

THE THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MARKAN ACCOUNT OF MIRACLES

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This paper combines both an exegetical and philosophical approach to the treatment of miracles in the Markan gospel. Using key insights developed by biblical scholars bearing on the problem of Mark's treatment of miracles as a basis, I conclude that for the author of Mark, miracles are effects, and as such, signs and symbols of what occurs in the moral and spiritual order. I argue that Mark connects miracles with faith in Jesus, a faith qualified through a grasp of the proper exercise of human power in the kingdom of God. The last section of the paper explores the ontological conditions for the possibility of miracles as they are portrayed in this gospel; there I argue that the best candidate for a theory that squares with Mark's understanding of miracle is a different one from that found in the contemporary philosophical literature on miracles.

Most treatments of miracles are either exegetical or philosophical. In this work I will try to bring the two approaches together, beginning with a description and analysis of what was thought about miracles at a key juncture within the Christian tradition, namely that of the Markan gospel. I will not start, therefore, by offering a definition of the miraculous and a close analysis of this definition, as standard philosophical treatments of the issue are wont to do.¹ No doubt such treatments can be helpful in their own right. Yet in *beginning* with a *definition* of the miraculous, one runs the risk of defining it in such a way that it is consonant with the modern world view, but quite at odds with the way it was conceived of at earlier points in the Christian tradition. Consequently it is easy to miss insights into the problem that might be supplied by those with a different set of presuppositions than our own.

In the first part of this paper, I will provide an overview of some recent biblical scholarship bearing on the question of miracles in Mark.² This preliminary sketch will ground my own analysis of how miracles are portrayed in the Markan gospel. Using the results of the first part of the paper as a basis, in the second part of the paper I will develop both the theological and philosophical implications of the Markan understanding of miracle. I hope to show that for the author of Mark, miracles are effects, and as such, signs and symbols of what occurs in the moral and spiritual order. Miracles are connected with faith in Jesus, which is in turn linked with the onset of understanding the nature of the correct exercise of human power in the kingdom of God. Furthermore, if we



reflect upon the ontological conditions for the possibility of miracles as portrayed in this gospel, we will see that they imply a grasp of miracles quite at odds with the one found in much of the contemporary philosophical literature.

Many of the conclusions of the literature surveyed in the first part, for instance, regarding Markan priority and the uniqueness of the gospel genre, are widely shared by mainstream Biblical scholars, although these conclusions have often been contested by a minority of scholars. I have tried to be as thorough as possible in dealing with differing points of view and contested issues in the endnotes. While for the most part I find myself in agreement with the consensus of New Testament scholars regarding issues such as the reliability of Mark as a historical source, my central point in the first section does not depend crucially on one's acceptance of such a conclusion. It is enough to recognize that Mark's intent is principally a theological one.

Mark's Understanding of the Miraculous

The consensus of the majority of biblical scholars is that Mark is the earliest of the four canonical gospels.³ Most also agree that the gospel narrative was neither meant to provide us with a historically accurate account of Jesus' life, nor to provide us with a biographical picture of him.⁴ Rather, the way in which the story is told, betraying a strong inattention to chronological and geographical detail,⁵ suggests that the author's main purpose was to give us a theological exposition of the significance of Jesus' life. What determines the order in which discrete events⁶ are related is not so much what may have been the actual chronology of the events themselves, but the theological significance evoked by the arrangement of the material in a certain way. Thus the picture which Mark provides us of Jesus and the events surrounding Jesus' life is one that is already itself *theologically* informed.⁷ Since this gospel contains about twenty-one separate references to miracles, it makes sense to look here in order to find one of the church's earliest attempts to come to terms with the question of the miraculous and to situate its place within the Christian faith.⁸

One of the most puzzling features of the gospel tradition, in particular that of Mark, is that which, following the foundational work of W. Wrede, has been termed "the Messianic Secret."⁹ The term refers to a secrecy motif found in the gospel, wherein Jesus is portrayed as enjoining secrecy as to his person and work. The issue is of particular import in regard to the question of the miraculous and its relation to Jesus, since Jesus is often portrayed as commanding the demons to keep silent (1:25, 34; 3:12) as well as those who have witnessed miracles (1:43f; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26). Whereas previous critics had attempted to explain these commands to silence in terms of Jesus' own concern that others estimate the nature of his messiahship correctly, Wrede located the origin of the secrecy motif *not* in Jesus' own actions and intentions, but rather, in theological accretions to the traditions with which Mark was working. These traditions, Wrede argued, were the result of the community's

attempt to reconcile the primitive Christian belief that Jesus became the Messiah at his Resurrection with the growing conviction that Jesus' earthly life had been messianic as well.¹⁰ As such, the secrecy motif could not be understood as reflecting the actual order of events, but rather, reflected the theology of the early church: the work of Christ during his earthly career, viz., his teaching, preaching, and miracles, could only be understood in light of the resurrection. The key to the secrecy motif, according to Wrede, could be found in Mark 9:9, immediately after the transfiguration scene: "And as they were coming down the mountain, he [Jesus] charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of man should have risen from the dead."¹¹ The secrecy motifs were intended to underline the idea that Christ's messianic status could only be understood correctly in light of the resurrection; thus it was only to be kept secret for a short while, but after the resurrection it could be proclaimed openly.

While many of Wrede's conclusions are under dispute, most critics agree that he was correct in pointing out that the secret is a literary device intended to make a theological point.¹² Since this literary device is employed by Mark in his presentation of the miracles of Christ, we may conclude that the point that Mark hoped to make in using the device concerns the proper understanding of the miracles of Christ as well as the issue of his messianic status. Here I will limit myself to reporting some of the more important corrections to Wrede's views, which in their turn brought with them a deepened understanding of Mark's message and theology.

An important emendation to Wrede's view is that of Percy;¹³ like Wrede, he stresses Easter as the key revelatory moment: before the resurrection, the nature of Christ's person and work is to be kept secret, but afterwards these can become public. And like Wrede he also accounts for the secrecy charges as the result of the meeting of two different traditions, albeit the traditions he has in mind are different ones. Contra Wrede, Percy denied the existence of a non-messianic tradition in Mark's gospel. Rather, the tradition which stressed Christ's earthly career as messianic came into conflict with the one that stressed the importance of the cross; consequently Mark's theology should be interpreted as very similar to the Pauline one found in 1 Cor. 2:8; 2 Cor. 13:4; and Phil. 2:7ff stressing the kenotic character of Jesus' earthly life, that is, before the resurrection Jesus' life was one of lowliness and humility.¹⁴

By far the most appealing and sophisticated analysis of the meaning of the secret is offered by H. Conzelmann,¹⁵ who argues that the secret is the means by which Mark controls the christological implications of his narrative. Like Percy, Conzelmann notes that the problem for Mark was precisely the messianic character of the units of tradition with which he was working. How does one work with these, while at the same time pointing to the decisive significance of the cross? Mark's solution was the literary device of the secret, which was meant to underscore the theme that Christ's person and work, and therefore the meaning of discipleship, could only be understood in the context of both the failure of the cross and the glory of resurrection. And this means that the miracles, belong-

ing as they did within Christ's earthly career, could only be properly grasped in light of these. The same can be said of Christ's teachings and parables, which even for the disciples remained dark sayings until later.¹⁶ Although Mark gathers most of the teaching in parables in chapter 4, he pictures the disciples as misunderstanding the teachings of Jesus regarding his person and work throughout. For instance, at 8:29, the point which many consider the watershed of this gospel, Peter correctly confesses to Jesus, "You are the Christ." But immediately afterwards he betrays his lack of insight into the meaning of his own confession when he refuses to accept the first of Jesus' passion predictions. Here too, the link between the miracles and the christological question has been emphasized by Mark. Right before this juncture the disciples report popular opinions of Jesus' identity: he is John the Baptist, Elijah, or a prophet, and these correspond exactly to the popular views expressed in 6:14, themselves occasioned by Jesus' miracles.¹⁷

The same lack of understanding on the part of the disciples is again portrayed at 9:30ff and 10:33ff, after the second and third passion predictions. Mark highlights the existential nature of this misunderstanding as one having to do with *power* by immediately portraying the disciples as wrangling over who was greatest after the second passion prediction, and similarly concerned with their positions in partaking of Christ's glory after the third.¹⁸ Because at these points in the story the disciples had yet no actual experience of Jesus' suffering and of Easter, they could not possibly understand Jesus' teachings.

Most importantly, Conzelmann points out that for Mark Christ's messianic character is not simply hidden until after the resurrection, but *remains* a mystery; its mysterious character is a fundamental feature of the preaching of the church. For those who are outside the church, Christ's messianic character, involving as it does the cross and resurrection, continues to be a scandal. Thus the mystery of Christ's person and work can only be grasped in faith, that is, in the actual following of Christ in the fellowship of the church.¹⁹ The secrecy charges, as well as the disciples' inability to understand, are Mark's way of stressing that while Christ's earthly career had indeed been messianic, its nature could only properly be understood in light of the passion, the true nature of which could only be understood through faith. Mark's emphasis on the passion of Jesus is underscored by the sheer amount of material that he devotes to it—over one half of the material is concerned with the last week of his life. It is not surprising, then, that this gospel has been called "a passion narrative with an extended introduction."²⁰

From this we may conclude that the secrecy charges serve to underscore the mystery behind the power that manifested itself during Jesus' public career: its decisive character and overpowering authority stem from the self-emptying that Jesus undergoes for the sake of humanity at the cross. Hence the importance of the disciples' misunderstandings of the passion predictions, and the portrayal of their immediate result as a mistaken quest for power by the disciples: the disciples do not yet understand the true nature of Christ's authority over nature and the principalities and powers because they have failed to grasp its intrinsic connection

to the overpowering love that gives itself up completely on the cross. They can marvel at the manifestation of Christ's authority as expressed in the teaching and miracles only in an all too human way, and this results in their grasping for power and competing with one another.

The injunctions to silence in Mark's gospel with respect to the miracles and Christ's messianic character, along with Mark's stress on a *theologia crucis*, are Mark's way of controlling a Christology which understands Christ's messiahship, and hence the nature of discipleship, sheerly in terms of power. This kind of Christology was no doubt expressed in some of the units of tradition with which Mark was working; his stress on the secret was his way of incorporating messianic units of tradition into his gospel while controlling their christological implications. Hence, while Mark acknowledges Jesus' wonder working powers, he sets them off center stage and puts them in the context of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection.²¹ The Christology which Mark seeks to control in his gospel is what has been generally termed a θεῖος ἀνὴρ, or divine man Christology.²² It has a good deal of similarities with the Christology which Paul opposes in 2nd Corinthians,²³ which viewed Jesus mainly as a wonder worker and which, moreover, understood the role of the Christian community primarily in terms of the power to perform miracles which had been handed down to it.

As H. J. Ebeling pointed out, Mark's gospel was primarily to be understood kerygmatically, that is, as having to do with the preaching of the early church.²⁴ This means that it functioned primarily neither theoretically nor apologetically, but rather, encouraged acceptance of the gospel as lived interiority, that is, its primary aim was to proclaim the gospel in such a way that it could be appropriated existentially. This existential appropriation of the gospel obviously involved more than assent to theoretical truths; it meant that the believer was to put her whole life at the disposal of the risen Lord. In order to do this, however, she had to become a follower, and in order to become such, she needed a picture of the Lord whom she was to follow.²⁵ Mark's view on miracles, therefore, belonging within this kerygmatic paradigm, has to be understood as having primarily to do with how the believer should understand miracles in the context of her journey in following the risen Lord.

As noted above, Mark's problem was in making sense of traditions having to do with Jesus' power: what was its proper understanding, especially in light of the pressing question of discipleship? Did discipleship mean imitating Jesus the wonder worker? Symptomatic of this type of faith in Jesus-as-wonder worker were the ideas that divine power revealed itself in the miracles of Jesus, and that belief in this gospel entitled the bearer access to that power.²⁶ Not only were miracles portrayed as the principle reason for faith in Jesus, but they also could serve as certification as to the genuine character of a disciple's spiritual career: in second Corinthians we find references to missionaries who thought of themselves in the grand tradition of wonder workers, reaching back from Moses at Pharaoh's court to Jesus, and who came equipped with letters of recommendation (2 Cor. 3:1).²⁷ These letters contained records of the many wonders wrought by the missionaries and

certified by other churches; the missionaries also hoped to get similar kinds of letters from Corinth. All of this conformed to the pattern of Hellenistic Jewish propaganda, and carried with it a view whose central christological conviction was that of Jesus as a manifest epiphany: he is the bearer of divine power, and it is precisely in this power that his divinity is recognized. Here the scandal of the cross has been completely by-passed or covered over, and it was precisely this fact to which Paul took offense. Parallel to Paul's preaching of Christ crucified is his understanding of genuine discipleship. Its labors are not likely to yield ease, but more often bring hardship and ignominy: witness Paul's catalogue of afflictions in 2 Cor. 11:23ff.

The view of Jesus as a *theios aner* can also be found in a source or sources for Mark and John, from which the canonical evangelists draw their stories of Jesus' miracles.²⁸ A careful look at miracles in John allows us to pinpoint characteristic elements of the theology inherent in his source. Here the miracles are understood as evidence for the divinity of Jesus; for instance John 20:30-31, which is conjectured to be the ending of the miracles source used by John, reads "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God."²⁹ This primitive kind of theology was not let to stand unchallenged: for instance, we can see how the evangelist countered this tendency in his source material at 4:48, where a story which portrays a miracle (the healing of an official's son) as the direct cause of belief is prefaced by Jesus' admonition "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." A similar kind of editorial critique of his own miracles' source can be found all throughout Mark, one that is much more focused in direction: the miracles of Jesus can only be properly understood in the light of faith, and moreover, the object of faith is the mystery revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Mark's redaction of the material provides several clues as to how the miracles are to be understood.³⁰ For instance, the miracles are by no means spectacles through which others can be spurred to faith.³¹ Mark is careful to point out that they do not awaken faith, but rather consternation and amazement (1:27, 4:41, 3:5-6, 5:15-17, 5:42, 6:2), and Jesus is even accused of being in league with Satan (3:22). On the other hand, Mark often makes the point that healing is the result of faith—either that of those who are healed, (5:34) or that of those close to them (2:5ff, 5:36ff, and especially 9:24ff.).³² Hence, while the units of tradition dealing with miracles were problematic for Mark, Mark does not eliminate them but rather carefully circumscribes them with a context through which they can be properly interpreted. This can most clearly be seen in Mark's handling of Jesus' appearance in Nazareth in the pericope 6:1-6; Mark accentuates the people's unbelief and offense at Jesus, and tells us that he could do no mighty work there. Jesus' ability to heal is thus made directly dependent upon the attitude that the people take towards him. This is further illustrated by the increased difficulty with which Jesus performs miracles as his passion nears (chapters 6-10). As a number of commentators have noted, while miracles are performed easily in chapters 1-5,

later miracles “require elaborate preparation (7:33; 8:23), sighs and groans (7:34; 9:19), prayer (9:29), and occasionally a second try at it (8:24-25).”³³ The difficulty is symptomatic of the faithlessness of the disciples and others around him such as the Pharisees; when faithlessness has reached its acme, i.e., when Jesus is betrayed and denied even by those closest to him, no miracle can occur at all.³⁴ The connection between faith and miracles is also clearly accentuated in the story about the paralytic (2:5) and in the story of Jairus’ daughter (5:36), where healing is linked with faith; the point is made directly in the story of the woman with a flow of blood, where Jesus tells the woman that it is her faith that has made her well (5:34).

For Mark, miracles do play a role in the Christian faith, but they are neither evidence for its truth, nor signs of arbitrary power.³⁵ The faith which is required for a miracle to take place is not merely faith in the power of Jesus. This is accentuated by Mark through his portrayal of the miracles of Jesus as the occasion of questions as to the origin (*πόθεν*) and nature (*τίς*) of Christ’s power (Mk. 6:2). These questions do not necessarily result in the right answer, as in the Beelzebul controversy (Mk. 3:20-27), where Jesus is outrightly suspected of being in league with the devil. The fact that the tradition at 6:3-5a ties Jesus’ lowly origins with his rejection is also noteworthy: the underlying assumption of those who reject him is that if power is to come from God, it must be glorious and splendid. That Jesus is a mere carpenter or joiner,³⁶ that he is so familiar and common that even his family is well known, proves to these people that Jesus’ power and authority cannot be of God. In this way Mark points out that those who do not affirm the lowliness of Jesus also reject Jesus; like Paul in 2 Cor. 11: 4, he would affirm that they preach a different Christ. Faith in Jesus’ power must be qualified by the fact that Mark’s Christology is dominated by the passion; simple minded faith in Jesus as a *theios aner* is vitiated by Mark’s portrayal of Jesus as the servant of all, a view of Christ very similar to the Pauline view expressed in 2 Cor. 13:4.

It should be pointed out that the principle thrust of such an understanding of Mark’s gospel does not depend on whether in fact there was a uniform concept of a divine man in the ancient world. The point is that Mark’s gospel is an attempt to come to terms with the view of Jesus as a marvelous wonder worker. As such, even a more conservative view of the Markan gospel, one that views it simply as a corrective to a theology of glory, has much the same theological thrust as the idea put forth by many Biblical scholars that Mark seeks to control a divine-man Christology.

The stress on the significance of the passion for Mark’s overall understanding of miracle can be seen, in its broadest outlines, in Mark’s structuring of the materials at his disposal into the overall unity of his gospel. If we focus on the introduction to the passion narrative, we see that it is mostly made up of a cycle of miracle stories capped by the story of the transfiguration (9:2ff), itself embedded between the first and second of the three passion predictions (8:31, 9:31, 10:32ff). Hence, the transfiguration scene functions not only as the capstone of the cycle of miracles—

here the glory of Jesus is presented as a manifest epiphany—, but also serves to inaugurate the passion. The epiphany is qualified by Jesus' admonition to the disciples at 9:9 not to tell anyone of what they had seen on the mountain "until the Son of Man should have risen from the dead." Jesus' admonition, then, serves to point forward to the passion, and hence underscores once more the double purpose of the transfiguration scene as both capstone and inaugurative moment. Moreover, the earlier miracles are linked to the transfiguration and Jesus' admonition through the device of the secret. This careful structuring of the traditions, in which Jesus' glory is unveiled at the transfiguration, which itself points to the cross, allows Mark to comment upon the nature of Jesus' power, his authority over demons and the powers of death and decay: his power is intrinsically connected to the self-emptying which Jesus undergoes at the cross. Mark highlights this in a most striking way through the centurion's confession at the moment of Jesus' death, where for the first time a human being declares Jesus to be the Son of God. Preceding the confession is Mark's report of the temple veil being torn in two, symbolic of the revelation of the secret.³⁷ Only at the moment of Jesus' utmost powerlessness is the mystery of his power over all of nature, the principalities and powers, revealed.

If in Mark, miracles are a result of faith, they are not the result of just any kind of faith. Rather, they are the result of understanding the real source of Jesus' power. Genuine faith recognizes the value of that love which empties itself of all power for the sake of others, and which in so doing establishes the true meaning of love and unleashes its effects. Even if words such as "your faith has made you well" in 5:34 are not attributable to Mark himself, but were found in Mark's miracle's source which already included the technical jargon of faith healers,³⁸ it is significant that Mark includes them. And yet these sayings such as "All things are possible to him who believes" (9:23), do not stand unqualified; as shown above, their meaning is deepened by the direction and focus of the gospel as a whole.

Theological Implications

The theme of faith preceding a healing, so frequently attested to in Mark's gospel, shows that for Mark the occurrence and recognition of a miracle already presupposes a shift in perception, that is, miracles presuppose the way of perceiving and relating to the world that comes with faith. Hence, we can say that for Mark miracles are a sign, that is, an effect of what has occurred and what is occurring in the moral and spiritual order. This theme—so similar to that of the "faith that moves mountains" which must have been a common one in the church at Corinth as well (1 Cor. 13:2; cf. Mark 11:22), receives strong ethical qualification in Mark. We do not have here to do with the naive extolling of that kind of enthusiasm which believes that a miracle will occur, i.e., a faith that is concentrated simply on a miracle's future occurrence. The faith of which Mark speaks is deflected from the miracle itself, and projected into both the ethical and spiritual realms. Faith is faith in Jesus, who teaches the way of the king-

dom of God, and it is in following Jesus that one learns the kind of attitude and behavior fitting for such a kingdom.

As noted by Crossan, the deeper issues concerning the kingdom have to do with how "human power exercise[s] its rule, and how, in contrast, . . . divine power exercise[s] its rule."³⁹ Mark teaches that when divine power is allowed to exercise its rule, that is, when human power is exercised in accordance with the laws of God, miracles occur. What Mark considers the correct exercise of human power is presented in 8:27-10:45 and paradigmatically in the actions of Jesus; for example, at 10:42, Jesus tells the disciples: "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." This is the third, and fullest of Jesus' teachings on discipleship in this complex; it is, however, already foreshadowed at earlier points in Mark's gospel. This is particularly true of the story of the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30), which in turn receives its full interpretation here. As Rhoads notes, this woman "diminishes herself by being willing to be identified as a little scavenger dog, down under the table, eating some of the little children's crumbs—in order to get her daughter freed. In so doing, the Syrophenician woman anticipates Jesus' teaching about the greatness of being least."⁴⁰ The faith of the woman is clearly linked with her implicit understanding of the kingdom of God—she is willing to be least on behalf of another—which is in turn linked with the freeing of her daughter from the demon. The miracles, then, are an effect of the inauguration of the kingdom of God, and as such they proceed in accordance with certain laws. Here, however—unlike the modern day understanding of efficient causality—these laws are not blind to an ultimate purpose, but are clearly subordinated to the final destiny of the human being.

On the whole, there are two sets of laws in the New Testament universe: those of life and death. Disease, the decay and corruption of the body—these are merely symbols of a much deeper malady: isolation, lovelessness and alienation. The miracles of Jesus, which are, for the most part, exorcisms and healings, are symbols as well—they are signs that a new order is at hand and has been welcomed; in Jesus, the breach that separates human beings from one another and from God is overcome. It is significant that the first miracles in the Markan gospel occur soon after Jesus proclamation at 1:15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."⁴¹ The section between 1:21-3:35 contains five miracles, one exorcism and four healings. Jesus' parables concerning the kingdom and the gospel in chapter 4 are followed by the healing of the Gerasene demoniac, the healing of the hemorrhaging woman, and the healing of Jairus' daughter; the parable on defilement in 7:14-15, which has to do not only with all foods being clean, but by implication, all peoples being clean, is followed by the healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter, as well as the healing of the deaf man in the Decapolis. Miracles, then, are portrayed as follow-

ing Jesus' teachings. And while they also function to proclaim the kingdom, they only occur where faith in Jesus and his gospel has taken root. In both cases, that of the exorcism and the healings, physical states of affairs are effects, and as such, signs and symbols of spiritual states. Yet while I have argued that for Mark, miracles occur when some understanding of the kingdom of God is achieved, it is important to note that for the most part, whatever grasp of its nature Markan characters achieve is only partial, and must be so, for the inauguration of the kingdom is only completed in Jesus' death and resurrection.⁴²

This is confirmed by Mark's presentation of the miracles of 4-8, especially the two sea miracles and the two feedings, which parallel Mark's treatment of the parables: neither are understood by the disciples.⁴³ The disciples do not understand, yet to them "has been given the secret (*μυστήριον*) of the kingdom of God" (4:11). What kind of mystery can be given, even while it is not yet fully grasped? Mark has in mind the mystery of Jesus, a mystery which cannot be fully appropriated by the disciples until the death and the resurrection. Nevertheless the process of understanding has begun in the decision to follow Jesus, and it is this inauguration that is sufficient for the breaking in of the kingdom of God and the miracles that are attendant upon it. The momentous significance of the apostle's decision to follow Jesus should not be overlooked. However insightful they may otherwise be, the disciples have put their lives at Jesus' disposal. Peter, for instance, exclaims: "Lo, we have left everything and followed you" (Mk. 10:28).

Mark shows that Jesus' work in joining together that which has been separated is accomplished through the mystery of the passion: he must suffer and die in order to heal the breach. The significance of this mystery is not something that can be unveiled or uncovered through intellectual effort; it is not a puzzle that can be solved through strenuous thinking. As such, it cannot be grasped and dominated by the intellect. Rather, the kind of understanding that is required can be attained only through the wisdom that comes with experience. However, for Mark this wisdom and experience is of a very particular kind, namely it is the kind of wisdom that can be gained only through following Jesus. Thus understanding for Mark primarily has to do with an existential attitude taken with respect to the person of Jesus: everything depends upon the willingness to follow him, and it is only in the following that understanding is achieved.

This is a very peculiar account of what constitutes understanding, one quite at odds with the account of it bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment. Understanding has for us come to mean something that is primarily achieved by the individual through his or her rational faculties, and it is a project that, in a significant sense, is a solitary one. While it is true that learning in even the most hard-core of the sciences such as physics or chemistry involves an intersubjective context—one involving teachers, the shared history of the discipline that shaped current hypotheses and states of investigation, discussion with peers etc.—one can still engage in this type of rationality without having to commit oneself to another particular individual. Because reason, whose principle

distinguishing mark is its universality, shapes the domain of this kind of discourse, it does not matter which person or persons serve as teachers or conversation partners so long as they satisfy criteria respecting competence in their field. Because of their dependence on rational procedures, intersubjective discourse in these fields has a distinctively impersonal character to it. One of the primary differences between the account of understanding which we have in Mark and the contemporary grasp of it is that for Mark understanding not only occurs with the other, it is also directed towards him or her: one comes to an understanding of oneself in understanding Jesus, and one understands Jesus in imitating his relationship to others. Hence what it means to understand is not so much rooted in rational procedures as it is in the interpersonal and relational character of human existence itself. To learn how to love, and hence how to understand, involves, for Mark, following the one who knows how to love perfectly. And following Jesus not only involves a commitment to him, it also involves a commitment to the way in which Jesus relates to others. Implicit in this narrative framework of what it means to understand is the conviction that love is not something that can be learned alone, that we learn to love in being loved, and that we learn to love perfectly in imitating the one who loves perfectly. Let us recapitulate our conclusions thus far: the miracle, for Mark, is the effect of a shift in perception, a deepening of understanding. But understanding for Mark is something that occurs in the context of a being with the other—in particular, it occurs in the context of becoming a follower of the crucified and risen Lord.

The idea that a miracle is the effect of a shift in perception implies that a condition of the occurrence of a miracle is change in the way a person perceives the world when s/he has learned how to love in accordance with the example of Jesus. A related way of understanding miracles was put forth by Jerome (d. 420), who wrote that “a fleshy miracle takes place to testify to (*probetur*) a spiritual one, even though it is the same power that drives out the evils of both body and soul.”⁴⁴ Jerome understands the change in a person’s disposition as a miracle, no doubt because he believes it cannot occur without God’s grace. We can understand the way he conceives of miracles in two ways: a) either God’s power directly produces both the spiritual and the physical effects or b) through God’s grace, a person changes her disposition and begins to learn how to love; this change in disposition in turn has an effect on the way things turn out in the physical world. The latter view suggests that the natural world itself is structured in such a way that people’s moral and spiritual dispositions are linked with whether or not a miracle occurs. On this view, it is inherent in the structure of nature to serve God’s purposes for the spiritual development of humanity. In other words, it suggests a relationship of mental causes to physical effects that are related in a lawlike manner; it is this view which I would like to explore here. In the next section I will discuss some of the different models available in order for us to understand this relationship.

Philosophical Implications

The exegetical discussion above shows that, for Mark, miracles are not inexplicable disruptions of the regularities of nature,⁴⁵ but are rather the accompanying effects of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.⁴⁶ This kingdom is portrayed paradigmatically in the actions of Jesus, who gives "his life as a ransom for many." This characterization reaches its culmination in the cross and serves to show how power is exercised in the kingdom of God; as such, it has a strong ethical component. In God's kingdom power is exercised in accordance with the following principles: 1) one must be willing to deny oneself and give up one's life in order to follow in the steps of the one who has given his life for many, (8:34ff); 2) one must be last and the servant of all (9:35, 10:42ff). Mark teaches that when human power is exercised in accordance with these principles, miracles occur.⁴⁷ There is, then, a strong correlation between the way that human power is exercised and the regularities of nature; more specifically, the regularities of nature are not independent of the way that human power is exercised. The human state of alienation, the product of the attempt to lord power over others, has as its correlate sickness, death, and decay. On the other hand, the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, which brings with it a different set of principles regarding how human power is to be exercised, reverses the process of sickness and death and brings with it health and healing.⁴⁸ This means that for Mark, the regularities of phenomenal nature are not only ordered to an ethico-teleological goal, they are clearly subordinate to spiritual laws.

If this reading is correct, this means that the grasp of miracles often presented in the contemporary philosophical literature is not well suited to Mark's understanding of them. Swinburne, for instance, defines a miracle as "an event of an extraordinary kind, brought about by a god, and of religious significance."⁴⁹ Later on he explains that events of extraordinary kinds can be either fortuitous yet unlikely coincidences which occur in accordance with natural laws, or violations of natural laws.⁵⁰ R. Larmer defines a miracle as an "unusual and religiously significant event beyond the power of nature to produce and caused by an agent who transcends nature."⁵¹ In these definitions, nature is thought of in terms of a system of interrelations within which certain events are or are not possible; the things in nature have limited powers and interact with one another in certain characteristic ways. A miracle is an interference in the nature system by an agent that is in some way not bound by the regularities of that system, and which moreover, can produce effects on that system. According to Larmer's definition, the nature system is a closed one. On the other hand, we can conclude from the discussion above that the nature system is not a closed one for Mark; as Moule put it, it "includes the 'transcendent' within its regularity and its interlocking order."⁵²

In order to explain the difference between an open and closed nature system more fully, I will use the typology developed by Moule. According to Moule, there are four possible positions which a person may take regarding miracles and their explanations, each of which involves a particular understanding of the nature system. These four

positions are divisible into two broader categories. In the first category is the position of the thoroughgoing naturalist. She holds to the belief that only the phenomena are real: if they are ordered in accordance with laws, there simply can be no intrusions or breaks in their interconnections; here we speak of a nature system that is completely closed.⁵³ Given this presupposition, only two options are open to her when confronted with a report of a violation of a law of nature: if she takes the report seriously, then she concludes that she needs to revise her previous understanding of the laws of nature so as to include the possibility of such an event. Otherwise the naturalist can conclude that the report was simply due to a mistake, or that it was the result of ignorance and superstition. It is, in fact, the firm acceptance of this presupposition that allowed Hume to argue the way that he did concerning the negative probability that miracle reports are true.

In the second broad category we can situate those who believe that there is another order of reality behind that of the phenomena. Moule subdivides this category into three groups. In the first group belong those who believe in the consistency and regularity of a material realm, but who admit that there may be capricious interruptions from a realm outside. As Moule notes, such an attitude can result in nothing less than a kind of paganism, in which blind fate is believed to be, to some extent at least, the arbiter of the destiny of human beings. Insofar as these interruptions are understood as capricious, they deny systematization or the possibility of being fathomed. It should be noted that this position is very different from that of contemporary science, which no longer holds that natural laws are mechanistic and deterministic, but are, rather, probabilistic. The latter position need not consider many anomalies as violations or interruptions, but rather as very improbable events.⁵⁴

Those that believe in two separate realms, each behaving in accordance with the laws appropriate to each, belong to a second group. Roughly speaking, this position can be summarized as follows: sometimes there are divine interventions in the natural order, but for the most part the two orders are separate: each order can be understood as operating as if it were a self-contained system. A theist might point out his or her belief that nature is not self-contained because it depends on God's preserving power. But no appeal to God's preserving activity needs to be made in order to understand how the laws ordering phenomenal nature function; the hypothesis of God's preserving power really does no work in illuminating, for instance, the rate at which an object will fall to the ground. For the most part, nature is understood as behaving in accordance with its own intrinsic and uniform regularities through which all parts of nature are relatable to one another. This view of nature is supported by the theological claim that God creates, and that henceforth the things in nature work in accordance with the causal powers God granted them. In this scheme, of course, the supernatural order takes precedence over the natural in the sense that it can interfere in the latter, but not vice versa. However, for the most part, the phenomenal world can be understood in its own terms, that is, in terms of uniformities which govern the behavior of all that passes within it, without hav-

ing to invoke the supernatural for its intelligibility, and it is in this sense that we can think of the natural order as a closed system. There are, of course, those rare occasions in which something momentous takes place, that is, a miracle, which is understood in terms of the purposes of God, and here we must appeal to the supernatural to make sense of the event. But for the most part, although the world and all that passes within it can be divided into sacred and profane spheres, most of it falls in the latter category, and as such is fully intelligible in terms of natural law.

It is in this second group that Swinburne belongs; although there are many others who fit into this group, I will focus on his views because they have been so clearly developed. This way of understanding miracles is the most serious contender to the view which I will discuss below, and which I believe is the correct one. According to Swinburne, miracles are violations that are non repeatable counter instances of laws based on statistical evidence. An event E is a violation of formula for natural law L when "we cannot replace L by a more successful law allowing us to predict E as well as other phenomena supporting L. For any modified formula which allowed us to predict E would allow us to predict similar events in similar circumstances and hence, *ex hypothesi*, we have good reason to believe, would give false predictions."⁵⁵ However, for such a violation to count as a miracle it must also have been produced by a God for religious purposes, that is, the event must be of religious significance.⁵⁶

Although the fit is awkward, Swinburne's position is yet compatible with the view we find in the gospel of Mark. As noted above, Swinburne's stance shares its view of nature with modern science in key respects—for the most part, nature behaves in accordance with its own uniform regularities and can be understood as operating as if it were a self-contained system. Yet as the creator and sustainer of the world, God has ultimate power over the natural regularities that God has established and can interrupt them. Hence the possibility exists that the laws of nature will be broken by an intentional divine act in those cases that God deems it necessary. Now, according to Mark, miracles are linked with faith in Jesus, which is in turn linked with a kind of moral learning. If we attempt to understand Mark in terms of Swinburne's view, this would mean that when the right sort of moral learning has taken place, if necessary God interferes in the nature system in order to produce an effect different from what nature would have produced, had she been left to her own devices, i.e., when a miracle occurs the regularities of nature are suspended.

However, one of the most significant problems with Swinburne's view is the following. As I have noted above, most theists will insist that all the normal processes of nature are somehow rooted in God's immanent preserving power and that there is an important sense in which divine causality is involved in them. When a miracle occurs, God in some way interferes with nature in order to produce a result at odds with what would have occurred had nature followed its normal course. The problem is that on this scheme God's actions must be understood as limiting and interfering with one another, i.e., God's activity of preserving nature,

along with its manifold causal powers, would be interrupted by God's intervention in the world. According to Swinburne, God has created the world in such a way that things behave in accordance with certain characteristic powers. Insofar as God preserves the world, he preserves the things that are in it along with their powers. In a very significant sense, God's sustaining activity is constitutive of a thing, *x*, along with its manifold powers, insofar as it is a necessary condition of *x* and its powers remaining in existence. This means, however, that when God interferes with *x* in order to perform a miracle, he interferes with his own sustaining power insofar as this sustaining power is constitutive of *x* and its manifold powers. God would thus be contradicting God's own actions. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the nineteenth century theologian so often called the father of modern Protestantism, had already called attention to an analogous type of problem when he argued for the unification of the doctrine of creation with that of preservation: if God's two activities were distinguishable from one another "each in limiting the other would exclude it; and thus the world would certainly remain entirely dependent upon God but irregularly, and on divine activities which mutually restrict each other."⁵⁷ In this century, Paul Tillich (1886-1965) provided a similar argument, this time against a Swinburne type understanding of the miraculous: "Miracles cannot be interpreted in terms of a supernatural interference in natural processes. If such an interpretation were true, the manifestation of the ground of being would destroy the structure of being; God would be split with himself. . . ." ⁵⁸ A Swinburne-like understanding of miracle constitutes what Tillich characterizes as the destruction of the structure of being by the ground of being, since God's activity of sustaining a thing along with its manifold powers would have to be annulled, however temporarily, by God in order for God to interfere in the natural order. In such a picture God's activities must be understood as at odds with one another; this, however, offends against intuitions concerning God's infinite wisdom and power. How much more elegant would be an understanding of God's relation to the world in which a single, eternal, divine activity is posited that constitutes a single order of which the experiential world is part! It is to such an understanding of the God-world relation that I now turn.

Moule catalogues a third group in this second category: the position espoused by those in this group seems to me to be the most congenial to the view we find in the gospel of Mark. Here the two systems, the realms of nature and of the divine do not form two separate orders—the natural and the supernatural—which sometimes interact, but rather one order, of which the phenomenal realm is a part.⁵⁹ In order to clarify what I mean by this, let me first explain what I understand by a law: given an antecedent, composed of certain conditions *a*, *b*, *c*, and so forth, it universally follows either that the consequent, composed of a particular effect, let us call it *z*, will occur or that it probably will occur. When nature is understood as a closed system, the conditions in the antecedent must be part of the phenomenal realm, that is, they must be part of what is in some way given to the senses.⁶⁰ What occurs at one point in time in nature is in principle relatable in a lawlike way to what occurs at another

er point in time; past conditions determine future effects. Roughly speaking, this is the way that modern science understands natural law.⁶¹ On a Swinburne-like view, when a miracle does occur, what would otherwise be a connection between antecedent and consequent that holds uniformly does not hold in virtue of an interference from the supernatural realm. On the other hand, to say that a system “includes the ‘transcendent’ within its regularity and interlocking order” is in part to say that the conditions in the antecedent do not all belong to the physical realm, i.e., what happens in the spiritual realm is a condition of what happens in the physical world. For our purposes, the most important distinguishing marks between the physical and spiritual realms are two: in the physical realm things exist in space and interact with one another through it, and further, what occurs prior in time determines, at least probabilistically, what will occur later. On the other hand the realm of spirit is not only a realm of freedom in which the past need not determine the future (not even probabilistically), it is also a dimension in which the outer—what occurs in the spatio-temporal world—need not determine the inner self. One’s faith or one’s decision to forgive are not determined by brain states that are themselves determined by past incidents in the spatio-temporal world. On the other hand, examples of spiritual conditions affecting what occurs in the spatio-temporal order might be, for instance, that a person has learned how to forgive another and in this way has freed herself of an enormous psychic burden; another may be the degree of a person’s faith. This latter condition is certainly one that appears throughout the gospel of Mark (for instance, at 11:23 Jesus tells Peter: “Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you”).

On this understanding, miracles are not irruptions and irregularities in the natural order, but rather, their occurrence can be fully integrated into one coherent system: they are what occurs when the moral and spiritual orders have been set aright. In this picture what we understand by natural laws today, laws which govern a world in which death is the final end of every creature, do not have the universality commonly ascribed to them.⁶² They may be a subset of a much more universal law, one which governs the relationship between moral states and the way that states of affairs appear in the phenomenal plane. In other words, death, sickness, and decay may be what occurs when love is blocked; on the other hand when love is unleashed, so are its effects. If humans are used to living in a state of alienation and separation, and if these kinds of interrelations among persons carry their consequences into the phenomenal realm in accordance with a certain lawlike regularity, the consequences, too, will appear normal. Yet if the initial conditions are altered such that persons begin to learn how to love in accordance with the example of Jesus, this too may carry with it a different set of characteristic consequences. In these cases, because persons are so used to the results of their past behavior, and because the world in which they live is one in which the kingdom of God has not fully taken hold, the effects

of learning how to love will seem rare and wonderful. In short, it will seem as if the lawlike regularity of nature to which they were accustomed was broken, when in fact what occurred was that a new set of conditions, a new way of being in the world and relating to others was introduced, and that these new conditions had their characteristic effects in the phenomenal plane. A miracle, then, would be a manifestation of the fact that the breach between persons is well on its way to being healed. This way of looking at the matter provides a philosophical underpinning to the theological view that nature was affected as a result of the fall and that furthermore, not only the human spirit, but nature, too, is healed through the in-breaking of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ. It also allows us to make sense of the strong connection in Mark's gospel between Jesus' command over nature and the self-emptying which he undergoes at the cross: it is precisely Jesus' overpowering love which is the source of his power over the physical world.

Given this account, miracles are not inexplicable and do not lie outside the purview of a law governed system. Rather both what appears to be the normal course of events, as well as the miraculous, are governed by moral and spiritual laws. Hence a miracle is not an interference by God in the workings of phenomenal nature, which otherwise forms a self-contained and closed system. In other words, God does not act directly as an efficient cause upon a system, altering what would otherwise be its normal course. Rather, phenomenal nature, that is, what appears, is connected in certain lawlike ways with what occurs in the spiritual or noumenal order. God, then, does not in each case interfere from outside, but everything is governed in accordance with certain laws which have to do with the nature of love and its characteristic effects when it is present, and, on the other hand, the characteristic effects of its absence. God's laws permeate the whole of what is.

It is curious how many theologians have correctly grasped the profound significance of the spiritual and existential revolution signaled by the advent of Jesus, but have not been willing to follow their existential commitments with ontological ones. For instance, while Bultmann does an excellent job of detailing the existential issues which wonder or miracle presents,⁶³ he steers away from any understanding of miracle in which past experience is really contradicted. This is because, presumably, he too quickly concedes that "we judge assertions which cannot be accommodated to this conception [the rule of law] as fantasies,"⁶⁴ that is, he fully accepts the idea of the nature system as a closed one. This leads him to ignore the significance of "the material or physical substratum,"⁶⁵ a key concern of the miracle stories.⁶⁶ Yet the significance of this substratum for the Christian faith should not be ignored: it is in and through it that we live and have our earthly being. If the natural world is to be thought of as directed to the spiritual goal of salvation, it cannot also be conceived as working only in accordance with its own immanent laws, themselves not directed towards any ultimate goal. The order of physical nature must be subordinate to the goal of salvation—and this means that the physical order is not autonomous, that what occurs here must be dependent on what God ordains for humans qua spiritual beings. It

must certainly have been this kind of reasoning which lay behind the Markan willingness to embrace miracles: with the advent of Jesus comes salvation and a new way of being in the world. How could nature fail to be touched by the onset of the kingdom?

The above discussion has shown that although a Swinburne-type philosophical analysis of miracles (Moule's second group in category two) might not be logically incompatible with Mark's theology of miracles, it is awkward and unwieldy compared to the philosophy of miracle we find in Moule's third group in this category, which flows much more naturally from the understanding of miracle Mark presents. In particular, the idea that states of the physical world are dependent on moral dispositions and attitudes is very well suited to Mark's theology of faith as a condition of miracles. I have also argued that the idea of an all-inclusive interlocking system governing the interrelations between the physical world and that which transcends it provides a simpler and more elegant understanding of miracles than the idea of supernatural interferences in a natural order governed in accordance with its own immanent laws.

It may be objected that an attempt to understand miracles in terms of universal laws governing the relationship between the physical world and that which transcends it is at odds with a key feature of the Christian confession, namely that salvation is through a personal relationship of faith in one individual, namely, Jesus Christ. The two ideas, are however, in no way incompatible, since the change in the moral character of persons, a condition of the workings of nature being set aright, is dependent upon the work of, and fellowship with, the Christ.

It is also important to note that in Mark the phenomenal realm is not merely the product of an individual's moral and spiritual states, but rather, the moral and spiritual order that is the ground of what occurs in the phenomenal plane is always an intersubjective one. For example, although Mark never presents a possessed person as having faith in Jesus, it is often the case that the faith of another close to that person is sufficient for Jesus to perform an exorcism, as in the case of the Syrophenician woman. Hence the faith of others does have an effect on an individual's fate, just as, conversely, lack of faith can have disastrous consequences for others, as suggested by the disciples failure in 9:18ff. This corporate character of the spiritual order as presented in Mark discloses that one cannot manipulate one's own faith in order to force a miracle, for one never has control over the attitude of others. The only key to changing the attitude of others is the fullness of love as it manifests itself in the cross, and this means that the crux of the kingdom lies in following Jesus, that is, in being willing to lose one's life for the sake of the gospel. Hence, although the miracles are attendant upon the kingdom, the kingdom can only be instituted by the willingness to give up one's life and follow Jesus. And although the gospel ultimately presents us with a positive understanding of miracle, it presents a realistic picture of the cost of discipleship and of doing one's part in inaugurating the kingdom—*itself a condition of miracles.*⁶⁷

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Richard Swinburne's clear exposition *The Concept of Miracle*, (London: St Martin's Press, 1970).

2. My use of the exegetical material will be constrained by and limited to that which illumines the theological and philosophical issues at hand. While my own approach to the Markan understanding of miracles builds on recent exegetical scholarship, much of which stresses Mark's combating a divine man Christology, it goes beyond this in showing that Mark's attitude towards miracles is still, nonetheless, a positive one.

3. Two major proponents of the hypothesis affirming Matthean priority are William R. Farmer (*The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis*, Dillsboro, N.C.: Western North Carolina Press, 1976) and Hans-Herbert Stoldt (*History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis*, trans. by Donald L. Niewyk, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980).

4. However, against such a consensus, see C.H. Talbert (*What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977]), who has argued that the gospels are similar to Graeco-Roman biographies. For a defense of the majority view that holds to the uniqueness of the gospel genre, see D. E. Aune, "The Problem of the Genre Gospels," in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981).

5. This was first pointed out by Karl Ludwig Schmidt in his study *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu*, (Berlin: Trowitzsch & Sohn, 1919). A brief overview of the inconsistencies in Mark's chronology and geography are provided by Paul J. Achtemeier in *Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 13-14; a more in depth discussion of how these inconsistencies might relate to Mark's incorporation of different traditions into his gospel can be found in Achtemeier's article "Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae" in *JBL* 89 (1970), 265-291.

6. It is more accurate to speak of the traditions which relate these events, since what Mark had at his disposal were traditions or stories which already bore the stamp of the community's theological interpretation

7. As Willi Marxen notes, ". . . Mk. by no means produced a historical record, but . . . he himself stood within the theology of the Church and was influenced by this theology in the account he wrote insofar as he expressed a particular theological conception in his work." *Introduction to the New Testament*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968) 120. Cf. Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). Tolbert notes that even if we take the Markan gospel to belong to the genre of Hellenistic historiography, "one would still be involved in the dynamics of fiction" 31. This is because ancient historiography never pretended to be more than interpretation: "Speeches, characters, and even whole incidents could be created by the Hellenistic historian, and events for which records or sources existed were often thoroughly embellished. The aim of ancient history writing was rarely to produce an accurate chronicle of record; rather, its purposes were moral edification, apologetics, glorification of certain families, and mainly entertainment" 32.

8. In his book *Faith and Understanding*, Bultmann notes: ". . . the Christian faith is apparently not concerned with miracles; rather it has cause to exclude the idea of miracle. No arguments to the contrary can be based on the fact that in the Bible events are certainly recorded which must be called miracles. That fact merely makes necessary the use of critical methods which show that the biblical writers, in accordance with the presuppositions of

their thinking, had not fully apprehended the idea of miracle and its implications" (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 249. Contra Bultmann, I hope to show that Mark had a very sophisticated understanding of the place of miracle in the Christian faith.

9. W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, (Library of Theological Translation; London: Clarke, 1971), German edition first published 1901.

10. According to Wrede, "It (the secret) can be characterized as the after-effect of the view that the resurrection is the beginning of the messiahship at a time when the life of Jesus was already being filled materially with messianic content" Quoted from *The Messianic Secret*, ed., with an introduction by Christopher Tuckett (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 6. Wrede believed the secret to be the result of the clash of the primitive Christian belief that Jesus became the Messiah only after his resurrection with the notion that Jesus had been the Messiah all along. The standard critique of this aspect of Wrede's views is that Mark's material was never understood non-messianically.

11. All Biblical quotations will be from the *New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, RSV, edited by Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger.

12. A clear and in-depth account of the debates surrounding the issue is provided by Christopher Tuckett in his introduction to *The Messianic Secret*, 1-28.

13. E. Percy, *Die Botshaft Jesu*. Lund: Gleerup, 1953.

14. Tuckett, *Messianic Secret*, 15.

15. H. Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament*, (ET New York: Harper & Row, 1969 [German 1968]) pp. 138-140; cf. "Present and Future in the Synoptic Tradition," *Journal for Theology and the Church* 5 (1968) 26-44, as well as "History and Theology in the Passion Narratives of the Synoptic Gospels," *Interpretation* 24 (1970) 178-197.

16. As noted by James M. Robinson, in Mark, failure to understand is not an intellectual failing, but an existential one. It has less to do with that which is known than with the attitude taken to it. So Robinson, "It is clear that 'understanding' is closely associated with 'faith' in defining the religious attitude that Mark advocates" (James M. Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark*, [London: SCM Press, 1957] 74ff.). The failure to understand Jesus has to do not only with a rejection of his person, but of the values he embodies as well. What is not grasped has to do with the inability to comprehend a completely new way of life, and moreover, this failure is intimately linked with the refusal to value this way of life.

17. The connection is noted by Gerd Theissen in his groundbreaking study *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, translated by Francis McDonagh, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), p 213.

18. For a discussion of the attitude of the disciples with regard to the passion see James M. Robinson, *History in Mark*, 51-53; cf. Joseph Tyson's article, "The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark," in Tuckett, *Messianic Secret*, 35-42, as well as Ernest Best's excellent study, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), especially 134-137.

19. Regarding the secret, Conzelmann notes, "The stress is on the irresistible way in which the call of Jesus is passed on—despite commands to keep silent. The theory becomes clear when we realize that here the evangelist represents the paradoxical character of the revelation: the faithful—i.e., the readers of the book—are shown the mystery in such a way that it remains veiled from the world even after Easter. It can only be grasped through faith, i.e., in the church. To those without it remains hidden. The misunderstanding of the disciples means that Jesus' work can be under-

stood only after Easter." Conzelmann, *An Outline*, 139.

20. Martin Kähler was the first to characterize all the gospels as "passion narratives with extended introductions" in his *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 80, n 11.

21. Robert H. Gundry's recent book: *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Willaim B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), attempts to correct this view. He acknowledges that the gospel is composed of two kinds of material, the first describing "the successes of Jesus which make him look like others admired in the Greco-Roman world for their divine powers of wisdom, clairvoyance, exorcism, thaumaturgy, and personal magnetism—men such as Pythagoras, Empedocles, Philo's Moses, Simon Magus, Apollonius of Tyana, and even Barnabus and Paul," and the second type of material portraying "a persecuted" Jesus. The first type of material corresponds to a theology of glory, the second to a theology of suffering. He correctly notes that "the basic problem in Marcan studies is how to fit together these apparently contradictory kinds of material. . . ." 2. Gundry, however, wants to show that "Mark does not pit the suffering and death of Jesus against his successes, but that Mark pits the successes against the suffering and death . . ." 3. Gundry is no doubt correct in emphasizing the fact that the theology of glory runs throughout Mark's text. However, it is not clear whether he pays sufficient attention to the ways in which the theology of glory is qualified and deepened by the theology of the cross. Insofar as God's ways are not the ways of fallen humanity, in this life acting in accordance with God's ways (forgiveness and service) is not likely to be met with immediate success, but rather with its opposite. In "this adulterous and sinful generation" (8:38) suffering is the inevitable result of following Jesus. Perhaps the most balanced view of how the two types of theology relate to one another can be characterized by Marxen's words describing the Passion story: it "does not really aim to depict a path of suffering followed—after Easter—by glory, but it shows the path of humility paradoxically as the path of God and therefore as the path of glory" (Marxen, Introduction, 132).

22. In this country, the seminal work interpreting Mark's own Christology as a corrective to this sort of view is Theodore Weeden's *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). Weeden's understanding of the θεῖος ἀνὴρ has been qualified by scholars such as Howard Clark Kee, who notes that "there is in Greek and Roman cultural history no uniform conception of a divine man to which Lucian or anyone else could appeal." Howard Clark Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 297; cf. the more recent study by Barry Blackburn, *Theios Aner and the Markan Miracle Traditions*, (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991), in which Blackburn denies that the term was a technical one applied to a miracle worker. Notwithstanding these reservations, the fact is that wonder-working was no doubt a common phenomenon in the first century, in particular in the spirit-filled churches, and that early Christianity had to come to terms with and interpret the phenomenon. However, Weeden's contention ("The Heresy that Necessitated Mark's Gospel," *ZNW* 59 [1968], 145-58) that the Marcan gospel arose out of a need to combat a belief in miracles is certainly going too far.

23. See D. Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in 2 Corinthians: A Study in Religious Propaganda in Late Antiquity*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), German 1964.

24. Hans Jürgen Ebeling, *Das Messiasgeheimnis und die Botshaft des Marcus-Evangelisten*, 1939. This approach to the gospel as kerygma led to his "epiphanic" understanding of the secret: the secrecy elements are literary

devices stressing the glory of Jesus. This understanding of the secret found small purchase among other scholars as the way to explain all of the secrecy elements in Mark; however, his approach to Mark as kerygma has far reaching implications. See James M. Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark*, 14-15 for a clear and concise discussion of Ebeling's views; cf. Tuckett, *Messianic Secret*, 13-15.

25. For a discussion of this point, see Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, (Sheffield: Dept of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield, 1981), 13. As Best notes, "... Christian's understanding of their discipleship and their ability to follow as disciples emerge out of their understanding of the passion and resurrection of Jesus."

26. As Koester points out "Belief in this 'gospel' implies that the benefits of such miraculous acts are accessible, or even that these acts can be repeated in the religious experience of the believer. Jesus is the 'divine man' (θεῖος ἀνὴρ); he can be imitated by his apostle, who thereby incorporates and represents the revelation in his missionary activity" Helmut Koester, "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels," in *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, by Helmut Koester and James M. Robinson, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 188.

27. Robinson's essay, "Kerygma and History in the New Testament," 59 in *Trajectories*, cited above; cf. *Ancient Christian Gospels*, by Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 202.

28. Robinson's essay in *Trajectories*, 46-66; See also Koester's essay in the same volume, "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels," 187ff. as well as his discussion of the miracle catenae in *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 201ff. For an excellent analysis of Mark 4-8, which argues that Mark combined two differing catenae in his gospel, see Achtemeier, "Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae." Achtemeier provides a convincing analysis of the setting in life of these catenae in his article "The Origin and Function of the Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae" *JBL* 91 (1972), 198-221: "they were formed as part of a liturgy which celebrated an epiphanic Eucharist based on bread broken with the θεῖος ἀνὴρ, Jesus, during his career and after his resurrection . . ." (198).

29. Robinson, *Trajectories*, 55ff.

30. See also H. D. Betz, "Jesus as Divine Man," in *Jesus and the Historian: Essays Written in Honor of Ernest Cadmann Colwell*, Philadelphia 1968, ed. F. Th. Trotter, 114-133.

31. The same is noted by E. Best: "In contrast to many miracles from the contemporary religious world, faith is the presupposition of miracle and not its result." In "The Miracles in Mark," 539-54; L. Schenke, *Die Wundererzählungen des Markusevangeliums* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1974); Cf. Tolbert, 180.

32. Robert Tannehill and David Rhoads have called attention to a healing type-scene in Mark which they entitle "A Suppliant with Faith." Rhoads counts eleven such type-scenes in Mark: Simon's mother-in-law (1:29-31); the leper (1:40-45); the paralytic (2:1-12); the man with the withered hand (3:1-6); Jairus' daughter (5:21; 35-45); the woman with the hemorrhage (5:24-34); the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30); a deaf and mute man (7:31-37); the blind man at Bethsaida (8:21-26); the father who brings a boy with an unclean spirit (9:14-29); and Bartimaeus (10:46-52). As Rhoads notes, in each of these scenes the suppliant must overcome an obstacle in order to have his or her request met by Jesus, and it is in this overcoming of obstacles that the faith of the suppliant is concretely illustrated. David Rhoads, "Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman in Mark: A Narrative Critical Study," in *JAAR* LXII

No. 2, (1994) esp. 349-350. Cf. Robert Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," *JR* 57 (1977), 386-405, as well as Gerd Theissen's structuralist observations on the motif "Difficulties in the Approach," where he notes that "faith in miracles is overcoming obstacles" (53). Later he notes that "the motif of difficulty articulates awareness of a boundary: the human will to overcome suffering is faced by apparently unsurmountable obstacles. 'Opposed' to this motif is the boundary-crossing motif of faith, that is, those cries for help, pleas and expressions of confidence by which the suppliant ignores the difficulty. Jesus calls this attitude, whose volitional character is clear, 'faith'—*θέλειν* is synonymous with *πιστεύειν*." Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, 75.

33. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 180; Tolbert's chapter "The Good Earth and the Rocky Ground," provides an excellent literary and rhetorical analysis of how Mark connects faith and miracles. Cf. A. Farrer, *A Study in St. Mark*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 290-304.

34. *Ibid.*, 180.

35. In his article "How Many Baskets Full?: Mark 8: 14-21 and the Value of Miracles in Mark" (CBQ 46 [1985], 643-665) William Countryman argues, correctly, I believe, that "for Mark faith must come from somewhere else, not from miracles. Miracles are not signs: they do not convey a clear, unobstructed view of Jesus' mission and authority" 652. Countryman's inference, however, that this represents "a sharp devaluation of miracles" (655) in Mark's theology is unwarranted. It simply means that for Mark, miracles cannot be used as evidence to decipher the nature of Christ's person and work. But this does not preclude the more positive portrayal of miracle as that which occurs when persons have faith in Jesus. Cf. Theissen's *Miracle Stories* (294) where he argues that Mark's intention could not have been to underplay miracles; if it were, it would have made more sense for him to leave out the miracle stories all together.

36. For an excellent discussion of the social position of a carpenter in first century Mediterranean life, see John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 29.

37. As proposed by Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, p. 214.

38. This is Robinson's suggestion, *Trajectories*, 51.

39. Crossan, 266.

40. Rhoads, 336-337.

41. See Frank J. Matera, 'He Saved Others; He Cannot Save Himself' A Literary-Critical Perspective on the Markan Miracles," *Interpretation* 47 (1993), 16.

42. Matera's position that in the Markan gospel "people do not perceive that, by these actions [the miracles] Jesus is proclaiming and inaugurating God's kingdom and calling them to repentance," (18) is too strong. For a more nuanced presentation of both the faith and failings in faith of the Markan characters, see Elizabeth S. Malbon, "Disciples, Crowds, Whoever: Markan Characters and Readers," *Nov. Test.* XXXVIII 2 (1986) 104-130. For instance, Malbon shows how Mark does not consistently characterize the faith of the disciples negatively; but rather both positively and negatively; their faith is incomplete, but its inchoate beginnings are nevertheless present. For instance, she notes that while "almost always their questions betray a lack of faith. . . . at least the disciples remain willing to question Jesus, and to be questioned by Jesus, and to question themselves" 121.

43. Matera underlines the parallel treatment of parable and miracle when he notes that the parables "prove to be mysterious speech, pointing to the deeper reality of the kingdom . . . [J]ust as the parables are mysterious

speech, so Jesus' miracles are mysterious actions" Matera, op. cit., 18. Cf. E. S. Malbon, "Echoes and Foreshadowings in Mark 4-8: Reading and Rereading," *JBL* 112 (1993), 211-230.

44. An excellent discussion of Jerome's view is provided by Rowan Greer in *The Fear of Freedom*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), p. 20.

45. T. C. Williams distinguishes between the miraculous, the definition of which he ties to the idea of nature as system—a product of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—, and the wondrous or marvelous, which he links with antiquity. Yet Williams also notes that while the ancients did not have our conception of a law governed system, they certainly must have possessed a rudimentary understanding of the regularities of nature. For instance, they would easily have grasped that ordinarily virgins do not have babies. T. C. Williams, *The Idea of the Miraculous*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 36-37. For a more in-depth account of how the ancients understood natural necessity, see R. M. Grant's study, *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought*, (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Co., 1952).

46. For an excellent discussion of how miracles serve to specify the political geography of apocalyptic contest in Mark, see Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988). Myers situates the miracles in the context of Jesus's conflict with the Satanic order, linked with both the structures of oppression specifically embedded in the dominant social order of first century Roman Palestine, as well as practices of domination "ultimately embedded in the human personality and corporately in human history as a whole" (103). The miracles function to challenge the very structures of social existence (148). It is important to note, however, that Myers also recognizes the fact that for Mark the faith of those who are healed, and their willingness to transgress socially oppressive structures is all important to the occurrence of a miracle (147). Hence the miracle witnesses to the transformation of interpersonal relations made possible by Jesus, and thus to the inbreaking of God's kingdom.

47. It may be objected that while Mark portrays the disciples as performing miracles, he also portrays them as lacking understanding. How, then, can they be acting in accordance with these principles? I have noted above that the significance of the disciple's decision to follow Jesus should not be taken lightly. The question then arises: is genuine discipleship a sufficient condition for the adoption of principle (2), that is, if we are genuine followers, does this mean that we will also exercise human power in these ways? Mark's answer, I think, would be that while it is certainly possible for a genuine follower to make mistakes, ultimately such a person will fully internalize the meaning of the kingdom, and that furthermore, the ground of this possibility already lies in the decision to follow Jesus. If (1) ultimately will imply (2), (1) is sufficient for the occurrence of a miracle. In other words, while a follower may lack autonomous insight, the fact that she has subjected her will to that of Jesus is of enormous significance, since in and through this subjection autonomous insight will eventually be achieved. Moreover, the decision to subject one's will to that of Jesus as the one who understands more, must count, even if paradoxically, as some kind of understanding.

48. It is important to keep in mind that, as Kee notes, "Judaism had adopted a dualistic worldview, which led it to see human problems—of the individual as well as the nation— as the result of machinations by superhuman powers opposed to the divine will" Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine*,

Miracle, and Magic in New Testament Times, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 70. This dualistic world picture is, of course, also found in Mark, where Jesus often performs exorcisms. However, this understanding of the cause of sickness need not be understood as conflicting with the interpretation I provide above. It is clear that Mark accepts both the theory of demons as a good explanation for some types of sickness (possession) as well as understanding these in terms of the absence of God's kingdom, where to be first is to be the servant of all. On understanding the way in which both themes are linked in Mark, see Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*.

My view is partially dependent on suggestions made by Crossan in his book *The Historical Jesus* linking possession to oppressive situations. Crossan, 315ff. While in his book Crossan links possession principally to a misuse of political power, it should not be restricted to this sphere but should be tied to any situation in which power is abused.

49. Swinburne, *Concept of Miracle*, 1.

50. *Ibid*, pp. 3-5. In this he follows R. F. Holland, "The Miraculous," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965) 43-51; reprinted in D. Z. Phillips, ed., *Religion and Understanding* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 155-170.

51. Robert A H. Larmer, *Water into Wine?: An Investigation into the Concept of Miracle* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 14. Another contemporary philosopher who holds that miracles "are the result of supernatural causation" is Ninian Smart; see his *Philosophers and Religious Truth*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1964) 38.

52. Quoted from C. D. F. Moule, ed., *Miracles*, (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1965) 13.

53. For an example of this position, see Nicholas Everitt, "The Impossibility of Miracles" *Religious Studies* 23, 347-349.

54. See Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracles*, 3.

55. *Ibid*, 27.

56. *Ibid*, 7-10.

57. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, second German edition, English translation H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, eds., (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), § 38, 2; 148.

58. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 116

59. As Moule notes, "whatever consistency or coherence there may be within the material realm is part of a larger whole, and is derived from and dependent upon it . . ." What follows is worth quoting at length: "If we have reason to believe that the character of God is best seen in Jesus, and that the consistency of sheer moral perfection is the ultimate consistency, then we may have to revise our ideas of what is and is not possible. And if we have reason to find in Jesus a unique degree of unity with the will of God, what is to prevent our believing that, where God is perfectly obeyed, there the mechanics of the material world look different from what they do in a situation dislocated by disobedience? It is not that regularities and consistencies are suspended or overridden: it is rather that our idea of how things work is based on too narrow a set of data. If the ultimate locus of consistency is in the realm of the personal—in the character of a God who cannot deny himself—then what is (in our present conditions) unusual need not be ultimately an intervention or an irruption or a dislocation or suspension of natural law: it need only be what 'normally' happens—indeed what is bound to happen—on the rare and 'abnormal' occasions when a right relationship is achieved in the family of God," Moule, *Miracles*, 16-17. Moule's characterization of Mark's understanding of miracle is certainly more accurate than

the one Bultmann suggests is present in the Bible: "Rather, when divine action is believed to issue in a higher causality, God is thought of simply as a man who knows more and can do more than other men. If other men can just imitate the method, (as, for example, a magician does), they can do the same" Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 249. The characterizations of God as creator found in the latter chapters of Job or in second Isaiah 40, which express so sublimely the transcendence of God, would rule out such a primitive conception.

60. The phenomenal realm, as that which is in some way given to the senses coincides with the natural realm. Quarks, for instance, while not observable by the naked eye still make some observable differences (have effects) which can be registered through instrumentation. No doubt insofar as they are theoretical entities, these effects can be understood as the effects of quarks only in so far as complex theories are in place and have been accepted by the scientific community. Nevertheless effects registerable through instrumentation still qualify as effects that are in some way given to the senses.

61. This definition of natural law is not too far afield from the one provided by Swinburne. So Swinburne, "Laws state the subsequent effect of certain initial conditions, and what happens is as much a function of the initial conditions as of the laws." *Concept of Miracle*, 4. Swinburne, however, denies that universality is a feature of a natural law since he wants to hold the door open to exceptions to those laws, i.e., miracles.

62. A similar view was put forth by the Oxford theologian William Temple when he wrote: "The machine-like character of the Universe, with its rigid laws and uniformities, is given to it by our unspiritual way of handling it; to a man in whom God dwells everything is plastic that he may mold it to God's purpose," in *Foundations: A Statement of Christian Belief in Terms of Modern Thought: By Seven Oxford Men*, (London: Macmillan, 1912), 129

63. For instance, Bultmann notes that "faith is directed to wonder as an action of God which is different from the world process" *Faith and Understanding*, 252.

64. *Ibid*, 248.

65. Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, 298

66. For a fuller account and critique of Bultmann's understanding of the nature system and the miraculous, see T. C. Williams, *Idea of the Miraculous*, 1-24; for a discussion of the presuppositions of the history of religions school, see Colin Brown's, *Miracles and the Critical Mind*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 128-133.

67. I would like to thank Ann Astell, Franklin Mason, Bill Rowe, Tom Ryba, Bill Wainwright and several anonymous commentators for their remarks on earlier drafts of this paper