“JESUS, SON OF DAVID, HAVE MERCY ON ME!”
Prayers to Jesus in the Miracle Narratives

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Many Christians look for precious words of inspired wisdom in the Scriptures to enrich their prayer life. The biblical witness of the early Church is normative not only for Christian truths but also for Christian spirituality. The Gospels in particular offer a rich resource. Many instructions on prayer are presented as coming from Jesus himself: the ones found in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord’s Prayer, the parables on prayer, Jesus’ own prayers, and many others. For centuries, these passages have helped many Christians grow in prayer and life.

How about the miracle stories? For decades, form-critical exegesis treated the accounts of Jesus’ miracles as a distinct literary genre. The miracle stories are understood as faith-inspired accounts proclaimed by the early churches to others, as one of the ways to announce that the promised Kingdom of God was making its presence felt in an extraordinary way in the ministry of Jesus, through his miracles functioning as its concrete sign.¹

But can they be considered as guides to Christian prayer? Can they also be considered “prayer stories”? Or at least narratives that contain prayers?

Balentine’s Study of Contextual Prayers

I propose to answer these questions with the help of an exegetical work made on prayers in Old Testament narratives. Samuel Balentine, in his book, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, made a novel study of narrative prayers, then an overlooked field of exegesis in the Hebrew Bible. He tried to study them as prayers precisely within the narrative context.\(^2\) One subcategory is a group called “contextual” prayers. Examples of such prayers are Ex 17:4 (Moses cries out to Yahweh for water in the desert for the Israelites), Num 12:13-14 (Moses cries out to Yahweh to heal Miriam of leprosy), Num 27:15-17 (Moses asks Yahweh for guidance in choosing a leader).

These prayers have the following characteristics:

- They are purposefully initiated by the person praying; most are introduced by “X said to God.”

- The prayers shape the narrative by being placed between a crisis of the person praying and its resolution by God. Thus the prayers are integral to the narrative and are not mere appendages.

- They are noted for their simplicity in form and content and their lack of extended or formal dialogue: they go straight to the point as very specific, urgent and direct appeals to God. The person praying asks for something which only God can give, and then expects an immediate response.

- They portray God anthropomorphically as immanently involving himself in the affairs of humanity, engaging in intimate, of-

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ten casual, conversation with human partners and heeding their cry for help.³

Balentine offers this outline⁴ for such prayer narratives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outline</th>
<th>Exodus 17:4-7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction by the expression “X said to God”</td>
<td>[Israelites complain of thirst.] So Moses cried out to the Lord,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A simple request of a pragmatic nature</td>
<td>The Lord said to Moses, “...strike the rock and water will come out of it, so</td>
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<td></td>
<td>that the people may drink.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>The request anticipates and receives a concrete and</td>
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<tr>
<td>immediate response</td>
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Balentine’s most significant idea in his book is that these prose prayers are “authentic witnesses to the everyday religious piety of the ancient Israelite.”⁵ These textual testimonies communicate a “theology of prayer,” portraying prayer as “an act of engagement that seeks to secure God’s active involvement” in personal or social crisis.⁶ Thus, such prayer narratives would influence the popular piety of ancient Israel beyond those found in formal worship.

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³Ibid., 19-20.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid., 25.
⁶Ibid., 30.
Some Miracle Stories Contain Contextual Prayers

With Balentine's ideas in mind, one can detect similar patterns and characteristics of contextual prayers in some of the miracle stories of the Gospels:

- There is a dialogue which is initiated by the one who purposely seeks healing from Jesus. “A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean’” (Mk 1:40).

- The petition is integral to the narrative. Sometimes Jesus heals because the sick person or a relative cried out for healing. The petition is preceded by the crisis and is followed by its immediate resolution. Well-known examples are the healing stories involving Jairus (Mk 5:21-24, 35-43), the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30), the father of the “epileptic” boy (Mk 9:16-29), and Bartimaeus (Mk 10:46-52).

- The petition is simple and straightforward, being an urgent and direct appeal to Jesus. The petitioner asks for something which only Jesus can give, and expects an immediate reply.

- Jesus draws near to the petitioners, engaging them in meaningful dialogue and manifesting concern for their well-being by answering their plea: “Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said, ‘I do choose. Be made clean’” (Mk 1:41).

The outline of some of these miracle stories can be seen as very similar to the outline of the contextual prayers, using Mk 1:40-42:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outline</th>
<th>Mark 1:40-42</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction by the expression “X said to Jesus”</td>
<td>A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A simple request of a pragmatic nature</td>
<td>“If you choose, you can make me clean.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The request anticipates and usually receives a concrete and immediate response</td>
<td>Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above comparisons between the contextual prayers of the Old Testament and some of the miracle stories of the Gospels posit the possibility of interpreting these miracle narratives from the perspective of contextual prayers. Of course it would be reductionistic to say that the miracle stories are contextual prayers, but it is reasonable to suggest that these miracle stories contain a secondary layer of contextual prayer, or at least elements of it. Miracle narratives remain primarily miracle narratives, but some of them contain the subordinate and secondary literary form or sub-genre of contextual prayers. The prayers are a sub-genre because they cannot exist independently of the larger and encompassing framework of the miracle narrative. Moreover, these miracle stories seen from the perspective of contextual prayer contain additional elements not found in the Old Testament contextual prayers, e.g., testament to the faith of the petitioner (e.g., Mk 10:52), and christological emphasis (e.g., Mk 10:47).

Therefore these miracle stories can be regarded as not only containing prayers, but also presenting authentic witness to the prayer life of the early Church and a profound theology of Christian prayer as an act of engagement that seeks to secure the risen Lord’s active involvement in a situation of crisis or death. The miracle narratives thus, in a secondary moment, seek to influence the prayer life of the
early Christians and can provide inspiration to contemporary Christians as well.

Again it must be emphasized that only several miracle stories are possible contextual prayer narratives: Mt 8:5-13, 9:27-31, 14:24-33; Mk 1:40-45, 4:35-41, 5:21-43, 7:24-30, 9:14-29, 10:46-52; Lk 5:1-11, 17:11-19; Jn 2:1-11, 4:46-54, 11:1-44.

Theologies of Petitionary Prayer in the Miracle Narratives

What understandings, or theologies, of Christian petitionary prayer do the miracle stories communicate? We can detect many elements of varied theologies:

a) **These stories legitimize prayers of petition as Christian:** they show believers praying for their own or for another’s needs. Jesus does not reprove them or deny their earnest prayers. He answers their prayers in wondrous ways. These stories discredit the theories of some nineteenth century theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl that petitionary prayers are un-Christian.

b) The miracle stories present **Christian petitionary prayer as a genuine dialogue between the believer and Jesus as Lord.** The one praying calls Jesus and approaches him. Jesus responds, listens, speaks and acts. Prayer is not depicted as a monologue but a mutual engagement between the petitioner and Jesus.

c) The ones praying make explicit petitions to the risen Lord, as

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7The richness and variety of these prayer narratives do not encourage a systematic and integral New Testament theology of Christian prayer. The New Testament does not have a theology of prayer, but several theologies of prayer. Some Gospels have elements that are not present in others (e.g., the petitionary prayers in Matthew are more christological then those found in Mark: compare the cry of the disciples in Mk 4:38 and Mt 8:25). What is attempted here is a list of what these theologies may contain.
prayers to Christ and not cries for help addressed to a mere miracle worker:

Lord, save us, we are perishing! (Mt 8:23; 14:31)

Lord, help me. (Mt 15:25)

Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! (Mk 10:47)

These prayers are highly christological. The miracle stories are not strict historical biographies of Jesus’ public ministry but are accounts narrated from the perspective of resurrection faith. Their experience of the risen Jesus caused the disciples to believe in Jesus as the promised Messiah and projected this conviction into their memories of the historical Jesus and his healing ministry. In these stories of healing, the petitioners already relate to Jesus as the Christ, as the one in whom the salvific power of God is definitively present. They are not simply accounts of past events but are revelatory proclamations of the risen Lord present and active in the life of the Christian community. Wilfrid Harrington, for example, wrote that the miracle of the stilling of the storm (Mk 4:35-41) is a depiction of the Marcan church in the midst of persecution (the disciples’ cry for help in the storm-tossed boat can be interpreted as prayer, even moreso in Mt 8:23).8

Acts of power solely attributed to Yahweh in the Old Testament are now accomplished by the same God through Christ, then in his public ministry, and now in the life of those who believe and pray to him. It is this understanding that justifies and encourages the Christian practice of prayer to Christ. Explicit prayers to Christ are rare in the New Testament; the miracle stories may be the best evidence of this Christian practice in the early Church.

d) The petitioners seek Jesus out of desperate need, often for healing of a dreaded disease, like leprosy9 or blindness, for liberation from unclean spirits, for salvation in the face of impending death due to disease or hostile natural elements, or even for the resurrection of a

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loved one who died. The person praying is conscious of the fact that in his/her helplessness, only Christ can save.

e) Gerd Theissen describes the “vicarious petitioner,” a literary character in the miracle stories.¹⁰ Instead of the sick person making a direct request to Jesus, someone else does it for him/her: parents, masters, or friends (Mk 5:23-24; Mk 9:22; Mt 8:5-8; Jn 2:3; 11:21-22). This indirect request confirms and encourages the practice of intercessory prayer, offered by Christians for those who are sick in their midst.

f) Another element is the petitioner’s trust that Jesus will ultimately hear and respond favorably to his/her plea. This is most visible in narratives where the one praying calls to Jesus repeatedly even if at first Jesus does not notice or refuses to grant the request (Mk 7:24-30; 10:46-52). Contrary to the complaint of the disciples in the storm-tossed boat (Mk 4:38, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”), the risen Jesus is not aloof from the distress of his followers. Today, the locus of Christian prayer is not a temple but Christ, who is present in the world, always accessible anywhere through prayer.

g) The stories show the basis for Jesus’ availability; they often depict Jesus as expressing concern, compassion and love for the needy who pray: in front of the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus wept, and some of the Jews remarked, “See how he loved him!” (Jn 11:35-36).

h) Miracle stories communicate the sovereign power of Jesus over hostile elements. In all the narratives mentioned which exhibit prayer motifs, Jesus always succeeds in granting the request of the one praying. The risen Lord is not only accessible, but also has the power to effect change, “to create possibilities where the world suggests only im-

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⁹“Leprosy” in the Bible is not Hansen’s disease, but any of a varied group of skin diseases, eruptions, etc.

possibilities.” The belief that nothing is impossible with God further encourages petitionary prayer to Christ: they take on new urgency and new hope.

i) In a number of instances, faith is presented as an essential element in the prayer dialogue. Jesus explicitly declares and acknowledges the crucial role faith played in the healing:

Your faith has saved you. (Mk 5:34, 10:52; Lk 17:19)

According to your faith let it be done to you. (Mt 9:29)

Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.... Go, let it be done for you according to your faith. (Mt 8:10, 13)

Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. (Mt 15:28)

In the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, we have Mary’s profound and prayerful confession that Jesus is the Lord of the resurrection (Jn 11:27). The centurion confidently assumes that Jesus’ authoritative word is sufficient to heal his paralyzed servant, for he is the Lord (Mt 8:8-9).

Sometimes Jesus would reprove those who prayed but lacked faith in him:

You of little faith, why did you doubt? (Mt 14:31)

Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith? (Mk 4:40)

You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?.... “If you are able”? All things can be done for one who believes. (Mk 9:19, 23)

Even though a miracle is primarily an act of divine power present in Jesus, it can be truly appropriated when the petitioner has unshakable faith in Jesus as Lord, expressed in the form of a prayerful dia-

11Balentine, 40, presents here the premise of petitionary prayer in the Old Testament, that these prayers take on new urgency and hope because nothing is beyond God’s power.
logue. In this dialogue Jesus is sometimes depicted as exhorting the petitioner to a greater faith that puts no limits to the power of God present in Jesus: he comforts Jairus after he was told that his daughter died, “Do not fear, only believe” (Mk 5:36). In one instance, faith itself becomes an object of prayer: “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24) These miracle stories can be seen as prayerful dialogues that presuppose, encourage, sustain, and help increase Christian faith. The richness of the faith theme in the prayer stories could emphasize that faith here is not faith in a miracle worker, but Christian faith in Jesus as the risen Lord and Messiah.

j) The miracle narratives also open the reader to a more holistic understanding of early Christian spirituality: in many instances the dialogue between Jesus and the petitioner ends with Christian responses to answered prayers: prayers of praise and thanksgiving (one of the ten lepers, Lk 17:15-19); proclamation of the Gospel (the healed leper “went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word,” Mk 1:45); and discipleship (Bartimaeus “followed him on the way,” Mk 10:52).

k) Explicit teachings on prayer found in the New Testament support and confirm the theologies of prayer found in the miracle stories. For example, the Johannine Jesus teaches his disciples about praying in his name:

I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. (Jn 14:13-14)

Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.... On that day you will ask in my name. (Jn 16:23-26)

John’s high christology presents Jesus as the Son who is “one with the Father” through his resurrection (Jn 10:30), thus grounding Christian prayer in Jesus (“On that day...”).

The letter of James describes a practice in the early Church of elders anointing brothers or sisters, who are sick, with oil “in the name of the Lord,” and praying “over them,” hopeful that “the Lord
will raise them up” (Jam 5:13-15). Petitionary prayers for healing was already an established “institution” in the early Church.

Qualifications

However, it must be noted that the miracle stories do not offer a complete theology of Christian prayer. There are other sources in the New Testament that must be considered in order to present a more balanced and complete early Christian theology of prayer. One example is the testimony of Paul that not all petitionary prayers are answered positively (2 Cor 12:7-9). Sometimes God mysteriously permits the suffering of his faithful ones, and Christian prayer consists of confidently accepting that will, as Jesus has demonstrated (Mk 14:36). Focusing only on prayers in the miracle stories might give the naive impression that Jesus positively answers all prayers.

m) Another reality to consider is that these prayer narratives are situated in miracle stories which today are seen as problematic. The mythical perspective of reality that was taken for granted in the time of the early Church is today undermined by the desacralizing scrutiny of modern science. The biblical authors clearly attributed sickness to the power of Satan, and Jesus heals by means of exorcisms (Mk 9:17, 25-29). The understanding of sickness in the ancient world is very different from the understanding of sickness in the modern world.

Can Christians today still pray for physical miracles? The miracle narratives cannot answer that question by themselves. Modern thinking must creatively engage and confront them. According to Gerd Theissen, exegetes since Schleiermacher have been embarrassed by the miracle stories and tried either to underplay them as allegories or symbols of interior redemption or of resurrection, or to deny their historical reality altogether. Miracles have become modern faith’s “illegitimate child.” However, Theissen finds it illogical that miracle stories do not point to miracles:

Can we really say, “The stories of the healings of blind people are
not telling us that God can, in certain circumstances, restore sight to the blind. The account of the stilling of the storm does not console victims of shipwreck with the information that God can save people from distress at sea. The exorcisms do not invite us to believe that God has the power to save from possession and madness. Rather, Jesus’ various individual signs and deeds of power reflect, in the form of a parable, the message of the Gospel as a whole.”? Have we really so firmly suppressed the elemental fears of disease, hunger and death as to deny their existence in the past too?12

Theissen emphasizes the fact that the early Church was not embarrassed by Jesus’ miracles and instead was proud to proclaim it as attested by the abundance and rich variety of miracle stories. Quoting Goethe, Theissen affirms that a miracle is “faith’s favorite child” (Faust I, Night). He describes his idea of the “existential meaning of miracles”:

Primitive Christian miracle stories are symbolic actions in which the experienced negativity of human existence is overcome by an appeal to a revelation of the sacred. Their action transcends the limits of what is humanly possible. They claim to derive their power for this transcendence from the “Holy One of God,” who casts out demons, multiplies bread, walks on the water and raises the dead.13

If miracles are understood this way, as visible symbols of God’s triumphant victory through Christ over the concrete evils of human existence, and not cruelly as events that defy natural laws, then these miracle stories today do not only legitimize prayer for physical miracles, but also in fact encourage it. As John Koenig explains:

...we may observe that every Gospel story of a needy person approaching Jesus is really a statement about prayer. Such vignettes were preserved in the Church’s oral tradition not only because they magnified Jesus and (occasionally) furnished biographical data about people who would later become prominent in the Church, but

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12Theissen, 299.
13Ibid., 300.
also because they provided models of how we are to offer our supplications. We may guess that much of the earliest prayer addressed to Jesus, as well as ritual invocations of his name, had to do with physical healings and exorcisms.\(^4\)

The very symbolic nature of miracles in the New Testament don’t just include, but also point beyond physical miracles. As sickness in the New Testament is a concrete symbol of humanity’s alienation from God and its being subject to the dominion of Satan and death, so are miracles concrete signs that point to the Kingdom of God, the liberation of humanity by Christ from the powers of death and suffering, and the permanent presence of God in the midst of those who were once estranged from him.

If it is by the finger of God that I cast out these demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. (Lk 11:20)

Thus prayers in the miracles stories can be interpreted, not as appeals to a miracle worker for physical healing, but as prayers to Jesus Christ to bring about this integral salvation, which include, and go beyond, physical healing or rescue: “Lord, save us!” (Mt 8:25). These prayers, like the miracle stories, transcend themselves and point to the eschatological manifestation of God’s salvation, the resurrection (Jn 11:24) which, however, can only be grasped under the shadow of the paradoxical and scandalous cross.

**Conclusion**

It is not certain if the early Church or the Gospel writers consciously and deliberately injected elements of Christian prayer into the miracle stories. Many miracle stories have little or no prayer motifs. The theory of reading the miracle narratives from the perspective of contextual prayers does not claim to usurp the primary interpretation of miracle narratives as Christian proclamations of the ar-

arrival of God’s kingdom, present in Jesus in the form of these wondrous signs. Prayer to Christ could not have taken place if it were not the initiative of God to disclose his kingly rule through his Son present in the Church.

Nevertheless, treating the miracle narratives as prayer stories complements and completes the evangelical nature of these stories. In his preaching, Jesus not only announces the arrival of God’s kingdom, but also seeks the appropriate response: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mk 1:15). In the narratives, those who pray faithfully respond to this invitation.

One criterion that is used to evaluate a certain approach to Scripture is its fruitfulness. Understanding the miracle narratives from the standpoint of contextual prayers empowers the contemporary reader to relate to these stories, not as irrelevant tales about the past, but as good news of the Kingdom of God and powerful exhortations to pray to the risen Lord in the manner of those who pray faithfully like the Syro-Phoenician woman and Bartimaeus, fully assured that Christ, who has made whole those who sought his salvation, will also save them.