

NEW TESTAMENT MIRACLES AND HIGHER CRITICISM: CLIMBING UP THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

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"The problem for the modern historian is that he or she does not have the option of explaining events in terms of demon possession or miracle." So declares Joseph Tyson in this year's revision of one of the standard textbooks for introductory NT courses in universities across America. As an avowed advocate of thoroughgoing Bultmannian philosophy, Tyson elaborates: "We cannot simply adopt a world view; it is part of the inheritance we have as citizens of the world at a particular time, and the ancient view of the world, as Bultmann described it, is obsolete."¹ From this perspective, antisupernaturalism would seem to have won a total victory, with demythologizing the only intellectually defensible alternative.

At the opposite extreme on the theological spectrum lies a certain percentage of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. Its "Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," while affirming the need for distinguishing the varieties of literary categories in Scripture, denies that "generic categories which negate historicity may rightly be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual."² This denial is not objectionable per se, but it leaves unaddressed the question of how one determines that a narrative is presenting itself as factual. The official commentary on this statement, however, considers as an example an approach that denies the historicity of an apparent OT miracle, the story of Jonah. Yet the commentator's only explanation for how he knows the book of Jonah is being presented as history is his appeal to the testimony of Christ (Matt 12:40-42: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale . . ."),³ which has repeatedly been shown to be inconclusive. As another writer points out via a parallel example in the same volume of ICBI summit papers, "a person might say 'as the good Samaritan stopped to help the half-dead man, so Christ in his compassion lived and died to help us,' . . . without either presupposing or implying that the good Samaritan and Christ both had historical existence on the same plane."⁴

The gap between conservative and liberal scholarship seems as vast as ever.

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¹J. B. Tyson, *The New Testament and Early Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1984) 138.

²Article XIII. See *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible* (ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 884.

³*Ibid.*, p. 897.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 369.

Or, to change the metaphor, a rigidly historical view of the Biblical miracles seems for many evangelicals to remain one of the fundamental affirmations of historic Christianity, which if abandoned would start one sliding down the slippery slope that inevitably ends in apostasy.⁵ Is the situation really this desperate? Colin Brown's magisterial new history of Christian reflection on miracles and the rise of modern critical philosophies suggests that it is not. Before the challenges of modern rationalism, Christian thinkers often recognized the essentially semiotic character of the Biblical miracles. In Brown's words, they "function as a sign of identification, enabling the one who performs them to be identified as God's agent." But a sign is only a pointer to and not a proof of something else. "It may carry with it some indication of its authenticity and veracity. But its function consists in directing us toward that to which it points."⁶ This intermediate position tended to become forgotten in the post-Enlightenment debate, which often polarized the issue into one of either rejecting the possibility of miracles altogether or accepting the Biblical narratives (primarily referring to the gospels) as straightforward history capable of proving the deity of Jesus. Nevertheless two turn-of-the-century authors, whose works continue to be reprinted as evangelical classics, signaled the beginning of a return to a more mediating stance. R. C. Trench "perceived a unity between the miracles of Jesus, his teaching, and his person which led him to say 'We believe the miracles for Christ's sake, than Christ for the miracles' sake.'" A. B. Bruce, in addition, suggested "that the miracles of Jesus might be viewed as *parables* . . . not . . . that they did not happen or that an original parable had been transformed into event through the wishful thinking of the early church," but as "intimations of redemption."⁸

A parabolic approach to the miracles of Jesus provides exciting opportunities for returning to the interpretation that the gospel writers themselves seem to stress most and for achieving agreement with a growing consensus of commentators of many theological perspectives. Three exegetical observations support this stance. First, when John the Baptist sends his disciples to question Jesus about his identity, Jesus replies that they are to tell John what they hear and see: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up" (Matt 11:5; cf. Luke 7:22). The miracles ought to point out Jesus as *ho erchomenos*, but Jewish expectations for this "coming one" were notoriously diverse. Johannine equivalents encourage the disciples to believe the miracles in order to learn that Jesus and the Father are "in" each other (John 10:36-38; 14:11), but ontological conclusions about the person of Jesus scarcely follow from this simple preposition.⁹ The miracles both reveal and

⁵Cf. H. Lindsell, *Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 205.

⁶C. Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 19.

⁷Ibid., p. 159, quoting R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Miracles of Our Lord* (London: Kegan Paul, 1895) 102.

⁸Ibid., p. 162, referring to A. B. Bruce, *The Miraculous Element in the Gospels* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1886). Brown's explanation lays to rest the objection of E. Best, "The Miracles in Mark," *RevExp* 75 (1978) 541, to the phrase "acted parable" on the grounds that parable means "something which might be true but is not true."

⁹Cf. J. R. Michaels, *John* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984) 174.

conceal, acting as signs for believers while repelling unbelievers, just like the parables.¹⁰ They challenge Jesus' audiences to view his ministry as divinely empowered (or "heaven-sent"—cf. John 11:42) without either compelling belief or clarifying all the details of that empowering. There is no contradiction between this semiotic function that the fourth gospel stresses and Jesus' refusal to produce a sign on demand in the synoptics (e.g. Mark 8:11-12). What the Pharisees desire is "public, definitive proof."¹¹

Second, even the disciples misunderstand the miracles, so as to provoke the identical type of reply from Jesus that he used when they misunderstood his parables. Citing Isa 6:9 in Mark 4:12 and Jer 5:21 in Mark 8:18, he in each case berates them for lacking true spiritual eyesight and hearing. The extreme example disproving an exclusively evidentialist function for the miracles comes when the scribes attribute his exorcisms to demon possession (Mark 3:22).

Finally, the synoptists consistently link Jesus' miracles with his proclamation of the kingdom of God. Matt 4:23 combines "preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and infirmity." Luke 4:18 includes in Jesus' programmatic statement of his mission that he must "preach good news to the poor . . . and recovering of sight to the blind." And Mark 1:27 portrays the crowds who observed Jesus' ministry of exorcism marveling specifically at his teaching, which v 15 has summarized as the announcement of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. Miracles, like parables, are therefore metaphors of the kingdom, any Christology is only implicit,¹² and an acceptance of their historicity is only a minor, first step to understanding their significance.

As for the growing consensus of scholarship, Gerhard Maier's survey of nineteenth- and twentieth-century miracle research highlights some surprising developments.¹³ Even typically critical continental circles are increasingly recognizing that antisupernaturalism is philosophically and scientifically indefensible and are admitting that a solid core of the gospel miracle stories is undeniably factual. Maier notes especially the positions of Rudolf Pesch, Karl Kertelge and Alfred Suhl as representative of this shift,¹⁴ but other supporters worthy of mention include Alan Richardson, Maria Trautmann, H. van der Loos, Bernhard Bron, James Kallas, and Ernst and Marie-Luise Keller.¹⁵ Pesch, however, points out an

¹⁰On this dual function of parables see esp. R. H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 27-35.

¹¹W. L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 277.

¹²On the parables' implicit Christology, see P. B. Payne, "Jesus' Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables," *Trinity Journal* n.s. 2 (1981) 3-23.

¹³G. Maier, "Zur neutestamentlichen Wunderexegese im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert," in *Gospel Perspectives* (ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, forthcoming), vol. 6.

¹⁴R. Pesch, *Jesu ureigene Taten?* (Freiburg: Herder, 1970); K. Kertelge, *Die Wunder Jesu im Markus-evangelium* (München: Kösel, 1970); A. Suhl, *Die Wunder Jesu* (Gütersloh: Güterslöher Verlagshaus, 1968).

¹⁵A. Richardson, *The Miracle Stories of the Gospels* (London: SCM, 1941); M. Trautmann, *Zeichenhafte Handlungen Jesu* (Würzburg: Echter, 1980); H. van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1965); B. Bron, *Das Wunder* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975); J. Kallas, *The Significance of the*

additional problem. He will accept a core of healings and exorcisms as authentic but not the so-called "nature miracles."¹⁶ The specter of Bultmann looms largest here, as exegetes sense not only the description of a different object for supernatural activity but also suspect that the motives for the recounting of these tales differ considerably. Since the rise of *Religionsgeschichte*, the most popular account of this difference has alleged that the narratives underwent radical revision in a Hellenistic Jewish-Christian milieu that sought to portray him as a *theos-anēr*. Yet recent research has proved this thesis untenable,¹⁷ so a new opportunity for defending the historicity of the nature miracles seems at hand. A survey of four of the most perplexing passages depicting Jesus' supernatural power over nature shows that their authenticity can be defended in the same way as with the healings and exorcisms—the nature miracles are enacted parables of the powerful inbreaking kingdom of God.¹⁸

I. NATURE MIRACLES

1. *Cursing the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14, 20-25 par.)*. The clearest example of all comes with this solitary synoptic *Strafwunder*. A straightforward reading of the narrative makes Jesus at best highly eccentric, as he destroys a healthy plant from which he could not have expected to find fruit. Little wonder that many exegetes have found the story incredible,¹⁹ and the typical conservative reply that the miracle illustrates the power of faith (the point Jesus himself apparently makes in vv 22-24) does little to alleviate the problem. The popular recourse to believing that the tree was prematurely ripe, since the presence of leaves indicated that figs should have been found as well, fails to explain why Mark seems to go out of his way to emphasize that "it was not the season for figs" (v 13). This approach does point out, though, that there is almost certain symbolism in the incident beyond what a superficial reading reveals.

The best interpretation views Jesus' behavior as deliberately incongruous in order to alert his disciples to a metaphorical meaning.²⁰ The stock use of the fig tree as a symbol for Israel (or her leaders), the parallels with Mic 7:1-6; Jer 8:13, and the sandwiching of the two stages of this story around the cleansing of the temple makes the conclusion virtually inescapable that Jesus intended to depict

Synoptic Miracles (London: SPCK, 1961); E. and M.-L. Keller, *Miracles in Dispute* (London: SCM, 1969).

¹⁶Pesch, *Jesu* 17.

¹⁷See esp. C. Holladay, *Theios Aner in Hellenistic Judaism* (Missoula: Scholars, 1977); B. L. Blackburn, "Miracle-Working Divine Men in Hellenism (and Hellenistic Judaism)," in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6 (forthcoming).

¹⁸For more detailed comments on each of the following four passages see my "The Miracles as Parables" in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6 (forthcoming).

¹⁹See esp. T. W. Manson's famous discussion in "The Cleansing of the Temple," *BJRL* 33 (1951) 271-282.

²⁰Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977) 356; Lane, *Mark* 409.

the impending eschatological destruction of Israel and her cult if she did not repent. Precisely because God's kingdom had come, because Jesus was ushering in the new age, the time for ultimate blessing or judgment for Israel was at hand. As Alan Cole concludes: "Like tree, like temple, like nation, the parallel is exact."²¹

But what of the sayings about faith moving mountains? Between Bethany and Jerusalem the disciples could have seen two main mountains: the Mount of Olives and Mount Zion. Casting either one of them into the sea would capture the eschatological symbolism of the miracle. Zech 14:4 prophesies the upheaval of the Mount of Olives in the day of the Lord, while a reference to Mount Zion would fit well with the cleansing of the temple. H. Giesen nicely epitomizes this miracle both for Jesus and for the evangelists as a "symbolic action" and "eschatological sign of the inbreaking kingdom of God."²² The parallel with the Lucan parable of the fig tree (Luke 13:6-9) virtually guarantees the validity of this interpretation. Jesus' actions may be viewed as rational, profound, and consistent with the major theme of his preaching, while the historicity of the narrative may be rejected only via an unwarranted antisupernaturalism.²³

2. *Changing water into wine (John 2:1-11)*. A straightforward reading about the events in Cana makes Jesus' morality as suspect as when he cursed the fig tree. At best his extravagant display of power seems frivolous, and at worst it could have proven highly destructive—if the entire wedding party had gotten drunk. Traditional explanations are again polarized. Classic liberalism finds the origin of the miracle in a Hellenistic community, comparing or contrasting Jesus and Dionysius.²⁴ Classic conservatism finds merely a celebration of the conversion of sinners, the institution of marriage, or of human life in general.²⁵ But on the one hand, the *religionsgeschichtlich* interpretation fails to account for crucial differences between John and his mythological counterparts. Dionysius, for example, nowhere transforms water into wine.²⁶ On the other hand, the conservative exegesis fails to account for the unnecessary reference to the water jars as

²¹A. Cole, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Tyndale, 1961) 177.

²²H. Giesen, "Der verdorrte Feigenbaum—Eine symbolische Aussage? Zu Mk 11,12-14.20f," *BZ* 20 (1976) 103 ("symbolische Handlung . . . eschatologische Zeichen der hereinbrechenden Gottesherrschaft").

²³For a comprehensive *Forschungsbericht* of this passage see W. Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980).

²⁴Compare R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 118, with E. Linnemann, "Die Hochzeit zu Kana und Dionysius," *NTS* 20 (1974) 408-418.

²⁵See respectively M. C. Tenney, "John," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9: 43; van der Loos, *Miracles* 615; C. Armerding, "The Marriage in Cana," *BSac* 118 (1961) 320-326.

²⁶See esp. E. Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (ed. U. Busse; Tübingen: Mohr, 1980) 195-196. Cf. Euripides, *Bacchae* 11.704-707; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 1.61.34a.

“for the Jewish rites of purification” (v 6), which in an otherwise sparsely-detailed narrative stands out strikingly.²⁷

The best option therefore follows the resurgence of interest in Jewish origins for the fourth gospel. The miracle vividly illustrates the transformation of the old “water” of Judaism into the new “wine” of Christianity. The parallels with a specific parable—the parable of the wineskins (Mark 2:21-22)—again reinforce this metaphorical interpretation. Moreover, marriages and marriage feasts call to mind their rich antecedent symbolism in earlier Jewish literature as foreshadowings of the coming eschatological banquet, while wine in abundance was regularly sought after as a blessing of the messianic age (see esp. Isa 55:1; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13; cf. also Jesus’ banquet parables in Matt 22:1-10; 25:1-13; Luke 14:7-24). The most plausible purpose for Jesus’ turning the water into wine at this celebration was to show that “the final ‘wedding feast’ between God and his people [had] begun.”²⁸ But this feast could not go on within traditional Jewish confines. OT religion had to be “purified and transformed in order to find its fulfillment in Christ.”²⁹ Or as Breuss nicely summarizes: “Jesus demonstrates himself as the one who transforms the water of the Old Testament into the wine of the New Covenant.”³⁰ It is also possible that eucharistic foreshadowings present themselves here,³¹ but these would have arisen more naturally in later reflection on the miracle after Jesus’ last supper. If additional significance must be sought, wisdom motifs rather than eucharistic motifs are most likely present.³² Again the fundamental similarity between the symbolism of the miracle and the undeniably authentic teaching of Jesus argues strongly for the historicity of the former, but it is history with parabolic significance. The new age had dawned, the true bridegroom had appeared, and his followers were to rejoice and make merry.

3. *Feeding the five thousand (Mark 6:32-44 pars.)*. Like the provision of wine, the feeding of the five thousand at the very least depicts Jesus working a miracle to provide abundantly for the physical appetite of the multitude. Again the expected polarization emerges. The skeptic sees only a portrait of extravagance (twelve baskets left over makes Jesus more prodigious than compassionate), and

²⁷B. Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel* (Lund: Gleerup, 1974) 100-101.

²⁸W. Nicol, *The Semeia in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 1972) 54.

²⁹Richardson, *Miracle Stories* 121.

³⁰J. Breuss, *Das Kanawunder* (Fribourg: Schweizerisches Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1976) 30 (“Jesus erweist sich als der welcher das Wasser des Alten Testaments in den Wein des Neuen Bundes verwandelt”).

³¹Cf. R. Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975) 250: “The only basis for finding a sacramental insinuation in this passage is the role of the wine, and it seems quite unnecessary to assign it that referent.”

³²Cf. R. J. Dillon, “Wisdom Tradition and Sacramental Retrospect in the Cana Account,” *CBQ* 24 (1962) 287-288.

a vague retort about divine provision for human need rings hollow.³³ However, a growing consensus again favors a symbolic interpretation of the miracle as a mediating view. Too many details remind one of pregnant OT imagery to escape the conclusion that some type of eschatological portrait of Jesus as the harbinger of the new age is in view. The setting is the wilderness and the arrangement by companies, as with Moses and the wandering Israelites. The crowds are like sheep without a shepherd and they sit on "green grass," as in Ezek 34:5 and vv 26-29 respectively. The miracle itself recalls the provision of manna in the wilderness and Elisha's accomplishments in 2 Kgs 4:42-44. These features lead Pesch to postulate an early Palestinian Jewish-Christian provenance, and Gnllka even finds an historical meal from Jesus' own ministry at the core of the pericope. Neither will assign the miracle itself to a *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, believing it to have been constructed out of the Elisha parallel.³⁴ But this is a non sequitur. The OT background enhances the case for authenticity. As Vincent Taylor observes: "That Jesus should have anticipated the Messianic feast is in harmony with His teaching concerning the Kingdom of God *and with Jewish customs.*"³⁵ Or with Albright and Mann: "Jesus, who feeds them now in token of the impending Kingdom and the Messianic Feast, will never fail to feed them. There is enough and to spare."³⁶ Such exegesis coheres so fundamentally with Jesus' undisputed teaching elsewhere (cf. esp. Luke 11:5-8; Mark 8:14-21;³⁷ Matt 6:11; 7:7-9 pars.) that a verdict in favor of the historicity of this miracle must be sustained, once the presence of the prophetic typology is recognized.

4. *Stilling the storm (Mark 4:35-41 par.)*. Here the focus of attention turns somewhat away from the blessings or curses of the new age to the herald of that new age himself. Here, too, less polarization of exegesis emerges. In fact both traditional evangelical and recent redaction-critical perspectives end up "spiritualizing" the miracle story to teach a lesson about the protection Jesus affords his Church through the storms of life.³⁸ On the other hand, parallels with Jesus' exorcisms, the story of Jonah, and God's dominion over the sea in Pss 104:7; 107:23-30 make a different interpretation more plausible. The climax of Mark's narrative calls the reader, like the disciples, to consider the question, "Who then

³³Contrast e.g. D.-A. Koch, *Die Bedeutung der Wundererzählungen für die Christologie des Markus-evangeliums* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975) 102, with Cole, *Mark* 115.

³⁴R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 1. 354-356; J. Gnllka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener; Zürich: Benziger, 1978), 1. 263.

³⁵V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952) 321 (italics mine).

³⁶W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) 177.

³⁷Sometimes viewed as redactional, these verses should instead be regarded as authentic; see esp. E. E. Lencio, "External Evidence for the Structure and Function of Mark iv.1-20, vii.14-23 and viii.14-21," *JTS* 29 (1978) 323-328.

³⁸As G. Bornkamm, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (ed. G. Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H.-J. Held; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 52-57, emphasizes in defense of his pioneering redactional analysis.

is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41). Jesus' power over nature mirrors the divine sovereignty and prerogative of Yahweh himself,³⁹ but it also discloses the compassion of one who saves and redeems his people.⁴⁰ Jesus makes no Christological affirmation, nor does the miracle unambiguously compel faith and understanding. Rather it arouses awe, creates a certain confusion and sets the disciples thinking about who this man is.

To this extent the miracle functions exactly like Jesus' teaching on the kingdom. It is "another mode of language (more dramatic certainly, but in its own way more ambivalent) communicating like parabolic teaching the mystery of God's action in the world, a mystery that discloses itself only to faith."⁴¹ Ought the miracle therefore not be anchored in a genuine *Sitz im Leben Jesu*? Even Bultmann rejects his customary appeal to Hellenistic parallels and finds an early Palestinian origin for this miracle.⁴² It should be a merely logical corollary to agree with what Schille calls "the astonishing fact" that this passage "springs from a report of the earthly [Jesus] and not as a post-Easter narrative."⁴³

The pattern that emerges from each of these four passages is clear. The symbolic or parabolic character of the nature miracles precludes any valid objection to their historicity. The narratives that describe them may scarcely be termed "straight history" in most modern senses of the expression,⁴⁴ but they do describe genuine and spectacular actions that Jesus performed. All but one of the other nature miracles in the gospels parallel one of these already discussed closely enough that they pose no threat to the main point of this study (cf. the feeding of the four thousand with that of the five thousand, the miraculous fish catches with the provision of fish in the wilderness, and the walking on water with the stilling of the storm). That main point may be inserted into a syllogism as the minor premise: (1) Jesus' teaching about the inbreaking kingdom of God, especially in his parables, is the most demonstrably authentic core of historical information about Jesus in the gospel, but its Christological significance is never more than implicit.⁴⁵ (2) Jesus' miracles, including the most perplexing of nature

³⁹R. Kratz, *Rettenngswunder* (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 1979) 217; P. J. Achtemeier, "Person and Deed: Jesus and the Storm Tossed Sea," *Int* 16 (1962) 169-176.

⁴⁰O. Betz and W. Grimm, *Wesen und Wirklichkeit der Wunder Jesu* (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 1977) 82-83.

⁴¹H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1976) 143.

⁴²R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963) 240.

⁴³G. Schille, "Die Seesturmerzählung Markus 4,35-41 als Beispiel neutestamentlicher Aktualisierung," *ZNW* 56 (1965) 40 ("die erstaunliche Tatsache . . . Bericht vom Irdischen und nicht als nachösterliche Erzählung entstanden ist").

⁴⁴E. g. L. D. Stephens, *Probing the Past* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1974) 5, defines history as an "integrated narrative description or analysis of past events or facts written in a spirit of critical inquiry for the whole truth."

⁴⁵Cf. P. B. Payne, "The Authenticity of the Parables of Jesus," in *Gospel Perspectives* (1981), 2. 329-344. The only major portion of Jesus' parables to be seriously questioned is the corpus of peculiarly Lucan parables, on which see my "Midrash, Chiasmus and the Outline of Luke's Central Section," in *Gospel Perspectives* (1983), 3. 217-261.

miracles, depict in symbol the identical inbreaking kingdom, often with striking parallels in both imagery and significance to specific parables of Jesus. (3) The miracle stories should therefore be recognized as authentic—i.e. factual accounts of deeds of the historical Jesus—but their evidential value for demonstrating who Jesus is remains reserved for those who see through the eyes of faith.

II. A PURE METAPHOR?

The one passage usually classified as a nature miracle that has been so far entirely ignored is the enigmatic little reference to the coin in the fish's mouth (Matt 17:27). Yet even the most superficial application of form criticism reveals that this is not a miracle story, because it is not even a *story*. Unlike all the other accounts of Jesus' wondrous deeds, here no description of any unusual event appears. Rather Jesus gives Peter a *command*: "Go to the sea and cast a hook, and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel." Did Peter obey his master? If so, did he find the coin as Jesus seemingly predicted? Matthew remains entirely silent. William Hendriksen does not but replies, "Needless to say, that is exactly what happened."⁴⁶ But why is that needless to say? Granted Peter's propensity for disbelief and misunderstanding, it is not at all certain that he would have followed through. More importantly, however, Jesus has just completed what is clearly a parabolic dialogue with Peter in vv 25-26,⁴⁷ so the commentator must be sensitive to the possibility of a less than straightforward interpretation of v 27 as well.

Further problems increase the likelihood of Jesus' command being metaphorical. For the evangelical, it is not antisupernaturalism that points in this direction but the entirely uncharacteristic, seemingly trivial and unnecessarily spectacular method for Jesus to pay a simple tax that proves troubling here if a genuine miracle be inferred. J. D. M. Derrett attempts to escape this embarrassment by arguing that Jesus wanted to avoid drawing on funds that were otherwise committed to God's service,⁴⁸ but such a motive would scarcely have required supernatural action. The critical consensus perceives the influence of Jewish or Greek fairy tales as the passage became embellished in oral tradition.⁴⁹ A metaphorical interpretation again mediates between these two extremes, although this time by denying that any extraordinary event took place. Thus John Meier explains: "The final command about catching a fish and finding the necessary coins in its mouth may be a metaphorical affirmation of trust in the Father who will supply his sons with what they need for their service of love."⁵⁰ Why then the specific

⁴⁶W. Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 679.

⁴⁷Cf. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (1984), 8, 394.

⁴⁸J. D. M. Derrett, "Peter's Penny: Fresh Light on Matthew xvii 24-7," *NovT* 6 (1963) 1-15.

⁴⁹H. Montefiore, "Jesus and the Temple Tax," *NTS* 11 (1964) 66; cf. b. *Šabb.* 119a, *Ber. R.* 2 on Gen 2:3; so also E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 357; cf. Herodotus 3.42 on Polycrates.

⁵⁰J. P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 127.

imagery of fish and coin? Marcus Ward continues: "Perhaps he means Peter to catch fish which can be sold to pay the tax for them both."⁵¹ If it be objected that this interpretation also makes the saying unparalleled in form, one might point to not entirely dissimilar commands of Jesus that at first glance suggest supernatural insight but that may have entirely natural explanations (e.g. Jesus' commands to the disciples on making preparation for the triumphal entry and again for the last supper in Mark 11:2-3; 14:13-15). Finally, to those who would view such an approach as an unnecessary concession to critical scholarship, G. M. Lee responds: "I yield to no one in the belief that miracles happen, but when a miracle seems more characteristic of D. D. Home than of Christ, I think we should either regard it as legendary or ask whether a non-miraculous explanation is possible." Lee opts for the latter and concludes that Christ is saying in a picturesque and somewhat humorous way (slightly differently than Ward), "Go and catch a fish, and it will be as useful for our purpose as one of those fabled fishes with a coin in their mouth."⁵²

III. SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Scholars who are willing to abandon the extremes that see either no symbolism or no history in the miracle stories are steadily moving toward an impressive consensus on their metaphorical character. But influences from another discipline mount an even more provocative challenge to traditional critical and conservative perspectives alike. That discipline is sociology. The recent avalanche of sociological analyses of religion has not left ancient miracle stories untouched. The two most recent monographs in English on the miracles both rely heavily on sociological insights and merit brief review here. The first is Gerd Theissen's *Urchristliche Wundergeschichte*, first published in 1974 but just recently translated into English. Although the first two parts of his volume present form-critical and structuralist classifications, part three turns to "miracle stories as symbolic actions" and includes a chapter on their social function.⁵³ In his introduction Theissen sets the stage for this study: "The role of the sociology of literature would then be to interpret miracle stories as symbolic interactions in which processes of integration and conflict take place." Again, "they may give a biased reflection of reality, they may contradict all experience," but "their credibility depends on none of this." In short, "symbolic actions are social groups' ways of interpreting social reality, of transforming it into 'symbolic words of meaning' in which they can live."⁵⁴ What Theissen is saying is that early Christian tradition may have distorted the original accounts of Jesus' wonder-working feats and

⁵¹A. M. Ward, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Epworth, 1961) 108-109; cf. van der Loos, *Miracles* 686-687.

⁵²G. M. Lee, "Studies in Texts: Matthew 17.24-27," *Theology* 68 (1965) 380.

⁵³G. Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 231-264.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 30.

that it may have invented some stories outright but that it never intended to pass them off as historical.

Theissen rejects the label "enacted parable" for the miracles because it suggests historical events with suprahistorical significance. Instead he views these stories as not having entirely historical referents but with entirely this-worldly significance.⁵⁵ They reflect the affirmation of a primarily rural, poor and uncultured people in the possibility of rescue, salvation and redemption in this life in a world of rapidly overturning geographical, economic and cultural norms.⁵⁶ Theissen has "no doubt that Jesus worked miracles,"⁵⁷ but this is largely irrelevant to his position. What is relevant is that "the historical charismatic wonder-worker Jesus appears in symbolic intensification as a divine miracle-worker," so that "primitive Christian miracle stories are symbolic actions in which the experienced negativity of human existence is overcome by an appeal to a revelation of the sacred."⁵⁸ Whether that revelation is objective or subjective does not seem to matter. What matters is the intensity of belief. "This is the final implication of the miracle stories; they will rather deny the validity of all previous experience than the right of human suffering to be eliminated."⁵⁹

Whereas Theissen devotes only a portion of his study to sociological analysis, Howard Kee dwells on it almost exclusively in his latest book. Unlike Theissen, Kee accepts the terminology "enacted metaphors" as applicable to the gospel miracles,⁶⁰ and his exegesis of the passages in Mark and John discussed above dovetails remarkably with the findings of this study. Calming the windstorm "is to be interpreted against the ancient Semitic tradition that the sea is the source of power hostile to God," and Jesus' rebuke "manifests his cosmic authority as in the exorcisms where he commands the demons."⁶¹ The miraculous feedings "like their Old Testament counterpart . . . are not isolated wonders benefiting individuals but divine acts seen as constituting a covenant community," while cursing the fig tree points to "impending judgment on the old covenant people."⁶² Changing the water into wine is a "symbolic eschatological picture," and the wedding's toastmaster's comment is a "thinly veiled prophetic pronouncement about 'the best is yet to be'."⁶³

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 32.

⁵⁶Ibid., esp. pp. 258-259.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 277.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 300.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 302. For more detailed review and critique of Theissen's work from two opposite perspectives see D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 41-50; *Semeia* 11 (1978), esp. the articles by Boers and Achtemeier.

⁶⁰H. C. Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World* (New Haven: Yale, 1983) 234.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 163.

⁶²Ibid., p. 164.

⁶³Ibid., p. 230.

Like Theissen, however, Kee goes beyond the metaphorical import of the parables to the sociological. Like Theissen he rejects the notion that the evangelists invented all their material,⁶⁴ yet he stresses that the question of "facticity" is not the most important one. "The hermeneutically prior and far more important question is 'What did the ancient writer who reported the event understand to have occurred?'"⁶⁵ The major contribution of Kee's wide-ranging analysis of extra-Biblical miracle stories in Jewish, pagan and Christian literature of the centuries surrounding the formation of the NT is to show how often such narratives were treasured by those who did not for one minute believe in their historicity. In some instances they offered hope for physical healing, while in others they offered union with a god, defeat of evil powers, assurance of God's sovereignty in the course of world history, or the maintenance of order in the midst of social upheaval.⁶⁶ For other ancients belief in the miraculous posed no problems, but they recognized that the demonic realm could also perform prodigious works. Kee corroborates the function of the dispute with Jesus about the source of his authority, noted above, "so that the important question from the viewpoint of this tradition is not 'Can miracles be accomplished?' but 'To what end do they occur?'"⁶⁷

IV. CONCLUSION

Theissen's and Kee's research provides one preeminent challenge for evangelicals preoccupied with questions about the historicity of the NT miracles. Both men reject antisupernaturalism and much of the more radical *Religions- and Traditionsgeschichte* that has preceded them. Rather, they raise this question: Is it not possible, even inherently probable, that the NT writers at least in part never intended to have their miracle stories taken as historical or factual and that their original audiences probably recognized this? If this sounds like the identical reasoning that enabled Robert Gundry to adopt his midrashic interpretation of Matthew while still affirming inerrancy,⁶⁸ that is because it *is* the same. The problem will not disappear simply because one author is dealt with *ad hominem*. Of course Theissen and Kee would argue that errors come in elsewhere in Scripture, so they would never feel the tension that surrounded Gundry's work. But how should evangelicals react? Dismissing the sociological view on the grounds that the NT miracles present themselves as historical gets us nowhere. So do almost all the other miracle stories of antiquity. Are we to believe all of them?

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 194.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 3.

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 293-295.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 157.

⁶⁸R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

In fact, Kee himself points to the proper approach: a careful examination of every alleged parallel. Kee, for example, would agree with evangelicals in rejecting both the *theios-anēr* interpretation of the miracles of Jesus and the view that interprets them in the light of second- and third-century romances, especially Philostratus' *Apollonius of Tyana*.⁶⁹ The proper approach to any proposal about the genre of a part of Scripture is the same regardless of the source—whether it is the old history-of-religions divine-man Christology, Gundry's Matthew as midrash, the new sociological analysis of the miracles, or Leslie Allen's parabolic interpretation of Jonah, G. Lloyd Carr's identification of the Song of Songs as non-Solomonic erotic love poetry, Richard Bauckham's new view of pseudonymity in the posthumous expansion of the memoirs behind 2 Peter, or any of dozens of other novel theories, some of which evangelicals have accepted and some not.⁷⁰ Every alleged parallel and every linguistic and literary feature contributing to the proposed genre must be assessed in detail. Perhaps they do not add up to what their proposer claims; perhaps they do. But a superficial appearance of history proves nothing. In the case of Theissen and Kee, it seems that their fresh insights into the social conditions of first-century Christianity are frequently valid, but that they need not entail any historical skepticism. The unique claims of Christianity with its doctrine of the fully divine and fully human incarnation of God's own Son still seem to demand that its miracles be grounded in an objective space-time continuum in a way less essential for the rest of religious thought and experience.⁷¹ The latest version of the view that rejects an early origin for this incarnational Christology has been nicely answered by the recent Donald Guthrie *Festschrift*.⁷² The results of this study will hopefully strengthen the case for the historicity of some of the most incredible miracle stories by pointing out their fundamental coherence with the most undeniably authentic portion of Jesus' teaching: the parables. In one case, however, the problem of unbelievability has been resolved by suggesting that what to some has seemed to be a miracle is merely a metaphorical command—on the grounds of its entirely distinct form and character.

Has the openness to critical scholarship reflected here, despite specific limitations, started us down that irreversible slippery slope? I think not, because I think the metaphor is fundamentally misleading. Even as wide-ranging discussions as those of Harold Lindell surveying the "defections" from our evangeli-

⁶⁹Kee, *Miracle* 297-298, 288.

⁷⁰L. C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) esp. 175-181; G. L. Carr, *The Song of Solomon* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1984) esp. 19-41; R. J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco: Word, 1983) esp. 158-162.

⁷¹The insights of even some secular historians agree. See e.g. H. Butterfield, "The Originality of the Hebrew Scriptures," in *The Origins of History* (ed. A. Watson; New York: Basic, 1981) 80-81: The Hebrews were "possibly more obsessed with history than any other nation that has ever existed"; G. Florovsky, "The Predicament of the Christian Historian," in *God, History and Historians* (ed. C. T. McIntire; New York: Oxford, 1977) 432: Contrary to most heathen cyclical views of time, Christianity came "as an eschatological religion and for that very reason is essentially historical."

⁷²H. H. Rowdon, ed., *Christ the Lord* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1982), esp. the articles by I. H. Marshall, R. T. France, D. A. Carson and M. M. B. Turner.

cal heritage in twentieth-century America⁷³ come nowhere close to proving a universally applicable maxim. In Europe, for example, this century alone has produced a major counterexample with the increasingly conservative progression of the school of thought traceable through the early Karl Barth to the later Barth to the Torrances in Scotland and finally to many of their students in Edinburgh and Aberdeen who even affirm inerrancy. People are climbing back up the slippery slope. In fact our study of the miracles suggests that the metaphor should include a two-sided mountain. Traditional evangelical and classic liberal positions sit comfortably camped out at the bottom of opposite sides. The latter have made important initial forays up the slope, and the former have sent out some major expeditions. But the meeting of both parties at the top still awaits future efforts. The summit of course represents not just a place where the two parties can meet but where the original intention behind and meaning of the Scriptural texts can be discovered. This is our true evangelical heritage. Can the summit be scaled? Only God knows. After all, the slopes are slippery—and there are plenty at the bottom of both sides eager to pull their companions back down.

⁷³Lindsell, *Battle*; idem, *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979).