nevertheless, he takes his own work to be necessary because all his predecessors have missed the true order of the events. And yet, despite his critique, Luke admits that they have actually given a narrative of the events in question. His contribution consists in his desire to add to and to retell the true order of the events of the story. These events as presented in the gospel did not happen as a result of human action and will, but as the fulfilment of God’s intentions just as they were already foretold in the Holy Scriptures of Israel. Luke’s prologue presents God not only by using the *passivum divinum* in v. 1:1b – “the things that have been fulfilled among us” –; but also by arguing that God is the true author of the events that Luke transforms into written signs. Luke’s ‘correct’ version of the gospel therefore narrates what God did. Luke presents the story in his Gospel as the narrative about the things God did “among us” (1:1) and every sign in the Gospel has to be read from this perspective.

God is not only one character among others in the narrative. His acts and deeds do not only function as the content of the written story, they are also the dynamic object²⁷ which motivates not only the whole work of Luke, but every shorter

26 Cf. Stefan Alkier, “Ways of Presence and Modes of Absence in the Gospel of Luke – Or: How Scripture works,” in *The Presence and Absence of God: Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* (ed. Ingolf U. Dalferth; Religion in Philosophy and Theology 42; Tübingen 2009), 41–55.

27 Charles Sanders Peirce, “Sundry Logical Conceptions,” in *The Essential Peirce* vol. 2 (ed. by the Peirce Edition Project; Bloomington and Indianapolis, Ind. 1998) 272f., defines the sign triad as follows: “A Sign or Representamen, is a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its object, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its Interpretant, to assume the same triadic relation to its object in which it stands itself to the same Object.” The sign represents the object *in one respect*. No sign is able to represent its object in every respect or capacity. It always takes a certain point of view. Peirce called the object that is represented in the sign triad through the choice of a special respect the *immediate* object. The immediate object has its place inside of the sign triad and indeed only inside this triad. The *dynamic* object, on the other hand, is the object that motivates the generation of a sign and of which the immediate object represents only some respect. The connection between the dynamic and the immediate object is given through the *ground* of the dynamic object. To speak of the *respect* of the immediate object thus means that the dynamic object cannot entirely be represented by the sign, but rather only with a view to a characteristic quality, which it shares with other objects. The generation of meaning is thus understood as a sign process that is motivated and driven by a dynamic object and that forms from the outset a first interpretant, which perceives something as a sign of this dynamic object. Furthermore, by means of this sign and on the basis of a ground postulated between both the dynamic and the immediate object, the interpretant brings in a certain aspect of the dynamic object as an immediate object in the sign relation, to be differentiated ontologically from the dynamic object.

narrative of “the things that have been fulfilled among us.” In the act of narrating the one gospel story, Luke presents his Gospel as a truthful and proven sign of the presence of God.

In v. 1:26 God appears as an active character within the narrative: “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth.” The readers are already acquainted with the angel Gabriel as an agent or mediator of God from the first episode. Here, however, Luke explicitly emphasizes that what happens now is the explicit idea and will of God.

The angel visits Mary, the virgin, and the very first words he tells her clearly link Mary with God: “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you.” (1:28b). Mary becomes afraid, but, unlike Zechariah, she starts thinking about the meaning of the words of the angel. Gabriel declares: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (1:30b–33).

The virgin birth is an intertextual link to the prophecy of Isaiah. Luke does not use the name of Immanuel as Matthew does when quoting Isa 7:14 (cf. Matt 1:23), but like Matthew he combines the virgin birth with the arrival of the messiah. The virgin birth indicates that God himself is the father of Jesus. Jesus is the son of God in a singular way, a way that no other creature was or ever will be.

Mary asks (just like, presumably, the reader): “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (1:34). The angel explains this miracle: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” (1:35–36). The pious and trustful answer of Mary is: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (1:38).

God is not only the all-knowing author of the “events that have been accomplished among us” (1:1), but the actor who makes things happen that human beings cannot do. It is his creative power that makes the pregnancy of the elderly Elizabeth happen and it is the power of his own Holy Spirit that causes the pregnancy of the virgin and the feeding of the 5,000.

John and Jesus come into being as bodily signs of the creative power of God. Both act as characters that present the power of God continuously. Both are connected with God through his Holy Spirit, but with a considerable difference – John is identified as the precursor (cf. 3:4–6), while Jesus is the messiah himself. John is filled with the Holy Spirit, “even from his mother’s womb”, and yet, he has a flesh-

and-blood father named Zechariah (cf. 1:5–25). The miracle, which is explained by the power of God, worked the same way as was done for Abraham and Sarah.

In contrast to John, and all other human beings, Jesus has no fleshly father: God’s own creative power causes Mary’s pregnancy. He becomes the Son of God like no other before or after him. In the universe of the discourse of the Gospel of Luke, he is not only *a* son of god, but he is *the* Son of God. Because of this fact, he not only represents God as a symbol, he is the fleshly presence of God. Or, as the Gospel of John puts it: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14). Perhaps John read Matthew and Luke and omitted the virgin birth (probably because of its repercussions of Greek and Roman myths concerning the sexual affairs of the gods with human women). Regardless, the idea of the presence of God in Jesus is the same. Jesus of Nazareth presents God not only in his words and deeds, but also in his flesh.²⁸

In Luke 11 Jesus teaches his disciples how to communicate with this powerful and creative God. They can talk to him like a child talks to his parents: “Father, hallowed be your name. Your Kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread” (11:2f.). The feeding of the 5,000 story proclaims that God fulfilled this petition of Jesus. The love, power and creativity of his father is not restricted in the boundaries of human competence. His frictional δύναμις (*dynamis*) transcends the possibilities of daily human life. The hermeneutical and theological key in the universe of discourse of Luke’s Gospel is the recognition that God is a God who communicates with his creation. Luke presents a God who can be asked for all the necessities of life precisely because he has the will, knowledge, freedom and power to do what he wants. After the narration of the Lord’s prayer, we read in chapter 11: “So I say to you: Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” And if we read further, we even find a specific reference to fish: “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?” (11:11)

In the first appearance story in Luke’s Gospel (24:13–33), Luke narrates the episode of the two apostles on the road to Emmaus: “While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” (24:15–16). The *passivum divinum* implies that they did not identify him because God kept their eyes shut. The implicit logic is:

²⁸ I agree with Hartwig Thyen who reads the Gospel of John as an intertextual commentary and correction of the Synoptics. Cf. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen 2005). This commentary is the most important work about John written in German since that of Rudolf Bultmann. It should be translated into English.

Jesus' resurrected body looks (according to Luke) just the same as the earthly body of Jesus before his crucifixion. For that reason the resurrected body in the Emmaus-episode does not function as a proof for the resurrection, because God does not seem to want to use this apparent proof.

What does the resurrected Jesus do in this scene? He walks with them, he talks to them and he teaches them like he did before his death: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." (24:27). He opens the Scriptures because without them it is impossible to understand the story of the gospel as "the things that have been accomplished among us" (1:1). The Scriptures are the necessary hermeneutical key for understanding that God has been present even on the cross and his power is the reason for the empty tomb. Only God possesses the omnipotent creative power that is necessary to resurrect Jesus, the crucified one.

The two apostles on the road to Emmaus do not believe in the resurrection of the crucified one, because they did not yet see him (cf. 24:24c). Jesus criticizes them for that: "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (24:25).

The pragmatic message of Luke, therefore, is that it is not necessary to see the body of the resurrected crucified to believe, but it is necessary to know and to understand the Holy Scriptures of Israel with regard to the story of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of John we find something like a commentary on Jesus' critique in the Emmaus episode: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 21:29b).

Reading the Scriptures as the word of God with regard to the story of Jesus Christ opens the reader's heart to the story of God, the story of the presence of God in all history, in the present and in the future, and especially his presence in Jesus. Thus we read in John 10:22: "All things have been handed over to me by my father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."²⁹ But the two on the road to Emmaus do not and cannot understand until Jesus "took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them" (24:30b), just as he had done in Luke 9:16 and 22:19. "And their eyes were opened,³⁰ and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight." (24:31).

²⁹ Cf. John 10:30: "I and the Father are one." Cf. H. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen 2005), 499–500.

³⁰ Cf. Richard B. Hays, "Intertextuality, Narrative, and the Problem of Unity of the Biblical Canon," in *Kanon und Intertextualität* (ed. Stefan Alkier and Richard B. Hays; Kleine Schriften des Fachbereichs Evangelische Theologie der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt/Main 1; Frankfurt a. M. 2010), 53–70, here: 68.

5 Some Guidelines for a Theological Interpretation of the Feeding Story

Theological interpretations of biblical texts are never reducible to historical or scientific knowledge. Much more is in view here, particularly regarding the significance of exegesis for the formation of present and future practices.

In general, modern interpretations of the feeding story have understood it as an invitation to share with others. This is nice, and it does at least ensure that the story serves to motivate some kind of pragmatic action on the part of modern readers. But the reduction of this story to an ethic of sharing fails to comprehend the theological dimensions of the account. These dimensions largely depend upon a theology of a responsive God whom one can thank, and to whom one can direct petitions not only, for example, concerning the salvation of one's own soul, but also for the provision of one's daily bread, and even for bread to be provided for the many.

One can even say more broadly that the symbolic, and so also the ethical function of the narratives that the restrictive code of modern, Western theology invokes when it lumps them together under the vague umbrella term “miracles” will itself only work if, in the context of the original universe of discourse of the biblical texts, the accounts were experienced and received as events that happened.

The interpretive horizon of the feeding of the 5,000 story cannot be adequately examined through the lens of a rationalist hermeneutic. Rather, one needs a theological hermeneutic that considers the intertextual connections among texts that focus on the God of Israel as the God who is merciful, just, and who desires to communicate with his creatures.³¹ That means interpreting, in particular, through Old Testament texts and through other passages in the New Testament. Also, however, one must consider other texts from the wider collection of

³¹ The Feeding Story triggers several intertextual associations with Old Testament texts. The Exodus narrative provides a plausible context for recognizing God's miraculous ability to provide food. In that story God gave the Israelites who had fled from Egypt not only his word, but also an abundance of food so that all the people were satisfied (cf. Exod 16:1–36). Even the reference to the 5,000 being divided into groups of fifty probably alludes to the Exodus tradition (cf. Exod 18:21–26) and helps one understand that the 5,000 are being presented as God's people. The Psalms also recall the fact that God is one who supplies provisions when they remember the Exodus account (cf. Ps 78:21–29). The notion that God is the miraculous giver of food also occurs in the collection of stories in the Elijah and Elisha traditions (cf. 1 Kgs 17:8–16; 2 Kgs 4:42–44). Cf. Richard B. Hays, “Intertextuality, Narrative, and the Problem of Unity of the Biblical Canon,” 53–70.

Jewish and Christian writings. Whoever desires to become a disciple of the Jesus of the feeding story must turn and in complete trust ask of God for his own bread and for bread to be provided for others. This is all the more necessary when one's options are, by the world's reckoning, limited.

This is not to say that one can anticipate miracles because, as God's friction, they defy what is feasible and calculable. In precisely this, however, they limit the totalitarian claims of causal explanations of reality, explanations that always lead to an exploitive ideology of what is possible.

The request made in faith can, in any case, be misunderstood when it is employed as a substitute for concrete political action. In this way such a request can itself devolve into another exercise in a cynical use of power that reinforces the unjust structures that are already in place. The actual material needs of those who are suffering and in want can thereby be shifted to God. This problem is, unfortunately, one of which the Christian church is perennially guilty.

Every individual act of thanksgiving and every individual request addressed to God transcends the boundaries of daily experience. It gets the potential to break open the self-contained character of common sense experience and politics. These frictional experiences generate an awareness of the possibility of new, genuinely contingent expectations, expectations that do not perpetuate shoddy substitutes for political action, but can instead motivate and orient our individual and our political life.

Michael Rydryck

Miracles of Judgment in Luke-Acts

In one of his works on form criticism Klaus Berger states the following concerning so called miracle-stories in biblical writings¹: “Miracle / miracle-story is no kind of genre, but a modern description of an ancient concept of reality” [MR].² This statement is part of a growing consensus. Its implications have been elaborated by Stefan Alkier for the exegesis of the New Testament and by Peter Müller for biblical pedagogy. For an analysis of miracles of judgment in Luke-Acts, Berger’s statement has two important consequences: first, it shows the impossibility of identifying miracle-like phenomena of judgment by methods of form criticism. Second, it directs the analyzing focus to the concepts of reality in the examined texts. In my paper I will follow these two lines of interpretation in at least two ways: After a short reflection on the character of miracles in biblical texts in general, I will outline some aspects of a hermeneutics of miracles based upon an extrabiblical example taken from popular culture and interpreted in patterns of theological exegesis. Second, I will focus on miracles of judgment in Luke-Acts as often underrated or even ignored miracle-like phenomena. Touching the *communis opinio* on miracles (of judgment) in Luke-Acts, I will apply the hermeneutics of miracles outlined before on specific phenomena in Luke-Acts, which could be interpreted as miracles of judgment.

It is commonplace in New Testament studies that the phenomenon “miracle” poses also a difficult terminological problem³: there is neither a standard terminology, nor is every related phenomenon *expressis verbis* called “miracle.” The terms θαῦμα, δυνάμεις, ἔργον, παράδοξον, σημεῖον and τέρας are, especially in Luke-Acts, used with reference to healings and exorcisms. Each of these terms emphasize different aspects of powerful phenomena and are actually far from referring to the same.

Nevertheless all these terms have one thing in common: they all express experiences on the limits of that reality, which one is daily used to. They are taking place on the borderline of human possibilities. Also, they point to powerful phenomena, which occur in the passing and marking of the limits of different spaces of possibilities, power or perception.

1 All translations from German texts are given by the author [MR].

2 Klaus Berger, *Formen und Gattungen im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Francke, 2005), 362.

3 Cf. Stefan Alkier, “Wunder. III. Neues Testament. IV. Kirchengeschichtlich,” *RGK*⁴ 8: 1719–25.

These liminal phenomena would be misinterpreted if defined/understood in modern ontological categories, since there is no strict distinction between “immanent” and “transcendent” in ancient/biblical texts in general. In biblical texts for example there is only one reality with different spaces of possibility, power and perception, but also with different spheres of knowledge, time and existence. It is therefore necessary to be aware of this dynamic and multi-dimensional concept of reality while analyzing biblical texts.⁴

By focusing on a phenomenon of popular culture I was able to outline some aspects of a hermeneutics of liminality based on studies of New Testament and Practical Theology scholars: miracles often appear strange – they cause confusion and/or amazement. Take for example the owls in the first of the Harry Potter novels⁵: the owls are invading the apparently “normal” world of the Dursleys.⁶ As messengers with letters from the mysterious and repressed world of “witchcraft and wizardry,” they contact Harry, the orphaned son of the Potter family. The suppression and burning of the letters only increase number and ambition of the owls. They are relentless in their mission. The effect of this incredible event on the Dursleys gradually progresses from anger to panic. To Harry, however, the owls seem promising and their message is highly attractive. Finally, the Dursleys have to surrender to the terrifying power of the world to which Harry now belongs, which is betwixt and between their “normal” reality.

It is a miracle, isn't it? The owls are transients. They pass the border from the world of witchcraft and wizardry to the everyday life of a British suburb. And, by passing through it, they are marking the existence of this special border.⁷ In the words of Henning Luther: “Along the frontier to the Other, the Unknown, to the moment unfamiliar and strange it is possible to perceive, that that which exists is not all that exists” [MR].⁸ The owls are part of the communication between different spaces of reality. They are messengers that make the border temporarily passable and perceptible. The effects of this passing and marking vary greatly: For

⁴ For the theological implications of this thought cf. Henning Luther, *Religion und Alltag* (Stuttgart: Radius 1992), 47f.

⁵ Cf. for the following Joanne K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury 2010), 28–48.

⁶ For the tension between concepts of reality and the appearance of normality see Stefan Neuhaus, *Märchen* (Tübingen: Francke 2005), 347f.

⁷ That the Harry Potter novels deal with contrasting concepts of reality outlines Neuhaus, *Märchen*, 345–52. Cf. also the thoughts concerning liminality and the perception of everyday life in Luther, *Religion und Alltag*, 46–48, 215–17.

⁸ Luther, *Religion und Alltag*, 54.

some it may be disturbing, terrifying or at least without meaning, for others it is fascinating – an expressive, meaningful promise.⁹

Only due to the liminality of frontiers, in the combination of marking and passing through them, in causing fascination and fear, the appearance of the owls is a miracle. Miracles are paradoxical phenomena – they are full of power and meaning in opposition to an apparently “normal” certainty, to social conventions and to the commonly known. To be clear, paradoxical does not necessarily mean incomprehensible. Miracles are always part of a communication, a dialogue, between different spaces of reality.¹⁰ If not, they remain one-dimensional curiosities – maybe strange or incredible but definitely without meaning to those who experience them. In this way, miracles are inter-dimensional or interliminal phenomena. They occur in the passing and marking of limits between spaces of possibility and power making dialogue possible and difference perceptible.

Because of their setting in a frontier-area, miracles are ambiguous and collide with the certainties of everyday life, which makes them paradoxical. They are communicative and meaningful acts, which makes them plausible. And they happen beyond the limits of our control, unrejectably and effectively, which makes them powerful. Therefore, a phenomenology of miracles has to be a paradoxy of power.

Miracles gain plausibility in a specific semiotic context, i.e. the universe of discourse.¹¹ Within the universe of discourse, powerful and interliminal phenomena may be plausible as miracles – initially distinct from the extratextual question of the matters of fact.¹² Any attempt at a hermeneutics of miracles which does not recognize this specific semiotic context and instead operates with so-called common or apparently self-evident categories of reality is bound to fail, since miracles are paradoxical and plausible in their specific contexts and concepts of reality.

These concepts of reality, arranged for example within the universe of discourse of a text, have to be related with the conventionalized knowledge of an

⁹ For the hermeneutical implications see Karl-Heinrich Bieritz, “Zeichen und Wunder” in *Zeichen und Wunder* (ed. Werner Ritter and Michaela Albrecht; BTSP 31; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 2007), 290–312.

¹⁰ See Bieritz, *Zeichen und Wunder*, 301–4.

¹¹ See Stefan Alkier, *Neues Testament* (Tübingen: Francke 2010), 146–48.

¹² See Stefan Alkier and Bernhard Dressler, “Wundergeschichten als fremde Welten lesen lernen: Didaktische Überlegungen zu Mk 4:35–41,” in *Religion zeigen. Religionspädagogik und Semiotik* (ed. Bernhard Dressler and Michael Meyer-Blanck; Veröffentlichungen des Religionspädagogischen Instituts Loccum 4; Münster: Lit 2003), 163–87.

epoch or culture, i.e. a specific encyclopedia. Only then, the matters of fact and possibility can be interpreted accurately. Due to the close relation of a specific universe of discourse and a valid encyclopedia the question of “miracle” implies the question of validity and plausibility of the concepts and meanings of reality in general.¹³ But, plausibility does not guarantee relevance. Only the experience of the powerful paradox, the unrejectable, effective, and ambiguous mystery makes miracles meaningful to a potential percipient.¹⁴

Otherwise miracles could easily be trivialized or misinterpreted. If, for example, a miracle-like phenomenon is not perceived as powerful and meaningful but as absurd or illusory, it loses its character as a genuine, powerful paradox. But, more fundamentally, this seems to be the problem of a one-dimensional wonder,¹⁵ i.e. a miraculous phenomenon which occurs not in marking and passing the limits of different spaces but has its setting on only one side of the frontier. Let us have a second look at the owls: as transients the owls are part of a miracle – their appearance is powerful, paradoxical, and ambiguous. What if the owls were no longer messengers but appeared exclusively in one or the other world? A glance back at the scene referred to in the beginning is instructive: in the beginning of the novel as well as its cinematic adaptation the owls appear for the first time in the British suburb. They come in great numbers and cause a lot of attention. Nevertheless their appearance remains without meaning to the spectators – a curious spectacle of nature.¹⁶ The frontier is neither passed nor is it perceivable.

On the other side of the frontier, in the world of witchcraft and wizardry, the owls are far from appearing peculiar. They are normal and expected, mostly reliable postal workers – not unlike carrier pigeons. The owls carry news and parcels without being transients in the outlined sense. They belong to everyday life and therefore do not cause amazement or fear in this context.¹⁷

Beyond the liminality of the frontier, the one-dimensional wonder loses its miracle-like character. On one side owls are wild animals, while on the other they are part of the service sector. A one-dimensional wonder, if recognized, remains without meaning. Such a phenomenon has lost its possibility of perceiving the

¹³ Cf. the fundamental study of Stefan Alkier, *Wunder und Wirklichkeit in den Briefen des Apostels Paulus: Ein exegetischer Beitrag zu einem Wunderverständnis jenseits von Entmythologisierung und Rehistorisierung* (WUNT 134; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2001).

¹⁴ Cf. Bieritz, *Zeichen und Wunder*, 295–97.

¹⁵ The problem in its contradictory character is raised by Bieritz, *Zeichen und Wunder*, 291f, 301.

¹⁶ Cf. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, 10–12.

¹⁷ Cf. for example Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, 149f., 181.

paradoxical fascination of liminality and its power to shape any concept of reality: “The one world within the limits easily becomes the only reality” [MR]¹⁸.

Miracles instead are effective and powerful on the limits of different spaces of reality and power. This specific characteristic makes them a focal point of theological interest, not only in regard to biblical texts. For Christian theology, miracles in their liminality reveal one kind of nexus between the divine and the human dimension of reality. Miracle-like phenomena include hermeneutic dynamics with regard to questions of possibilities and concepts of reality on the borderline between and between different spaces.¹⁹ The perception of miracles therefore may cause frustration, alteration, or even creation of theological concepts of reality.

At this point it is necessary to turn to the mainstream of exegetical opinion about miracles in Luke-Acts. Gerd Theißen writes concerning miracles (of judgment): “Modern and ancient people put more emphasis on the fear of punishment than on the increase of appreciation by imposing rules. It is therefore much more remarkable that in the New Testament miracles of judgment are nearly missing” [MR].²⁰ More recently, Theißen has regarded solely healing and exorcism stories done by Jesus as reliable examples of miracles in the New Testament.²¹ This perspective includes many unsolved difficulties, but still represents the main discourse in German (miracles) scholarship.

Theißen’s point of view is also important for the exegesis of Luke-Acts in particular. Miracles in Luke-Acts for many scholars seem to be recognizable through the methods of form-criticism. Luke has a special preference for healing and exorcism stories, which are, in general, comprehensible in modern medical or psychological categories. Jesus seems to be the charismatic healer par excellence, familiar to Hellenistic culture in which the texts were written.

Other miracle-like phenomena in this perspective are legends or superstition. Miracles of judgment only occur in Acts and are told to impose rules or to help

¹⁸ Luther, *Religion und Alltag*, 46.

¹⁹ It is necessary to say, that miracles do not have to be curious or extraordinary in an emphatic sense. Miracle-like phenomena can also happen on the frontiers of every-day life: “Experiences of frontiers are not limited to dramatic and exceptional situations, but run through every-day life itself.” (Luther, *Religion und Alltag*, 217).

²⁰ Gerd Theißen, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten: Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien* (StNT 8; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1987), 117.

²¹ See Gerd Theißen, “Die Wunder Jesu: Historische, psychologische und theologische Aspekte,” in *Zeichen und Wunder* (ed. Werner Ritter and Michaela Albrecht; BTSP 31; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 2007), 30–52.

the reader come to terms with emotions like wrath, feelings of inferiority, and the like.

At the beginning of this essay I referred to the impossibility to generate a hermeneutics of miracles based on form-criticism, because it assumes what it attempts to prove by extrapolating a pattern and then identifying only such texts as miracles which fit that pattern. In fact, “miracle of judgment” is not a category given by the biblical texts.

Why the focus on healing and exorcism stories? Concerning Luke-Acts, there can be no doubt that these kinds of stories are an important part of Luke’s theology. But considering only this aspect, generates a false picture of God acting in Luke-Acts. To complete the picture of Luke’s theology, it is therefore necessary to emphasize God’s wrath as well as his mercy, his power to heal as well as his power to judge. Or like it is said in chapter one of Luke’s Gospel (Luke 1:51–53):

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”²²

Luke-Acts tells the story of God who imposes his eschatological rule. He acts through persons like John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, and Paul. But God also acts by sending angels or without mediation. On the one hand, God acts through preaching, healing, and exorcising demons. On the other hand, he enacts his rule by announcing and working miracles of judgment, punishing the proud and freeing the captured. The holy God shapes his reign by acts of power. Thus, the divine dimension of possibility and power comes in contact with the human dimension. In other words, the boundary between the divine and the human spaces of reality is crossed and marked by God. Contact with God causes opponents of God, or the unholy, to vanish (or perish). This means demons, diseases, and persons such as Herod who failed to give glory to God (see Acts 12:20–24). God’s reign, as pictured in Luke-Acts, is not harmless but full of potency.

In Luke 1:5–25 the first miracle of judgment occurs when an angel appears before Zechariah who is serves the Jerusalem temple. Zechariah’s reaction appears formulaic in light of the intertexts of Gen 15 and 1 Sam 1. First, Zechariah asks for a sign to confirm himself. By asking this way, Zechariah indicates that he is unaware of the eschatological nature of the appearance. He underestimates the ambiguous power of the holy presence. The announcing angel works the requested sign as a punishing one because of Zechariah’s lack of belief: Zechariah

²² All quotes from biblical texts are taken from the Fully Revised and Updated Harper Collins Study Bible.

falls silent until the foretold birth of his son (Luke 1:18–20). Some scholars interpret this revocation of voice as a psychosomatic consequence of the experienced epiphany. Such interpretation(s) join(s) the long tradition of rationalistic hermeneutics of miracles, which (problematically) transfers the modern encyclopedia to the ancient texts.

Remaining within the discourse of Luke-Acts, the meaning of Zechariah's muteness seems quite different: the revocation of Zechariah's voice is contextualized by the border-crossing epiphany in the temple of God and the appearance of a holy presence in front of a human being. In this context, the punishing sign as well as the promised birth mark the border between human and divine spaces of possibility. The presence of the holy God is creative and injuring at the same time. Zechariah's lack of belief vanishes with his voice and the birth of John the Baptist gives shape to the imminence of the reign of God.

In this story, borders are crossed and marked in different ways: the spatial border between divine and human spaces is represented by the appearance near the altar in the temple of God, i.e. a place which by definition is intended for border-crossing communication. The different limits of divine and human possibilities are marked by the muteness of Zechariah and the promised birth of his son. Furthermore there are limits of time, which are crossed in multiple ways: the histories of Abraham and Samuel are experienced again by the characters in the context of Luke's Gospel. The promise of John the Baptist's birth and the interpretation of his life in Zechariah's first speech after regaining his voice point simultaneously to the past and the future: John is both the returning Elijah and the prophet of the eschatological time. God passes the limits of linear time by combining future, past, and present in the inauguration of his eschatological reign.

The imminence of the reign of God is characterized in Luke-Acts as restitution and judgment. Luke 13:1–9 shows that the divine judgment has yet to begin. Two miracles of judgment are combined with an interpreting parable:

The scene is opened by a group of people coming to Jesus who report to him that Pilate has killed a great number of Galilaeans. Obviously, they interpret this event as a divine judgment for the sins these Galilaeans must have done. Jesus does not refute this interpretation. Moreover, he extends the interpretation to a universal threat of judgment for all those who do not repent. He likewise refers to the fall of the tower in Siloam and interprets this event as divine judgment. Death seems to be the consequence of sin and sin has to vanish in the presence of the divine/God. The narrative function of Jesus is not to limit the consequences of God's wrath. On the contrary, Jesus predicts wrath without limits in the time to come, if the people do not repent. The event horizon to the divine judgment has already passed and was marked by the events referred to in this scene.

The following parable affirms and supplements the theology presented in the preceding scene. Jesus tells a parable which interprets the preceding events in the context of the eschatological judgment – alluding to the sermon of repentance of John the Baptist in Luke 3, showing an intertextual relation to Jer 8:13 with synoptic parallels in Mark 11 and Matt 21. The message of Luke 13:1–5 is modified in such a way that there remains a final period for repentance, to avoid the eschatological wrath of God.

Luke 13:1–9 shows the liminal character of miracle-like phenomena. A massacre and the collapse of the tower in Siloam could be interpreted in human categories as cruel acts of Roman oppression or as terrible accidents. Also, the lack of fruit on a fig tree is not necessarily an extraordinary event. Only when contextualized in the theological or, more precisely, eschatological setting of Luke-Acts do these events acquire the specific meaning of miracles of judgment. The final frontier of God's eschatological judgment appears to be crossed and thus appeals to the reader to bring fruits worthy of repentance. One-dimensional, i.e. rationalistic, interpretations of the events would be inadequate in Luke's perspective. To modern readers, this point of view may seem offensive and difficult to accept. However, such an offense cannot be solved theologically by ignoring or misinterpreting texts like these to paint a picture of Jesus and God that is easier to accept.²³ Miracles of judgment are an important part of the universe of discourse shaped in Luke-Acts and are to be interpreted within that context. How this interpretation fits into a specific encyclopedia is another question, which cannot be answered by exegesis alone.

At the beginning of the book of Acts a miracle of judgment occurs, which is not often recognized as such: the death of Judas (Acts 1:15–20):

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus – for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) "For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it'; and 'Let another take his position of overseer.'"

²³ For such political and, in part, offending issues concerning miracles cf. the paper of James Noel in this book.

In the perspective of form-criticism this text is not a miracle but a legend, a text of minor theological relevance. By looking at the text as part of the universe of discourse of Luke-Acts its character as that of an act of judgment seems obvious. The death of Judas is presented as fulfilling scripture by referring to intertexts from the Book of Psalms. The reference to the Holy Ghost, who spoke through David, and the verb *δεῖ*, as indication for a divine act, characterize the betrayal and death of Judas as some kind of necessity. The limits of time are abrogated in this event because David predicted the events that are fulfilled in God's imminent reign.

Acts 1:18 states that Judas has fallen and consequently his body burst asunder, expelling his bowels. Interpreted simply as a horrific demise, this event would be conceivable within the context of everyday life. But, contextualized by the Holy Scriptures of Israel it becomes transparent as a divine act of judgment. Borders are marked and crossed in different ways, such as the abrogated limits of time and the intertextual interplay cited above. Judas is forced to pass the final frontier of human existence. His death marks the limit that is set to those who stand against God. The consequence of their way of acting is death – a most familiar thought from the Psalms. From the perspective of the reader, the death of Judas appeals to the recognition of the eschatological judgment of God as the final limit of every human decision.

Acts 9:1–9 tells the repentance of Saul-Paul caused by an epiphany. Saul falls blind as a result of the appearance. Some scholars interpret this blindness in a rationalistic way as a physical consequence caused by the intense light. But let us have a closer look: in the beginning Saul is characterized as a persecutor. While he is on his way to persecute the Christians in Damascus he has a vision and audition of Jesus. The voice of Jesus accuses Saul (Acts 9:4): “He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” The question contains an accusation; the persecutor is called such by his victim. Saul loses all his power; he falls to the earth and is struck with blindness. He reacts with trembling and astonishment and shows respect to the powerful other, calling him “Kyrios.” Like Jacob at the river Jabbok, Saul asks for the identity of the appearing other and finds out that it is Jesus. Without explaining his reasons, the Kyrios-Jesus gives orders to Saul. In the end of the scene, verse 9, Saul shows his repentance: he does not eat or drink for the time of his blindness.

The event has a pedagogical character without being called punishment or judgment *expressis verbis*. Saul's own power is taken only to be restored afterward by Jesus. The persecutor vanishes and becomes the chosen vessel of God's mission. Saul is brought to his limits by losing his own abilities. In an act of recreation he is empowered through the power of the divine other. The power of taking and giving shows the superiority of God and his messiah. The border between

the human and the divine dimension of possibility is crossed in at least two ways: one, the miracle of judgment makes Saul powerless; two, the empowerment as a chosen vessel makes Saul more powerful than before. Both acts are beyond human possibility. Furthermore, the events mark a biographical frontier: the persecutor of Christ becomes the vessel of Christ; his former life is finally past and his new life is a recreation of God.

The list of miracles of judgment in Luke-Acts could easily be extended. Texts like Acts 5:1–11; Acts 12:19–24 or Acts 13:6–12 are not the only but surely the most prominent ones. I hope that it became clear, that miracles of judgment are an important part of Luke's narration and theology. They are complementary to healings, exorcisms, and stories of liberation. Restoration and judgment are closely connected in God's action to impose his eschatological reign. Miracles occur on the frontier between the divine and the human dimension of possibility. They are powerful phenomena of liminality expressing the character of God's imminent reign as pictured in Luke-Acts.

Philip Erwin

Epiphany Reconsidered: A parallel reading of Acts 9:1–9 and *Iliad* 188–224a

1 Introduction

The epiphany of Jesus to Saul on the Damascus road in Acts 9:1–9 inaugurates a shift both in Saul’s character and in the overall narrative of Acts. Prior to this scene Saul had entered the narrative only briefly at the periphery of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58) and as a persecutor of the *ekklesia* (Acts 8:3). From chapter nine forward, Saul (later to be known as Paul; Acts 13:9) emerges from a peripheral role as persecutor to a central role as one who proclaims the message of Jesus Christ. Given these dramatic shifts, most commentators interpret this scene as Saul’s conversion or prophetic call.¹ Specifically, the categories of conversion/call are often generated by comparing Saul’s epiphanic experience to those of prophets, e.g. Moses (Exod 3:3; 19:16–20); Isaiah (Isa 49); and Jeremiah (Jer 1);² gentiles/idolaters who convert to “Judaism,” e.g. Aseneth (*Joseph and Aseneth* 14);³ Heliodorus (2 Macc 3:22ff.); and the epiphany of Isis to Lucius in Apuleius’

1 Some interpreters, following Krister Stendahl, classify this scene as a prophetic “commissioning” or “call”: Krister Stendahl, “Paul Among Jews and Gentiles,” in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 7–23; Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (trans. R. McL. Wilson et. al.; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 322; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 166–69; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 146–56; Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 230–44, see especially 236. Others, even of more recent vintage, maintain that this scene is comparable to other religious conversions of antiquity and is thus classifiable as a conversion: Christoph Burchard, *Der Dreizehnte Zeuge: Traditions- und kompositionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Lukas’ Darstellung der Frühzeit des Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 59–88; James D.G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 117–25; Charles H. Talbert, “Conversion in the Acts of the Apostles: Ancient Auditors’ Perceptions,” in *Reading Luke-Acts in its Mediterranean Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 135–48; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 302–20, see especially 303–4.

2 See Stendahl, “Paul Among Jews and Gentiles,” 8–11; Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 163–64.

3 See Burchard, *Dreizehnte Zeuge*, 55–88.

Metamorphoses 11.3ff.⁴ Despite the variation in date, language, and social context of these epiphanic accounts, one may observe a common, for lack of a better term, “religious”⁵ orientation in each account. From the prophets to Lucius, each

4 Jason Lamoreaux reads Acts 9:1–19 in light of *Joseph and Aseneth* and Apuleius’ *Metamorphosis*, using Victor Turner’s model of ritual process and Social Identity Theory. See Jason Lamoreaux, “Social Identity, Boundary Breaking, and Ritual: Saul’s Recruitment on the Road to Damascus.” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 38 (2008): 122–35, see particularly 127–32.

5 The terms “religious” and “conversion” require provisional definitions. First, I understand “religious” primarily in terms of ritualistic patterns of behavior associated with a divine figure. Ritual itself is a difficult term to define; however, for the sake of brevity, I understand ritual here, apropos a divine figure, simply as acts that signify devotion. To define what I mean (to critique) concerning conversion is best expressed by the oft-cited Arthur Darby Nock: participating in various cults “led to an acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes, and they did not involve the taking of a new way of life in place of the old. This we may call adhesion in contradistinction to conversion. By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.” A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 7. I should also acknowledge two critiques of Nock that influence my thinking. First, Ramsay MacMullen raises the point that Nock defines “religion” too narrowly in terms of doctrine and thus must understand conversion as shaped by doctrine or, as MacMullen puts it, “verbal orthodoxy”; that is, MacMullen believes other types of non-verbal/doctrinal practices can form an ethically normative way of life (MacMullen, 76). Second, Zeba Crook critiques both Nock and MacMullen on similar grounds, locating them both within a “psychological scale” of interpretation. Crook’s critique is the common social-scientific one: “We cannot assume that such different beings experience life and emotions in similar ways. And if they do not experience life and emotions in similar ways, we should not imagine that psychology, which (allegedly) can help us understand our own lives, will be a helpful or illuminating way to understand their lives. For example, behaviour in the ancient world was governed *externally*, by honour and shame, more than it was governed *internally*, by guilt” (Crook, 51; emphasis his). One wonders how Crook would interpret Achilles’ deliberation κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν (*Il.* 1.193), the “gall [χόλος], which makes a man grow angry for all his great mind, that gall of anger that swarms like smoke inside of a man’s heart” (*Il.* 1.108–110; Richmond Lattimore’s translation), or Saul’s ἐμπνέων ἀπειλῆς καὶ φόβου (Acts 9:1). The options for understanding so-called ancient religion and conversion seem extreme: people approach religious practice either “psychologically” or “socially”; conversion is either “internal” or “external”; or, at the very least, is more one than the other. While I cannot develop a coherent proposal here, I suggest that such alternatives fall well short of addressing the complex accounts of Saul’s and Achilles’ epiphanies. In a sense, the experiences or behaviors are neither psychological nor social; rather, they exist on a plane of discourse (in narrative/literature) that such categories obfuscate – my simple provisional definitions may (unintentionally) illustrate this point. Ramsay MacMullen, “Conversion: A Historian’s View.” *The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5:2 (Summer 1985/1986): 67–81; Zeba Crook, *Reconceptualising*

epiphany has the effect of transforming one's fidelity to a particular deity – whether by opening a prophetic channel or by an exchange of one set of practices/beliefs/religion for another.

Contrary to this classification regarding Acts 9:1–9, Homeric epiphany functions primarily as a narrative device to associate and direct human action with divine will. These associations and directions do not, however, develop cultic devotion of characters to particular gods or goddesses, nor do they require total loyalty or obedience to divine will. This alternative function of epiphany in the *Iliad* led me to consider its potential for generating insights on the epiphany of Saul, which avoids the tendency to fit it into categories of conversion or call. In the following essay I expand on this point, reading Acts 9:1–9 in parallel with perhaps the most famous of Homer's epiphanies, Athena's epiphany to Achilles in *Iliad* 1.188–224. In light of this parallel reading I contend that Saul's epiphany in Acts 9:1–9 functions to prevent Saul's imminent violent action by introducing alternative motivating factors that (re)direct his subsequent actions.

2 Reading the Epiphanies of Saul and Achilles in Parallel

Saul's epiphanic experience parallels other epiphanies insofar as he is visited by a heavenly figure, receives instruction, and, subsequent to that instruction, determines to alter his course of action, particularly in relation to the heavenly figure represented in/by the visitation. In light of current interpretative tendencies it seems reasonable to question the extent to which one must/may classify an epiphany of a heavenly figure as religious in orientation.⁶ Given the range of epiphanies consulted by interpreters, one would think that epiphanies in the ancient world always have a religious function – i.e. to solicit worship or honoring of a particular god or heavenly figure. This is not the case for Homer. In *Iliad* 1.188ff. Athena appears to Achilles in order to prevent him from killing Agamemnon in a fit of rage. Athena does not solicit worship neither for her-

Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 24–27, 49–52; Homer, *The Iliad* (trans. Richmond Lattimore; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 378.

⁶ Gerd Theißen classifies epiphany, in its broad sense, as a theme of miracle stories, concluding that “epiphany is to myth as anecdote is to biography: it can be a part of a myth, but is complete in itself.” Gerd Theißen, *Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (trans. Francis McDonagh; Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1983), 98.