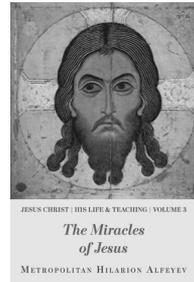


The Miracles of Jesus

By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev

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Reviewed by Brian Welter



Few individuals have more suitable credentials for writing an investigation on the miracles of the Lord than Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev. He is the chair of the Department of External Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church, a classical music composer, and the author of many books and articles. *The Miracles of Jesus* follows the first two volumes in a planned six-volume series on Jesus. Alfeyev has also written a five-volume series on Orthodox Christianity.

The author's wide and deep Christian culture will remind readers of Pope Benedict XVI's writings on Jesus and Christian tradition. This, along with the simple black and white pictures of traditional depictions of the story of Jesus, will repeatedly draw readers back to this satisfying and long book. It requires no previous training in theology, given that the author provides ample background and explanations to his points. This precision will also be appreciated by theologically-trained readers.

Alfeyev is well-aware of the challenges of such a book written in our secular modern era. He outlines the philosophical foundations of this secularism, and reminds readers of the post-Christian view of miracles.

Chapters are devoted to the miracle at Cana, healings, exorcism, miracles of the natural world, the transfiguration, and the resurrection. The author analyzes similarities and differences among the four gospels, with John clearly distinct from the others in terms of presentation and selection of miracles and in the style of theological evaluation.

Throughout the book, the author points out how the Old Testament contained significant typologies of the New Testament, and therefore paralleled the New Testament in many ways. A typological reading of the Old Testament is common in Orthodox theology. These parallels include the religious importance of water or the mystery of human suffering. Yet Alfeyev also argues that the New Testament differs notably from the Old. For one thing, ‘Jesus radically changed all notions about impurity’ (156). He saw impurity as arising from the heart, not something from the outside.

Jesus totally changed the concept of miracles. Miracles in the Old Testament proved ‘God’s power and omnipotence,’ with people as passive recipients. ‘The healings of Jesus present a different reality. He often asks people whether or not they want to be healed, whether they believe that it will occur, and sometimes he requires specific actions as proof of that faith’ (58). Alfeyev emphasizes the ‘synergy’ between Jesus’ divine power and the individual’s faith as a requirement for the miracle to occur. Such recipients of miracles are much more active than in the Old Testament. They have the power, presumably, to refuse the miracle. This synergy is a pillar of the kingdom of God, which is a kingdom where miracles take center place because people’s faith takes center place.

Jesus also altered how we see death. Whereas death was impure to the Hebrews, for Christians death has a joyous element to it. The author notes that this is why Orthodox priests wear white vestments for funerals. The dead body is not impure from the New Testament perspective, as it was for the Hebrews. Saints’ bodies were even seen as filled with grace. Alfeyev discusses the issue of death through the miracle of Lazarus, which was a foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Alfeyev excels at parsing the Greek. He discusses the precise meaning of words and how church fathers such as John Chrysostom interpreted them. This style of analysis conveys to readers the emotions that Jesus felt when he heard of the death of his friend Lazarus. One expression, *tarass beahton*, can mean to be shaken, overwhelmed, upset, angry, or overcome with emotion (420).

Just as Alfeyev confidently rejects challenges to the historical reality of Jesus’ miracles, so he rejects making too much out of differences among gospel accounts. Fascinating distinctions among the three synoptic gospels (Mark, Luke, and Matthew) reporting the miracles could be due to differences in style or perspectives as much as to theology. Nonbelievers simply

use these supposed inconsistencies as excuses for their lack of faith. The author does not attempt to smooth these over.

The major theme running through this book is that Jesus came to heal the world. Miracles are not simply physical manifestations of the Lord's power. Jesus not only healed physically or exorcised demons. The physical healing or exorcism was only a step towards the deeper healing of the soul. The author wonders what the good of an exorcism would be if the person continued to sin afterwards, which would just invite the demons back in. Jesus' tremendous compassion for the individuals he healed took into account firstly their vulnerable spiritual side. One theological conclusion that Alfeyev draws is that 'salvation occurs not en masse, but individually, and it cannot occur against man's own will' (132-3).

The author's theological commentary on the various miracles places them in Jesus' wider mission. For example, Alfeyev explains nature-based miracles through the lens of the pre- and post-fall world. After the fall, 'together with the sudden knowledge of their own nakedness, a new sensation appears in man – powerlessness before nature because of man's loss of authority over it' (256). The author shows the consistency of this theology. Nature has suffered due to the fall of man and is in need of transformation as much as humans are.

The early miracles are consistent with what occurs later in Jesus' ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. While Alfeyev spends a later chapter on the Transfiguration, and man's own transfiguration, or *theosis*, in the earlier chapter on nature miracles, he ties nature's healing to man's theosis: 'The restoration of the lost harmony [between man and nature] is possible only through the salvation and transfiguration of man, which will give rise to the salvation and transfiguration of the entire created world' (261).

In other words, much of the earlier action in the Gospels hints at or parallels what happens at the end. 'The transformation of water into wine at the wedding feast doubtless has eucharistic connotations. This is how the event was understood in the early Church' (66). Jesus' Transfiguration foreshadows his resurrection. This helps readers see the consistency of the narrative and the theology within each of the Gospels and when comparing one with another.

Much of the theological background shows the unique perspective of the Gospel of John compared to that of the three synoptic Gospels. For John, miracles are signs of Jesus' power by which he reveals his glory. John

develops the theology of Christ's nature far more than Matthew, Mark, and Luke do. He is possibly 'motivated by a desire to tell about those things that the first three evangelists left out' (59). John only mentions those miracles that shed light on theological truths. The synoptic gospels, conversely, 'record miracles one after the other and leave the interpretation of them to the reader' (66).

The Miracles of Jesus will be highly interesting for Catholic readers because of the Orthodox theology, such as theosis, which Alfeyev discusses. In addition to the Latin Fathers Jerome and Augustine, he refers to many Orthodox thinkers, such as John Chrysostom, Gregory Palamas (and the doctrine of the energy and essence of God), John of Kronstadt, Dostoyevsky, and St Symeon the New Theologian. The discussion therefore reveals many differences between the two lungs of the Church, but also surprising similarities. His reference to the theological importance of light echoes certain western medieval thinkers such as Robert Grosseteste: 'St. Gregory [of Nazianzus] sees the entire history of the Bible and the entire life of the Church, all the way to the eschatological entry into the kingdom of God, as an unbroken chain of God's revelation of himself through the appearance of divine light' (369). Some western medieval theologians also equated God with light.

Metropolitan Alfeyev provides readers with a balanced and rich account of the miracles of Jesus that does not shy away from modernity's rejection and criticism of this all. His references to Biblical Greek, the Church Fathers, and other aspects of tradition such as liturgy offer a convincing rebuke to these unbelievers. *The Miracles of Jesus* will benefit apologists because of the pairing of biblical analysis with theological reflection.