

# Amaze (*existamai*)

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The general meaning of *existamai* in the New Testament is "to be amazed." There are two exceptions. Since they give insight into the derivation of the word, let us look at them first.

## The Exceptions

In Mark 3:20-21, those who were with Jesus (probably not the apostles listed in vv. 16-19 who may already have been off on their mission) hear, among other things, that Jesus is attracting great crowds that are so eager they don't even bother to eat. The friends try to seize him and they say, "He is beside himself." This *King James Version* rendering has been carried over by the *Revised Standard Version* because it is close to the literal meaning of the Greek—to stand outside. In every case, the word implies a great change has taken place in someone. Here the change is viewed by Jesus' friends as detrimental. Jesus' actions constituted deviant behavior. Then, as now, deviation from the norm was looked on as something that ought to be corrected.

It is interesting to note that in a related passage (Matthew 12:23), it is the people to whom the term is applied and in the general use of the word.

In 2 Corinthians 5:13, Paul, referring back to verses 6-9 and the at-home-in-the-body-or-at-home-with-the-Lord idea, says, "If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are sane, it is for you." That is a nice play on meanings. Unfortunately, the whole of verses 6-16 translates into English in such a way as to make people think that Paul is obscure or profound, depending upon which way they misinterpret him.

## The General Use

The other uses of the word (Matthew 12:23; Mark 2:12, 5:42, 6:51; Luke 2:47, 8:56, 24:22; Acts 2:7,12, 8:9-11,13, 9:21, 10:45, 12:6) translate as "they were amazed." They refer to the responses of people to the actions of Jesus, his followers, or Simon Magnus.

There is no record that these responses made any permanent change in the people. Only one response (Mark 2:12 where the people were amazed and glorified God) showed any recognition that God was doing something by the healings. There is nothing to suggest that being amazed caused anyone to believe in and follow Jesus. On the contrary, amazement was often followed by controversy.

Consider Matthew 12:22-39 as an example. Jesus healed a man who was blind and dumb. The people were amazed (v. 23). The amazement (not the healing) attracted the Pharisees who started an argument with Jesus. This carried over to a further argument with scribes and Pharisees demanding a sign from Jesus. As usual, he refused to give a sign.

This is one of several instances in which argument feeds on amazement. Of the two, Jesus was willing to take part in argument but was not willing to encourage amazement. (See the way he responded to the amazement of the girl's parents in Luke 8:56.) He used none of the props which make for good theater. His cross was not of gold. His chalice and paten were not silver. He eschewed the priestly ornaments of his day (Matthew 23:5-8). When he rode into Jerusalem, his followers waved tree branches, not flags. His approach was consistently low key. The spectacular does not nourish faith. Jesus was not even spectacularly humble.

## Amazement Today

Amazement is a response on the level of feeling. It is a crude form of mysticism. Its articulation is "Oh wow!" and its comprehension is nil. On the spectrum of aesthetic responses, amazement is at one extreme and delight at the other. There are some prehensions which inherently exclude love. Amazement is such. It is ethically neuter, socially neutral, and psychologically intractable. It represents not an appreciation of a person, thing, or event, but a dissociation from it. We are no longer amazed by the results of Christian living. In my opinion, this is good. The shock value of true Christian living is low. Only people who have grown up in places which know nothing of Jesus are likely to be astonished by lives lived for him.

If the reports of Christian activity which appear in *The Lutheran* do not attract attention the way news accounts in tabloids at the checkout in supermarkets do, that's fine. There is nothing inherently wrong with either amazement or amusement, but neither has been an essential element in Christianity.

We have come to distinguish between the miracles of Jesus and the reactions to them. We realize that Jesus did not perform healings in order to amaze. He healed in response to human need. If the response was amazement rather than thankfulness, that says something about the religious climate within which they were performed. Our evaluation of the healings must not be patterned on the reactions of the people of Jesus' day. Most especially, we must not seek to evoke in our day the sorts of reactions which the early church reports.

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