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St Mark and John Wimber — Allies or Opponents?

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The preface to the recently-published second edition of John Wimber's book *Power Evangelism* gives the information that the book has been translated into 'at least a dozen languages' and that total sales approach a quarter of a million copies.¹ One of the messages of this book is that the mission of the Church, like that of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, should consist not only of proclamation but also of 'demonstration', which Wimber says should include healing the sick, exorcising the demonised and raising the dead.² In his companion volume, *Power Healing*, Wimber states that 'The first guiding principle is: *God wants to heal the sick today*'.³

Wimber claims that his teaching and practice are based on the Bible, and he refers constantly to that source, especially to the Gospels and Acts, in support of almost every point he makes. This submission to Scripture is the first feature of Wimber's ministry and teaching which Michael Harper comments in the Foreword to *Power Healing*:

The first safeguard is his evangelical emphasis on scripture. Everything has to be scrutinised in its light. He uses the Bible sensibly, and is not a tub-thumping literalist.⁴

In describing his first experiences of preaching about healing, Wimber says that God challenged him with these words, which he has sought to fulfil ever since in his preaching and in his books: 'Preach my word, not your experience.'⁵

A summary of Wimber's basic thesis is given in the Introduction to *Power Healing*:

How do I know that Jesus wants me to pray for the sick? Scripture teaches that we are commissioned to do the will of God on earth, which is illustrated in the life and message of Jesus. Regarding the healing ministry, Jesus 'healed many who had various diseases' (Mark 1:34); he gave the Twelve 'power and authority... to cure diseases' (Luke 9:1); he commissioned the Seventy-two to 'Heal the sick... and tell them, "The kingdom of God is near you"' (Luke 10:9); and, in a

1 John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (rev. edn), Hodder & Stoughton, London 1992, p 15.

2 Ibid. p 33.

3 John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Healing*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1986, p 183.

4 Ibid., p 11.

5 Ibid., p 67.

post-resurrection appearance, he said of those who followed him, 'they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well' (Mark 16:18). So, in obedience to his life and message, I pray for people's healing.⁶

John Wimber's teaching along these lines at conferences and in these two books, together with reports and experiences of his own ministry of healing and that of people who have been influenced by him, has led to much controversy. Anyone who wants to discuss or examine Wimber's teaching may do so from any of several points of view.

One vitally important current debate in which the present study will not involve itself is that of the authentication of modern healing miracles. Any complete evaluation of the ministry of John Wimber and other modern miracle-workers must not overlook the challenges of those investigators⁷ who are still seeking irrefutable medical evidence that a miraculous healing has taken place.

In view of Wimber's assertion that the Gospels and Acts support his teaching, one of the ways in which his ministry may be investigated is by means of biblical exegesis. John Goldingay has formulated the key question as follows:

In what sense, and on what basis, can we take the signs and wonders performed by Jesus, his disciples and the church in Acts as a guide to the healing ministry we should expect to see exercised in the church today?⁸

One important question which cannot be answered by exegesis alone is whether contemporary Christians have to abandon their late-twentieth-century Western world-view and adopt the first-century belief in demonology before they can continue Jesus' work of healing, as Wimber alleges, or whether this healing ministry can be reinterpreted in twentieth-century terms. Wimber himself has no doubt about this question, repeatedly stating that the secular character of the contemporary world-view prevents its adherents from discerning spiritual reality and from allowing for the possibility that God might act. He urges his readers to take on 'kingdom perspectives', 'assumptions from Jesus' life that all Christians should hold as normative.'⁹ The whole of part 5 of *Power Evangelism* is devoted to the subject of competing world-views.

No one doubts, however, that both Jesus and the Gospel-writers believed in Satan and in demons. Whether modern Christians should believe in them too is a question more of hermeneutics than of exegesis, even though Wimber seems to believe he has settled the issue by showing that such belief is implicit in the Gospels. The present article will seek to remain open-minded about this question.

6 Ibid., p 16.

7 e.g. Dr Peter May in J. E. Goldingay, *Signs, Wonders and Healing*, IVP, Leicester 1989, pp 75-81. The same author has taken a similar sceptical approach to modern claims of healing miracles in subsequent articles in the Christian and secular press and on BBC television.

8 Ibid., p 22.

9 *Power Evangelism*, p 144.

The present study will examine a self-contained part of the New Testament material with a view to discerning one New Testament author's answer to John Goldingay's question. Several scholars in recent years have studied the use of miracles in Mark's Gospel, but different studies have produced widely differing results. This survey of Mark's attitude to miracles in Christian ministry is based on a fuller study entitled *The Use of Miracle Narratives in Mark's Gospel: A Redaction-critical Study*, which was awarded the degree of M.Phil. by the University of Leeds in 1989.¹⁰

The place of miracles in Mark's Gospel

Miracles form a very important element in Mark's story. Several writers quote the statistics that over 31% of the whole Gospel, and about 47% of the first ten chapters, refer either directly or indirectly to miracles. They occupy a rather less prominent position in Matthew and Luke, who omit some of those which occur in Mark, abbreviate the narration of others, and include much additional material of other kinds. Conversely, over two-thirds of the miracles recorded in the Synoptic Gospels are included in Mark.

The miracle narratives in Mark include several different kinds. There are six healings, which themselves include a wide variety of illnesses and handicaps — a fever, leprosy, an unidentified gynaecological disorder, a multiple handicap of deafness and speech impediment, and two cases of blindness. Two other pericopes include healings but centre on controversies — cases of paralysis and a withered hand — while another Pronouncement Story includes an exorcism at a distance. There are three actual exorcism stories, each of which is recorded with a wealth of detail. One resuscitation of the dead is recorded, and there are four summary statements which record that many healings and/or exorcisms took place at various stages and in various locations in Galilee. A further five Miracle-stories record Jesus' power over nature, viz., two water miracles (calming the sea and walking on the water), two feeding miracles and the cursing of an unfruitful tree.

The majority of the miracles in Mark occur in the first half of the Gospel, i.e., before the confession at Caesarea Philippi. This chronological limitation has geographical implications, too, for Galilee is presented as, amongst other things, the locus of miracles. The only miracle located in Jerusalem is one of judgment, rather than of healing or salvation.

Interpreting the miracles in Mark's Gospel

The miracles in Mark's Gospel have been interpreted in many different ways, but for the purpose of pursuing the present enquiry three main competing principles may be set in opposition to one another.

10 If the thesis itself had been published in book form, then it would have been dedicated to the memory of my friend A. Howard Webb, of Bengoe, Hertford, who supported and encouraged the project at every stage of its progress. I deeply regret that Alan did not live to see the publication of this article, which would have given him so much pleasure.

The first principle may be called *imitation*. The reason why so much space is given to miracles in the Gospel, according to this theory, is to encourage and instruct Christians to continue Jesus' work and follow his example. John Wimber derives from Jesus' own ministry not only the principle that Christians should be engaged in a ministry of healing, but also many details of how they are to do it. This is how he explains the origins of his method of 'five steps to healing prayer':

Each element of the five steps is based on Jesus' method of praying for the sick, though in scripture these steps are not presented in a systematic and chronological fashion.¹¹

This idea that the miracle stories in the Gospels are to be imitated is, however, not restricted to popular writing. It is axiomatic for form critics that some of the details in typical Miracle-stories are included for the instruction of those who exercise a similar ministry in the Christian community, e.g.

The apostolic church cultivated the art of healing and had its miracle workers (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:28). The Novellen depicted the master healer at work, offered advice on specific points of technique and, above all, emphasized the importance of confidence in the effective power of the divinely appointed miracle worker.¹²

The second principle of interpretation is quite different from the first, and may be described as *polemic*. Some scholars have suggested that one of Mark's aims in writing his Gospel was to oppose and correct an overemphasis on signs and wonders on the part of a group within the Church which he was addressing.

This polemical interpretation of the material is based partly on the strikingly critical portrayal of the disciples of Jesus in Mark's Gospel. Preachers and commentators have often remarked on the author's disarming honesty in showing that the disciples were all too human, and this feature has often been cited as evidence for the tradition that Mark's Gospel was based on the reminiscences of the Apostle Peter, since anyone other than one of the Twelve would, surely, have depicted them in a more flattering light — as the other Gospels generally do. Such an explanation, however, is scarcely adequate for the degree of animosity Mark displays towards the disciples. Two scholars who have attempted detailed explanations of Mark's opposition to the disciples are J. B. Tyson¹³ and T. J. Weeden.¹⁴

Weeden discerns in Mark's story a great cleavage between Jesus and his disciples; in Jesus' public ministry, they are seen to be less perceptive than the crowd: when he describes the vocation of suffering to which both he and they are called, they fail to understand and finally they reject Jesus in his hour of need by betraying, denying or deserting him. Weeden acknowledges

11 *Power Healing*, p 208.

12 T. A. Burkill, *Mysterious Revelation: An Examination of the Philosophy of St Mark's Gospel*, Cornell, Ithaca 1963, p 58.

13 J. B. Tyson, 'The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark', in C. Tuckett, ed, *The Messianic Secret*, SPCK, London 1983, pp 35-43.

14 T. J. Weeden, 'The Heresy that Necessitated Mark's Gospel', in W. Telford ed, *The Interpretation of Mark*, SPCK, London 1985, pp 64-77; and T. J. Weeden, *Mark — Traditions in Conflict*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1971.

that Mark's portrait of the disciples as he has described it is not historically accurate; it must, therefore, he concludes, relate in some way to a controversy in the church which Mark knew. He finds the clue to this controversy in 2 Corinthians, and especially in D. Georgi's study¹⁵ of the background to that epistle. Mark's opponents, like those of Paul, are charismatic miracle-workers who believe that they constitute an elite among Christians, boasting about their powers, their achievements, their esoteric knowledge and their special relationship with the original apostles, whose successors they believe themselves to be. Weeden draws parallels between the two situations by examining Mark's treatment not only of miracle narratives but also of resurrection appearances (or, rather, lack of them), the concept of secret teaching in chapter 4 and elsewhere, and the apocalyptic discourse in chapter 13.

Mark's own theology, according to Weeden, was developed and presented in opposition to that of his opponents, and it includes suffering messiahship, suffering discipleship, the absence of Jesus, and the imminent but indubitably future parousia. Since his opponents claim the authority of the apostles for their doctrine, Mark cites against them an even greater authority — that of Jesus himself. As far as the Miracle-stories are concerned, in the first half of the Gospel Mark takes over his opponents' presentation of Jesus as a powerful and impressive miracle-worker, but he subjects that identification to a thorough critique in the second half.

The main criticisms which have been levelled against Weeden's thesis are that it is based more on Georgi's account of the background of 2 Corinthians than on the text of Mark's Gospel itself, and that it fails to do justice to the complexity of Mark's portrait of the disciples. While it is certainly true that the representation of the disciples in this Gospel does include very negative aspects, these are not the whole story: they do, after all, respond immediately to the call of Jesus; they share successfully in his ministry; they are the recipients of private instruction; and they are sometimes bracketed with Jesus in controversies with the Pharisees.

The third principal way of interpreting the Miracle-stories in Mark is as *symbolism*. This interpretation is associated most notably with Alan Richardson, whose influential book on *The Miracle Stories of the Gospels* was published in 1941. Partly in opposition to the form critics, Richardson maintained that all the miracles in all the Gospels should be understood symbolically. He explains his approach in this way:

There can be little doubt that the makers of the Gospel tradition understood the miracles of Jesus as 'signs' or symbolical acts which convey in a dramatized form essential Christological teaching. They were enacted parables, not mere 'wonder-stories', or occasional works of charity undertaken from motives of compassion in response to a particular and immediate need, or mere historical reminiscences, or yet decorative appendages to the main preaching and teaching material.¹⁶

15 D. Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1986.

16 A. Richardson, *The Miracle Stories of the Gospels*, SCM, London 1941, p 22.

The choice between these rival methods of interpretation is clearly vital for the question under consideration. If the detailed examination of the text supports the hypothesis of Weeden that Mark wrote in order to dissuade a church from expecting signs and wonders in its own day, then part of the answer to current questions about the place of the miraculous in the life of the Church will be that at least some of the biblical tradition is against it. Likewise, if the evidence supports Richardson, and the miracles are to be interpreted as symbols (e.g. leprosy = sin), then it would be a categorical error to expect to reproduce them literally. On the other hand, if some of the details which Mark gives in the text can best be explained as being intended for the guidance of miracle-workers of his own day, as Wimber and the form critics maintain, then this Gospel will make a very different contribution to the current debate. A real possibility is that the material is not all of a piece, and that Christians of subsequent generations should therefore expect to be able to reproduce some, but not all, of the miracles of Jesus.

How to discern the attitude of the Gospel writer

In order to discover how Mark would have answered John Goldingay's question, it is necessary to identify the Gospel-writer's own attitude to the miraculous material in his narrative. Tasks of that kind come in the category of redaction criticism. Redaction-critical investigation of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke is relatively straightforward, since we have a fairly good idea of the sources which those writers used and can therefore easily recognise the use which they have made of those sources. The work of redaction criticism on Mark's Gospel, however, is a rather more sophisticated and less certain matter, since the sources in this case are entirely hypothetical.

The study on which the present paper is based relied quite heavily on the results of the work of E. J. Pryke,¹⁷ who used a combination of form criticism and redaction criticism to identify Mark's own redactional contributions to his Gospel. Pryke's procedure was circular. The first stage was to produce a provisional list of verses which on form-critical grounds are quite widely considered to have come from the redactor. By studying the vocabulary and style of those verses in detail, Pryke was able to compile a list of the characteristic features of redactional vocabulary and style. Next, he looked through the Gospel again, to produce a new list of verses which exhibited those characteristics and therefore might well be redactional. Finally, he checked this list of verses by form-critical criteria.

The two places above all where form critics would expect to find the Gospel-writer's own 'handwriting' are in 'seams' and in 'summaries'.¹⁸

It is axiomatic for form and redaction critics that the Synoptic Gospels consist mainly of self-contained stories or 'pericopes', which originally existed as separate units but were later combined, by Mark or his predecessors, to make a consecutive narrative. If the pericopes constitute the 'bricks'

17 E. J. Pryke, *Redactional Style in the Markan Gospel*, CUP, Cambridge 1978.

18 See R. H. Stein, 'The Proper Methodology For Ascertaining a Markan Redaction History', *Novum Testamentum* 13 (1971), pp 181-198.

of Mark's edifice, then he has presumably provided the 'cement' which binds them together. In the case of Mark 1:21-28, for example, vv 21f constitute the 'seam' with which Mark has connected 1:16-20 and 1:23-27, which previously existed as separate stories.

An example of a Markan 'summary' is 1:32-34. It is hard to imagine that this paragraph ever existed in isolation, because its entire significance seems to come from its position as the climax to the connected story of a specimen day in Capernaum. Since it was probably Mark who constructed this specimen day out of unconnected materials at his disposal, it is most likely that he composed this summary himself.

Naturally, some of Pryke's conclusions are firmer than others, but on the whole the circularity of his procedure is its justification, inasmuch as the findings of form criticism and of redaction criticism do seem to confirm one another. The characteristics of Mark's own redactional work are — as expected — especially discernible in the seams and summaries.

It is not known what sources Mark had available to him for his Gospel in general or for the Miracle-stories in particular, although many hypotheses have been advanced. Several writers¹⁹ have suggested that he made use of one or more connected cycles of Miracle-stories, but edited them in such a way as to diminish an exclusive emphasis on Jesus' power by focusing on the cross. However, the tendency for the hand of the author himself to be particularly evident in the 'seams' between stories strongly suggests that it was Mark, not a predecessor, who compiled the collections of Miracle-stories which are contained in the Gospel.

The use of miracles in Mark's Gospel

There is a clear difference of emphasis, tone and vocabulary with regard to miracles between the earlier and the latter parts of Mark's Gospel. In the first part, Jesus is presented as the eschatological champion who lays down a direct challenge to all the works of Satan, and the miracles are very important parts of this challenge; as Kallas explained, in opposition to Richardson, a generation ago,

The miracles are no veneer, they are no vehicle employed for expressing a truth which is quite independent of them — they are, instead, themselves the message! They are the bringing of the kingdom, the routing of the forces of evil which rule this world!²⁰

In 6:7-13, the disciples are given a share in the eschatological mission of Jesus. The most important teaching on the involvement of disciples in continuing Jesus' ministry is the story of the healing of an epileptic boy in 9:14-29.

Miracle-stories are less numerous in the latter part of the Gospel, and serve a very different purpose, for it would be superfluous to bring in at this point yet further evidence of Jesus' eschatological challenge to sin, suffering,

19 e.g. H. H. Koester, 'One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels', *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968), pp 203-247.

20 J. Kallas, *The Significance of the Synoptic Miracles*, SPCK, London 1961, p 83.

demon-possession and untruth. Rather, most of the miracles in this part of the Gospel can appropriately be described by Richardson's phrase 'enacted parables', for they now relate to the major theme of the disciples' slow realization of Jesus' identity and vocation.

The two miraculous feedings, together with the walking on water (6:45-52) are apparently intended to be revelatory of Jesus' identity and ministry, and quite a lot of description and discussion is devoted to that fact, particularly with regard to the disciples' failure to perceive the truth. The main reason, indeed, for the much-discussed duplication of the feeding narratives seems to be to emphasise the incredible obtuseness of the disciples. The accounts of the restoration of the faculties of hearing, speech and sight symbolise, and mark the progress of, the spiritual enlightenment of the disciples. The Gospel-writer seems to have allowed himself rather more editorial freedom in making use of miracle-stories in this part of his presentation than in the first few chapters.

1:21 - 3:6 The authority of Jesus

A sequence of four Miracle-stories in which Jesus shows his authority over demons and diseases is followed by a group of controversy stories. However, the two cycles are not totally distinct from one another, for controversy is an aspect of the miracles, while two of the controversies concern miracles. Immediately after being commissioned in baptism, Jesus confronts Satan in single combat (1:12f) and then proceeds to seek out and overcome every manifestation of the cosmic power of evil.

There is particularly strong evidence of the redactor's handiwork in the seams connecting these stories to one another. It is, therefore, much more probable that Mark himself collected the units together into this position than that he inherited them as a pre-existing connected cycle. Any editorial adaptations are unlikely to have been intended to diminish the impact of the miracles.

Authority over an unclean spirit (1:21-28)

As J. M. Robinson pointed out, the exorcisms in Mark's Gospel are the points in an historical narrative where the transcendent meaning of that history is most clearly evident.²¹

So it is particularly appropriate that Jesus' first miracle, and one of the first actions of his ministry, should be an exorcism. By placing the story in this prominent position, Mark shows that, having won a spiritual victory over the chief of all spiritual evil, Jesus will in his ministry encounter various forms of spiritual opposition, but will always conquer them.

The stylistic and literary evidence suggests that the origin of this pericope was an exorcism story roughly the same as the present vv 23-26, the purpose of which was to demonstrate Jesus' power over spiritual forces of evil. Mark has introduced the theme of teaching, in order to show that in the ministry of Jesus, word and action are inextricably linked. A contrast is drawn between the spiritual perception of the demon and the incomprehension of the people.

21 J. M. Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark*, SCM, London 1957, p 33.

Healing comes to Simon's house (1:29-31)

In linking this story to the preceding pericope by means of v 29a, Mark makes it a further instance of Jesus' power and part of the 'specimen day in Capernaum'.²² The proximity to vv 16-20 implies a link between healing and discipleship, which is confirmed when the healed woman shows her gratitude by serving Jesus and his companions.

Crowds healed in Capernaum (1:32-34)

This generalising summary almost certainly comes from the hand of Mark himself. The style and vocabulary are strongly typical of the redactional element in the Gospel, and the composition of such a summary at this point would be quite consistent with Mark's general methods of working. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine how or why this pericope could have existed in isolation. Its purpose is to reinforce the presentation of Jesus at this early stage of the Gospel as a popular healer and exorcist, who rejects demonic testimony to his identity.

Even leprosy yields to the authority of Jesus (1:40-45)

This pericope has the function of a bridge between the Miracle-stories of chapter 1 and the controversies of chapter 2. Its inclusion at this point of the Gospel is probably due to this theological appropriateness, rather than to any connexion of time or place with any surrounding material. It makes an appropriate climax to the series of Miracle-stories, since leprosy was proverbially difficult to cure, and by including the reference to Jesus' loyalty to the Jewish law it sets the scene for the controversy stories which follow.

A controversy about forgiveness (2:1-12)

The five pericopes in 2:1-3:6 constitute a group of controversy stories, which describe the beginnings of opposition to Jesus and provide a stark contrast to his success among the common people.

The most widely accepted theory of the origins of 2:1-12 is that vv 3, 4, perhaps part of 5, 11 and 12 originally existed as a healing story, into which Mark has inserted the controversial element in vv 6 (or 5) to 10. As a Miracle-cum-Pronouncement story, this section forms an appropriate link between the Miracle-stories of chapter 1 and the controversies of chapter 2. Verse 10 echoes 1:27, suggesting that this incident represents a further extension of Jesus' authority.

The focus of this story appears to be the authority of Jesus to pronounce the forgiveness of sins (v 10). It is therefore likely that the principal significance of the story in Mark's mind is to justify the Church's proclamation of forgiveness of sins in Jesus, against their Jewish opponents, and that the original Miracle-Story serves merely as the setting for such teaching. Alternatively, G. Theissen²³ has described the story as a 'rule miracle', and has

22 The title given to 1:21-34 in D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Pelican New Testament Commentaries), Penguin, Harmondsworth 1963.

23 G. Theissen, *Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1983, p 113.

shown from rabbinic sources that miracles in New Testament times were quite often used to settle an argument, to confirm or to undermine a judicial decision.

At no other point in his Gospel does Mark draw attention to any supposed connexion between sin and sickness, and such a connexion is not the most prominent theme even in the present story. Wimber is, therefore, unlikely to be right when he uses this case as evidence that forgiveness and healing are often connected, and that the former is often a precondition for the latter.²⁴

A controversy about the Sabbath (3:1-6)

Although it would be easy to suggest that an original Miracle-story has here been transformed by Mark into a controversy narrative, there is in fact too little trace of the hypothetical original form and too little evidence of the hand of the redactor in the central parts of the story for this suggestion to be certain. At least the first part of v 1 and the whole of v 6, however, appear to be from Mark's own hand. The main purpose of the story in its present setting is to portray the enmity which Jesus was arousing amongst religious and political leaders, an enmity which would eventually destroy him. It is probably also intended to give guidance to Christians on their proper attitude towards the Sabbath.

3:7-30, 4:35 - 6:6 Power and faith

The previous section is rounded off by a discussion about the authority which Jesus has exhibited. Then a further collection of Miracle-stories portrays Jesus as powerful over various inimical forces. The need for faith on the part of the petitioner is emphasized.

Popularity by the lakeside (3:7-12)

This generalising summary looks both backwards and forwards. As a conclusion to the preceding verses, it reasserts Jesus' popularity in contrast with the opposition recorded in 2:1 - 3:6, and it also picks up and reinforces the account of his miraculous achievements in 1:32-39. The demonic acknowledgement of Jesus as Son of God is a reminder of Mark's presentation of Jesus' baptism, temptation and exorcisms. The passage also prepares for various features of chapters 3-6, such as the appearance of crowds and a boat, the expulsion of demons, and sick people touching Jesus in order to be healed.

Jesus' authority misrepresented (3:22-30)

This story is reminiscent of the 'Prologue' to Mark's Gospel, 1:1-15, partly because the two passages have several items of vocabulary in common; both sections describe the cosmic dimension of Jesus' eschatological conflict. The linguistic evidence indicates that most of this pericope consists of traditional material, but that it is Mark who has linked it with the confrontation between Jesus and his relatives (vv 21, 31-35).

²⁴ *Power Evangelism*, p 176.

Power over wind and waves (4:35-41)

This story is quite different from all the miracles recorded so far in the Gospel, inasmuch as it is not a case of healing a disease or expelling demons. Since the stormy and threatening sea may very naturally be taken as symbolic of all kinds of chaos, evil, danger and even death, the story functions as an acted parable of Jesus' ability to save his Church in times of danger, and the need to trust in him. However, as Mark tells it, the emphasis is on the question asked by the disciples in v 41, as part of their gradual realization of Jesus' identity and mission. The themes of fear and faith prepare for the other stories in this collection.

Power over a demon in Gentile territory (5:1-20)

The heading for this section in Nineham's commentary, 'An exceptionally powerful demon overcome', may be the best explanation of its significance. John Wimber reads this story in a generally similar way, but the text does not seem to justify his comment that

A close examination of this account reveals characteristics that distinguish severe demonisation from mild demonisation or mental illness.²⁵

There is no evidence that Mark believed in mental illness as distinct from oppression by unclean spirits, or that he would attribute some cases to the former and others to the latter. This Gospel, therefore, and indeed the whole New Testament, does not justify the distinction which Wimber draws here. First-century and twentieth-century terminology may each be internally quite coherent, and it can certainly be argued that contemporary Christians should abandon the latter in favour of the former, but the simplest way of explaining Wimber's distinction between cases of one and of the other is that he is confusing incompatible world-views. Furthermore, the first half of Wimber's comment implies a precision of diagnosis which would have been strange to Mark.

Jesus' authority over the powers of chaos has just been demonstrated in the natural order, and is now seen to be equally effective in pacifying a disordered personality. Other commentators place a great emphasis on the Gentile setting of the story (explicit in vv 1 and 20, and implicit elsewhere); there is almost certainly some truth in this reading, for the two geographical references must have been introduced for some purpose, but Mark does not seem particularly interested in the Gentile mission at this stage of his narrative, and it is therefore probably not of prime importance in this case.

Power over death (5:22-24, 35-43)

This story constitutes a climax to the cycle, since raising the dead is the greatest deed of power which any wonder-worker can accomplish. The use of the metaphor 'sleep' in v 39 reflects the Christian understanding of death.

Most commentators suggest that the reason why Mark quotes the actual Aramaic words with which Jesus effected the cure here and in 7:34 is either

²⁵ *Power Healing*, p 124.

an historical recollection or so that Christian healers of his own and subsequent times can use the same technique to achieve similar results. However, the latter cannot be the reason why the original language is quoted in 14:36 and 15:34, and the fact that in this case Mark also translates the phrase shows he is interested in its meaning, not just the words as a magic spell. Foreign words quite often appear in miracle stories, apparently on the principle that the use of a strange, foreign language conveys the impression of a strange, foreign (and supernatural) power. By recording both Jesus' original words and a translation, Mark shows that the power at work here is both strange and rational.

Twice in this narrative, Jesus limits the number of witnesses by turning some people away. The raising of the child is witnessed, therefore, by only the parents and Peter, James and John, who are singled out as an 'inner circle' in a similar way at the Transfiguration (9:2) and the agony in Gethsemane (14:33). This coincidence suggests that the story is of exceptional significance, perhaps foreshadowing the resurrection of Jesus himself.

Wimber believes that the criterion for inclusion was having faith in the authority of Jesus to raise the dead

By excluding those who were full of unbelief, he created a healing environment²⁶

— but there is no suggestion in the text that these three disciples believed more than the other nine, nor that the parents had any such faith (except that in v 36 Jesus urges the father unspecifically to continue believing), and it is therefore unlikely that Mark was seeking to make precisely this point.

The literary device of interrupting one story in order to tell another is one which Mark uses in other places, too (6:14-29, 11:15-19). As well as heightening the reader's interest and suspense by allowing time for the girl's condition to worsen, the interpolation brings the stories into a close relationship, in which each implicitly comments on the other, probably with regard to the theme of faith (especially vv 31 and 35).

A secret petitioner healed by faith (5:24-34)

The faith with which this woman approaches Jesus is tentative, secretive and uninstructed. Rather than rejecting her appeal, however, Jesus responds to her at the stage she has reached, and then leads her on into open confession. Although his closing words (v 34) make perfectly good sense in terms of the healing, they are also capable of bearing a deeply religious significance, which suggests that the story is being presented partly as a symbol of salvation.

Jesus' power rejected (6:1-6)

Just as 3:6 rounded off a section by introducing a negative note, so this pericope has been placed as an ironic comment on the wonderful deeds Jesus has done. Unlike the central figures of the preceding stories, Jesus' fellow-townpeople do not have faith, and therefore are incapable of receiving from him.

²⁶ Ibid., p 185.

6:7 - 8:21 The disciples' hardness of heart

Two stories of miraculous feedings show how Jesus meets the needs of both Jews and Gentiles, but the disciples fail to perceive this truth. This teaching is endorsed by other Miracle-stories. Various explanations have been given for the inclusion of two such similar stories of miraculous feeding, but the literary evidence suggests that the story in 8:1-10 is traditional, whereas 6:30-44 has been composed by the Evangelist on the analogy of the other.²⁷

The Twelve share in Jesus' mission (6:7-13)

The eschatological ministry which Jesus has been exercising is now delegated to the disciples, as anticipated in 3:15. Within Mark's whole story, this event is not very significant, and does not (as might have been expected) cause a change of tone, subject or pace in the Gospel. For the readers, however, it is very important, as Wimber, amongst others, recognises,²⁸ for it grounds the ministry of the Church in the ministry of Jesus, in whose absence the Church is called to continue on his behalf his own work of opposition to every manifestation of evil, by means of exorcism, healing and preaching.

Five thousand fed (6:30-44)

If this story really has been composed out of 8:1-10, as seems probable, then it is significant that in the present case Mark relates Jesus' 'compassion' to the people's need of teaching, rather than their hunger, because he does not want the miracle story to detract from what he considers to be the central concern of Jesus' ministry. The lack of any concluding expression of amazement on the part of the witnesses of this miracle, together with its wealth of symbolic background and resonances make it likely that this story, unlike some others, fits into Richardson's category of 'enacted parable'. The similarities between this story and the Christian eucharist have often been noticed, but they do not necessarily imply that the miracle is to be interpreted narrowly in eucharistic terms; perhaps the best explanation is that the feeding of the five thousand is part of a cycle, which includes the Last Supper, the Eucharist and the messianic banquet, but is not intended to prefigure any of these exclusively or in detail.

Jesus comes to his disciples (6:45-52)

The rather odd features of this story (such as that according to v 48 Jesus originally did not intend to help his disciples) are best explained by the hypothesis that the original version described a theophany, but Mark has adapted it to remind the reader of 4:37-41. In view of that earlier story, the disciples are even more to blame for their failure to discern the truth about Jesus (v 52). Mark uses the present story to illustrate the tension between the revelation of Jesus' identity and the blindness of the disciples to perceive it.

27 This case is argued with persuasive detail by R. M. Fowler, *Loaves and Fishes*, Scholars Press, Chico 1981.

28 *Power Healing*, p 183.

Healings at Gennesaret (6:53-56)

This passage is typical of those 'generalising summaries' with which Mark punctuates his narrative. The writer's main purpose in composing it for this position in his narrative is probably to indicate Jesus' popularity in the area around the sea, already depicted in vv 32-34. Such popularity contrasts with the attitude of his own people in vv 1-6, with the critical stance of the Pharisees which will be described in the next section, and also with the fear exhibited by the disciples in the preceding section. All of these groups, for different reasons, should have had more understanding of Jesus, and more faith in him, but as it is, the response of the crowd is a judgment on all of them.

The persistent faith of a pagan woman (7:24-30)

Despite the well-intentioned attempts of commentators to lessen its force, it seems inescapable that Jesus' initial response to the woman's approach is extremely insulting. Instead of being rebuffed, however, the woman replies by accepting the insult and embodying it in a quip, whereupon Jesus relents and declares that her daughter is healed. The most likely explanation of Mark's purpose in selecting, positioning and modifying this story relates to the Church's ministry to the Gentiles: on the one hand, such a ministry is supported by the best kind of authority — the example and word of Jesus — but on the other hand the primacy of the Jews in God's purposes and in Christian missionary strategy is preserved. Other motifs, such as encouragement to perseverance in prayer, an attack on legalism, an illustration of faith, or an example of Jesus' popularity, are subsidiary to this main theme.

Deafness and speech impediment cured (7:31-37)

This pericope is a fairly typical example of a Miracle-story, but by positioning it at this stage of the Gospel, Mark probably also has a symbolic interpretation in mind. So it can reasonably be read at several levels. The coincidence of the double handicap in one patient justifies the anonymous acclamation of v 37, in which Jesus is hailed as the messianic fulfilment of Isaiah 35:6f. The ineffectual attempt to secure privacy and compel silence is unrealistic, for the good news of Jesus cannot be hidden. At this stage of the narrative, however, the disciples are in a plight similar to that of the afflicted man, and in just as much need as he of having their ears unstopped and their tongues loosed, for, since 6:7, they have been not only disciples (hearers) but also witnesses (speakers). Furthermore, all of this is located in Gentile territory, and is therefore probably intended to relate to the Gentile mission.

Before performing the healing requested of him, Jesus takes the patient aside, away from the crowd of spectators. This may well have been a traditional feature of the story, which Mark has reinterpreted in terms of his theory of the Messianic Secret. Originally, it may have meant that the healing itself either was too sacred to be revealed to the vulgar gaze or depended on certain esoteric techniques which must be kept secret.

It is not difficult to find practical reasons why Jesus might have approached this particular case in this manner. William Barclay, for example, sees this technique as evidence of Jesus' care for the individual, pointing out from his own experience that deaf people are especially disadvantaged in

crowds.²⁹ John Wimber makes a slightly different suggestion, based on 'reading between the lines' of the story itself:

I have been in many situations where an emotional atmosphere created by friends and family members present has quenched faith for healing. They are so desperate and full of fear and anxiety that it is difficult for me or the person I am praying for to have much faith for healing. I usually ask them to leave, allowing to remain only those who know how to pray and are not emotionally caught up in the situation. I suspect Jesus took aside the deaf and mute man for the same reasons.³⁰

Verses 33f. record in detail the techniques which Jesus uses to cure the man: viz., insertion of his fingers into the man's ears, use of spittle, upward look, groan and the word *Ephphatha* (transliterated in the Gospel from the original language and also translated). Most commentators interpret these actions as magical techniques, typical of wonder-workers of the period, recorded for the practical guidance of Christian healers of a later day. If, however, Mark appears to be interested in this story principally for its symbolic value, then it is unlikely that he would be interested in those details for such reasons. He may understand these actions as an effective means of communicating to the patient what Jesus is doing to him and (probably) thus awakening faith on his part, since he can, after all, neither articulate his own need nor hear what is said to him. John Wimber finds these techniques rather puzzling, but cites other examples to confirm the principle which he sees illustrated here, 'that sometimes God heals through strange means'.³¹

Four thousand fed (8:1-10)

Quite a strong cumulative case can be made out for a Gentile setting for this miracle, whereas the earlier miraculous feeding was more clearly Jewish; part of the purpose of the repetition, therefore, was probably to represent Jesus as ministering to both Jews and Gentiles. On the other hand, if this had been the main idea in Mark's mind, he would probably have made it a lot clearer. The writer has made so many verbal links between the two stories in his presentation of them that it is quite certain he had a literary and theological purpose in presenting them as a pair. In view of the discussion in vv 14-21, and of the overall theme in this section of the Gospel, by far the most likely reason for the duplication is to emphasise the confirmed obtuseness of the disciples.

A sign refused (8:11-13)

The saying of Jesus is clearly the main point of this story, and the introductory verse contains no information that could not have been deduced from that saying. Although it is generally the disciples against whom the allegation of blindness is levelled, this incident shows that the Pharisees are even

29 W. Barclay, *And He Had Compassion On Them*, Church of Scotland, Edinburgh 1955, pp 75f.

30 *Power Healing*, p 156.

31 *Ibid.*, p 157.

more culpable in this respect; furthermore, the disciples will gradually become enlightened during the succeeding chapters, while the Pharisees' role continues to be one of 'testing' Jesus (10:12, 12:13). This passage should not be cited as evidence of Mark's antipathy to miracles, because Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees here is based not on any over-emphasis on the miraculous, but rather on their unbelief, and there is an obvious irony in the location of this pericope immediately after the Feeding of the four thousand, for that miracle constituted a most powerful sign for those who had eyes to see it.

Discussion about feeding miracles (8:14-21)

Jesus' words here, more than any other evidence, make it clear that the two feeding miracles are to be interpreted symbolically, but the nature of such symbolic interpretation is not explained, and the disciples are judged to have failed to apprehend it. The whole discussion contributes to Mark's teaching about the wrong attitude of the Pharisees, the identity of Jesus, and the slowness of the disciples to recognize that identity. It is also an implicit commentary on the significance of the feeding miracles.

8:22 - 10:52 The disciples learn slowly

The spiritual 'blindness' of the disciples concerning Jesus and his mission is gradually alleviated in this section, and this process is vividly symbolised by a pair of Miracle-stories in which blind men receive their sight. Jesus also prepares the disciples to live without him.

Blindness cured gradually (8:22-26)

Although the medical condition is different, this story is remarkably similar to the healing of the deaf man with a speech impediment in 7:32-37. Despite the opinion of many commentators³² that they were originally the same story, and have diverged in the course of transmission, it seems more likely that they were originally quite distinct, and that Mark has introduced the links to enable the present story to function as a hopeful and specific appendix to the description of the disciples' blindness in 8:14-21. The main reason for interpreting this story symbolically is that it is so well suited to the purpose. The idea (although not the exact word) of blindness as a symbol of incomprehension has already been introduced in v 18, and Mark's primary concern in the next two chapters or more of his Gospel is to show how the disciples gradually come to 'see' the truth about Jesus, a process which is vividly portrayed in the present story.

This symbolic interpretation of the story satisfactorily explains why the healing takes place in stages instead of immediately. Commentators, beginning with Matthew and Luke, have found this feature embarrassing, although Wimber takes it as evidence that patience and perseverance are sometimes needed in praying for the sick.³³

32 Based on R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, Blackwell, Oxford 1972, p 213.

33 *Power Healing*, p 157.

Frustration when Jesus is absent (9:14-29)

If 8:27 - 9:13 forms the 'water-shed' in the structure of Mark's Gospel, concluding the first half of the story and introducing the second half, then the present passage occupies a very significant position, beginning the second half proper. Three stages can be discerned in the use of this story: a fairly typical exorcism story seems to have been used by an early editor as the setting for a memorable dialogue about faith; then finally Mark used it to teach how the Church should proceed in the absence of Jesus. In this final version, the emphasis is on the disciples, rather than on Jesus, as previously. To locate the story immediately after the Transfiguration was particularly appropriate, for the latter is generally interpreted as having some relation to the resurrection — either a misplaced post-resurrection appearance or a preview of Jesus' resurrection glory — and so this story can naturally be taken as prefiguring the state of the post-resurrection church. The story ends with advice for Christians who are asked to exorcise a particularly powerful evil spirit. Concerning this advice, and its fate at the hand of copyists, Schweizer has helpfully commented:

The reference to prayer requires no explanation. Therefore the disciples have misunderstood the story if they seek for some special method by which they can overcome the misery of their impotence. Perhaps the truth that all power is found in God and not in the inner being of the believer is stressed more emphatically by Jesus' call to prayer than by his call to faith. There is no room whatever for human achievement; all that man can do is be receptive to the action of God. Of course, this was not understood by the copyists who added the words 'and fasting' (which are found in many manuscripts), because to them prayer alone seemed too simple. They were not able to perceive that what is simplest and most taken for granted is really most important, since it causes one to cease looking at himself, and look to God.³⁴

John Wimber, too, recognises the importance of this story to the Gospel-writer, but in the light of Schweizer's comment Wimber seems misguided when he interprets v 29 as teaching that especially powerful demons like this one 'require greater faith and prayer'.³⁵ Some of Wimber's own comments about his healing ministry, however, are more in keeping with this story than he appears to realise. On the evidence of this section of the Gospel, Mark would probably have welcomed Wimber's distaste for the phrase 'faith healing' and his report that God 'chose to heal through me when I exhausted my personal resources'.³⁶

A rival exorcist (9:38-41)

This passage is yet another example of the disciples' failure to understand the meaning of discipleship. More specifically, like the passage which immediately precedes it — and like some of the material in chapter 10 — it

34 E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, SPCK, London 1971, p 189.

35 *Power Healing*, p 242.

36 *Ibid.*, pp 26, 34.

deals with misunderstandings about Christian leadership. The Church, and in particular its leaders, should not be narrow-minded, introverted or exclusivist, but should welcome the signs of the grace and power of God wherever they are found. In the wider context of Mark's Gospel as a whole, v 40 is a reminder of the spiritual battle which is going on between two sharply-differentiated forces; anyone who opposes evil in the power of God is on Jesus' side in the warfare he came to wage. There is also an irony in the proximity of this story to vv 14-29, for those disciples who are so concerned to forbid someone whom they consider to be an unauthorized (but successful!) exorcist have just shown themselves to be less than effective when they are asked to deal with a case of demon-possession.

Blindness cured leads to discipleship (10:46-52)

The most likely explanation of the present form of this story is that Mark heavily re-wrote a rather brief and straightforward Miracle-story by adding the linking introduction, the presence of the disciples and the crowd, the repeated use of the title 'Son of David' and both halves of v 52. In the form and context which Mark has given it, this story is rich with meaning, and functions as a bridge between two major sections of the Gospel. It concludes a long section of material concerned with discipleship, and in particular the theme of revelation. Unlike the earlier account of the restoration of sight to a blind man (8:22-26), this healing is complete in one action, and appears to be a reward for, or at least a response to, the patient's faith.

Equally, this story prepares for the lengthy passion narrative, which begins its inexorable progress in the next verse. The one who heals and reveals the truth is the suffering Son of David, whose arrival in Jerusalem will be hailed with such enthusiasm, and the 'way' on which the disciple 'follows' him is the way that leads to the Cross.

11:12 - 13:22 The end of the temple

The last six chapters of Mark's Gospel tell of the final 'act' of the 'drama', and include very little miracle material indeed, for miracles as acts of salvation and revelation belong in Galilee, not in Jerusalem. Chapters 11 to 13 are concerned with the forthcoming eschatological crisis and the imminent condemnation of the Jews. A curse on a fruitless fig-tree symbolises the fate of the nation, and disciples are warned not to be taken in by false claimants who support their pretensions by impressive feats.

A fruitless tree cursed (11:12-14, 20-25)

The characteristic device by which Mark interrupts this story to tell of the purification of the Temple gives a powerful hint of a connexion between this miracle and Jesus' attitude towards Jerusalem and especially the Temple. The miracle is the culmination of those eschatological Miracle-stories which are to be found mainly in the first half of the Gospel, but its symbolic character makes it resemble more the stories in the second half. Israel, its leaders and its institutions, have the outward tokens of spiritual fruitfulness, but their failure to live up to their appearance is about to be condemned in the time of their visitation.

Warning against false claims (13:22)

This warning against leaders who support their claims by performing 'signs and wonders' is the strongest piece of evidence in favour of the hypothesis that Mark's Gospel was written in opposition to such people in the Church of his own day. More evidence would be needed, however, to show that Mark had interpreted Jesus' own miracles in such terms (for he never uses the phrase 'signs and wonders' to refer to the activities of Jesus or his disciples), or that his hypothetical wonder-working opponents are represented in the Gospel under the guise of Jesus' disciples.

Conclusion

Of the three rival principles of interpretation articulated near the beginning of this article, two seem to be supported by the text of the Gospel. Only the *polemical* interpretation, espoused by Tyson and Weeden, seems to lack such support.

In the first two main sections of the Gospel — viz., to 6:6 — the miracles are part of the *eschatological* ministry of Jesus, who opposes evil wherever he encounters it and in all its manifestations. Editorial contributions to the presentation serve, not to blunt the impact of the miracles, but to elucidate their significance and their relationship to other dimensions of Jesus' ministry.

This eschatological ministry of Jesus is now to be continued by the Church. So Burkill and Wimber are at least partly right. Mark is interested, at least to some extent, in using the Miracle-stories to instruct Christians of his own day to emulate and continue the work of Jesus. He has written the story of the mission of the Twelve in 6:7-13 in order to show that Jesus' followers share in his eschatological ministry of word and deed, and he has used the story of the healing of the epileptic boy in 9:14-29 to show something of how the Church should and should not exercise its healing ministry while Jesus is absent. On the other hand, Mark gives very little specific guidance for contemporary Christians who wish to practise such a ministry. The only principle enunciated in 9:14-29 is that would-be exorcists should rely on prayer (implicitly, instead of their own gifts, experience or techniques). The Gospel-writer's attitude seems to be that he wishes to assert that contemporary Christians *should* be performing similar miracles to those of Jesus, in succession to him, but he is *not* concerned to give them guidance on *how* to do so.

The second most important method of interpretation of the miracles in Mark, which relates especially to the latter part of the Gospel, is *symbolism*. Here, the miracles relate to the major theme of the disciples' slow realization of Jesus' identity and vocation. Some of them, especially the two miraculous feedings, focus on Jesus himself, while others illustrate the slow process of revelation to the disciples. In these cases, Richardson's approach to the miracles produces convincing answers.

The two major themes and principles of interpretation — eschatological and symbolic — fittingly come together in the final miracle of the Gospel, the cursing of the fig-tree, in which the eschatological challenge of Jesus is

expressed and enacted in a symbolic manner fully in keeping with the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament.

On the basis of Mark's use of miracle material in his Gospel, he appears to expect the Church to be continuing the eschatological work of Jesus. It may be said with some confidence, therefore, that Mark would in principle have approved of John Wimber's ministry as being in line with the vocation of the Church. He would, however, probably have been a little surprised at some of the detailed guidance which Wimber has deduced from the miracle stories in his Gospel, since in every case such guidance is based on narrative details which the foregoing study has suggested were included for theological rather than for historical or practical reasons.

In 13:34f, Mark records a brief parable about the role of the Christian community during Jesus' indefinite absence. According to what has gone before, Mark understands this role as continuing Jesus' own work. The answer, therefore, which Mark might have offered to John Goldingay's question is that the Church today, like the Church in the first century, is charged with the task of continuing Jesus' eschatological ministry until he returns, and that the work of healing is an important part of that ministry. Whether John Wimber and other evangelists are fulfilling Mark's expectation or not is a matter for a different kind of investigation.

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