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THE STILLING OF THE STORM IN MATTHEW 8:23-27

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Miracle narratives play a key role in revealing the heart of God in the gospels. Nature miracles, so named because they deal with supernatural power over the natural forces of wind and water, are a mysterious subcategory within the genre of miracle narratives. W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann say “what have often been called ‘nature miracles’ can equally be seen as a demonstration of the order of God’s dominion against the disorder and chaos which can and does threaten men.”¹ The stilling of the storm is among the ranks of nature miracles found in the Synoptic gospels (Mt 8:23-37, Mk 4:35-41, and Lk 8:22-25); The stilling of the storm in Matthew 8:23-27 is distinctive in the author’s choice of words; the narrative also reflects OT motifs where Jesus is depicted doing what God has previously done and holding the same power over the sea as a representative of primordial chaos.

¹ William Foxwell Albright and C. S. Mann, eds., Matthew (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), CXXX.


And after he got into the boat his disciples followed him. And suddenly a great earthquake was taking place in the sea, with the result that the boat was covered by the waves, but he was sleeping.

The composition of this narrative is a chiastic ring structure: the words of the disciples and of Jesus, the sleeping and rising of Jesus, and the great earthquake and great calm are antithetical to one another in parallel.² The theme of discipleship seen in Matthew’s use of ἀκολούθεω, along with the author’s relation of Jesus getting into the boat first followed by his disciples, connects the Mt 8:23-27 narrative with the previous one in
Mt 8:18-22. The inserted sayings concerning discipleship after Mt 8:18 shift the focus in Mt 8:23 towards the disciples, their small faith, and the unique authority of Jesus displayed over nature. Luz comments that “God’s help and human struggle are intertwined. There is nothing passive about discipleship.” Longman and Garland remind the reader of the risk involved when investing ἀκολουθεῖω with the deep notions and ramifications of discipleship. Following Jesus means responding to a decisive call with the same authority used by God to call the prophets in the OT, not an intimate discipleship for which one can volunteer. This following, the same following as the prophets, is full risk.

An interesting word choice in the Matthean version of this narrative is the noun σεισμός. This word denotes the idea of violent movements or disturbances and is usually translated “earthquake.” Bornkamm suggests that the “apocalyptic idea of primitive Christianity that the σεισμός is an eschatological tribulation helps to explain a peculiarity in the story of the stilling of the storm.” Matthew has a special interest in σεισμός, as the

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5 Luz, Matthew 8-20, 22.


9 Ibid., 199.
author uses the word four times while the other Synoptics only use it once a piece.\textsuperscript{10} The σεισμός is a favorite apocalyptic symbol for God ushering in the new kingdom by shaking the foundations of the old world order.\textsuperscript{11} Batto says “it may be that the evangelist wished to suggest here the advent of the eschatological times when the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan engage in the definitive battle.”\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{verbatim}
καὶ προσελθόντες ἤγεραν αὐτὸν λέγοντες· κύριε, σῶσον, ἄπολλυμεθα.
\end{verbatim}
And approaching they were rousing him saying; Lord, save, we are perishing.

A recurring word seen in other miracle narratives is the term σῴζω. This word is derived from “to make safe, sound”; “to deliver from a direct threat”; or “to bring safe and sound out of a difficult situation.”\textsuperscript{13} First and foremost, σῴζω means “to save by snatching others by force from peril.” The word also has a beneficial meaning when the element of the threat has disappeared: “to be or stay in good health.”\textsuperscript{14} In the LXX, σῴζω is rendered from the Hebrew for “to save,” “to free,” or “to help.”\textsuperscript{15} Later Judaism syndicates meanings to be understood as “preserving or restoring integrity” and in the NT, σῴζω has lost the “preservation” and “maintaining” element but retains the relation to acute physical danger.\textsuperscript{16} The use of σῴζω in the miracle narratives of the Synoptic gospels, based most

\textsuperscript{10} Hagner, \emph{Matthew 1-13}, 221.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 966-967.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 970.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 980, 989.
likely on an Aramaic word, relates the twofold meaning “to make healthy” and “to make alive.” Albright and Mann offer a psychosomatic understanding of σῴζω, where salvation is deliverance from whatever kind of evil presented to a man or woman be it mental, spiritual, or physical.

Nolland relates that the stilling of the storm narrative is the first time σῴζω is used in direct relationship to Jesus fulfilling a present need. The verb σῴζω may mean salvation “from the eschatological ἀπώλεια (destruction) that one can hear behind ἀπολλύμεθα (we are sinking).” Witherington oddly remarks that σῴζω holds the mundane meaning of rescue. I cannot understand or agree with Witherington’s description of rescue as “mundane.”

καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· τί δειλοί ἐστε, ὀλιγόπιστοι; τότε ἐγερθεὶς ἔπετιμησεν τοῖς ἀνέμοις καὶ τῇ θαλάσσῃ, καὶ ἐγένετο γαλήνη μεγάλη.

And he says to them; what sort of cowardly are you, of little faith? At that time you were raised up he was rebuking the winds and the sea, and it became a great calm.

The verb ἐπιτιμάω, a key term in 8:26, is one that is seen in other miracle narratives, though in a slightly different context than Matthew’s use of the word here. The meaning of ἐπιτιμάω is twofold with “to honor” on one hand and “to blame, punish, reprove” on the other. Its meaning becomes more focused in the LXX where it is used to relate the divine

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17 Foerster and Fohrer, "σῴζω, σωτηρία, σωτήρ, σωτήριος," 990.
18 Albright and Mann, Matthew, CXXIX.
20 Luz, Matthew 8-20, 21.
rebuke, threat, or reproof. The NT continues the use of ἐπιτιμάω as in the OT with restrictions to only brotherly correction and as the prerogative of God alone. Stauffer explains that it is not only the demons that recoil at his threat, but his rebuke also tames the powers raging within the very elements of nature. The language of rebuke is matched with OT imagery of a power contest. Matthew discusses a faith too small to combat demonic powers using another of his favorite words (ὀλιγόπιστος) that Jesus says to his disciples “you of little faith.” The little faith of the disciples inhibits their ability to act because they have forgotten the power and presence of their Lord.

οἱ δὲ ἄνθρωποι ἐθαύμασαν λέγοντες· ποταπός ἔστιν οὗτος ὅτι καὶ οἱ ἄνεμοι καὶ ἡ θάλασσα οὕτω ὑπακούουσιν;
But the people were amazed saying; of what sort is this one that even the winds and the sea respond to him?

An important term found in this verse, as well as in numerous miracle narratives, is θαυμαζω. The root of θαυμάζω is linked to “vision” and “contemplate” and was seen as the beginning of philosophy in Hellenistic Greek. Defining θαυμάζω is difficult in the OT, as it renders a large and diverse number of Hebrew words. Bertram says “even where the group denotes astonishment in the deeper sense, it is often used as a stylistic device in the

23 Ibid., 625.
24 Ibid., 626.
27 Luz, Matthew 8-20, 22.
Gk. Bible, being employed by a narrator or author to emphasize the greatness or the significance of a fact or an event.”

It is difficult to find continuity in the use of θαυμάζω and its word group in NT writings, with most of its occurrences in the Synoptics and primarily in miracle narratives.

Matthew uses the term οἱ ἄνθρωποι at the beginning of 8:27, leading scholars to disagree on the subject of θαυμάζω. Is it the disciples or the men? Are the disciples differentiated from the group of men? The men are obviously not intended to represent the disciples, according to Bornkamm, but a group who confirms the miraculous event.

Nolland agrees that the men are “best explained as designed to introduce here people other than the disciples.” Hagner says that it is merely tempting to avoid the ignorance of the disciples by differentiating between them and the men in 8:27. The likelihood of the men encountering the narrative through preaching, as proposed by Bornkamm and Luz, is even less. Luz argues that the men in Mt 8:27 cannot be the disciples who have just addressed Jesus as Lord within the same narrative.

The stilling of the storm narrative depicts Jesus doing what God has been doing in the OT, especially in the Psalms. An equivalent in Hellenistic literature of a human being

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29 Bertram, "θαυμά, θαυμάζω, θαυμάσιος, θαυμάστός," 30.
30 Ibid., 37.
31 Bornkamm, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, 56.
calming a storm is not found. Jesus’ contemporaries would have remembered that God is depicted in the OT as the one who stills the seas. The power over nature motif in the stilling of the storm narrative is also reflected in several Psalms. The power to still the raging sea belongs to God alone, according to Psalms 89 and 107. This power is attributed to God’s victory over the primordial chaos. In light of this, “Jesus’ calming of the sea borrows upon the terminology of Yahweh’s stilling of the hostile sea, especially when this stilling is done through the divine rebuke.” Witherington remarks that stilling the seas is seen as an act of God in light of the Psalms. Batto says “whether Jesus’ stilling of the sea retained the age-old connotations of battle against the chaos monster or only the power of the creator to control his creatures, Jesus is clearly depicted as exercising divine control.”

The Psalms also share the imagery of the sleeping Lord with Mt 8:23-27, which is the only NT passage where we find Jesus asleep. There are several ways to understand the sleeping God image. Some scholars interpret the image as an anthropomorphic metaphor for the lack of attention God gives to prayers. The anthropomorphic metaphor is not the most fitting for the nature miracles genre; however, one might see this reflected

38 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 174.
42 Ibid., 153.
in the distressed prayers of the disciples in Mt 8:25 to the sleeping Jesus. There are several Psalms (7, 35, 59) with similar images of a people perishing while their God is sleeping.\footnote{Batto, “The Sleeping God,” 153.} 

A better method to interpret the sleeping God image within the context of power over nature is “sleep as a symbol of divine authority.”\footnote{Ibid., 159.} The sleeping deity in Psalms 44 and 74 “is used to express Israel’s belief in Yahweh’s absolute kingship.”\footnote{Ibid., 170.} The final stage in the biblical adaption of the Ancient Near Eastern sleeping deity motif is in the story of Jesus calming the sea. The authors of the Synoptic gospels display their regard for the stilling of the storm as a manifestation of divine presence through their use of traditional OT language and imagery concerning divine activity.\footnote{Ibid., 172-173.} As in the OT, God can be counted on to awake and maintain order over chaos in Matthew’s narrative.\footnote{Ibid., 170.}

Batto declares that some commentators have missed the point completely when they interpret the sleeping Jesus as an indication of his humanity; others still miss the mark in interpreting the sleep as a sign of Jesus’ trust in the sustaining power of God.\footnote{Ibid., 174.} Hagner is one who discusses the paradox of Jesus who has no place to lay his head but is also at home anywhere and everywhere untroubled by normal anxieties, such as being in the middle of a great storm.\footnote{Ibid., 170.} Batto argues that “just as the Israelites had called upon Yahweh to awaken

\footnote{Hagner, \textit{Matthew 1-13}, 221.}
and save them in their tribulation, so Jesus’ beleaguered disciples wake Jesus for help against the sea which threatened to engulf them.”

Matthew’s narrative also reflects the common motif of Chaoskampf, where God is engaged in a struggle with chaos but ultimately has power over chaos. Albright and Mann relate that “the restoration of order to God’s creation is a constant theme of OT prophecy.” The saving acts of God are most evident in the division of the primordial chaos at the beginning of creation or at the dividing of the sea during the creation of God’s chosen people in the exodus from Egypt. The Chaoskampf seen in the creation stories of Genesis and Exodus is reflected in Jesus’ power over the watery chaos. Water is a symbol of “the power of death and darkness.” Hagner relates that “power over the sea, which is often symbolic of evil or the dwelling place of evil, was regarded as especially impressive.”

Isaiah writes in exile concerning God’s ability to still the sea when the waves rage and Batto interprets the passage in Is 51 as “some may feel that Yahweh’s authority has slipped away, in actuality Yahweh is very much in control.”

In the stilling of the storm narrative, Jesus is seen as a Jonah figure. Jesus is quelling chaos. Nolland remarks on how there is a curious relationship between this miracle narrative in Matthew and the Jonah account. Baker says “in both Jonah and the Gospels

50 Batto, “The Sleeping God,” 175.
51 Albright and Mann, Matthew, CXXX.
53 Luz, Matthew 8-20, 20.
54 Hagner, Matthew 1-13, 222.
wind and water enclose the event, occurring at beginning and end.”57 While a great storm on the sea rages, both Jonah and Jesus are asleep; both are awoken with cries for rescue; the storm abates when the main character acts, whether it is Jonah being tossed overboard or Jesus rebuking the sea; both witnesses respond with strong emotions, be it fear or wonder.58 Twelftree characterizes the stilling of the storm narrative as a reversal of the Jonah narrative.59

Luz says that this miracle narrative is a creation of the post-Easter church “told in the colors of the Jonah story and that announces Jesus is more than Jonah.”60 Lessing says that the differences between the two narratives should not dispel their similarities. A great storm on the sea is seen in both, which the leading character sleeps through until awoken by others on the boat who are afraid. The storm on the sea is then stilled by the same character in both stories, God. Interestingly, the context in both narratives also involves the movement from a Jewish territory to a Gentile territory.61 Batto says that although there are obvious similarities between the stilling of the storm narrative and the Jonah story, “the sleeping Jesus cannot be adequately explained as the evangelists’ attempt to portray ‘one greater than Jonah.’ Both the motive and the result of sleep are different…the disciples call

58 Hagner, Matthew 1-13, 221.
59 Twelftree, Jesus the Miracle Worker, 317.
60 Luz, Matthew 8-20, 17.
upon Jesus even as the distressed sailors of Ps 107,23-30 called upon Yahweh to save them from the storm."\(^{62}\)

There are few miracle formulas present. One standard seen in a miracle narrative is faith in Jesus’ ability to save. The disciples wake Jesus and cry out to him in 8:25 because they knew he could provide rescue. Another aspect seen in many miracle narratives is the initiation of the miracle by the people and not Jesus. Again, the disciples call out to Jesus, not waiting for him to save them, but taking the initiative. The wonder of the witnesses is also another common miracle motif. The men in 8:27 marvel and are amazed at the power Jesus displays over the wind and the waves, who answer to no one but God.

Though the stilling of the storm narrative is present in the three Synoptic gospels, all three versions have their differences. Matthew makes his usual abbreviations to the Markan source. Mark and Luke are close to identical for all intents and purposes.\(^{63}\) Matthew tweaks a number of elements to fit them into the author’s own voice. Mark uses the word ἄνεμος instead of σεισμός to describe the storm on the sea. Mark has more attention to detail, like that of one recalling an event for which they were present. Matthew calls Jesus κύριος, while Mark calls him διόδοσκαλος, and Luke uses ἐπιστάτης.\(^{64}\) The sea is identified most strongly in Mark with the demonic and Jesus rebukes it in nearly the exact

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\(^{63}\) Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 155.

\(^{64}\) Günther Bornkamm, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, 55.
language as he rebukes a demon earlier in Mark. Luke leaves out any reference to θάλασσα and uses λίμνη and ὕδωρ.

The stilling of the storm is among the ranks of nature miracles found in the Synoptic gospels. The stilling of the storm in Matthew 8:23-27 is distinctive in the author’s choice of words: using the more dramatic language of σεισμός and ἐπιτιμάω. The narrative also reflects OT motifs where Jesus is depicted doing what God has previously done and holding the same power over the sea as a representative of primordial chaos.

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