MATTHEW 13:53-15:39

Six Impressive Miracles further Confirm the Divinity of Jesus

The following is based on John W. Welch and Brent J. Schmidt, The Gospel of Matthew, BYU New Testament Commentary (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, forthcoming).

ollowing the chapter on the parables, the materials in chapters 14 and 15 report six miracles similar to the earlier ones but now performed in even more remarkable ways that conveyed significant meanings. Matthew recorded these miracles to demonstrate the divine power of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Enhancing the overall chiastic structure of the Gospel of Matthew, these miracles together with the miracles in Matthew 8–12 provide an impressive frame around the central parables chapter in Matthew 13.

At the same time, Jesus had to endure the slight of not being accepted in Nazareth, His hometown. In addition, in this season Jesus received reports about the ugly execution of John the Baptist, Jesus's second cousin and prophetic forerunner. Upon hearing of this, Jesus left, trying to spend time alone, but additional crowds followed Him and Jesus continued to minister to the people. Jesus, always compassionate, took time to bless others in spite of these great personal sorrows.

Matthew 13:53-58. Challenge 6: Is This Not the Carpenter's Son?

Jesus returned to "his own country," Nazareth, and went about teaching in the synagogues. Joseph Smith changed "synagogue" to the plural, which may imply that Jesus was going about His regular ministry, teaching on the Sabbath in various places.

The local residents, who knew the family, mentioning His brothers by name and knowing His sisters (Matthew 13:55–56), were unprepared to accept that a carpenter's son could perform a divine ministry.

In Matthew 13:55 they ask, "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?" Differently, Mark records the people asking, "Is not this *the carpenter, the son of Mary*?" (Mark 6:3; emphasis added). Sons, at this time, began working alongside their fathers at a young age.

The Greek term used here, *tekton*, has long been translated as carpenter (13:55), but it actually has a much wider range of meaning. It can also refer to a stonemason, a shipbuilder, a sculptor, and many other technical craftsmen of considerable skill. Tall trees were not plentiful in the region, so houses and important buildings were generally not made of beams and lumber but of stone.

So it is possible that Joseph was not just a simple—and poor—village carpenter. Potentially he was a builder of some consequence traveling over wide areas of country. The Joseph Smith Translation indicates that Jesus and His brothers "served under His father [Joseph]" (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 3:24–26), adding to the reasonable assumption that Jesus may well have traveled with Joseph and other workers to larger growing cities nearby such as Sepphoris, where He would have encountered Romans, Greek-speakers, and highly educated and skilled people.

13:54. How well known was Jesus in Nazareth? In Matthew, people seem to know Jesus and His family fairly well. Luke 4:22 and John 6:42, however, imply that some of the people of Nazareth did not know Jesus by sight when He first appeared after the beginning of His public ministry. Both situations may be true. Some scholars have pointed out that Jesus probably spent limited time in Nazareth, so some people there may not have known Him very well. At the same time, a few others there may have known Him quite well.

13:54. He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief. Here, one learns again that if people do not exercise faith, God does not perform miracles. The Book of Mormon prophets sustained this principle: "For if there be no faith among the children of men God can do no miracle among them; wherefore, He showed not Himself until after their faith" (Ether 12:12). The prophet Moroni added, "For it is by faith that miracles are wrought; and it is by faith that angels appear and minister unto men; wherefore, if these things have ceased wo be unto the children of men, for it is because of unbelief, and all is vain" (Moroni 7:37).

Because Jesus's miracles were triggered by faith (*pistis*, meaning "understanding, trust and faithfulness"), many of the people of Nazareth were unable to receive the blessings that had been poured out in other towns. Jesus requires loyalty and commitment to the God of Israel as well as harmony with others who are faithful to the God of Israel. "Men can no more be saved without obedience than they can be healed without faith."¹ Harold B. Lee warned, "Will we forfeit the harvest because we cannot accept direction, revelation, or counsel from someone who just lives down the street, in the ward, or in the stake? Will we reject leadership from the churchman who is human, with frailties, and who has family members who may be quite human also? While we are struggling with an 'Is-not-this-the-carpenter's-son? attitude, we may be missing the truth, the way, and the ultimate harvest."²

Matthew 14:1–12. Event 9: Herod Antipas Beheads John the Baptist at His Sister-in-Law's Behest

Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, was the Roman puppet ruler of Galilee and Pereia (Luke 3:1). Herod's mistaken identification of Jesus as the resurrected John the Baptist performing miracles shows how widespread the general idea of resurrection—though not necessarily the exalted resurrection of the Christian faith—had become. Herod may have been reflecting the Pharisees' belief in resurrection or even the simpler Hellenistic (Greek-inspired) belief in the reappearance of dead people.³

Herod's mention of John the Baptist gave Matthew the cue to give an account of how the Baptist's death had occurred as a prize for Herod's sister-in-law and now wife during the celebration of Herod's birthday. John had spoken out strongly against the inappropriate marriage between Herod and his brother's wife, Herodias. John the Baptist was now in Herod's custody. Herod's divorce of his first wife was legal under Judean law, but his subsequent marriage to his brother's wife while his brother was still alive was not (see Leviticus 18:16; 20:21).

Herodias encouraged her daughter to trap Herod into executing John the Baptist. The daughter danced at Herod's feast and for a reward, "she, being before instructed of her mother," requested that Herod decapitate the Baptist and bring his head to her on a charger (platter). John the Baptist's head was then brought into the party and given to the daughter, who passed it along to her mother.

In stark contrast to the executions of Jesus and Paul, Herod did not worry about Jewish or Roman law in his execution of John the Baptist. Execution by beheading was not allowed in Judea, but it was sanctioned by Roman and Greek custom and was even considered a privilege of Roman citizens to die by beheading instead of by other torturous means. However, according to Matthew, Herod was distressed by the situation, but not enough to counter Herodias's daughter's request. He was intent on fulfilling his promise to give her whatever she asked and thereby maintaining his image of trustworthiness before his guests.

Matthew is the only writer to record that John the Baptist's disciples "went and told Jesus" (14:12). Consequently, Jesus went out into the countryside for some quiet time. However, crowds followed Him, as usual, and His compassion overcame His need for reflection.

Matthew 14:13–21. Miracle 12: Feeding the Five Thousand

Jesus learned of the illegal execution of John the Baptist and then departed by ship to a desert area to be alone. However, the crowds heard where He was and came to Him from the cities on foot. It appears that they had come a considerable distance. Jesus healed many people from the multitude that had followed Him. He "was moved with compassion toward them" despite His own sorrow (Matthew 14:14).

When evening approached, the disciples suggested sending the people home to get food, but that would have sent them a long way home in the dark. Jesus, asking the multitude to sit, offered to feed them all

with what they had on hand: five loaves and two fishes. Jesus blessed the food and miraculously shared it among the disciples who distributed it to the entire crowd.

One can suggest several observations about this expansive miracle. Here one sees Jesus's great compassion. Also, in the divinely given bread, Jesus created a physical manifestation that would set the stage for His expansive statement about being the Bread of Life in John 6. This miracle was also a compelling manifestation of divine power over the elements of the earth.⁴ And, after feeding five thousand men plus the women and children who were present, twelve baskets of fragments were left over. James E. Talmage wrote: "The broken but unused portion exceeded in bulk and weight the whole of the original little store. Our Lord's direction to gather up the fragments was an impressive object-lesson against waste; and it may have been to afford such lesson that an excess was supplied."⁵

Here, again, Jesus demonstrated His divine authority over what to humankind is seen as finite matter, but this divine manifestation represents much more, exemplifying Jesus's profound spirit of compassion and service. This miracle may also be symbolic of Jesus, as the "bread of life," feeding all of humankind, and it foreshadows Jesus's institution of the sacramental eating of bread in remembrance of His broken body. In 3 Nephi 20, the resurrected Jesus miraculously brought forth bread and wine so that a multitude in Bountiful—probably twice the size of the original gathering of 2,500 men, women, and children—were able to eat and drink "and were filled with the Spirit; and they did cry out with one voice, and gave glory to Jesus" (3 Nephi 20:6–9).

Matthew 14:22–33. Miracle 13: Jesus and Peter Walking on Water

Previously, in Matthew 8:23–27, Jesus had shown His power over the wind and waves by stilling a large storm on the Sea of Galilee. Here in Matthew 14:24–31, Jesus *walked* on the water during "a contrary wind," an even more spectacular miracle. When the disciples panicked at the appearance of someone crossing the waves and coming toward them in the night, they heard Him speak the consoling words, "It is I, be not afraid."

The disciples were alone in the boat, after sundown, trying to sail back to the north shore of Galilee. Jesus had sent them off so that He could dismiss the multitude and then go up into a mountain alone to pray (Matthew 14:23). It was very early in the morning, about 3:00 a.m. (in the "fourth watch" [14:25]), and the winds were still blowing contrary to where the disciples were trying to go when they saw Jesus walking on the sea toward them. At first they thought it was a ghost (14:26), but Jesus said, "I am" (*ego eimi*).

Peter then called out to Jesus to say that if it really was Him to direct Peter (*keleuson* is a strong verb; see Matthew 18:25) to walk to Him on the water (14:28). Jesus did so. "Come," Jesus invited. Peter stepped off the boat and walked toward Jesus (*periepatēsen*) upon the water. However, Peter soon lost focus when he "saw the wind boisterous" (14:30). As Peter began to sink, he called out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" and He extended His hand and "saved" Peter, just as He will save everyone else. Jesus caught

him and asked, "Why did you doubt?" (14:31). With a little more faith, Peter could have kept going. He wanted Peter, and us, to know how much was possible with faith, together with God's power. When they were all in the ship, the twelve exclaimed, "Truly you are God's son" (14:33).

The twelve disciples now had no room to doubt who Jesus was, as He had power even over the chaotic waters. The ability of Jesus to bestow power and authority upon His disciples is key message of Matthew. Only Matthew (who was on that boat that night) tells of Peter's experience on this extraordinary occasion. A lesson to be learned here by all is this: by connecting with the Savior during times of fear, His devoted and faithful followers allow Him to help in truly extraordinary ways.

14:27. Be of good cheer. Be not afraid. The Greek says "have courage." It was a term of solace, and Jesus was recorded as having used it several times. To the paralyzed man He had said, "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee" (Matthew 9:2). This time He said it to His disciples as He was walking over the water toward them. John also recorded Jesus as using that expression when explaining to His disciples His upcoming sacrifice: "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). More literal ways of saying this may have been "take heart," "take courage" or "be brave." Such encouragement comes in very useful when the covenant path seems beset by metaphorically boisterous waves of trials.

14:27. *It is I.* Jesus's use of "It is I" (Greek $eg\bar{o} eimi$, literally "I am") is far more than a simple identification. The term "I AM" is an eternal present, and its usage here is identical with the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) of Exodus 3:14, which identified Jehovah to Moses.⁶ John 18:5–6 has a remarkable example of the effect of this phrase. When Jesus was about to be arrested, the captors said they were looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He responded, "*Egō eimi*." His captors were alert enough to know what that really meant—that He was the God of the Old Testament—and "as soon then as He had said unto them, I am *He*, they went backward, and fell to the ground" (John 18:6).

14:33. *Truly you are God's son.* These words occur at the end of this miracle when His disciples in the ship worshiped Him and exclaimed, "Of a truth thou art the Son of God." After their fear at first, the disciples fully realized or at least were willing to say who Jesus was when He had walked on the water. Later Peter expressed this again a little more theologically, when Jesus later asked "But whom say ye that I am?" Peter responded, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," which is a more detailed and sure testimony than his previous statement (Matthew 16:15).

Matthew 14:34–36. Miracle 14: Healing the Sick in Gennesaret

Jesus and the disciples sailed over to Gennesaret on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. When the people realized that He was there, they sent messages everywhere for the men to round up their sick. The number of individuals needing to be healed was large enough that in this case, like the woman with an issue of blood, many people were completely healed just by touching the hem (or tassels) of Jesus's long outer garment. It is not clear that all those in this multitude would have been Jews or Israelites since this area was predominantly inhabited by Gentiles, but apparently that made little difference. This event was another more extensive indicator that the faith of the people triggered Jesus's miracles. It also demonstrated that Jesus ministered to all the people, not just a privileged few. Jesus did not have to speak or touch to heal, nor was He concerned about impurity. As David Hill points out, "To allow oneself to be touched by large groups of people was an abomination in the sight of the Pharisees."⁷ Considering the feeding of the five thousand and this healing of multitudes, it is not surprising that Pharisees would be concerned here about the issue of purity because of being in the midst of large crowds.

Matthew 15:1–20. Challenge 7: Why Do Your Disciples Transgress the Traditions of the Elders?

Ironically, along with performing miracles, Jesus had to withstand challenge after challenge. Here, the scribes and Pharisees approached Jesus with a thorny question: "Why do thy disciples transgress *the tra-dition of the elders?* For they do not wash not their hands when they eat bread?" (Matthew 15:2; emphasis added). Note that they did not accuse Jesus's disciples of breaking the law of Moses or the commandments. It was a matter of those Jewish leaders applying the letter of their oral traditions, beyond living the requirements of the law of Moses.

Jesus—responding as He often did, with a question—asked the scribes and Pharisees why *they* transgressed an important commandment: "Honor thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death." They had developed a tradition that provided a loophole to dodge taking care of and providing resources for their parents. They would declare that their resources had been given as a gift to the Lord, "a sacred gift," or *corban* as it was known. In the temple, but evidently for some personal gain, they would voluntarily set their assets under a vow or pledge, consecrating certain amounts to the Temple. Jesus detected and found objectionable their ulterior motive, for the fulfillment of such a vow should not be regarded as a deeper obligation than one's duty to honor and support one's parents.

Their legalistic bending of the Decalogue was part of the same tradition that they had accused Jesus and the disciples of having broken with the handwashing. It *was not* an original part of the law of Moses, whereas honoring parents *was* part of those commandments. Jesus consequently said, "Ye have made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition" (Matthew 15:6).

Jesus turned to the crowd and referred back to the tradition of handwashing, reminding people that the impurity that went into the mouth of individuals through lack of handwashing did not defile nearly as much as what came out of the mouths of these uninspired leaders—those oral traditions.

Jesus referred to these leaders as "blind leaders of the blind" and provided the memorable maxim, "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." Joseph Smith taught: "A man of God should be endowed with wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, in order to teach and lead the people of God.⁸

To drive home the point about "the doctrine of men," Jesus announced that "every plant, which my Heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up" (Matthew 15:13). Not surprisingly the scribes and Pharisees took offense.

In both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, the people's hearts were set on material possessions instead of on the Lord. Ezekiel taught in Ezekiel 33:31, "They hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth, they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness." Alma taught in Alma 34:28, "For after ye have done all these things, if ye turn away the needy, and the naked, and visit not the sick and afflicted, and impart of your substance, if ye have, to those who stand in need—I say unto you, if ye do not any of these things, behold, your prayer is vain, and availeth you nothing, and ye are as hypocrites who do deny the faith."

Jesus referred to the Pharisees' "teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 5:9). In modern revelation, Jesus listed the related hazards that leaders in this dispensation may avoid by prayer. Among them is the same phrase, "that ye may not be seduced by evil spirits, or doctrines of devils, or the commandments of men." Then He expands a little: "For some are of men, and others of devils" (Doctrine and Covenants 46:7).

Matthew 15:21–28. Miracle 15: Casting a Devil Out of the Daughter of a Faithful Canaanite Mother

Jesus and His disciples had gone to the area around Tyre and Sidon, where they encountered a Canaanite or Phoenician woman who pleaded with Jesus to heal her daughter that was possessed with an evil spirit. This is a most memorable and educational episode.

Jesus paused. The mother was a gentile woman, and the disciples observing this suggested that Jesus send her away. Jesus pointed out to the woman that He was, for now anyway, "not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15: 24). This statement reflects Matthew 10:5–6, in which Jesus taught the disciples, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." However, in this instance, Jesus brought additional wisdom to that statement.

The woman pleaded more, and Jesus responded with a harsh thought that seemed to be designed to challenge her thinking and faith. He remarked that it was not appropriate "to take the children's [covenant Israel's] bread, and to cast it to dogs [Gentiles]," to which woman responded with a powerful, faith-filled thought: the dogs could eat the crumbs that fell from the children's table.

The Greek word *kynarion* meant not a young or small dog but a household pet. House dogs were as widespread and beloved at all social levels in antiquity as at any other time, though they were considered unclean throughout Old Testament times and there was an obvious fear of the numerous stray dogs.

While people sometimes threw food to stray dogs and then chased them away, it was taken for granted that gentile people fed house dogs with table scraps (15:26-27).

Her faith and humility moved the Savior so deeply that He healed her daughter. Obviously, the Savior knew how much faith the woman had. Was He reflecting it back to lift her? She was far greater than the dogs under the table. "O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt" (15:28). He had done likewise for the centurion. He took these people from where they were, lifted them, and helped them to understand much more than they would have otherwise.

Jesus also taught His disciples who witnessed these occasions that these were people who had true faith and were in need. He taught that compassion and faith were more important than the letter of the law that advised not giving to the Gentiles yet. He dealt with the spirit of the law and demonstrated that principle.

In this dispensation, the Lord addressed this principle: "Make not thy gift known unto any save it be those who are of thy faith. Trifle not with sacred things" (Doctrine and Covenants 6:12). Furthermore, the Lord added: "For it is not meet that the things which belong to the children of the kingdom should be given to them that are not worthy, or to dogs, or the pearls to be cast before swine" (Doctrine and Covenants 41:6). It is easy for members of the Church of Jesus Christ in these days to take miracles for granted. It is important to remember that they are beneficial for those that have faith.

Matthew 15:29–31. Miracle 16: Healing Many Afflictions up in the Mount in Galilee

The King James version says that Jesus, having returned to the Sea of Galilee, like Moses went up into "a" mountain. Greek texts say that He went up into "the" mountain (*anabas eis to oros*, as He did also in Matthew 14:23), apparently a specific holy mountain or a specific type of separate mountain, exactly as is also said at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. For contrast, one might note that when Satan took Jesus to an "exceedingly high mountain" the words are *eis oros*, "into a mountain," not "the mountain," denoting a specific place associated in antiquity with temples or holy places.

Here Jesus found Himself once more surrounded by a great multitude who had brought friends and family that were lame, blind, dumb, maimed, "and many others," and He sacrificed His time by healing them. The multitude were amazed at all the miraculous results "when they saw the dumb to speak, the maimed to be whole, the lame to walk, and the blind to see" and "they glorified the God of Israel" (15:31). This is a reflection of Jesus's words to the followers of John the Baptist when they came to confirm that He was the Messiah: "Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: Blind people receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (11:4–5).

Elder Ronald A. Rasband said, "Jesus Christ who created the seas can calm them; He who gave sight to the blind can lift our sights to heaven; He who cleansed the lepers can mend our infirmities; He who healed the impotent man can call for us to rise up with 'Come, follow me.'"⁹

Matthew 15:32–39. Miracle 17: Feeding the Four Thousand

Feeding thousands again must have been yet another exhausting three-day experience. The Savior's complete love and compassion and His openness to even the lowest classes of people is shown not only by the healings but also by what He expressed and what He did next: "I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way" (Matthew 15:32). The word translated in the King James Version as "fasting" refers to physical hunger, not to the spiritual principle of fasting. "I do not want to send them away hungry" (Matthew 15:33 *BYU-NTC: Matthew*).

Matthew recorded that there were, this time, four thousand men and their wives and children, yet seven loaves and a few little fishes fed them all. Jesus blessed and broke the bread, and He had His twelve disciples share it among the crowd. Again, He demonstrated order and efficiency through delegation. For Latter-day Saints, it is common for particular assignments to be spread out vertically as well as horizontally (see also 3 Nephi 18:4). The Savior's will was carried out by His Apostles, acting in their sacred priesthood roles of service to care for the multitude's physical needs.

As with the previous miracle of feeding a crowd, there were baskets full of leftovers after this meal this time seven. "The baskets here referred to were probably the ordinary traveling baskets, not the giant tubs in later European paintings, which the Jews took with them when on a journey. They carried their provisions in them, so that they might not be polluted by eating the food of the Gentiles; and it is also said that they sometimes carried hay in them, on which they slept at night. Thus, they kept aloof from the Gentiles in food and lodging. This will account for the contemptuous description which Juvenal (*Satire* 3.14) gives of the Jews, when he represented that their household goods consisted of a basket and hay!"¹⁰

In both of the recorded crowd-feeding events in Matthew, we see that Jesus did not provide or do merely the minimum. There was no record that the crowd had complained about needing food, but then it is likely that Jesus had perceived their need in advance. He raised the issue in this case, unlike in the feeding of the five thousand, in which the disciples raised it. These events were not flukes; He had constant, consistent charity accompanied by divine power and the authority to bless all the people in these narratives. These miracles went beyond Jesus's usual miracles, cementing in the minds of His disciples that He was indeed the Messiah.

J. Reuben Clark taught: "Now brethren, I take it that we can all glimpse something of the nature and the power of this Priesthood, which each of us has. With the possession of that power, there comes a tremendous responsibility, so great indeed, that to contemplate it seriously, is almost to crush us. Certainly, it is a humbling thing to think and try to understand and to contemplate that you and I are clothed with that Priesthood, the same Priesthood that participated in the creation of heavens and of worlds. But remember, we do not have, and so we cannot exercise, save only a fraction, a very small fraction, of the fullness of the Priesthood, and we must be most careful in our attempted use of what we have. . . . Please do not accept the explanation that is made by those who are tinctured by 'higher criticism.' Please do not accept the suggestion that the 5,000 were fed because they had taken their lunches with them."¹¹

Notes

- 1 Bruce R. McConkie, Doctrinal New Testament Commentary, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1965), 1:322.
- 2 Marvin J. Ashton, *Ye Are My Friends* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1982), 66–67.
- 3 David Hill, The Gospel of Matthew (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 243

4 D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse by Verse: The New Testament*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2006), 1:307–308.

- 5 James E. Talmage, Jesus the Christ (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News, 1916), 334.
- 6 See also Matthew 22:32; Mark 14:61–62; John 4:26; 8:58.
- 7 David Hill, The Gospel of Matthew (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 249.

8 "Discourse, 11 June 1843–A, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff," p. [45], The Joseph Smith Papers, https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-11-june-1843-a-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/4.

9 Ronald A. Rasband, "Behold! I Am a God of Miracles," April 2021 general conference, online at church ofjesuschrist.org.

- 10 James M. Freeman, Manners and Customs of the Bible (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 441.
- 11 J. Reuben Clark, in Conference Report, April 1953, 54.

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