

Symbolic Acts of Faith

The Bible has some stories that might raise some questions, because they don't make sense to a modern scientific mind. For example, in Gen. 30:31-43, Jacob and Laban agreed that Jacob would get all the speckled, spotted and brown sheep, and Laban all the rest. Then it says Jacob would wait until the best sheep were watering, and place wooden rods in the gutters, after he had peeled off some of the bark. The result was that those sheep then produced the colors that would belong to Jacob. They certainly don't teach that in our agricultural schools today. What are we to make of such a story?

There are other Bible stories that are somehow similar. For example:

1. Ex. 15:23-26 – The people complained that the water at Marah in the wilderness was bitter. God showed Moses a tree which he cast into the water, and the waters were made sweet.
2. Num. 5:11-31 – In a case where a husband suspected his wife of adultery, he could bring her to the priest and make a complaint against her. Her guilt was tried by making her drink the “water of jealousy”, which was just some holy water mixed with dust from the floor of the Tabernacle. This sounds very strange and unfair to us, and yet it should be remembered that muddy water, while unpleasant, is not naturally going to cause any real ill effect. The miracle was that if she was really guilty, only then would it cause her “thigh to rot and her belly to swell”. This is not at all the same as making someone drink poison, or throwing a bound person into water, to prove their innocence.
3. Num. 21:4-9 – God sent fiery serpents among the people because of their unbelieving complaints. The solution was for Moses to make a brass serpent and put it on a pole, and when anyone would look at the serpent, they would live.
4. 2 K. 2:19-22 – Some men had found a good place for a city but the water was bad and the ground barren. Elisha threw some salt into the spring, and the waters were healed. This was not only counter-intuitive, but the change was permanent.
5. 2 K. 4:38-41 – The sons of the prophets at Gilgal were being fed pottage from some wild gourds they found, which were poisonous. Elisha took some meal and threw it in the pot and then it was safe to eat.
6. 2 K. 5:1-14 – Naaman the leper was told by Elisha to wash in the Jordan seven times. Though he was initially disgusted and angry, he finally obeyed, and was healed of the leprosy.
7. 2 K. 6:1-7 – The sons of the prophets were working on a building and when cutting timber, a man lost a borrowed axe head as it slipped off the handle and into the Jordan river. Elisha threw in a stick and the axe head floated to the top and was retrieved.
8. 2 K. 13:14-19 – Elisha told Joash, king of Israel, to shoot an arrow out the window. This showed that Israel would defeat the Syrians at Aphek. Then he told him to take his arrows and smite the ground, which he did three times. Elisha was angry that he hadn't done it five or six times so he would have smitten Syria to the end, but now he would only defeat them three times.
9. Isa. 38 – Isaiah told king Hezekiah that he would die, but when Hezekiah humbly prayed for mercy, God granted him 15 more years of life. Verse 21 explains that Isaiah had told them to make a lump of figs and put it on the boil, and Hezekiah was thereby healed.
10. Lk. 8:43-48 – A woman who had had an issue of blood for twelve years came up to Jesus and touched the hem of his garment and was healed. Jesus knew that healing power had gone out of him, even though many people were crowding and touching him. He told the woman, “thy faith hath made thee whole”.
11. Lk. 17:11-19 – ten lepers were told by Jesus to go show themselves to the priests, and as they went, they were healed.
12. Jn. 9:1-7 – Jesus healed the blind man by anointing his eyes with mud from spittle, and telling him then to wash in the pool of Siloam.
13. Ac. 5:14-15 – People brought sick people into the streets so they could be healed by Peter's shadow.
14. Ac. 19:11-12 – from Paul's body, handkerchiefs or aprons were taken to the sick who could not come to him, and they were healed and delivered.

All of these stories have something in common. People did something that seemed unusual, and which would in the natural have no effect on their situation. These things really happened, but the point is they were miraculous. There is no healing virtue in salt, trees, brass on a pole, or figs. There is no genetic link between sheep drinking water in front of rods with the bark peeled, and the color of their offspring. We don't wage war by shooting an arrow out a window. Sticks can't make metal float, and the waters of Jordan really weren't any better for healing leprosy than rivers elsewhere. We would err if we thought that any of these actions in themselves literally caused the effect which followed. That is not the point. What really mattered was the faith of the person, or simple obedience to the direction of a prophet. Many people were touching Jesus' clothes, but it was the faith of the the bleeding woman that made the difference,

Many of these stories represent what we could call symbolic actions of faith, because they were done to symbolize something to follow (e.g., Jacob's sheep, or the arrows of Joash), or even a larger purpose of God (e.g., healing as a promise to God's people (Ex. 15), the serpent on the pole representing Christ on the cross (Jn. 3:14-15), or the washing of Naaman showing cleansing from sin and uncleanness. Others were simple acts of obedience, but how did Jacob, Moses, Elisha, or Jesus know to do those specific things? Somehow God showed them.

What does this mean for us? Just copying those things won't work. God doesn't work the same way all the time. It is amazing how many different ways God worked through Jesus, the apostles, Moses, and the prophets, and how seldom it was done the same way twice. If God shows you to do something in connection to a prayer or need, do it by faith. The real issue is faith. It wasn't the rods themselves that caused Laban's sheep to produce the way they did, it was Jacob's faith that God would bless him. It wasn't the mere cloth of Jesus' garment that healed, but "thy faith hath made thee whole". Salt or trees or flour cannot change the safety of water or soup, but God acted as a response to their obedient faith.

So if God shows us to do something that "doesn't make sense", we need to do it. Even then, we should realize it is not that action itself that will heal, or somehow meet the need, but it is the faith that motivates us to that obedience. Also, we should not think that it is our faith itself that heals us (like mind control or "Christian Science"), but it is our faith in GOD himself that brings healing. The bleeding woman's faith was not in his garment, but in him. He heals those who respond to him in true faith and obedience.