Miracles in Apocryphal Infancy Narratives
(ca. 550–13th c.)

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Introduction

Like the Bible, many apocryphal narratives from early Christian and medieval literature included stories about miracles concerning disabilities. Just as the canonical gospels feature Jesus performing various miracles to heal disabilities, extrabiblical stories about Jesus also highlight such feats even in Jesus’ infancy. Non-canonical apocrypha, in fact, were widely popular in the medieval world, and influenced an array of literature like sermons, world histories, and poems, as well as visual arts like manuscript illuminations, wall paintings, sculptures, and church architecture. Two of the most widespread apocrypha in the Middle Ages were the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, both of which feature episodes in which the child Jesus was involved with healing disabilities.

Composed in Latin, likely in the early seventh century, Pseudo-Matthew consists of an expanded adaptation of an earlier Greek apocryphon known as the Protevangelium of James. Both recount the story of Mary’s parents, Anna and Joachim, her birth, childhood, and betrothal to Joseph, the birth of Jesus, and the holy family’s flight to Egypt. The following episode about the birth of Jesus and the withering of the doubting midwife’s hand is taken from chapter 13 of Pseudo-Matthew. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas was originally composed in the second century, probably in Greek or possibly in Syriac. This apocryphal gospel recounts various episodes from Jesus’ childhood, many presaging his later actions and teachings as an adult (as in the canonical gospels). During the Middle Ages, a Latin translation was undertaken and began to circulate paired with Pseudo-Matthew in manuscripts from the twelfth century onward (often called the pars altera [“second part”] because of this designation by the editor Constantine von Tischendorf). The following episode about Jesus’ interaction with his rabbis (Jewish teachers) is taken from chapters 6–8 of the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (chapter 31 in Tischendorf’s edition). The other passages are taken from episodes inspired by the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, from an expanded narrative including Pseudo-Matthew, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, and other additions about Jesus’ childhood in the thirteenth-century manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 11867.

All of the episodes presented here include sensational miracles, especially the healings of physical disabilities. In her discussion of canonical Gospel miracles, Sharon V. Betcher highlights “the stock feature of disablement, which always immediately signals cure as resolution,” for example, “in terms of miraculous remediation.” This view is similarly applicable to parallel representations in apocryphal gospels like Pseudo-Matthew and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, as with those presented here. Most of these accounts introduce disabilities for the very purpose of demonstrating miraculous powers—in other words, disabilities exist to be healed. One example appears in the episode in which Jesus teaches the rabbis: it concludes with Jesus giving a blessing, using the type of language that is
directly juxtaposed to that of a curse, calling for the reversal of infertility, blindness, lameness, poorness, death, and other states presented as adversities; in response, “immediately all were restored who had fallen under evil illness” (“continuo sunt omnes restituti qui sub malis deciderant infirmitatibus”). Jesus’ miracle, then, is to do away with those infirmities portrayed as “evil illness” (“malis...infirmitatibus”) —here, disabilities linked to the evil state of the world (a consequence of the biblical fall of humans into sin) that must be overcome through miracles.

The majority of these apocryphal miracles also highlight a symbolic relationship between physical disability and spiritual lack. For example, there is a clear parallel between Salome’s doubt and the subsequent withering of her hand and the story of the apostle Thomas’ doubt in John 20:24–29. The intertextuality between these stories highlights the use of disability as metaphor for spiritual impairment. Representations of physical health as allegories for spiritual health demonstrate the multilayered uses of disabilities found in both the Bible and throughout medieval Christian literature. As seen in the previous example of Jesus’ general healing of infirmities seen as “evil,” bodily health, spiritual righteousness, and miraculous healings are closely aligned.

A number of episodes in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas also pit Jesus against the Jews, creating a cast of anti-Judaism. Much of this is rooted in the theological idea of Christian supersessionism, or the belief that Christianity replaced Judaism. Such anti-Judaism is especially pronounced in the symbolism of Jesus blinding the Jews who speak against him after he curses a boy. Similarly, the idea of physical blindness is meant to symbolize spiritual immaturity, or inability to understand, in the episode with Jesus and his rabbis. Master Levi expresses his amazement at not understanding Jesus, the language of blindness is used throughout the passage, and the spiritual symbolism is further emphasized by the comment about Jesus’ healing of those afflicted with illness at the end of the episode. All of this intersects with what Edward Wheatley has discussed in relation to the trope of blindness used in medieval culture (with roots in the New Testament), especially in literature about the Jews. These episodes in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas participate in the more general trend of using blindness as a motif to express medieval Christian anxieties about Jews.

Bibliography


Now, it came to pass that after some time a proclamation was made by an edict of Caesar Augustus that everyone should hasten to their native land. This proclamation was first made by Cyrrinus, the governor of Syria, and made it necessary that Joseph go to Bethlehem with Mary, because Joseph and Mary were from the tribe of Judah and from the house and family of David.

When, therefore, Joseph and Mary were going along the road that leads to Bethlehem, Mary said to Joseph, “I see two peoples before me, one weeping and the other rejoicing.”

To which Joseph responded, saying, “Sit and hold onto your mule and do not speak unnecessary words to me.”

Then a beautiful boy appeared before them dressed in gleaming clothing and said to Joseph, “Why did you say that the words you heard about the two peoples were unnecessary? For she saw the Jewish people weeping because they have withdrawn from God, and the gentile people rejoicing because they have drawn near to the Lord, which he promised to your fathers Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. For the time has come that by the seed of Abraham a blessing shall be given to all nations.”

And when he had said these things, he ordered the mule to stand still, and instructed Mary to get down from the animal and go into a cave in which there was always darkness because, in its innermost parts, it did not have the light of day. But when Mary went in, the whole cave began to fill with great brightness; and as if the sun were in it, so did the whole cave begin to exhibit the gleaming of light; and as if it were the sixth hour of the day, so did the divine light illuminate that same cave. This light did not withdraw, neither day nor night, until Mary gave birth to a male, whom angels surrounded at birth; and when he had been born on his feet, immediately they worshipped him, saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.”

And Joseph, finding Mary with the child to whom she had given birth, said to her, “I have brought Zahel, a midwife, to you; behold, she is standing right outside of the cave, but is unable to enter because of the great brightness.” Hearing this, Mary smiled. Then Joseph said to her, “Do not smile, but take care that she inspect you, in case you need her medicine.” And Mary commanded her to enter.

When Mary allowed herself to be scrutinized, the midwife called out in a loud voice and said, “Great Lord, have mercy! Never before has it been either heard or suspected that the breasts might be full of milk, and yet this newborn makes manifest that his mother is a virgin. No stain of blood is on the child, and no pain was evident in the birth. A virgin has given birth and after giving birth she has continued to be a virgin.”

Hearing this cry, another midwife named Salome said, “Certainly I will not believe this unless indeed I verify it.” And Salome went in to Mary and said to her, “Let me examine you so that I should know if the words that Zahel declared to me are true.”

Now when Mary allowed her examination, as soon as Salome drew away her right hand from the inspection, the hand withered and she began to be most violently stricken by the pain and to cry out, weeping and saying, “Lord, you know that I have always feared you and have taken care of all the poor without the worry of payment. I have taken nothing from the widow and the orphan and I have never sent the destitute away from me empty-handed. And behold, I am made wretched because of my unbelief, because I have dared to test your virgin, who gave birth to the Light and after this birth remained a virgin.”

And while she was saying these things, a brilliant young man appeared beside her saying, “Go to the child and worship him, and touch him with your hand, and he will heal you, because this is the Savior of all who hope in him.” And quickly Salome went to him and worshipped the child and touched
Jesus Teaches the Rabbis

Iterum magister Zachyias legis doctor dixit ad Ioseph et Mariam: Date mihi puerum, et ego tradam illum magistro Levi, qui docet eum litteras et erudiat.

Tunc Ioseph et Maria blandientes Iesum duxerunt in scholas, ut doceretur litteras a sene Levi. Qui cum introisset, tacebat. Et magister Levi unam litteram dicebat ei: Responde.

Iesus autem tacebat et nihil respondebat. Unde praeceptor Levi iratus apprehendens virgam storatinam percussit eum in capite.

Iesus autem dixit ad didasculum Levi: Ut quid me percutis? In veritate scias quia ipse qui percutitur magis docet percutientem eum in capite.


Jesus Teaches the Rabbis

Again, Master Zacchaeus, a doctor of the Law, spoke to Joseph and Mary, “Give the boy to me, and I will hand him over to Master Levi, who will teach him letters and instruct him.”

Then Joseph and Mary, soothing Jesus, led him to school, so that he might be taught letters by old Levi. When he had entered, he was silent. And Master Levi said one letter to Jesus, and beginning with the first letter aleph he said to him, “Repeat.”

But Jesus was silent and responded with nothing. At that the instructor Levi was angry, and seizing a storax-tree branch, struck him on the head.

Now, Jesus said to the teacher Levi, “Why do you strike me? In truth you should know that the one who is struck teaches the one striking him more than he learns from him. For I am able to teach you what you are saying. But all these who speak and hear are blind, like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal, in which there is no sense of the things that are understood in their sound.”

And furthermore, Jesus said to Zacchaeus, “Every letter from aleph° up to tau,” is discerned by arrangement. Therefore, say first what tau is, and I will say to you what aleph is.” And again Jesus said to them, “Whoever does not know Aleph, how are they able to say Tau? Hypocrites! Say first what is Aleph, and then I will believe you when you say Beth.” And Jesus began to ask the names of each letter and said, “Let the master of the Law say what the first letter is, or why it has

the hems of the cloths in which the child was swaddled, and her hand was immediately healed. Then she went out and began to cry out and to speak about the great deeds of power that she had seen, and what she had endured, and how she had been cured, so that many believed because of her proclamation.

aleph the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet tau the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet Beth the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet
Cum autem Levi hoc audisset, obstupefactus est ad tantam dispositionem nominum litterarum.


Nulla enim paterceptio, nisi fuerit deus cum eo. Nunc ego ipse infelix tradidi me huic in derisum. Cum enim me putarem habere discipulum, inveni magistrum meum, ignorans eum.

Quid dicam? Non valeo sustinere verba pueri huic: de hoc iam municipio fugiam, quia non valeo haec intelligere. Ab infante senex victus sum, quia neque initium de quibus ipse affirmat invenire non possim nec finem. Difficile enim est initium ex se ipso reperire. Certe dico vobis, non mentior, quod ante meos oculos operatio huius pueri et initia sermonis eius et intentionis exitus nihil cum hominibus commune habere. Hic ergo nescio an magus aut deus sit; aut certe angelus dei loquitur in eo. Unde sit aut unde venerit aut quis futurus sit, nescio.

Tunc Iesus laeto vultu subridens de eo dixit cum imperio cunctis filiis Israel ostantibus et auditentibus: Fructificent infructosi et videant caeci et claudi ambulent recte et pauperes fruantur bonis et reviviscant mortui, ut redintegrato statu unusquisque reverentur et permaneat in eo ipso qui radix est vitae et dulcedinis perpetuae.

Et cum hoc dixisset infans Iesus, continuo sunt omnes restituti qui sub malis deciderant infirmatibus. Et amplius non audebant dicere ei alicquid aut audire ab eo.
Jesus Climbs a Sunbeam

Una autem die temporeimale cum sol in sua uirtute clarus radiaret extendit se radius solaris attingens a fenestra in parietem in domo Ioseph, ubi cum ludent cum Iesu contribules pueri uicinorum per domum discurrentes ascendit Iesus radium solis et positis super eum uestimentis suis sedebat quasi su-per trabem firmissimum.

Quod cum uidissent colludentes coetanei pueri opinabant se similiter posse facere. Et ascenderunt ut sederent cum Iesu ludentes exemple illius conterimur.

Iesus autem instantibus Maria et Ioseph lesiones omnium attritorum levi flatu aspirando super locum dolentem sanabat omnes et air: Spiritus ubi uult spirat et quos uult sanat et sani facti sunt. Haec omnia nunciauerunt patribus nostris.

Et factum est palam hoc uerbum in Ierusalem et in remoris finibus Judee. Et multiplicata est fama Iesu per circuitum prouiciarum. Et uenerunt ut benedicerent eum et ab eo benedicerentur patribus nostris.

Jesus Curses a Boy and Blinds the Jews

Alio tempore ambulante Iesu per villam cucurrit unus de infantibus et percussit Iesum in ulnas.

Iesus autem dixit ad eum: Sic sic perficias iter tuum. Et statim cecidit in terram et mortuus est.

Illis autem uidentibus mirabilia clamauerunt dicentes: Unde est puer iste?

When the child Jesus had said this, immediately all were restored who had fallen under evil illness. And they did not dare to say any more to him or to hear any more from him.

Jesus Curses a Boy and Blinds the Jews

Another time, when Jesus was walking through the country, one of the children ran and struck Jesus on the elbow.

Now, Jesus said to him, “This is the end of your journey.” Immediately he fell to the earth and was dead.

At that, those who saw the wonder called out, saying, “Where does this child come from?” They said to Joseph, “It is not proper
Et dixerunt ad Ioseph: Non opportet esse nobiscum nec habere talem puerrum. Ille autem abit et tulit eum.

Et dixerunt ei: Recede de isto loco et si te oportet esse nobiscum doce eum orare et non blasphemare filii autem nostri insensati.

Uocauit Ioseph Iesum et incepit eum docere Ut quid blasphemas et alieci male dicis, habitatores isti hodiernum habent super nos de loco isto.

Iesus autem dixit: Ego autem tacebo pater. Ipsius autem uideant insipientiam suam.

Et ii statim qui loquebantur adversus Iesum ceciderunt. Et deambulabant dices: Omnes sermones qui procedunt de ore eius exsecutum habent et effectum.

Et cum vidisset Ioseph quod faceret Iesus cum furore apprehandit eum per auriculam.

Iesus autem turbatus dixit ad Ioseph: Sufficient tibi uidere me non me tangere, tu autem nescis quis ego sum, quia si scires non me contestares et quomimum ego mod tecum sum, ante te factus sum.

Jesus Heals a Boy’s Foot

Post hoc ante paucos dies evolutos puer quidam in eodem loco scindebant ligna per cussitque pedem plagam horribilem faciendo, et cum uenisset turba multa ut uideret eum lamenem accurit Iesus cum ipsis et deprecati sunt eum ut leniret dolorem suum. Praestim cum pater et mater lesi non se caperent pro dolore Iesus autem mistertus eorum ait: Credite tantum et fiet quod petistis.

Cumque inalaret magister accessit ad pedem suum Iesus et blandit ad modum medici fomentantis ait: Surge sanus; in memoria potentie De sanaris.

Ipse autem sanus omnino saltum fecit et gloriam dedit item in confessione.

Cum autem udisisset turba quae facta fuerant adorauerunt Iesum et dixerunt: Vere credimus quia Deus est tu.

for him to live with us, nor for us to have such a child.”

At that, he (Joseph) went and took him, and they said to him, “Go away from this place, and if it is necessary for you to live with us, teach him to pray and not to blaspheme, for our children do not understand.”

Joseph called to Jesus and took him to teach him, “Why do you blaspheme and speak evil to others? The inhabitants in this place hate us.”

Now Jesus said, “Then I will be silent, father. But let them see their own folly.”

Immediately those who had spoken against Jesus were made blind. Walking away, they said, “All the words that go out of his mouth are followed by weight and effect.”

And when Joseph saw what Jesus had done, with anger he seized him by the ear. In an uproar, Jesus said to Joseph, “It is sufficient for you to see me, but do not touch me, for you do not know who I am; and if you knew, you might not admonish me. Although I am with you presently, I was made before you.”

Jesus Heals a Boy’s Foot

After this (before a few days went by), in the same place, a certain child was cutting wood and struck his foot, making a terrible wound. When a great crowd came and saw him wailing, Jesus ran to him along with them, and they begged him to soothe his pain.

Especially because the father and mother of the wounded child could not handle his pain, Jesus had mercy on them and said, “Only believe and what you seek will be done.”

After the master (Jesus) went to him, he breathed on his foot and caressed it, like a soothing physician, and said, “Arise whole; remember that you are healed by the power of God.”

Completely healed, he began leaping and also gave glory in confession.

When the crowd saw what had happened, they worshipped Jesus and said, “Truly we believe that you are God.”
Endnotes

1 Endnotes and translations for all of the passages here have been provided by Brandon W. Hawk. Bibliographic information for each passage is included in the following footnotes.


4 See Irina Metzler, Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment in the High Middle Ages, c.1100–1400 (Routledge, 2006); David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis, Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse (University of Michigan Press, 2001).


7 This episode is found in chapter 13 of the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew in Tischendorf and Hawk. The translation is based on the newer critical edition, Libri de nativitate Mariae: Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium, textus et commentaries, eds. Jan Gisel, Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum 9 (Brepols, 1997). The Latin text provided for comparison is from Tischendorf’s edition, although the Latin differs from the English translation presented here in details.

8 This episode is found as chapter 31 (part of the so-called pars altera, a Latin translation of the Infancy Gospel of Thomas) of the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew in Tischendorf and Hawk. The Latin text is from Tischendorf’s edition.

9 This episode is found as chapter 58 in Hawk. For this and the two following episodes, the translation is based on Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 11867, which is transcribed here with some modernizations of capitalization and punctuation.

10 This episode is found in Hawk, The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, chap. 61.