The First of the Miracle Stories According to Mark (1:21-28)

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Mark is the most attractive of the four canonical Gospels for many modern readers. This attraction is linked to the consensus among twentieth-century biblical scholars that Mark’s Gospel is the earliest written account of Jesus’ life and work. The evangelist’s presentation to action-oriented Romans of the late first century seems designed also to catch the attention of twentieth-century Europeans and Americans. Much of the action in the narrative, however, is based on miracle stories which sometimes present a problem for readers at the end of the twentieth century. After considering the first of the miracle stories incorporated into Mark’s Gospel, we shall return to face some of the awkward questions about miracles.

Mark’s story

The first words in the Gospel according to Mark declare that Jesus is the “Messiah” and “God’s son” (1:1). The story of Jesus’ baptism by John includes a voice from heaven which reinforces this identification, and the brief account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness includes elements which seem to imply miracles.

After John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus returns to Galilee and announces that the time has come for God’s government to be established. Recruiting four aides for his campaign (1:17), Jesus proceeds to Capernaum where he teaches in the synagogue on the Sabbath and performs an exorcism. This teaching and exorcism stand together as the first act of Jesus’ public ministry which is described by the evangelist.

The focus of this story in Mark’s Gospel is on Jesus’ power and authority (1:22 & 27). As a young teacher, Jesus might have been expected to shore up his teaching with references to acknowledged authorities, but this was not his style (1:22). Without recording or even summarizing Jesus’ words, the evangelist tells readers that Jesus’ teaching created a very strong impression. But the audience is allowed little time to sort out their reactions before the synagogue meeting is completely disrupted by the shouting of a man possessed by an evil spirit.

Speaking with his victim’s voice, the evil spirit identifies Jesus by name and with
Every illness is a disorder in God’s creation, but demon possession is an acute manifestation of universal disorder.

The possessed man shouts other things as well, but Jesus remains on top of the situation and counters with a stern command: “Shut up! And get out of him” (1:25). Shaking his victim violently, the evil spirit departs, howling (1:26). Now everyone is astonished, realizing that the earlier remarks about this young teacher’s authority were understatements. This is a new kind of teaching, indeed.

This exorcism in a Galilean synagogue can be described as the archetypal miracle for Mark’s Gospel. As the first sample of Jesus’ mighty acts in his public ministry, the exorcism shows the Messiah ready to do battle against the forces of evil as the new age is ushered in. Having survived temptation by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus is now prepared to take the offensive in the eschatological confrontation. The evil spirit’s bravado in trying to exorcise the LORD’S anointed only confirms Jesus’ authority for those witnessing the event.\(^1\) The evil spirits’ fear that Jesus has come to destroy them (1:24) is justified.

As an indication of things to come, this first recorded miracle story illustrates several motifs which recur throughout the Gospel, such as faith, compassion, healing, and the setting in Galilee, besides the motif of power and authority.

The connection between faith and miracles is mysterious and multifaceted, demanding our attention at every level at which we consider this story. Jesus’ power is an expression of his own faith in God, and the congregation’s response of amazement at Jesus’ teaching (1:22) is also an expression of faith. Further on in the Gospel, the evangelist notes a direct link between people’s faith and Jesus’ ability to perform acts of power (6:5, cf. 5:34). As incoate and ambiguous as the congregation’s faith is here, it forms a sufficient base for the demonstration of God’s liberating power. Whether the victim’s voiced confession is also to be understood as supporting the demonstration of divine power is more difficult to say, since in the text Jesus attributes this confession to the evil spirit.

Jesus’ compassion can be inferred as a motivating factor in this story of rough confrontation, although the word itself (σπλαγχνίζομαι) is first used by the evangelist in the story of the healing of the man with leprosy (1:41). In well-run synagogues and churches, even today, guest speakers can expect those in charge to shield them from serious disruptions. In the setting for our story, the ruler of the synagogue seems to have failed in his responsibility to keep the possessed man away from the meeting. With the congregation off balance and fall-

\(^1\) B. D. Chilton points out that “In the literature which mentions exorcism, the technique of naming (sometimes with multiple designations) generally appears as the means by which the exorcist gains control over the demon. That convention is here reversed.” “Exorcism and History: Mark 1:21-28,” in Gospel Perspectives: The Miracles of Jesus vol. 6, ed. David Wenham & Craig Blomberg (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 261.
An appeal to Roman superstition?

Redaction criticism, by crediting the whole composition to a single writer or ‘editor,’ has the great advantages of focusing the interpreter’s attention on the text that we have. Questions about Mark’s sources are relevant to redaction criticism — especially regarding miracle stories. But how (and why) the evangelist uses the material available to him is the main concern.

In proportion to the length of his book, Mark includes more miracle stories than any other canonical Gospel writer. The tendency of critics in the recent past to de-emphasize miracles in Mark’s Gospel tells more about the critics’ intended audience than about Mark’s. Gerd Theissen’s wry comment, against this tendentious line, confronts us with the prominence of miracles in the Gospel: “Can Mark really have told sixteen miracle stories solely to warn against belief in miracles? It seems a rather clumsy way of doing it.”

How did the evangelist himself understand traditional Christian miracle stories?


\footnote{3}{The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition 294 in response to G. Klein Wunderglaube 56 and K. Kertelge Wunder 206.}

The chart in B. L. Blackburn’s article “Miracles and Miracle Stories” in The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, ed. Joel B. Green et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) lists eighteen miracles performed by Jesus in Mark’s Gospel besides miracles noted in summary reports. In this list, all but five (“Calming the Storm,” “Feeding the Five Thousand,” “Walking on Water,” “Feeding the Four Thousand,” and “Fig Tree Withered”) fit into the broad category of healing miracles.
And why did he incorporate so many of them into his Gospel? 

Mark himself believed that the miracles recorded in his Gospel actually happened. We have no direct information about whether he also believed reports of miraculous power related to pagan gods. In principle, belief in Jesus’ miracles does not require belief in pagan miracles any more than belief in Jesus’ God requires belief in pagan gods. But Mark’s first miracle story indicates that the evangelist believed not only in the power of God but also in other powers, specifically the power of the unclean spirit.

For readers today, the power of the unclean spirit is at once the most difficult and the easiest to acknowledge. In the story, the victim’s actions suggest extreme mental illness of a kind which we ourselves have seen or heard reliably reported. Moreover, we know that crack-cocaine addicts sometimes go wild, and we have been astonished at the power of ethnic prejudice to possess people for the destruction of others and themselves. In such cases, we sometimes say that a miracle would be required to save the possessed person. Such analogies from our experience remind us of the limits of our understanding of evil powers in relation to human personality. We must admit that our understanding of God’s power is probably even more limited.

“Power is a fundamental religious phenomenon,” as Martin Hengel reminds us. In Mark’s narrative, John the Baptist has already explained that the source of Jesus’ power is the Holy Spirit (1:7-8). The reader is now challenged to believe that God’s government is being established (1:15) by “Jesus Messiah, the Son of God” (1:1). Faith in almighty God is basic to any understanding of the Gospel. Here God’s power is channelled through Jesus, specifically in a restraining order directed at the evil spirit (1:25). Jesus’ demand for silence recurs throughout the Gospel as a major theme closely connected to the miracles.

“The Messianic secret” has been interpreted in various ways since W. Wrede first identified this Markan theme. Theissen correctly protests the use of this theme to downplay or dismiss the significance of miracles in the Gospel. Nevertheless, it is true that this theme and the whole framework of the Gospel function as a restraint and critique of credulity regarding signs and wonders (n.b. Mk 13:22). In this first miracle story, the inexplicable power that Jesus channels demonstrates his divinity. But the nervous excitement of the young teacher’s audience, the embarrassment of the disruption, Jesus’ compassion and cour-

4 M. E. Glasswell persuasively argues that this is not a focus of the evangelist’s concern: “Mark is clearly not so much concerned about the historical status of miracles, whether they actually happened—though he would seem to have no difficulty in stating that they did—as with the question of faith in Jesus as he is proclaimed in the Gospel.” Miracles: Cambridge Studies, 159.

With reference to the reliability of Mark’s sources and Mark’s editorial focus, Gerd Theissen concludes, “There is no doubt that Jesus worked miracles, healed the sick and cast out demons, but the miracle stories reproduce these historical events in an intensified form.” Miracle Stories, 277. Likewise Paul Achtemeier concludes that “Whatever else Mark may have thought about Jesus, he surely also understood him as one who performed acts of power.” Mark. Proclamation Commentary (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 85.


6 M. E. Glasswell, Miracles: Cambridge Studies, 154. Jesus’ rebuke of the demon here anticipates but can also be interpreted independently from what Glasswell calls “the Markan secrecy theme.”

7 G. Theissen, Miracle Stories.
The First of the Miracle Stories According to Mark

Age in treating the possessed man, and the
detail of the violent cure all emphasize the
humanity of Jesus. It is the coming together
of divinity and humanity in the Messiah, as
announced in the first line of Mark’s Gos­
pel, which make this miracle story, and the
ones that follow, understandable by faith.

Ancient and modern, modern
and post-modern

Not long ago I heard a good sermon on
Numbers 22. That Bible story includes the
fantastic report of a donkey talking back to
Balaam. By way of introduction to his
sermon, the preacher observed that various
spiritual movements of our time, including
New Age religion, have made Americans
much more ready than we used to be to
reflect positively on reports of supernatural
happenings.

I doubt if this new wave has extended
so far as to reach critical readers of Mark’s
Gospel. Theological professors and pastors
can still be heard expressing frustration to
each other about the pre-Enlightenment
views held by some seminarians and influ­
tential parishioners. But these “enlightened”
complaints themselves are beginning to
sound quaint and old-fashioned. Put an­
other way, we might say that these com­
plaints seem ‘modern’ and ‘rationalistic’
over against ascendant post-modernism.

Ramsay MacMullen describes what
might be called a common world-view in
antiquity in his study of paganism in the
period C.E. 125-325 (somewhat later than
the time of Mark’s composition): “Jews,
Christians... and most other people in the
Empire... were united in perceiving a pyra­
mid of powers above them—real powers
able of suspending the laws of nature.”

In another summary statement MacMullen
says, “They... took miracles quite for grant­
ed.” But not every reported miracle was
believed by everyone, even in antiquity.

Readiness to believe stories of miracles
—and, it seems, readiness to make up such
stories—seems to have followed regular
socio-political patterns in antiquity. Credu­
lity seems to have flowed and receded in
waves. Some stories of miracles were never
intended to be believed. As an example,
Robert Grant points to the miracles in An­
tonius Diogenes’ romance, Incredible Things
Beyond Thule. But in a later century the
Neoplatonist Porphyry took these stories

—C. S. Lewis, in a book which is still
instructive, declares that “The central miracle
asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They
say that God became Man. Every other
miracle prepared for this, or exhibits this, or
results from this.” Miracles: A Preliminary
Study (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 131.

*R. MacMullen, Paganism in the Roman
Empire (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1981), 88. MacMullen’s point is clear, but the
notion of “suspending the laws of nature” as a
definition of miracles is susceptible to
anachronistic interpretation.

10 R. MacMullen, Christianizing the
Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400) (New Haven:
Yale University Press, 1984), 22.
seriously, as Grant also notes. Whether all Christian miracle stories written after Mark’s Gospel (such as those about Jesus’ childhood) were written to be believed is a question beyond the scope of this article.

Even in antiquity people knew that persons who died and were buried did not rise from the dead. According to Mark’s Gospel Jesus was tortured to death, was buried, and rose again so that the women who came to the empty tomb ran away in fear. The details of this human response to an actual resurrection are convincing, but the claim itself is surely as hard to believe in our time as in Mark’s, and more difficult to believe than any of the other miracles recorded in the Gospel. (See Acts 17:31-32.)

The Enlightenment is often characterized as a watershed in modern biblical studies. But anyone who reads “A Discourse of Miracles” by John Locke will realize that the watershed must be located later. D. F. Strauss’ Life of Jesus, published in 1835, triggered a series of ‘Lives of Jesus’ which were constructed on “a framework in Mark of a well-attested, early and reliable tradition.” Despite Albert Schweitzer’s devastating critique of this movement which minimized miraculous and eschatological elements in the Gospel, biblical scholars continue to be influenced by the 19th and early 20th century Enlightenment world-view which shaped this movement.

When preparing to preach on this text about Jesus’ teaching and exorcism in a Galilean synagogue, modern pastors do well to heed the warning of Shakespeare’s Hamlet:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (I/v.)

Except for older New Testament critics, it seems that everyone today is interested in miracles. Pastors must guard parishioners against the credulity which the supermarket tabloids encourage just as carefully as Mark guarded his readers against false claims of “signs and wonders.” But preachers of the gospel know the God who created all things. We know that there is truth in the sentimental talk about “the miracle of a sunset” and “the miracle of life.”

The created universe is miraculous. We know the Creator through “Jesus Messiah, the Son of God,” who not only cast out demons but also liberates us from sin and death. The power of the Spirit that raised the crucified Messiah from the dead has been given to us as a guarantee of life under the government of God, which was first proclaimed by Jesus in Galilee.