

The Jesus of Mark: A Worker of Miracles

by Ronald W. Graham

The sermon explores the portrayal of Jesus in Mark's Gospel as a powerful worker of miracles, emphasizing his authority and the role of faith in healing.

Scripture: Mark 1:21, Mark 2:9, Mark 5:21, Mark 5:25, Mark 6:45

Topics: "Miracles Of Jesus", "Divine Authority"

Description

Ronald W. Graham delves into the portrayal of Jesus as a Worker of Miracles in Mark's Gospel, emphasizing the narrative of words and deeds that include exorcisms, healings, nature miracles, and raising from the dead. The miracles in Mark's Gospel showcase Jesus as a person of extraordinary power, compassion, and authority, evoking astonishment and praise from witnesses. These miracle stories reveal Jesus' restraint in accumulating details, his motive not solely driven by compassion but also by power and goodness, and the enigmatic nature of his actions that challenge the perception of what is possible for human beings.

Transcript

"Which is easier to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk?'" (Mark 2:9)

Introduction

As far as we can best determine, the earliest writings in what is now the New Testament are Paul's Letters. The first of them precede the Gospel of Mark by perhaps 15 years, although the traditions enshrined in Mark go back some 20 years beyond the penning of Paul's first Letters.

Paul has few citations of, but a number of allusions to, the teaching of Jesus. He holds him up as an example for the Christian. His ethic is close kin to the Galilean's. He is sure that the Christ whom the church worships is the Jesus whom the church remembers. But for all that, there must have been a felt need for a more tangible account of Jesus. Hence the Gospels. Unless Paul and the rest of us can put some content into "Jesus" in the confession, "Jesus is Lord," we do not know what we are saying or why we are saying it. Hence, I repeat, the Gospels.

Tonight we are going to isolate in Mark's Gospel the portrayal of Jesus as a Worker of Miracles. The Gospel story is a narrative of words and deeds and life and there is no strand of the early traditions about

Jesus that does not include the deeds. I am going to consider the stories as they are, for it is "as they are" that for the most part the church lives and has lived with them.

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First, I should like to say a word about the terms used. Second, we shall look at the miracles in each of their four categories: exorcisms, healings, nature miracles, and raising from the dead, summarizing some findings as we go along. Then I should like to make six concluding comments.

1. Terms and Comparisons

First, then, a word about the terms used and some comparisons between the Gospels.

In the Synoptic Gospels, the usual term for "miracle" is dynamis. It means "might," strength," authority," "a force." "a mighty work," a "powerful deed." It is used ten times in Mark and not at all in John.

The NIV renders the word "power(s)," five times; "mighty work(s)," three times; miracle," only once. The RSV translates it as "power(s)," seven times and "mighty work(s)," three times; never as "miracle." The NIV has "miracle(s)" or "miraculous powers" four times, and the TEV and NEB three times each. None of them have "mighty work(s)"; all have some feel for "power(s)."¹

In John, the parallel term is ergon, "work" or semeion, "sign," when used by Jesus; semeion when used by others.

Except in the book of Acts, the wondrous, astonishing, amazing, marvelous aspect of the deeds of Jesus is played down. The word for a wonder or a marvel is teras. In the Gospels it is found only in the expression "signs and wonders"; once in Mark, and the parallel passage in Matthew,² and once in John;³ and in every instance it is used disparagingly. All the Evangelists play down the sheerly astonishing, the merely marvelous, in the deeds of Jesus.

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The figures that I am now going to cite are practically the same for Matthew and Luke respectively as for Mark. In Mark, there are seven accounts of exorcisms (casting out of demons); in John, none. In Mark, there are 11 or 12 healings; in John, three. In Mark, either four or five nature miracles; in John, three. In Mark, perhaps one raising from the dead, the daughter of Jairus; in John, certainly one, Lazarus.

2. The Miracle Stories in Mark

Second, then, let us look at the mighty works of Jesus in their respective categories, making some summaries as we move along.

a. Exorcisms

To begin with, the exorcisms.

1) 1:21-28: The man in the Capernaum synagogue.

(No. 12: Luke 4:31-37; Matt. 7:28-29)

Jesus' first public appearance was at Capernaum, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was the Sabbath. He entered the synagogue, which was a lay institution, needing neither priest nor rabbi. As an acknowledged competent interpreter of scripture, he was invited to expound the Word of God. There is no record that Jesus ever said "thus saith the Lord." He expected his teaching to be given a serious hearing either because its truth was self-evident or because it was his word. His teaching was felt to be with power.

And there was a man there with an unclean spirit, a demon (Luke 4:33). The demon cried out to "Jesus of Nazareth," whom he calls "the Holy One of God." But Jesus cut the demon short and told him to hold his tongue and come out of the man. Which he did, convulsing the man. Whereupon the possessed man let out a loud shriek.

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The onlookers were astonished and saw this happening as a confirmation of the fact that Jesus taught with authority. And his fame spread through that region.

2) 1:32-34: A summary of exorcisms

(No. 14: Matt. 8:16-17; Luke 4:40-41)

At twilight of that same day, perhaps still at Capernaum and possibly in the house of Simon and Andrew (vv.29-31), the sick and the demon-possessed were brought to Jesus. The Sabbath was ended and so it was lawful to carry the sick to Jesus.

The demons, viewed by Mark as spiritual beings, recognized Jesus, but what they recognized him as, Mark does not say. Part of the usual technique of exorcism was to force the demon to speak, but Jesus does not allow them to do so. Jesus is no ordinary wonder-worker who must follow a prescribed procedure.⁴

Why only "many" of the demon-possessed were cured Mark does not indicate.

3) 1:39: Another generalized summary

(No. 16: Matt. 4.23-25; Luke 4:44)

This is another generalized summary: Jesus travelled all over Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and casting out demons.

4) 3:7-12: A third generalized summary

(No. 71: Matt. 12:15-21; Luke 6:17-19)

This is the third generalized summary. Jesus withdrew from the villages and towns and the controversies of the synagogue to the Lake. But the crowds followed him from all parts of Palestine inhabited by Jews. They came even from parts beyond: from east across the Jordan and from northwest, from the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon.

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5) 5:1-20: The Gerasene demoniac

(No. 106: Matt. 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39)

This mighty work took place in Gentile country somewhere east of the Lake: in the territory of the Gerasenes or the Gadarenes. The manic-depressive psychotic, as sore identify him, was probably himself a Gentile. He was a self-punishing, tomb-dwelling deranged person of prodigious strength. He ran to Jesus, did him reverence, and with considerable trepidation appealed to him, "Son of the Most High God." And Jesus cast out the demon or demons that possessed him.

Jesus did not use any formula of exorcism but he did ask the demon his name, as exorcists were accustomed to do. The answer came back that his name was "Legion," that is, there was not one demon, there were five or six thousand. Then the demon begged and begged Jesus not to send him out into the desert, the home of demons, but to let him remain among human beings where he could continue his activity. Then the unclean spirits asked Jesus for permission to enter a herd of pigs feeding on the hillside. Permission was given and the pigs rushed into the sea and were drowned.

Mark does not debate whether demons could rise to the surface and swim to safety. Nor does he raise the question of the morality of destroying one man's herd of 2,000 pigs--whether the man were Gentile or Jew--in order to . . . In order to what?

The herdsmen spread the word abroad, in town and country, and folk carne out to see the former demoniac, "clothed and in his right mind," and the sight scared the wits out of them, and so they pleaded with Jesus to leave their territory.

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The former psychotic implored Jesus that he might companion with him, but Jesus sent him home to what had not been home to him and to friends who had found it difficult to befriend him to testify to God's mercy. And thus it was that the gospel was proclaimed among people in the Decapolis, the ten Greco-Roman cities situated around Lake Galilee.⁵

6) 7:24-30: The Syrophoenician woman

(No. 116: Matt. 15:21-28)

One day Jesus was found somewhere up in the direction of Tyre and Sidon. He was travelling incognito, perhaps in exile. And a Greek woman, by nation a Syrophoenician, got to hear that he was in her vicinity and came to him and fell at his feet, entreating him to drive the demon out of her little daughter.

Jesus responded with this seemingly harsh statement: "Let us feed the children first; It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (TEV; "children" being understood to refer to the Jews, "dogs" to non-Jews).

The desperate mother, stubbornly humble, refusing to be rebuffed, was open to receive whatever help Jesus was prepared to give. "Sir," she retorted, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's leftovers" (TEV). At that, Jesus answered: "For such an answer you may go home; the demon has gone out of your daughter" (TEV).

Verse 27 has long presented difficulties, first at the point of the suggestion that the Jews must be given the bread of the gospel before it can be shared with the Gentiles, and second, the sharpness of Jesus's

response. These are attempts that have been made to tone down Jesus' seeming rudeness: (1) He spoke in half-jest, referring playfully to house dogs or puppies. (The Jerusalem Bible translates the word, *kyrania*, as "house dogs.") But that is not very funny humor. (2) He

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spoke sharply to put the mother's faith to the test. (3) His response was not intended as an insult but was a reflection of his own uncertainty: was he obliged to give to the Gentiles that which in large measure he had not been able to give to his own people? (4) His response was all the more harsh because his understanding of his own mission had a growing edge to it: it was now becoming acutely clear to him that the good news could not be confined to his own nation.⁶

This pagan woman's faith--or her confidence, or desperate hope, or stubborn refusal to be put off, or humble openness--found reward in her little girl's restoration to a sound mind in a healthy body: "she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone."

7) 9:14-29: The epileptic boy

(No. 126; Matt. 17:14-21; Luke 9:37-43a)

A father had a son who had a "dumb spirit" (RSV), that is, an evil spirit that had "robbed him of speech" (NIV). He took the boy to the disciples of Jesus, but they were not able to drive out the demon. Then he brought the lad to Jesus, describing his pitiful condition, which he had had from childhood, and said: "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us" (NIV).

Jesus responded, not in terms of his motivation, compassion, but in terms of his power released through another person's faith. "Everything is possible for the person who has faith" (TEV). To which the anxious father said: "I do have faith, but not enough. Help me have more!" (TEV). Whereupon Jesus cast out the unclean spirit, forbade it to ever enter the boy again, and set the youngster on his feet, well.

At that the disciples asked why they could not cast out demons to which Jesus replied: "Only prayer can drive this kind out; nothing else can" (TEV).

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Summary

What is it that catches your eye in these stories of exorcisms?

1) Whether Jesus was convinced of the reality of the spirit world, angels and demons, we do not know. Many Jews lived with good and evil spirits impinging on their lives, but not all. In a statement to the Jerusalem Sanhedrin Paul said that the Sadducees denied, while the Pharisees affirmed, the existence of angels and spirits, presumably evil spirits.⁷ The Jesus of John is not presented as driving out a single demon. In Mark, it is the smaller number of cures of human ills that is recounted as exorcisms. Perhaps on occasion an insightful Jesus found it necessary to begin, not with reality as such but with a given individual's perception of reality.⁸

2) There was no shingle swinging outside his carpenter's shop announcing that he was an exorcist on the side. He is never depicted as taking the initiative in effecting these miracles: the man in the synagogue cried out; people are brought to Jesus; the Gerasene demoniac ran to him; the Syrophenician mother

came to him on behalf of her daughter; the father brought the epileptic lad to Jesus.

3) Some recognition of Jesus as a person of unusual power and personality is made by demons and a demon-possessed man, but Jesus is not comfortable with this. I take it that it is a fully personal response that most delights his spirit.

4) To be sure, those who came to Jesus, or appealed to him, or were brought to him had some expectation of a significant response, though faith as such is not underscored. Where faith is noted, it is a mother's for the sake of her daughter and a father's on behalf of his son.

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5) Jesus is portrayed as a person of extraordinary power. He impressed people as being a dynamic person, a man of authority. And it is not to be wondered at that Mark says they were astonished.

6) Jesus was not the only exorcist at work in Judaism in his time. There is a scene in Mark in which it is said accusingly that Jesus is able to cast out demons only because he is in league with the prince of demons. To that he said, with devastating logic, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"

Matthew and Luke have Jesus driving home the point with a second question: "If I drive out demons by [the prince of demons], by whom do your people drive them out?" (NIV).⁹

b. Healings

Now, the healings.

1) 1:29-31: Peter's mother-in-law, a fever

(No. 13: Matt. 8:14-15; Luke 4:38-39)

This took place on the Sabbath, probably in Capernaum. Simon Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever. Jesus was informed of this. "He took her by the hand, and helped her to her feet. The fever left her and she waited upon them" (NEB).

2) 1:32-34: The sick healed at evening

(No. 14: Matt. 8:16-17; Luke 4:40-41)

These twilight healings took place the same day, or rather, by Jewish reckoning, at the beginning of the new day. All the sick were brought to Jesus and many of them were healed.

More than that Mark does not say. Why "all" the sick were brought but only "many" were healed he does not indicate.

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3) 1:40-45: The leper.

(No. 45: Matt. 8:1-4; Luke 5:12-16)

In some undesignated place a leper came to Jesus and said, "If you want to, you can make me clean" (TEV). Jesus was moved with compassion and reached out and touched this untouchable and said: "I do

want to. Be clean!" (TEV). And straightway the leprosy left him and he was healed.

Jesus thereupon dismissed the man with instructions that had an edge to them: "Be sure you say nothing to anybody. Go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering laid down by Moses for your cleansing; that will certify the cure" (NEB).

But the healed man could not contain himself; blabbed it all out in public so that crowds gathered about Jesus. He retreated to "the country," but still they came.

4) 2:1-12: The Paralytic

(No. 52: Matt. M-8; Luke 5:17-26)

This healing took place in Capernaum, either in Peter's house or in Jesus' own house. It is packed so tight that when four friends brought a paralytic on a mat, they could not get through the front door. It was probably a one-room dwelling with an outside stairway to the roof, so the four men carry the sick man up on to the roof, tear up part of the roof, and let down the paralyzed man.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said: "My son, your sins are forgiven."

Healing and teaching with authority might cause astonishment but they would not necessarily arouse hostility, but this aggressive word of forgiveness could be, and was, regarded as an invasion of God's prerogative.

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The statement by Jesus implies not that he has forgiven the man but that he knows that God has forgiven him. However, it is understood by some critical scribes to mean that Jesus claims to be an intermediary between God and the paralytic. According to Judaism, forgiveness depends on true repentance, and by repentance is meant: "sorrow for sin, open acknowledgement of it, and resolute turning away from it, together with such restitution as may be possible. Where these conditions are present, God forgives sin unflinchingly without the need of any human mediation or absolution."¹⁰ But Jesus pronounced this man's forgiveness without any evidence of repentance.

The sensitive and perceptive Jesus, reading his critics' body language, put this question to them: "Is it easier to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, pick up your mat, and walk?'" (TEV).

Obviously if all that is involved is saying, it is easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven," than to say, "Get up and walk." So to begin at the level of the questioners' perceptions, Jesus said to the paralytic: "Get up, pick up your mat, and go home" (TEV). And the people "were all astounded and praised God saying, 'We have never seen anything like this'" (JB).

5) 3:1-6: The man with a withered hand

(No. 70: Matt. 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11)

This was another example of Sabbath activity by Jesus. He went to synagogue and there was a man there who had a "shrivelled" hand (NIV). And there were those present who watched Jesus with a jaundiced eye, ready to lay a charge against him should he infringe a Sabbath law. He goes on the offensive and

poses this question: "What does our Law allow

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us to do on the Sabbath? To help, or to harm? To save a man's life, or to destroy it?" (TEV).

But for the critics of Jesus, that was not the question. The Law of the Sabbath is divine decree; it is clear enough; and the question is obedience or disobedience. But to Jesus the first question is: Is God active in our lives for good, or is he not? Does God seek to heal and therefore save, or does God not heal and therefore destroy?

Jesus looked around at those who took issue with him, angry and sorry at the same time, because their hostility kept them from judging the case on its own merits. So he said to the man with the "crippled" hand (TEV), "Stretch out your hand." And the fellow did; and his hand was well again.

Whereupon the Pharisees--and perhaps in synagogue that day there were present some fanatical Pharisees--took counsel with some of those who were close to Herod Antipas, how they might destroy Jesus.

There is Markan irony in this story: Who is right? The one who would heal on the Sabbath or those who, on the same Sabbath, would plot the death of the healer?¹¹

6) 3:7-12: A generalized summary

(cf. "Exorcisms," No. 4)

This is a generalized summary. People came to Jesus from all over, and of some importance in the tradition of the healings effected is the fact that Jesus touched the afflicted.

7) 5:25-34: The woman with a hemorrhage

(No. 107: Matt. 9:20-22; Luke 8:43-48)

This incident took place when Jesus was on his way to the home of Jairus, a ruler of a synagogue, on the northwest or northern shore of

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Lake Galilee. A woman had had a hemorrhage for twelve years. She had suffered on two counts: one because of the disorder, the other because she had used up all her resources going unsuccessfully from doctor to doctor, getting worse rather than better in the process. She had heard reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak in the hope that if only she could touch his clothes she would get well. She did, and the source of her bleeding dried up.

Jesus perceived that power had gone out from him and turned and looked around at the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples told him that in view of the number of people pressing upon him that was a dumb question. But Jesus kept on looking around until the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came to him, trembling with fear, fell at his feet, and told him the whole truth.

To that Jesus said: "My daughter, your faith has restored you to health; go in peace and be free from your complaint" (JB).

8) 6:53-56: Healings at Gennesaret

(No. 114: Matt. 14:34-36)

This is a generalized statement of healings that took place south of Capernaum. Wherever Jesus went people were magnetically drawn to him, bringing sick neighbors and relatives on mats laying them out in the busy marketplaces in the belief that if only they could touch the tassel on his cloak, they would be healed. "And as many as touched it were made well."

9) 7:31-37: The deaf mute

(No. 117: Matt. 15:29-31)

This healing took place somewhere in the region surrounding Lake Galilee. In or between the region of the Decapolis is how Mark puts it,

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but we do not know the territorial boundaries of these ten Greco-Roman cities. The man, who was a deaf mute, was brought to Jesus. Jesus took him aside privately, then put his fingers into his ears, spat, touched his tongue, and said, "Ephphatha" ("Be opened"), and the man spoke clearly, the embarrassing, inhibiting impediment gone.

There is almost something secular about this story. "The use of saliva, the groan uttered by the healer, and the healer's word in the original language, are all marks of ancient miracle tales."¹²

Jesus told the onlookers and hearers not to say anything about this, "but the more he insisted, the more widely they published it" (JB). "Astonished beyond measure" is how Mark says they reacted to the healing.

10) 8:22-26: The blind man

This cure took place at Bethsaida, which may have been located on the east side of the Jordan north of the point where it opens into Lake Galilee. Some people brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch him. Jesus took him by the hand and led him outside the village. Then he spat on the man's eyes and placed his hands on him and asked him "Can you see anything?"

The man looked up and said, "Yes, I can see people, but they look like trees walking around" (TEV). Jesus placed his hands on the man's eyes a second time. "This time the man looked hard, his eyesight came back, and he saw everything clearly" (TEV).

Whereupon Jesus sent him home, ordering him not to re-enter the village or, perhaps, not to tell anyone in the village (NEB).

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11) 10:46-52: Blind Bartimaeus

(No. 193: Matt. 20:29-34; Luke 18:35-43)

The last of the healings took place in Jericho, at the beginning of the journey--the last journey--up to Jerusalem. His disciples and a great crowd of people were accompanying him. There was sitting by the

side of the road out of Jericho a blind man, by name Bartimaeus, and when he heard that the center of all those goings on was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out, "Jesus! Son of David! Have mercy on me!" (TEV).

Some of the bystanders scolded him and told him to keep quiet, but he only shouted the more loudly, "Son of David, have pity on me" (JB). "Jesus stood quite still and said, 'Call him here.' So they called the blind man, saying, 'It's all right now, get up, he's calling you!' At this he threw off his coat, jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. 'What do you want me to do for you?' he asked him. The blind man answered, 'Oh, Master, let me see again!' (Phillips).

"Go on your way then," responded Jesus; "your faith has healed you."

Immediately the man's sight returned and his way became the way of Jesus: he followed him along the road.

Summary

What is it that invites your attention in these stories of healings?

1) Once again, Jesus is never portrayed as taking the initiative. Others inform him of Peter's mother's fever; the leper came to him; the four friends carried the paralytic to him; the woman with a hemorrhage

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touched him; the blind man at Bethsaida and the deaf mute in one of the ten Cities were brought to him; blind Bartimaeus of Jericho called out to him. He was no promoter, busy advertising himself.

2) Those who cried out to Jesus for help had some hope in his power; those who carried others to him were anxiously expectant; those who laid their sick in the marketplace thought there was magic in the mere touch of the tassel of his cloak; but only of two--the woman with the hemorrhage and blind Bartimaeus--does Jesus say, "Your faith has restored your health."

On the other hand, Mark does say that Jesus stood in awe at the unbelief that shuts out the grace of God: "He could do no mighty work there [meaning Nazareth?], except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief" (6:5-6).

3) Jesus' power was not used for himself. It was used with the interests of others at heart. One can sense in these stories the longings, the fears, the despair, the hope of a whole people who had little or no access to medicine, and amongst whom disease was constantly present in every form. Jesus was concerned for people, especially the simplest and neediest folk of the Galilean countryside, and it was thus that he found a way to their hearts.

4) The wondrous healings have something in common with accounts of other such miracles in the ancient world: the saliva, the healer's groan, the word uttered in the original language, but there was also much that was different: the interest in the Good News, of which the healings are but one expression; the demand for faith in God; Jesus' human compassion; and his fundamental conviction that in the totality of

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our existence God is for us, not against us, active for our good, seeking to heal and restore and therefore save.

c. Nature miracles

Third, the nature miracles.

1) 4:35-41: Calming the storm

(No. 105: Matt. 8:18, 23-27; Luke 8:22-25)

Jesus and his disciples, or some of them, were going by boat across Lake Galilee. It suddenly "began to blow a gale and the waves were breaking into the boat so that it was almost swamped. But [Jesus] was in the stern, his head on the cushion, asleep. [The disciples] awoke him and said to him, 'Master, do you not care? We are going down!'" (JB).

Jesus awoke and rebuked the wind, telling the waves to be still. "The wind dropped and there was a dead calm" (NEB).

And he said to the disciples, "Why are you such cowards? Have you no faith even now?' They were awestruck and said to one another, 'Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him'" (NEB).

2) 6:30-44: Feeding the 5,000

(No. 112: Matt. 14:13-21; Luke 9:10-17)

The "apostles" (disciples) and Jesus crossed Galilee by boat to get some rest from the demands of the crowds, but they were observed and people followed around the shore on foot. They made better time than he. When Jesus arrived where the people were, "he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd": "a nation without a national leader, . . . a Maccabean host with no Judas Maccabaeus."¹³

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Then Jesus began to teach them.

When it grew late, the disciples came to Jesus with the suggestion that he dismiss the people so that they might go to villages and farms to buy food. Jesus' response was to ask them to give the people something to eat. They asked if they might go and buy "two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" (A denarius was the wage a day laborer would earn. Nothing is said about where the money would come from. Apparently the intention was to give, not sell, the bread.)

Then Jesus instructed them to find out how many loaves could be secured then and there. "Five, and two fish" was the answer, after searching.

Then the people were asked to sit on the grass in orderly fashion, in groups of hundreds and fifties. Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, broke the bread and had it distributed, then divided the fish. All ate and were filled. Twelve baskets full of scraps were gathered up.

Five thousand people were fed that day.

(In 8:1-10 there is the account of the feeding of 4,000. If Matthew and Luke used Mark, both turn to the account of the feeding of the 5,000 [Matt. 14:13-21; Luke 9:10-17], but only Matthew uses the second Markan feeding [15:32-39].

(The chief differences between the first and second Markan accounts are: 5,000 as against 4,000; five loaves and two fish as against seven loaves and a few small fish; and twelve baskets full as compared to seven.)

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3) 6:45-52: Walking on water

(No. 113: Matt. 14:22-33)

This miracle takes place after the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus withdrew into the hills that run down to the Lake to pray. Some time between three and six in the morning, looking down on the Lake, he saw that the disciples, who had set out for Bethsaida by boat, were straining at the oars. He came to them, walking on the sea, making to pass them by. The disciples thought it was a ghost and were terrified. Jesus said, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." And then he got in the boat with them and the wind dropped.

Why Jesus wished to pass by the distressed disciples or was on the point of doing so is problematic. Some think it was to test their faith; others, to show that he was master of the wind and the waves.

Mark has three comments on this miracle: the disciples were "utterly and completely dumbfounded" (JB); they had been oblivious to the meaning of the feeding of the 5,000; and the reason for their lack of comprehension was the fact that their hearts were hardened.

The Evangelist does not say how he thinks their hearts became hardened, nor does he suggest how hardened hearts can be "unhardened." If they were insensitive and lacking in insight, what would be the use of performing a miracle? For the person who expects nothing, nothing comes to pass.

4) 11:12-14: The cursing of the fig tree

(No. 199: Matt. 21:18-19)

Jesus and some of his followers were going into Jerusalem from Bethany when Jesus got hungry. (Bethany is a mile and a half east of Jerusalem, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Orientals of that time

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ate little for breakfast.) In the distance, he saw a fig tree in leaf and went to it to see if it had any fruit. (Fig trees bore fruit ten months in the year around Lake Galilee; in Jerusalem, only in the summer.) If whatever happened took place at Passover, then this was not the season for figs--not in Jerusalem.

Jesus found leaves but no fruit. Mark says "it was not the season for figs"--an obvious reason for there being no fruit on the tree.

So Jesus cursed the tree into fruitlessness--and Mark concludes with: "And his disciples heard him say this" (JB).

Summary

What is it that arouses your notice in these stories of nature miracles?

- 1) None of these miracles were performed in Jesus' own behalf.
- 2) In each instance, what he did was evoked by other people.
- 3) Every one bears testimony to his power.
- 4) In one account, the disciples are taken to task for unbelief, in another, for being hard hearted.
- 5) Condemning the fig tree to lifelong barrenness for not bearing fruit out of season is the only curse miracle attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. It strikes us as vindictive and unwarranted punishment and therefore out of character. Perhaps what we have here is a parable about a barren fig tree, found subsequently in Luke 13:6-9, turned into a "miracle" that symbolizes the rejection of either Israel or the priesthood. In Luke (19:41-44) it is replaced by Jesus' weeping over the city and predicting its destruction.

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d. Raising from the dead

- 1) 5:21-24, 35-43. Jairus' daughter

(No. 107: Matt. 9:18-19, 23-25; Luke 8:40-42, 49-56)

In the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as effecting three raisings from the dead: in John, Lazarus; in Luke, the son of the widow of Nain; and in each of the first three Gospels, the daughter of Jairus.

There is some question as to whether Mark means for this to be understood as a raising from the dead or a healing, since Jesus says to the mourners, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep" (NIV).

In the Old Testament and elsewhere "sleep" is often a synonym for death. In the New Testament, early Christians looked upon death as a temporary sleep in hope of the resurrection. If Jesus used "asleep" as a synonym for death, he must have meant something like, 'She is not dead, not really; she only appears to be dead.'

The incident took place on the shores of Galilee. Jairus, a ruler of the local synagogue, came to Jesus on behalf of his twelve-year old daughter, who was at the point of death, pleading for him to come and place his hands on her so that she would get well and live. Jesus set out in response, followed by a crowd.

On the way, messengers came with word that the girl was dead, and saying that there was no need for the Teacher to trouble himself any further. (There is a touch of Markan irony in that: they do not realize the depth of the Teacher's compassion or his power to act when everything seems lost.¹⁴) But Jesus said to the president of the synagogue, "Do not be afraid; only have faith" (NEB).

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Then he took with him Peter and James and his brother John and went to the house, put the professional wailers out of the house, took in with him the father and mother and (probably) the three disciples, took the youngster by the hand, and said, "Talitha, koum," which means, "Little girl! Get up, I tell you!" (TEV). And she got up and started walking around.

Those who saw it were overcome with astonishment. "But Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell anyone, and said, 'Give her something to eat'" (TEV).

Summary

What is it that awakens your mind in this story of a raising?

- 1) Again, Jesus moves at the bidding of another.
- 2) Once more, he is antithetical to the publicizing of his miracle-working.
- 3) As before, what is contrasted with faith is fear.
- 4) Yet again, whether this was a healing or a raising, a father's concern for his daughter, his expectation of Jesus, and his faith in the active goodness of God play a part in the little girl's being set on her feet and sent on her way.

Conclusion

There are many teasing questions that these miracle stories raise and many fascinating comments that may be made. I must draw some conclusions within narrow limits.

- 1) These miracle stories show an extraordinary restraint in the accumulation of any kind of detail. Emphasis sometimes is laid, as

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might be expected, on the amazed reaction of the bystanders. But this emphasis is almost never reinforced by the addition of details that would heighten the miraculous impression.

- 2) To our surprise, compassion is infrequently designated as Jesus' motive for action. He is said to have stretched out his hand and touched the leper out of a sense of pity (1:41); twice it is written that he had compassion on the crowds in general (6:34; 8:2); once he is appealed to on the basis of his compassionate nature but he responds not in terms of pity but of power (9:22-23). Mark allows for pity, but not as the primary motive in the majority of miraculous incidents.

- 3) It might be that Jesus performed miraculous deeds in order to acquire fame, popularity, and authority but Mark does not share that reading of things. The deeds evoked astonishment but they are never presented as being performed for the sake of this reaction.

- 4) As with the teaching in the parables, so with the miracles, the meaning was not immediately apparent. The restored and the observer were expected to reflect and perceive; and even to the disciples, says Mark, the feeding of the 5,000 was an enigma (6:52).

- 5) One of Mark's emphases is that it is the glory of God, not that of the wonder worker, which is the consequence of the mighty deeds of Jesus. That is in keeping with the accounts of the miraculous deeds of Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and others in the Old Testament. It is summed up in the claim by the Jesus of Luke: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."¹⁵ C. S. Lewis contends (in *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*) that the Christian works with two basic assumptions, neither of which should be subsumed under the other: one, the data offered by our senses

recur in

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regular patterns, and miracle, therefore, has to be viewed against the normal stability of nature, and two, Christianity begins with the conviction that there is some reality beyond nature.

6) Five of Jesus' healing miracles are cures of the deaf, the dumb (7:31-37), the blind (8:22-26; 10:46-52), and the lame (2:1-12; 3:1-6). But these were without precedent in his own culture, either in the Old Testament or in subsequent Jewish writings.¹⁶ One explanation we are faced with is that Jesus was demonstrating the possibility of overcoming those constraints and limitations which we instinctively feel stand as intractable and inexplicable barriers in the way of our attaining a better life and a fairer world.

Jesus' teaching has retained its power because . . . it contains an invitation to undertake what normally seems to lie on the far side of what is possible for human beings. It challenges us to do the impossible. The same is . . . true of [his] mighty works . . . [Mark's Jesus goes] beyond the limits of the possible, [he pushes] back to a significant degree the constraints of the impossible.¹⁷

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ronald-w-graham/the-jesus-of-mark-a-worker-of-miracles/>

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