The Challenge of the Gospel Miracle Stories

Bernard Robinson

Among the many questions raised by the Gospel stories of Jesus' miracles, half a dozen are perhaps particularly pressing. How do the miracles differ from magic (if they do; Morton Smith's recent book *Jesus the Magician*[1] argues that they do not)? What criteria is one to invoke to distinguish authentic from inauthentic miracles in the Gospels? What have Form and Redaction Criticism to say about the miracle narratives? Do the Gospels see the miracles of Jesus in a different light from the oral tradition and from the historical Jesus? Are the ways that Jesus, the oral tradition and the evangelists saw the miracles valid and/or mandatory for Christians today? I hope to say something by way of answer to each of these questions, but my method will not be to examine the questions in the abstract, but to look at three specific miracle stories and to attempt to cope with the problems that each throws up.

First, though, *one* general point. Namely, that the New Testament evidence makes it very difficult to subscribe to the view that Jesus did not work any miracles at all. In the Gospel of Mark, 209 out of 666 verses (the figures come from Richardson) deal directly or indirectly with miracles. Press back into the Gospel sources, if you will, and look in turn at Q, Mark, special Matthew, special Luke, and John and in each (probably independent) source Jesus is seen as a miracle worker. Q admittedly narrates only one miracle, that of the centurion's son/slave, but then that is the only narrative of any sort attributed to Q, and Q does elsewhere *allude* to Jesus' miracles:

e.g. "If I cast out demons through Beelzebul, through whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast them out through the spirit of God, then has the rule of God come suddenly upon you." (Matt. 12:27-28; cf. Luke 11:19).

Again, if Jesus did not work miracles, why did Jewish tradition need to accuse him so consistently of sorcery (Mk. 3.22 par.; Matt. 9.34; Lk, 11.15; Sanh. 43a; TB Shab. 104 b Bar.)? A further argument against trying to purge the Gospel record of all miracles is that urged most recently by Geoffrey Ashe, namely that those who have tried have each come up with a totally different picture of Jesus. Assume that the miracle stories are all accretions on the original record and try to strip them away, and you find yourself in the position of the man who peels off layer upon layer of an onion till he is empty handed. The historical Jesus eludes you altogether, and you find yourself recreating him in your own image.

---

[1] **Books alluded to in the text (usually by the author's name only) will be found listed in the Select Bibliography at the end.**

We begin our survey with the story of the demoniac in the synagogue at Capernaum, Mk. 1.21-28. Lk, 4.31-37, and we shall first say a word or two about the views of the Form Critics. Dibelius, one of their founding fathers, sought to distinguish in the Gospels two types of story involving miracles, the *Paradigm* and the *Novelle*. Paradigms differed from Novellen in that the style of narration was simpler and less emphasis was placed on the miraculousness of the event. Paradigms, he thought, began life as stories told by early preachers in their sermons; whereas Novellen were the work of early Christian story-tellers. Paradigms tended to be more primitive and to stick closer to historical facts ('because the eyewitnesses could control and correct, a relative trustworthiness of the Paradigms is guaranteed'). The narrative about the Capernaum demoniac Dibelius saw as a Paradigm (though one 'of less pure type'), rather than a Novelle. I agree with Jeremias in thinking that Dibelius' distinction between Paradigms and Novellen is rather tendentious (we have no evidence that a class of 'story-tellers' such as are postulated as the transmitters of the Novellen ever existed in the early Church). What the Form Critics have done, however, is to draw our attention to the fact that some miracle stories are narrated in a much more straightforward fashion than others. Some are fairly elaborate in construction and tend to follow a pattern which can be readily paralleled in Hellenistic circles outside the Bible. Bultmann has pointed to more than a dozen features which tend to recur in miracle stories, whether Biblical or non-Biblical (gravity of the complaint; difficulty of the healing; use of word and gesture; reprimand of the demon responsible; demonstration of the recovery of the patient; reaction of the crowd; and such like). Bultmann sees conformity to the pattern as a sign of antiquity, but I agree rather with Jeremias that the opposite is the case; I see, therefore, as pointers to the artificiality and lateness of the present story the elements of the pattern that it contains (such as: the demon recognises the advent of the healer; the healer reprimands the demon; the cure is instantaneous; the reaction of the crowd is chronicled). I see no good reason to think the story unhistorical (there are indications that it was transmitted in Aramaic, such as the echo in 'What to you and me ...?' of 2 Sam. 19.22, 1 Kings 17.18, which make it very unlikely that it is a late, Hellenistic fabrification), but its presentation seems stereotyped.

That Jesus (by whatever means) exorcised demons is, I think, historically certain. It is also very embarrassing to most modern readers. As embarrassing to them, perhaps, as it was comforting to the early Christians. Richardson aptly quotes some words of Harnack on the latter point:

> 'It was as exorcizers that Christians went out into the great world, and exorcism formed one very powerful method of their mission and propaganda ... the age was ruled by the black

> one and his hordes (Barnabas); it 'lieth in the evil one' (*keitai en ponero*, John). Nor was this mere theory; it was a most vital conception of existence. The whole world and the circumambient atmosphere were filled with devils; not merely idolatry, but every phase and form of life was ruled by them. They sat on thrones, they hovered around cradles. The earth was literally a hell, though it continued to be a creation of God. To encounter this hell and all its devils, Christians had command of weapons that were invincible' (*Expansion of Christianity I*, 160).

How is one to come to terms today with these facts? Should one say, with Bultmann,

> 'No one can use electric light and the radio, or rely in cases of sickness on modern medical and clinical remedies, and at the same time believe in the New Testament world of spirits and wonders' (in Bartsch, *Kerygma und Mythos* 1948, p. 18);

and proceed to demythologise the Gospel record? Should we, therefore, say that Jesus practised psycho-somatic healings of conditions which baffled the medical knowledge of the day and were for this reason ascribed to diabolic intervention but today would be diagnosed as psychological or mental in origin and treated accordingly? Perhaps so. Rudolph Otto, Morton Smith and others favour this solution. A teacher who takes this view will have to decode the exorcism miracles for his pupils, explaining that today they should be read as expressing a conviction that Jesus makes men whole psychologically. Glasswell, indeed, seems to suggest the need for this sort of de-coding for all the miracles:

> 'Since miracles fit more easily into a first-century view of the world than into that of our own day, the assertion that Jesus performed miracles may have had in itself the same status for his near-contemporaries as a psychological explanation of Jesus' effect on individual sufferers may have for us' (M. E. Glasswell in Moule *Miracles* p. 153).

For my part, however, although I use the electric light and the wireless, I am chary of treating all the cases of demoniac possession, let alone all the miracles of whatever type, in this way. The fact that people often in the past through ignorance attributed to diabolic forces things which have a natural scientific explanation, does not prove that diabolic forces do not exist. The fact that the material world has its own laws of operation does not prove that there is not another world beyond, which may either from time to time or consistently impinge on this one. To make of science a closed system and suppose that everything in the universe must belong within it is irrational. Such scientism amounts, in my view, to a blind faith, a blinkered superstition.

How credible then, today, is New Testament demonology? To answer this question we need first, I suggest, to ask another: Why did the New Testament writers, and the Jews generally perhaps, believe that the world was in the grip of demonic forces? What line of thinking led to calling Satan 'the god of this age' (2 Cor. 4) or 'the ruler of this world' (Jn. 12.31; 16.11) or to saying 'The whole world lies in the power of the evil one'(1Jn 5.19), or to seeing the great business of life to be a conflict with 'principalities and powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places' (Eph. 6.12; cf. Rom. 8.38-39; 1 Cor. 2.8; Gal. 4.3; Col. 2.15. etc.)? The Jewish religion taught very clearly two doctrines about Yhwh, (i) that He is omnipotent, (ii) that He is compassionate and just. Over the centuries, and particularly in the long era of disillusionment and demoralisation that followed the exile, the era of continuous subjection to foreign rule, the Jews came to find it difficult to square these doctrines with the evidence of their senses. It was not simply that they could find no physical cause for some illnesses and could not believe that they were always caused directly by Yhwh as a punishment: even if someone had discovered physical causes the mystery would have remained of how Yhwh the almighty and merciful could have created such a world as they saw before them—a world in which disease and suffering seemed to occur in random fashion rather than to fall only on the unrighteous; a world in which all, rogues and saints alike, had the precious gift of life snuffed out after, at best, a few decades, a world in which a nation which did its best, by and large, to serve God aright was an object to be kicked around by irreligious but larger and more powerful nations. The author of Job was prepared to conclude all in mystery: he had no explanation of why things were so, but sought to show that none of the facts contradicted either the omnipotence or the compassion of God. Many others, however, opted for the demonological explanation: the world was all awry because forces hostile to God had gained control of it. These forces were personal agents created by God and given free will; their *de facto* power, therefore, in no way compromised the sovereignty of God.

Most Christians today, it seems to me, take their theodicy from the Book of Job rather than from the New Testament. They are conscious of the difficulty of believing in an almighty, just and kindly God who created a world as this one is, but balk at non-materialist explanations of suffering, death and injustice. They tend to say that we know that disease is normally caused by germs and viruses and that therefore to speak of demonic forces is to formulate an unnecessary hypothesis. But the discovery of germs and viruses does nothing at all to reduce the difficulty of reconciling the facts of life with the doctrine of God, and the demonological explanation surely has lost none of its force. Germs and viruses will be the means used by the demons; that is all. It may be (I am not certain of this) that the New Testament Christians thought that the demons always acted directly rather than through secondary causes; if so, we should have to demur and say that they employ 'natural' physical causes, but with this one qualification, their viewpoint seems tenable still today and it seems to me to be odd that so many Christians reject it in favour of the pre-Christian outlook of Job.

James Kallas, in his provocative study of the Synoptic miracles, has not only put up a very strong case for thinking that demonology is central to Jesus' message, but he has also shown that to eliminate the demonology from Christianity is to impoverish it considerably. Demythologise Christianity of its demonology and you make it a high falutin religion, a religion more likely to appeal to intellectuals (Scribes, Pharisees and German professors) than to the poor and simple (Galilean fishermen, Breton peasants and Irish navvies). That Jesus saves men from the power of Satan, that he conquered Satan by curing disease and finally by surviving death, Satan's ultimate weapon, is a message intelligible to all, and is unmistakably Good News or Gospel. But that Jesus saves in a metaphorical sense by enabling one to appropriate authentic existence, and that he did not rise literally from death but metaphorically survives death in that he is risen and ascended into the Kerygma (Bultmann's phrase), which is the sort of line that the demythologisers take, such a message as this is neither readily comprehensible nor is it, when understood, calculated to produce mass conversions (and demonstrably it fails to do so).

I offer these observations on demonology with some hesitation, because I am well aware that some people, adults and children alike, will find New Testament demonology frankly incredible and a barrier to belief. The issue, though, is not, 'How much are people prepared to swallow?' but, 'What is the truth?' Further, the interest in the occult and in science-fiction today, especially among the young, suggests that perhaps viewpoints which clash with the prevalent scientific orthodoxy may have more chance of appealing to the younger generation than we sometimes suppose.

To conclude my examination of the Capernaum demoniac story I want to ask how Jesus himself, if the narrative is factual, will have seen his action, how the oral tradition saw it, and finally how the evangelists Mark and Luke understood it.

As for Jesus himself, I note first that miracle-working was arguably common among rabbis (Schlatter disputed this, but Van Der Loos has recently shown that Fiebig's contention that the rabbis often worked miracles has much to commend it; Vermes' work suggests that miracle-working was particularly common among Galilean Hasidic rabbis) but that cases of exorcism are virtually unknown in the rabbinic literature. Jesus' reference to exorcising by the sons of the Pharisees (Matt. 12; Lk, 11) shows that he was not unique, but Jesus does appear to have seen exorcism as a specially important part of his ministry (though, as Moule has pointed out, it is a strange fact that no case of exorcism occurs in the Fourth Gospel; also, that in the Synoptics exorcism is almost confined to material common to all three—in other words the Marcan tradition is responsible for most instances). He saw the casting out of demons as a demonstration that the reign of God had suddenly begun to dawn (so in the Q saying preserved in Matt. 12 and Lk. 11). The forces of darkness and light had met in open battle and light had prevailed.

I would draw attention to the fact that no reference is made in the story to the *faith* of the demoniac. It is true that in some other miracles we do find such allusions to the faith of the patient or of his relatives (e.g. Mk. 7.24 seq.) or friends (Mk. 2.3 seq.; Matt. 8. 5 seq.) and in Mk. 5.34, 10.52, Lk. 17.19, Jesus actually says, 'Your faith has made you whole.' Was Jesus, then, a faith-healer? Mk. 6.5, which says that he could do no miracle at Nazareth because of the people's lack of faith, is often taken as evidence that the faith of patient or bystanders was the *sine qua non* of his healing miracles (whether the faith in question is full Christian faith in Jesus and/or God, or only, as Bultmann supposes, faith in Jesus' competence as a wonder-healer). I think, with Richardson, that Jesus' ability to work miracles was not dependent on faith, but he chose not to exercise his power unless there were present people who would read the miracle aright as he understood it, as a sign or pointer to the dawning of the reign of God. The miracles, in fact, like the parables, could be understood only by those who 'had eyes to see'. They were not objective proofs or demonstrations. But on the other hand, they were not faith-healings either—in the sense of being the product of the faith of the patients. The cures were effected by the divine power operating in Jesus, not by something in the patients.

It seems, in the light of Form Critical studies, probable that between the time of Jesus and that of the evangelists the miracles came to acquire a slightly different significance. To Jesus they had been signs of the advent of the Kingdom of God, but oral tradition, to which the idea of the Kingdom came to have less appeal, saw them rather as signs of the authority of the King, as pointers to Jesus' Messiahship. Our present story probably reflects this change of emphasis at several points: 'I know you who you are, the Holy One of God.... He has a new teaching, with power: he commands the unclean spirits and they obey him.' Oral tradition, however, was not fabricating a new meaning for the miracles, only bringing out an emphasis that had originally been implicit.

What, finally, has the evangelist himself made of the miracle? It is the very first miracle that Mark has chosen to narrate, and its placing in his Gospel is surely intended to be programmatic. This, Mark implies, is what the ministry of Jesus is all about, the head-on clash of the forces of light and darkness. So anxious is he, indeed, to make this point that he forgets to bring in for once his King Charles' Head, the idea of the messianic secret. But evangelists are not solely interested in the once-for-all events of Jesus' life viewed as history, even as saving history; they wish to assert too that what Jesus was for his contemporaries he remains for theirs. Mark (and the same applies to Luke) begins the demoniac story with Jesus *teaching* with authority, then shows him in the work of exorcism *acting* with authority, and ends up with a comment about the spread of Jesus' fame. Such is Jesus now, he implies, a living presence in today's world, teaching, acting and propagating the Gospel message.

That the Kingdom has dawned and Satan's forces put into disarray, that Jesus is the Lord Messiah in whom all the authority of God is vested; that Jesus is alive and active in his Church now; these three viewpoints, those of Jesus himself, the oral tradition and the evangelists respectively, all seem to me to be valid today. These remain the points which those who teach or preach the miracle story should stress.

We move on to a consideration of a second miracle narrative, that of the healing of the Blind Man of Bethsaida, Mk. 8.22-26 (no parallels). I begin this time from a Redaction Critical perspective by aligning myself with those scholars such as Fuller, Glasswell and Richardson who think Mark sees in the story a symbolic representation of Jesus the great illuminator. The opening of the eyes of the blind man symbolises Jesus' ability to cure the spiritual blindness of all. Jesus has recently fed the Five Thousand and asked his disciples, 'Do you have eyes and see not?' (8.18). Now he opens a blind man's eyes and enjoins secrecy on him before proceeding metaphorically to open Peter's eyes, to his own messianic authority (8.27-30), and to enjoin secrecy on *him.* Whether or not Mark is alluding to the tradition that Peter himself came from Bethsaida (Jn. 1.44; Richardson boldly says, 'The Blind Man of Bethsaida is no other than St Peter'), the whole context of the story surely shows that it acts as a symbol of Jesus' power over spiritual blindness. The fact that the man recovers *by stages* (which is surprising: miracle stories usually emphasise the instantaneous nature of the cure) symbolises the fact that men are sometimes brought to complete faith in Christ gradually; as indeed can be seen from the Gospel of Mark to have been the case with the disciples.

The mention of the use of spittle raises difficult but important questions which must now detain us for a few minutes. Jesus is recorded as having used spittle in two other healing miracles, Mk. 33 (a deaf and dumb man) and Jn. 9.6 (a man born blind). Now in the ancient world spittle was commonly thought to possess a sort of life-force, for good or ill: the Assyrians spoke of 'a spittle of life' and of 'a spittle of death', and the Babylonians had similar ideas; in Egyptian mythology Horus' injured eye was cured by saliva; Pliny (NH 28.7 and 22) and Galen (Natural Faculties 3.7) spoke of the curative value of spittle; at Epidaurus people were allegedly cured in the temple of Asclepius by the application of spittle from sacred snakes and dogs; a blind man owed the restoration of his sight to the healing quality of the saliva of the emperor Vespasian (Tac. Hist. 4.81; Suet. Vesp. 7.21 seq.). It is not clear whether the spittle was thought of simply as a medicine or as possessing some sort of magical potency, but John Hull argues that the fact that the blind man cured by Vespasian supposedly insisted that the saliva applied to his eyes must be the emperor's, as also the fact that the cure is stated to have been instantaneous, favours the idea that the saliva was thought to act magically. Why, we must ask, is Jesus, who is usually represented as healing at a word, shown in these three Gospel instances as resorting to a folk remedy, whether medicinal or magical? Delitzsch thought that Jesus believed that spittle had in fact a medicinal effect, and Morton Smith (to whom Jesus was a magician) thinks that he believed it had magical power. Strack-Billerbeck supposed that Jesus wished to indicate to the patient the fact that he was a healer (though the healing itself was effected not by the use of the saliva but by Jesus' subsequent word). Calvin thought that Jesus used spittle as a symbol of the power of speech which he gave back to his patients: an explanation that makes some sense in Mk. 7 (the deaf and dumb man) but none where the patient is blind. Van Der Loos thinks that because of 'the universal belief in the curative power of spittle' Jesus accommodated himself to people's ideas and used his spittle as a vehicle for his healing powers. I am inclined myself, however, to doubt whether Jesus did in fact use spittle: I suspect that the spittle stories are due to assimilation of the Jesus traditions to Hellenistic ideas of how wonder-workers behave. Jeremias has invited us to contrast the present account with that of the healing of blind Bartimaeus in Mk. 10. The latter story is much simpler in construction, and contains several Palestinian features (*bar,* 10:46; *rabbuni,* 10.51; 'son of David', 10.47), whereas the Bethsaida story contains no Palestinian characteristics and conforms in a number of particulars to the pattern of Hellenistic miracle stories (exclusion of the public; use of spittle and the laying-on of hands; recovery by stages).[2]

I see in the story of the Blind Man of Bethsaida, therefore, a tradition which, while it may well be based on an historical healing, has been moulded by a view of Jesus as a sort of magician, a view that I find it hard to credit. The basic idea in magic is that certain secret powers inhere in set formulas, actions or commodities which work automatically (as the noted magician of our century, Alistair Crowley, put it, 'By doing certain things, certain results follow'). The Gospels of Mark and (more especially) Luke from time to time fall into the temptation (for so, despite Morton Smith's ingenuity,[3] I regard it) of assimilating Jesus to the magician figures of his day, such as Apollonius of Tyana; Matthew, to his credit, was on his guard against this tendency and eliminated such ideas from his sources (thus the woman with the flow of blood who in Mark (5.29; cf. 6:56) is cured by touching Jesus' coat is healed in Matthew (9.22) by Jesus' word). My verdict on the story of the Blind Man of Bethsaida, therefore, is that it has to be used with great care: the symbolic message which Mark wishes to convey by it is valid and important, but the picture it presents of the historical Jesus is probably misleading.

My last miracle is a 'nature miracle', that of the Stilling of the Storm, Mk. 4.35-41, Matt. 8.23-27; Lk, 8.22-25. There are very few 'nature miracles' in the Gospels (Walking on Water; Cursing of the Fig Tree; Coin in the fish's mouth; Peter's Catch; Stilling of the Storm; Feeding in the Wilderness; Water changed to Wine) and I think it would be true to say that a majority of critics believe that none is historical. There are suspicious circumstances about some of them (the Fig Tree story seems to anticipate the stories in the apocryphal Gospels where Jesus petulantly exercises power for his own sake; the tale of the Coin in the mouth of the Fish is totally unlike any other Gospel miracle story; the Cana miracle would appear to have been motivated by rather a petty consideration, a desire to save a young man from social embarrassment) but the rejection of all the nature miracles seems to me to be unjustified. I suspect that such rejection had its roots in an unexamined and irrational feeling that there are some things which Jesus simply could not do. Harnack indeed said bluntly about the Storm miracle, 'We no longer believe that a storm was stilled by a man, and we shall never believe it again.' It is easy enough to rationalise the story—by supposing that Jesus calmed the disciples' nerves so that they thought the storm was over before it was and attributed its cessation to Jesus; or that Jesus said, 'It will be over soon' and when the storm suddenly, as was common with storms on the Sea of Galilee, abated, Jesus' words were seen as the cause—but if Jesus was what the Gospels and the Creeds make him out to be, I see little difficulty in supposing him capable of stilling a storm which threatened his disciples' lives.

Richardson, Kallas and others have noted that in the words 'he rebuked the wind' and 'he said to the sea, "Be muzzled",' we have an echo of Mk. 1.25, where Jesus rebuked the demon in the Capernaum synagogue and tells him to be muzzled. Clearly, as Richardson says, Mark recognised no distinction between healing miracles and nature miracles. Moreover, Jesus' action in the story is of a piece with his ideas elsewhere:

> 'Jesus looked upon this ordinary storm at sea, this ordinary event of nature, as a demonic force, and he strangled it! Rain may be normal, but to Jesus, when nature goes berserk and tries to drown men and wipe them off the earth, sucking them down to a watery grave, this is demonic and he treats it like a demon.' (Kallas, p. 65).

That people today will initially find this thinking alien, is clear enough. But with Kallas, I am not sure that you can demythologise it away and retain a meaningful Christianity. Is it not possible, too, that some of the difficulties that we encounter in presenting Christianity today in schools and elsewhere arise from the fact that the Christianity we offer is an emasculated one? I agree with the 1978 Reith Lecturer to the extent of thinking that many of the troubles of the Church today stem from capitulating to the spirit of the age. Teachers and preachers mutilate Christianity of the elements that they find uncongenial and then marvel that their audiences find what is left unappealing. Who knows, perhaps the audience would find the full-blooded New Testament Gospel of God's victory in Christ over the principalities and powers that hold the world in bondage a more stimulating, more challenging message than the humanism with Christian face that is so often substituted for it?

But let us return to the Stilling of the Storm. Over and above, though not unconnected with, what we have already found in the story, the evangelists see, I think, in it one, or more probably two, additional ideas. In Mk 4.41 par. the disciples ask, 'Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?' The point here is that in the Old Testament the lord of the wind and waves is Yhwh Himself (Ps. 107.23-30, 89.9 etc.). The evangelists clearly see in this story an illustration of the fact that Jesus is vested with Yhwh's lordship of the elements. Less certainly the evangelists saw in the event also a symbol of the Church in their own day. Van Der Loos and Kallas (also Goulder) are unhappy about this interpretation, but I side with Richardson and Bornkamm in thinking it very probable. It was a commonplace among the Church Fathers:

> 'That little ship presented a figure of the Church, in that she is disquieted in the sea, that is, in the world, by the waves, that is, by persecutions and temptations, the Lord patiently sleeping, as it were, until, roused at last by the prayers of the saints, He checks the world and restores tranquillity to His own'.
>
> (Tertullian De Bapt. 12; less persuasive is Tertullian's suggestion, in the same place, that the waves of the Sea of Galilee washing over the apostles supplied their lack of a formal baptism!)

Van Der Loos, who is allergic to any suggestion of symbolism in the miracle stories, protests

> 'When the fishing boat which was once in distress on the Sea of Galilee is converted into the "ship of the Church", it should be realised that this conversion is effected purely and simply in the ship-yard of the imagination!' (p. 649).

But if the evangelists are, as is generally agreed, interested not simply in what Jesus did and was in his historical ministry but also in what the Risen Christ did and was for the world of a few decades later, the symbolic interpretation seems very likely. Kallas and Van Der Loos reject it, I think, because they see it as an alternative to accepting the story as historical; but why should it not be both symbolic and historical?

I see, then, in the story of the Stilling of the Storm an historical event in which Jesus took the storm to be an exercise of diabolic power, and vanquished it; an event which the evangelists saw also as a pointer to Jesus' special relationship to Yhwh the lord of nature, and probably as a symbolic representation of Jesus' power to guide in safety the Christian community of their day. I do not see why all three ideas should not be used in modern treatment of the narrative in both Church and classroom.

I have now looked at the three miracle stories I set out to consider. Before proceeding to a general conclusion, I must spend a minute on the criteria for historicity. I have already indicated that I am not convinced that all the miracles occurred (I expressed doubts about those of the Fig Tree, the Marriage Feast at Cana, and the Coin in the Fish's Mouth); also that I think that some did not occur in quite the way that they are narrated, because of the assimilation of Jesus' miracles in the apostolic period to pagan magic. How is one to decide between the authentic and the inauthentic? Source, Form and Redaction Criticism can each be of assistance here, in that if we were, for example, to find that a story circulated in a folkloristic form (as is probably the case with the Old Testament story of Joshua stopping the sun) or that it mirrored with suspicious neatness the theological views of the evangelist, our doubts might be aroused. The most useful criterion, though, as Professor Moule urges, is that of consistency. One asks of a miracle not, Is this consistent with what we know of the laws of nature (if it were, it would not be a miracle!) but, Is this consistent with what we believe about the nature and character of God; does this miracle accord with 'the kind of way in which a personal God helps and trains his children'. (Moule, p. 17)? Conjuring tricks with no moral content, or destructive miracles, are to be rejected because it is inconsistent that the God revealed through the Cross should have manifested himself in this way. This is the criterion by which so many stories in the Apocryphal Gospels are to be rejected; and it serves to throw considerable doubt on such stories as those of the Coin in the Fish's Mouth or of the Cursing of the Fig Tree.

I wish to draw now to a conclusion by briefly applying the ideas I have been outlining to the place of the Gospel miracles in Religious Education and preaching.

i The teacher or preacher cannot side-step the 'academic' work of scholars and plunge straight into the question of how to present the material to 3C or to a mixed congregation. The way you present the miracles is inevitably determined by your attitudes on the problems that exercise scholars in their ivory towers. Is a particular miracle story historical; is the world-view implied by it (demonic forces, and all that) true or false; does the evangelist see symbolism in the event? Your answers to questions such as this must influence the way you treat the story.

ii The miracles are not proofs or demonstrations of Jesus' claims (Jesus appeals for men's faith in him, not for their intellectual conviction that he is what he seems to be), and it is a mistake so to present them: Jesus himself, after all, refused a sign to his own 'unbelieving generation'. But on the other hand, they are clearly intended by the evangelists to help men on the way to faith. They did not expect men to opt for faith in Christ in a vacuum: it was because of hearing of his actions (mainly his miracles) and his teaching that they would come to believe. Jesus himself indeed is represented in one story as alluding to the evidential value of a miracle: he healed the Capernaum paralytic, we read, 'that you may know that the son of man has power on earth to forgive sins' (Mk. 2.10). The miracles are not proofs or demonstrations; but they are pointers to faith. They testify eloquently for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see.

iii The teacher or preacher needs to be aware of the debate about the magical features in the Gospels. Stories which have magical overtones (e.g. that of the woman with the issue of blood) should perhaps not be used with children until they are of an age to make sense of a discussion of this problem. Similarly, I should think it wise, in the case of miracle stories that the teacher considers useful but unhistorical, that pupils should not meet them until they are capable of understanding that while the narratives may not have an historical basis their evolution may have a sound theological reason.

iv Where one can detect several different layers of meaning in a miracle story (that of Jesus; the oral tradition; the evangelist; sometimes, too, a redactor), I would suggest that normally one should concentrate on one at a time. If on a particular occasion one is expounding the story as the oral tradition understood it, or the evangelist, one should beware of automatically attributing that understanding directly to Jesus himself.

Note: The Problem of Magical Features in the Gospels

Are the magical features in the Gospels necessarily late? Morton Smith argues forcibly that they are not. The recent tendency to stress Jesus' Jewish background Smith sees as misguided: Jesus' Jewishness may have been rather superficial (this would certainly not be totally surprising in a Galilean), and he resembled a magician in a number of respects. Like the magicians he claimed to have a spirit (the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God); he cast out demons (making use of the knowledge of their names; enjoining silence upon them; and such like); he used saliva in the course of healing; he employed the 'I am ...' formulation much favoured by magicians. May he not, then, have actually been a magician?

Crucial perhaps to Morton Smith's claim is his suggestion that the Eucharist was 'an unmistakable magical rite' (p. 46), 'a familiar magical operation–giving enchanted food to cause love' (p. 122). To try to find a Jewish background for the Eucharist, for instance in the Passover celebration, is, he thinks, 'ludicrous' since 'strange as some rituals of Judaism may be, they do not include eating people' or the drinking of blood, which would by Jewish standards be 'an atrocity' (p. 123). Texts are extant, on the other hand, among the magical papyri attesting the existence of the idea of a magician identifying himself with a god and giving food and wine to devotees, asserting its identity with the magician-god and its power to draw those who eat it to the magician in bonds of love. Smith's ingenious argumentation fails to convince. If the New Testament conception of the Eucharist goes beyond Jewish ways of thinking about the Passover, it is even further removed from the mumbo-jumbo world of the magical papyri, those 'interesting relics of degenerate religions and the human mind gone astray' (S. Eitrem, *Papyri Osloensis fasc.* 1, 1925 p. 1). Again, the narratives of the institution of the Last Supper are thoroughly Semitic in nature, and in the absence of evidence of use by Jewish magicians of *anagogai* of the type quoted by Smith (the examples adduced are clearly pagan) it is easier to suppose that Jesus took Jewish paschal ideas and stretched them to fit the new reality that he was instituting than it is to suppose that he adapted an Hellenistic pagan custom the account of which was later Hebraized.

In general Smith argues that 'when magical traits appear in the gospels it is less likely that they have been added by the tradition than it is that they have survived from the earlier, lower-class, and more primitive form of the cult' (p. 146). This is somewhat conjectural, and does not take account of the fact that whether or not the early Church evolved from being primitive and lower-class to being lower middle-class, respectable and rational (p. 146), it certainly evolved from being a largely Jewish to being a largely Gentile Church, a fact which would tend to encourage magical accretions. Further, in 7.34 and 5.41 Mark preserves words of command in the Aramaic (*Ephphatha* and *Talitha Kum*) presumably because by his time Aramaic phrases had come to function in the way that *nomina barbara* did in magical circles (in Acts 9.36 seq. as Smith notes on p. 95, we have a story of Peter using the second phrase to a dead woman: only the tradition has misunderstood the phrase and taken the first word, or a variant of it, to be the woman's name). To Jesus himself Aramaic phrases can scarcely have been exotic magical spells. It is the apostolic Church, not Jesus himself that in these cases at least was responsible for the magical features (Note, however, that I. Rabbinowitz suggests, *ZNTW* 53 (1962) 229 - 238, that *Ephphata* is supposed to be Hebrew rather than Aramaic).

If Smith were right in supposing the magical features early, would Christianity as a credible religion be necessarily undermined? Smith himself adopts a straightforward position. Miracles do not happen, though healings caused by the power of suggestion do. Jesus was a faith-healer and magician; nothing more. But suppose, I ask, that miracles do happen? Suppose that the spiritual world completely interpenetrates the material? May not, in that case, some occurrences of 'magic' be more than instances of psychological suggestion? That some men and objects have supra-natural powers, is more than I should care to deny. Men have believed this sort of thing throughout the centuries; Christians among them. May they perhaps have been right? If so, this would not be the least of the things that God has hidden from the learned and wise and revealed to the simple (Matt, 11.25; Lk. 10.21). Perhaps people *were* healed by touching Jesus' coat or by contact with his saliva, the power of the invisible God being communicated to men through the vehicle of the material object. I do not say that these things are true—on balance I think they are not; only that such a reading of the evidence deserves to be treated seriously, and that the use by Jesus of magical practices if established need not necessarily be so damaging to the Christian position as Morton Smith seems to suppose.

---

2 It is true that the argument for antiquity on the basis of the use of Semitisms has its critics (Morton Smith, who argues for 'a progressive Judaizing of Christianity after Jesus' death' [*Journal of Bible and Religion* 24 (1956) 95]; E. P. Sanders [*The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition*, ch. iv]; and others). but common sense would seem to support the view that although it may not be a decisive, infallible criterion, on balance the presence of Semitisms is likely in any particular case to be a sign of earliness.

3 See 'Note' at end.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

ASHE, G.	*Miracles*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978
BULTMANN, R.	*History of the Synoptic Tradition*, Blackwell, 1963
DIBELIUS, M.	*From Tradition to Gospel*, Clarke, 1971
FULLER, R. H.	*Interpreting the Miracles*, SCM, 1963
GRANT, R. M.	*Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought*, North-Holland, 1952
HULL, J. M.	*Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*, SCM, 1974
JEREMIAS, J.	*New Testament Theology, I* SCM, 1971
KALLAS, J.	*The Significance of the Synoptic Miracles*, SPCK, 1961
LEWIS, C. S.	*Miracles*, Bles, 1947
MOULE, C. F. D.	*ed. Miracles*, Mowbray, 1965
RAMSEY, I. T.	*and others, The Miracles and the Resurrection*, SPCK, 1964
RICHARDSON, A.	*The Miracle Stories of the Gospels*, SCM, 1941
SMITH, MORTON	*Jesus the Magician*, Gollancz, 1978
SWINBURNE, R.	*The Concept of Miracle*, Macmillan, 1970
VAN DER LOOS, H.	*The Miracles of Jesus*, Brill, 1965