I indicated in my last post that, to my surprise, I had never written about the history of the scholarship on the Gospels in terms of the major shift from seeing them as Supernatural Histories to Natural Histories to Myths. And just as I was preparing to write about the move to see them as Natural Histories, in today’s post, I read a comment from a reader (Bless his soul, as we used to say!) who pointed out that I did indeed have a detailed discussion of the matter in my first trade book Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium. I looked it up, and lo and behold, I absolutely did — and in precisely the terms I wanted to discuss the matter here on the blog. For some reason none of my search engines picked it up when looked through all my files.

So, today I will talk about The Gospels as Natural Histories, as lifted from that treatment in my book. As I hope you’ll agree, this shift in understanding the Gospels was both significant and incredibly interesting.

***************************************************

The Gospel Accounts As Natural Histories

The Enlightenment that swept through Europe in the eighteenth century involved a whole new way of thinking and looking at the world. Such intellectuals of the Enlightenment as Descartes, Locke, Newton, and Hume had come to distrust traditional sources of authority and started to insist on the power of human reason to understand the world and the human’s place in it. This was an age of science and the development of modern technology. Scholars began to assert the “logic” and importance of cause-effect relationships. They developed scientific notions of “natural law,” i.e., highly predictable ways that nature worked, along with the concomitant view that these “laws” could not be broken by any outside agency (for example, a divine being). They modified the grounds of human knowledge – away, for example, from the traditional teachings and dogmas of the church to such “objective” processes as rational observation, empirical verification, and logical inference.

In terms of religious belief, scholars of the Enlightenment recognized that ...

If you want to read the rest of this post, and all others, you need to join the blog. Hey, it’s less than 50 cents a week. Every one of those cents goes to charity. And you get a ton of informative and interesting discussions. So JOIN!!

In terms of religious belief, scholars of the Enlightenment recognized that in earlier times, people had appealed to divine agency to explain natural phenomena that seemed mysterious and beyond the ken of normal human experience. Ancient Greeks, for example, thought that thunderbolts were hurled to earth by Zeus and that bodily diseases were cured by the God Asclepius; Christians had analogous beliefs, that rain was sent from God or that a sick child could be made well through prayer. But during the Enlightenment all such beliefs — and others like them — were widely discounted, as scientists learned, for example, about meteorological phenomena and the body’s natural defenses.

What though does this have to do with the Bible?

In fact, there were a number of biblical scholars who were heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, who took, therefore, a rationalistic view of the Gospels. According to these scholars, the miracles of the Bible obviously didn’t happen – since modern people no longer need to appeal to the supernatural the way the ancients did. Even though the ancients
thought they saw miracles (e.g., when it thundered or when a sick child was returned to health), they simply didn’t understand the true nature of cause and effect. For such scholars, the Gospels do not therefore contain supernatural histories at all. They instead recount natural histories. That is to say, according to these scholars, the Gospels do record events that happened. But the ancient authors, who were decidedly not influenced by the Enlightenment, mistook what they saw to be miracles. Since miracles don’t happen, we should look behind the accounts recorded in the Bible to see what really did happen. And in every case, what really happened were natural (as opposed to supernatural) events.

One of the famous rationalist interpreters of the Bible was a German theologian named Heinrich Paulus. In 1827, Paulus wrote a study of the Gospels called Das Leben Jesu (= The Life of Jesus). In his book, Paulus subjected the Gospel accounts to serious scrutiny in order to discern what actually happened during Jesus’ life. In no instance were there miracles — including the three rather stupendous examples I cited (in the previous post): the feeding of the 5000, the walking on the water, and the resurrection. In each case, Paulus tries to show that a misunderstanding occurred. The disciples ascribed a miracle to Jesus when in fact no miracle took place.

Take the feeding of the 5000. Paulus notes that after a long period of teaching, Jesus instructed everyone to sit. He then collected five loaves and two fish from his disciples, said a blessing, and started to break the food into pieces and distribute it. What happened next, however, was not a miracle, except in the most generous meaning of the term. For according to Paulus, the crowds must have seen what Jesus and his disciples were doing – sharing their food with one another – and realized that they themselves were famished. They immediately broke out their own picnic baskets and started to swap all the goodies they had brought. Soon there was more than enough for everyone! There was no supernatural intervention here. Only at a later time did someone look back on this wonderful afternoon of sharing and fellowship and decide that it was a miracle.

Well, easy enough. But what about the walking on the water? Paulus observes that it was dark when the disciples started rowing across the lake, and that a sudden storm came up, preventing them from making any headway. In fact, he claimed, they made no headway at all; they never got more than a few feet from shore. They didn’t realize this, of course — it was a dark night, possibly foggy, with sheets of rain falling all around. Jesus, then, seeing their distress, came to them wading through the shallow water on the shore. They were terrified. Since they thought they were in the middle of the lake, they assumed the figure coming towards them must be walking on the water. They cried out. Jesus shouted to them, telling them not to be afraid, it was only he. Peter called out that if it really were he, to allow him to come to him; Jesus ordered him to come — and why not? Peter jumped from the boat, but floundered a bit (thinking he was in over his head); Jesus steadied him with a hand, helped him back into the boat, which they managed, then, to get back onto shore.

No miracle here, just a bit of a misunderstanding.

Surely, though, Paulus cannot so simply explain the resurrection. Jesus was dead. Completely dead. He was buried. And the third day he arose.

Or was he dead? Paulus notes that the ancient Jewish historian Josephus mentions a time from his own life when he persuaded Roman officials to have two of his companions taken down off their crosses before they had died. One of the two actually survived to tell the
tale. This historical information gives Paulus all the ammunition he needs. As he reconstructs the events of the Passion, Jesus was flogged within an inch of his life prior to being crucified. Weakened already, his life already beginning slip away, Jesus’ vital signs slowed down on the cross. He practically stopped breathing. But not quite. He was at death’s door, and the Roman soldiers mistook him for dead. One of them stuck a spear in his side, inadvertently performing a phlebotomy (that is, a blood-letting, a common medical practice in Paulus’s day). Then he was taken from the cross, wrapped in a clean cloth with burial spices, and laid in a sepulcher carved out of rock. Later, in the cool of the tomb, with the smell of the unguents, Jesus awaken from his death-like torpor. He arose, emerged from his tomb, and went to meet his disciples. They of course thought they had seen him — just three days earlier — dead and buried. The conclusion they drew, though completely natural, was thoroughly mistaken. They thought that Jesus had been raised from the dead. In fact, he had never died.

Paulus’s explanations for the miracles of the Gospels — and he can explain them all! — may seem fairly outlandish to us today; but for many people of the Enlightenment, they made a lot of sense, at least, a lot better sense than the claim that Gospels recorded miracles that actually happened. After all, everyone can make a mistake and we all know people who have been confused or misled or gullible. These are all among our everyday experiences. But how many of us know people who can multiply loaves, walk on water, or rise from the dead?

I will continue in the next post to talk about how this understanding itself came to be seen as inadequate, leading to the development of the idea that the Gospels were neither supernatural histories nor natural histories, but myths.

The Gospels as Myths
The Gospels as Supernatural Histories