

SBL Annual Meeting Papers, November 2008

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Thaumaturgical Psychology

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Introduction [SLIDE 1*]

When John the Baptist sent to inquire whether Jesus was the one sent by God, what did he say? "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight..." (Matthew 11:4-6, RSV). Not "believe in me," and certainly not "believe (blindly) because I say so – but "believe your ears and eyes."

[Slide 2] Isn't faith "the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1)?

This passage is a challenge to us moderns – a challenge to be truly empirical. It is also a challenge to interpret a crucial but often overlooked thread of biblical theology. This paper looks at the place of the Thaumaturge¹, the "wonder worker" who cites empirical evidence *as the standard of truth and belief*. We then look at the implications for the anthropology of the relevant Bible texts.

We pose two questions: **[Slide 3]**

- 1) Are we scholarly enough to acknowledge what the text actually says?
- 2) Are we scientific enough to consider the anthropology of these texts represents an incisive understanding of the psyche of the person-as-a-whole?

* Slides are attached at the end of the paper

¹ Thaumaturge, from Greek *thaumatourgos*, *thauma* = "miracle" plus *ergon* = "work."

Along the way, the Thaumaturge may just upset our models of the way in which people constitute their most important relationships.² **[Slide 4]** Another challenge therefore: how does it happen that the essential nature of what the gospels characterize as "family" changes so radically, and does the "empiricist Jesus" have a role in that "conversion"?

If we can answer these question, the "expansion of paradigms" invited by Dr. Ellens' conclusion to our recent anthology (*Miracles*) has become an immediate possibility.

Jesus the Empiricist [Slide 5]

I have always been intrigued at Matthew's most pointed definition of the nature and work of Jesus, just quoted. It is easy, as well as traditional, to take

² To cite just one authority: In the earliest gospel (with parallels in the other gospels), "at the very beginning of his ministry Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, James and John, then Levi, all of whom respond by renouncing father, household, or occupational ties (Mark 1:16-18, 19-20; 2:13-14). Disciples leave ordinary ties because the time is extraordinary, eschatological," Osiek and Balch, p. 126. In 3:35, Jesus redefines family: "whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother." See also Mark 10:28-30, "Peter began to say to him [Jesus], 'Lo, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.'" However, Jesus is not anti-family *per se*, as we see from the commands against divorce. Osiek and Balch write that this redefinition of relatedness is a general pattern in the NT. They point out that families will be split by faith in Jesus (p. 128), but they do not address what prompts the change of worldview.

the gospels as an idealized and even magical prescription for faith. So I asked, Why this "aberration" – this foray into the empirical? The answer: Study of the entire larger context yields a surprise. Every gospel and every major writer in the NT voices the same empiricism.

Let us look at the critical texts that voice the "empirical" message – a message that just may affect the interpretation of the rest of the NT.

[Some of the texts are written out at the end of this paper.]

[Slide 6] These passages fall into two categories. In the *first* kind of statement, Jesus invites the onlookers to look for evidence. **Matthew 11:1-6** and **Luke 4:15-22** present Jesus speaking about himself, quoting or alluding to **Isaiah 61:1-2**. The Isaiah text is a list of restorative actions by which, traditionally, believers will be able to identify the Messiah. Mark approaches it differently, making it easy to overlook. For instance: after the feeding of the 5000, the disciples fail to understand. Jesus says (Mark 8:18-21):

Having *eyes do you not see*, and having *ears do you not hear*? And do you not *remember*? ... And he said to them, "*Do you not yet understand* [i.e., on the basis of what you saw and heard]?"

John's Gospel contains so much emphasis on (1) the author as eyewitness and (2) Jesus' own instruction to *be empirical* that there is not time to cite all of the instances. Here is just one verse, in the mouth of Jesus:

John 10:37-38: If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe

me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.

[Slide 7] II Peter 1:14-18 and **I John 1:1-3** present, pointedly, eye-witness accounts of the miraculous actions of Jesus. **[Slide 8]** I John deploys seven sensory words, plus "made manifest" twice, in the first three verses, all "so that you may have fellowship with... Jesus Christ."

[Slide 9] The *second* kind of text *offers proof of the disciples'* ability to do similar works. But note: I am not rehearsing the obvious, that these books contain stories of the signs and wonders delivered by Jesus and the disciples. I am speaking strictly about Jesus' *empiricism*. For example,

Mark 16:17-18: These *signs* will accompany those who believe... they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.³

Do we ever take "these signs will accompany" as a statement of *Jesus'* *epistemology*? Why promise signs, rather than simply spiritual gifts? The reader is to understand that we are *not asked to believe* in the *believer* without *signs*, *any more than we believe in Jesus* without them.

³ The text ends with the confirmation of the promise, using "signs" in a positive mode: Mark 16:20: "And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it. Amen." Mark uses "sign" and "signs" seven times – twice in chapter 16 (just cited), once positively regarding the end of the age, and four times negatively in the context of the hearers testing him hypocritically. This term is one reason the text is considered late – but it is not unknown in the main part of the gospel. The "refusal" of signs in Mark 8:12, for example, comes immediately after the feeding of the 5000. They have had an unheard of sign and still demand another.

A problem in NT scholarship now raises its head. This ending of Mark is often said to be "late" and therefore it can be "dismissed." (But how late? Most scholars place it before the end of the First Century.) In the context of Jesus the empiricist, we must accept one of two implications:

- 1) The text is late. Then: it is contemporary with John, Acts, and some of the epistles, and asserts Jesus' empiricism *over against*, or as *complement to*, statements that do not address evidence.⁴
- 2) The text is not late. It is fully consistent with Mark's concern to define a historical/empirical basis for belief— an essential element of Christian theology.

Either way, we cannot simply draw a line after Mark 16:8 and forget the rest (the confirmation of the resurrection, the promise of signs among the disciples, or the confirmation that those signs were realized, 16:20).

A variation on the second kind of statement gives evidence that the believers' works did in fact come about. The last verse of Mark (16:20) is an example. For example, Paul writes about the beginning of his Corinthian ministry: it was the power works (δύναμις, *mewj*) and the Spirit that launched it (I Corinthians 2:1-5). Since (he effectively says) it could not possibly have been the result of his words, spoken in "weakness," "fear," and "trembling," he is writing as eye-witness

⁴ For example, John 14:12: He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father. James 5:14-15: The prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

to the direct action of God in that place. Acts employs "empirical" language throughout. **[Slide 10]**

Summary. **[Slide 11]** So far, we know two things: (1) Jesus cites empirical evidence for performing the actions of the Messiah. (2) The believers are to constitute *eye-witness and also the opportunity* for eye-witness to such works. In fact, only half of the message is about the spiritual power thus evidenced. **[Slide 12]** The other half is that the onlooker is to look for evidence, *critically though not hypocritically*, and is to use his *reason* – use it radically, wherever it might lead.

OT and NT Background

With these statements in mind, I conducted a word search on "believe" throughout the canonical Bible, to discover the relationship between prescriptions for belief, specifically in Jesus or God, and the presence of wonder works. I eliminated verses that used "believe" as an ordinary word; and verses that address belief without referring to any confirmation.

An entire thread of biblical theology addresses belief in the eternal city or eternal life – but the reference point remains the works of God in the Hebrew Bible and the signs of Jesus – of the one who made those promises.⁵

⁵ The most prominent is **Hebrews 11:1, already cited**: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The OT "type" of faith is in Genesis 15:6, "And he [Abraham] believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." This verse is quoted three times in Romans 4 and in Galatians 3:6, and alluded to in Hebrews 10:38. Abraham and the other characters in the "by faith" series in Hebrews 11 were, as far as we can

[Slide 13] The result of the word study was thirty texts connecting belief specifically with the Lord's visible wonder works. In two of these verses, the reason is an eye-witness account of the works (John 19:35; 20:31, the latter in the context of the sign just given Thomas).

In an additional six texts, the prophetic word is cited. Prophecy is by definition the living, present word of the Lord. The prophet is a reliable witness and also, his words themselves are the very sign to which the hearer is to apply the prescription for belief.

Other word studies unequivocally support these conclusions.

The past tense, "believed," powerfully strengthens this conclusion. A further word study on the term "works" yields about 30 of the passages using the term specifically of the works of the Lord and of the effect they should or did have upon the believer.

The "works" passages also reinforce the above conclusion.⁶

know from the text, talking with God in person at the time. This kind of encounter is the "mother of all signs."

⁶ Other texts of singular significance round out the study. To give just one example, the prolog to the Ten Commandments (**Exodus 20:1-2**) says:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage...

... where his works are the stated reason for the covenantal relationship and the reason to obey these commandments. For another example, one of the very oldest texts of the Hebrew Bible – an offertory creed and hymn, repeated whenever Israel was presenting offerings to the Lord, is Deuteronomy 26:5-10. It is a rehearsal of God's deeds – deeds that are the reason for the entire system of offerings:

Among the "works" passages, the only condemnation is this: people are condemned for not believing when they have seen a sign, and a small number of times for not believing the word of the prophets or eyewitnesses to signs or works. They are never condemned for *not* believing when there were *no* signs or eyewitnesses to signs.⁷

This thread of empirical evidence as the criterion for belief – or as I came to see it, the steel cable – extends right from "Let there be light" (presumably to see), to "Behold, he is coming ... and every eye will see him" (in Revelation 1:7).

For an overview, let us look at "doubting" Thomas in John 20 – a passage that is almost always misinterpreted. After hearing the eye-witness testimony of the other disciples, Thomas says he himself must to see and touch Jesus' wounds or he will not believe. Jesus *affirms* his request for a sign and never rebukes him. "Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me?'" (verse 29a). In the context of the verses just cited, Jesus effectively says, have you behaved anyone would expect of you?

Then, John goes on (29b-31):

...the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me.

⁷ There is no statement that the criterion of belief is to *do or experience* wonder works, only that belief should result from having the benefit of *witnessed* wonder works.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples ... these are written that you may believe...

In other words, *I, the eyewitness am showing you the signs SO THAT you CAN believe.*

In this passage, signs as the basis of faith are promoted in four different ways: **[Slide 14]**

1. the resurrection appearance to the disciples,
2. the generous granting of Thomas' seemingly petulant request,
3. the positive acknowledgement of Thomas' belief,
4. and the blessing of belief based upon the eye-witness report of signs, written explicitly to promote the readers' belief.

There is one more finding from these word studies: stories of healing where the person believes before the healing occurs (e.g., the Centurion in Matthew 8; Luke 7) present that fact as something extraordinary. There is a trend in the latest gospel and in virtually all of the epistles to counsel believers that they do not need a *new* set of signs. However, the tone has been set by the "empirical" Jesus. The message of the gospels is, never has anyone had (or been expected to have) faith like this (faith without works)! It gives James 2:14-17, "*faith without works is dead,*" a whole new meaning. **[Slide 15]**

This way of looking at the human being impacts the model we use to understand the way we are collectively constituted. **[Slide 16]**

Biblical Anthropology [Slide 17]

I subtitled this paper, Jesus as Type and Antitype. The Bible, over all of its authors, cultures, and centuries, consistently demonstrates a very particular anthropology of which *Jesus is the type*. **[Slide 18]** The human is made to want and *need* to see and hear. That is why idolatry is such a problem, and that is why God sends a human Jesus whom people can see and hear. The whole premise of the NT is, not a concession, but a *demonstration* that that is an essential aspect of the image of God. To put it another way: the psychology of knowing and believing involves the *ability to reason*, but first of all, the *senses*. An implication is that the human being is also able to *provide* empirical observation, here, in the form of "miracle."

Jesus is also the antitype. Humans collectively are the image of God. *Jesus is foreshadowed in the creation of human being*. The implication is startling, at least to me. When Jesus cites the acts that identify the Messiah, he is not listing the properties of the Son of God. They are (in biblical anthropology) the acts of a *human being* anointed by God for a task. Apart from Jesus' resurrection body – the only truly new thing in the NT – the signs *do not* distinguish him from the human. (Henry Bernard writes that Jesus shows no consciousness of doing anything unusual in the "miracles," and that the "wonder" works are a natural aspect of human being.⁸)

⁸ Bernard, p. 82, writes: "The miracles of Christ were not miracles, in the sense of wonders, to Himself. There is no consciousness in Him that anything unusual was taking place. This makes a point of difference between Christ and all others who have claimed to work miracles." He writes further that the apostles were conscious of a power from the Father; but

Jesus' works rather function to lift the horizon of ordinary people to what their created being really is, the psychic makeup of the thaumaturge. They acknowledge the extraordinary (the signs) as the ordinary, and the ordinary (the human being) as extraordinary.

Further, this anthropology must be the dominant one; without it, the spread of the Church in Acts remains one of those happy accidents to which we used to attribute evolution.

The next slide [**Slides 19, 20**] shows just how profoundly the centrality of sensory evidence changes the view of the family of believers from the models of family to which we are accustomed. Thus also it illustrates the unexpected thaumaturgical psychology of the NT.

Conclusion

I have thus been led to one conclusion. Virtually all of the Bible scholarship on miracles – including my own contribution to our anthology on *Miracles* – has assumed a deficient anthropology. To interpret Bible texts without the point of view of its empiricist writers is to fail to understand the Bible on its own terms, and therefore, to misinterpret a significant aspect of its content.

Our challenge is whether to believe *the text -- for the purpose of interpreting the text*. This is the demand these text makes of us. Are we up to

there was no hesitation to use that power for necessary restoration. He also observes, p. 76-77: "The scientists of the present day seem to have closed their senses to one half of man's being." Henry N. Bernard, *The Mental Characteristics of the Lord Jesus Christ*. New York: Thomas Whittacker, 1888.

the paradigm shift? And what if it leads us to shift our anthropology and *also believe the makeup of the human being (as well as the Messiah) thus represented?* This is the challenge Jesus presents to John, and also to the reader, in Matthew 11. **[Slide 21]** *As thaumaturges ourselves – whether or not we acknowledge it – I believe we are up to the task.*

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**Texts that evidence the Empirical Jesus and his followers in
empirical observation**

Matthew 11:1-6: And when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me."

Mark 8 has the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus' rebuke to the disciples who have just seen and not understood. The two-stage healing of the blind man that immediately follows is analogous with the disciples; first they see for themselves, then hear from Jesus what it meant. Jesus rebukes them for not understanding what they have seen.

Luke 4:15-22: And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.¹ And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" [*w' s' i' n*; "ears"]. And all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth...

Mark 16:17-18: And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."

1 Corinthians 2:1-5: When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

II Peter 1:14-18: ... I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. And I will see to it that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the

Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

1 John 1:1-3: That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

James 5:14-15: Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Revelation 1:7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him... ⁹ **I John**, your brother, ... was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I **heard** behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches..."

Revelation 22:1 Then he **showed** me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ... ³ There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; ⁴ they shall **see** his face, and his name shall

be on their foreheads. ... ¹⁶ "**I Jesus** have sent my angel to you with this **testimony** for the churches.

Thaumaturgical Psychology

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight..." (Mat. 11:4-6, RSV).



1

Isn't It...

Hebrews 11:1: Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.



... or is it?
... and BTW, what happened to works,
God's and ours?

2

Challenges

- Are we scholarly enough to acknowledge what the text actually says – what we *hear and see there*?
- Are we scientific enough to consider whether these texts represent an incisive understanding of the person-as-a-whole?

3

Another Kind of Challenge

- In the middle of the gospels, the essential nature of family radically changes.
 - The monarchy never "succeeded" in supplanting tribal structures the way the gospel did.
- Given the psychological, religious, and economic centrality of the biological family in the cultures of the Bible, what can account for it?

4

What's That Matthew Text Doing There?

- Every gospel and every major writer in the NT voices the value of empirical evidence.
- Acknowledgements of belief without a sign cite or assume eye- and ear-witness reports in the immediate context.

5

Two Kinds of Statements:

1. Jesus' citation of evidence for his actions (examples)

- Matthew 11:1-6, "hear and see"
- Luke 4:15-22, "in your hearing"
- Mark 8:18-21, "having eyes, do you not see"
- John 10:37-38, "even though you do not believe me, believe the works..."

6

Jesus Attested by Disciple

- **2 Peter 1:14-18,**
"Since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. And I will see to it that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were *eyewitnesses* of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we *heard* this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain."

7

Jesus Attested - 2

- **1 John 1:1-3,**
"That which was from the beginning, which we have *heard*, which we have *seen with our eyes*, which we have *looked upon* and *touched with our hands*, concerning the word of life -- the life was made *manifest*, and we *saw it*, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made *manifest* to us -- that which we have *seen and heard* we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."

8

Kinds of Statements

2. Evidence as continuing basis for believers' faith and for propagation of the faith
 - Mark 16:8, "the *signs* of my believers"
 - I Cor. 2:1-5, "not in ... words of wisdom, but in *demonstration* of the Spirit and of power..."

9

And in Acts...

11 uses of "signs" in Acts, 9 "wonders" throughout Acts, including:

- **Acts 2:22,**
"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus ..., a man *attested* to you by God with *mighty works and wonders and signs* which God did through him in your midst, as *you yourselves know...*"
- **Acts 2:43,** "And fear came upon every soul; and many *wonders and signs* were done through the apostles."
- **Acts 15:12,** "And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what *signs and wonders* God had done through them among the Gentiles."

10

So far...

- Jesus invites the onlooker to use eyes and ears, plus reason
- The disciples are presented as giving empirical evidence of God's own work
- The disciples thus present ongoing opportunity for eye-witness

11

Role of the Observer

- Onlookers are to react *critically though not hypocritically*,
- Implicitly, use *reason* – use it radically, wherever it might lead – in deciding whether to believe.

12

Word Studies

- Word studies show that the criterion for belief is signs of God's works, witnessed personally by the onlooker or a credible witness.
- This pattern of thought extends from
 - "Let there be light" (presumably to see, Gen. 1:3),
 - to "Behold, he is coming ... and every eye will see him" (in Revelation 1:7).

13

"Doubting" Thomas

In John 20, signs as the basis of faith are promoted in four different ways:

1. the first resurrection appearances,
2. the generous granting of Thomas' request,
3. acknowledgement of Thomas' belief,
4. the blessing of belief based upon the eye-witness report of signs, written explicitly to promote belief.

14

Hebrews 11:1 Revisited

See no good, hear no good, speak no good!

Hebrews addresses promises made by God who *first provided signs ... Without an eye-witness somewhere in the system, no one will ever hear the good news.*

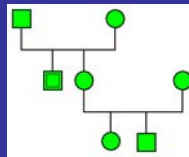


NT Empiricism: Faith without God's works is dead! It does not propagate...

15

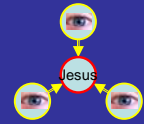
Models of Relatedness

Family Systems Concept



Lines are biological relationships → limited in time and space, even with inclusion of ancestors

Empiricist Jesus' Concept



Lines are sensory → psychological → spiritual → fictive-familial

16

Biblical Anthropology

- The human is constituted to have to see, hear, touch, reason...
- Which is...
 - The reason for idolatry
 - The reason for incarnation!
- Blind faith is out!

17

Jesus: Type and Antitype

- Bible anthropology: *Jesus is the type.* Jesus as Messiah (Isa. 61) is the supreme demonstration of *human being*.
 - Only the resurrection body distinguishes him as Other.
- *Jesus is foreshadowed in the creation of human being* – thus, antitype.

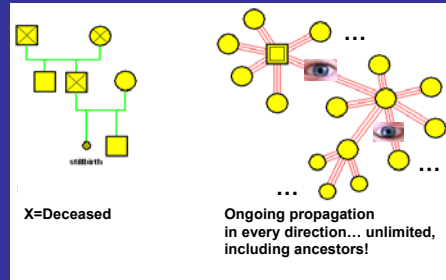
18

Jesus cites observables...

- To appeal to senses and reason
- To invite observers to be credible:
critical but not hypocritical
- To create eye-witnesses who
 - Create eye-witnesses who
 - » Create eye-witnesses who...

19

Biological vs. "Empirical" Family



20

Thaumaturges Ourselves



... paradoxically called to be Empirical.

21