1. Introduction

The deeds and sayings of the historical Jesus continues to be an important domain of investigation for New Testament scholars and, in recent discussion, there is a growing interest in understanding Jesus as miracle worker.¹ This essay will seek to investigate the healings and exorcisms of Jesus within the tradition transmitted in the New Testament Gospels.² They will be examined through the lenses and by application of the criteria of authenticity,³ first by means of the internal evidence found in the Gospels and secondly, by exploring them from the standpoint of the external evidence found outside the Gospels, including an investigation of these deeds of Jesus in relation to his contemporaries, first from a Jewish perspective and secondly from a Greco-Roman perspective—delineating both similarities and dissimilarities in these perspectives. I will argue in this essay that the place of healing and exorcism appears to be a core ingredient of the Jesus tradition.

² I will only address the subject of healings and exorcisms of Jesus in this essay. There are other deeds attributed to Jesus that are referred to as “nature miracles” such as the calming of the storm, raising of the dead, the feeding of the five thousand, the withering of the fig tree, and walking on water, which I will not treat. On nature miracles, see Twelftree, Jesus the Miracle Worker, 314–322.
The acts of healing and exorcism by Jesus of Nazareth are well attested in the Synoptic Gospels, as well as John’s Gospel. The Fourth Gospel calls these acts “signs.” The Fourth Gospel, while recording instances where Jesus healed and performed acts that would be considered extraordinary, is nonetheless different from the Synoptics in that it contains no accounts of exorcisms performed by Jesus. The reason for the absence of exorcisms within the Fourth Gospel is not stated, but its absence is generally attributed to a theologically motivated interest in realized eschatology.\(^4\) The question scholarship has rightly been asking in investigating the gospel records of the healings and exorcisms of Jesus is not so much whether these miracles actually happened, but whether or not Jesus of Nazareth was believed to have performed them in the Hellenistic culture out of which he emerged. Does the tradition about the extraordinary deeds of Jesus fit within the profile of the historical Jesus? The question concerns whether or not the gospel records of the healings and exorcisms of Jesus are coherent with the culture from which they came. This brings us to a realization that this question is primarily a historical-critical question.

It appears axiomatic that what can be ascertained from the historical-critical method is not whether miracles really occurred, but whether Jesus was believed to have performed them by his contemporaries. Hence the question is first and foremost, not philosophical or metaphysical in nature, but historical-critical. If we abide within the contours of historical-critical research in regards to the data in the Gospels in relation to the healings, exorcisms, and miracles of Jesus, we will be in a better position to assess the available evidence in terms of authenticity.

While the definitional questions about “miracle” as a conceptual notion typically fall outside of what is appropriate historical-critical discussion, it is precisely the historical-critical method that has buttressed the notion

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\(^4\) On the subject of exorcism and the Gospel of John, see Graham H. Twelftree, *Christ Triumphant: Exorcism Then and Now* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 88–90. Even if a realized eschatology is granted within John to account for the absence of exorcisms, this is still problematic in that it does not account for the fact that disease or illness and death itself are still present even while being defeated by Jesus. Of all the Gospels, John is the only one that states that “Satan entered him [Judas Iscariot]” (ἐίσηγεν εἰς ἕκεινον ὁ Σατανᾶς) (John 13:27), which seems to grind against a notion of realized eschatology. While there are no accounts of exorcism in John, the idea of demonic possession is implied in the Fourth Gospel when Jesus is accused by his opponents as having a “demon” (John 7:20; 8:48, 52; 10:20).