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JESUS AS MIRACLE WORKER*

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Introduction

Jesus did miracles and told parables, Many a Sunday School syllabus is based on such a division, and even Univeristy courses at lower levels. If we were to be a little more precise, we would want to add a third: miracles, parables, and other teaching material (eg., ethical instruction and eschatological discourse).

The teaching material in the Gospels is well known and probably fairly well understood by the Christian. As a good deal of modern scholarship has been devoted to just such material. The names of C. H. Dodd, A. M. Hunter and perhaps above all J. Jeremias come to mind.¹

The miracle material of the Gospels is also well-known, and probably frequently read and taught in the church. But it is, I suspect, less well understood. Theologically and historically the miracles have often been an embarrassment (probably more so to the theologian than the person in the pew), for they smack of magic and pagan practices; and why did Jesus do them anyway? One answer is that he did not! The most radical of critics would excise them from the Gospel record, and attributed them to the creative minds of the evangelists and the early church rather than to the ministry of the historical Jesus. And perhaps many Christians would be happier, or at any rate quite happy, with a Gospel containing no miracle tradition.

This is, however, an impossible approach. More recent work on the Gospels and comparisons with similar extra-biblical material, even by critical scholars, has concluded that the Gospel miracles are an integral part of the ministry of the historical Jesus. Even a scholar like Jeremias, once he has removed the material he considers inauthentic, concludes that there remains a core of material which is original.²

Miracles in modern study

What, however, are we to make of that core – or indeed of the whole miracle tradition, accepting as authentic material which critics would dismiss as secondary? Why did Jesus do miracles? That is a question to which many might find it difficult to give a satisfactory answer. Before the

* A version of this paper was read at the 1984 conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society. I am grateful for comments made on that occasion.

1. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, London, 1936; A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, London, 1960; J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (revised ed.), London, 1963.
2. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, London, 1971.

era of modern scholarship, it was customary to view the miracles as proofs of Jesus' divinity or messiahship: these were the signs that Jesus was the divine Son of God, and God's Anointed One. But, more recently, this view has fallen out of favour, for two reasons. First, it is said that the gospels do not actually say so; and secondly because so much more is now known about the background to the New Testament, particularly its Jewish background including messianic expectation and the existence of contemporary miracle workers. Before discussing this in more detail, however, mention must be made of two books which reflect the rise of modern scepticism and the beginning of the influence of parallel material on the study of the miracles among English writers, along the lines of the approach already made in Germany by Bultmann. They are Alan Richardson, *The Miracle-Stories of the Gospels* (1941), and Reginald H. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles* (1963). Richardson attempted to use the insights of scholarship to discuss what the miracles meant. He does not reject them all as unhistorical, but nor can he vouch for the historicity of any particular one. He uses critical methods very sparingly, and does not refer to parallel material. Fuller, however, is much more free in his use of critical methods like source and form criticism. He cannot accept *a priori* the historicity of miracle material, the miracles are not seen by him as messianic proofs, and he does refer to Jewish and Hellenistic parallel material in his discussion.

The work of Fuller prepared the way for the last two decades' scholarship on the miracles. It is characterised by two main things – increased use of critical methods on the N.T. material itself, and an increased awareness of the parallel material with resulting implications for our understanding of Jesus. Before outlining the contribution of this recent work to our understanding of Jesus as a miracle worker, and commenting on what lessons we can learn from it, we will first outline the Jewish and Hellenistic parallel material which is relevant to the discussion.

Miracle in the ancient world

We must first of all realise that the ancient world was generally less incredulous of miracle than we are today. It would be wrong, however, to think that miracles were accepted without question in every case by all, and by whomsoever they were performed. Even the biographer of a famous Hellenistic miracle worker was not uncritical of some of the wonders attributed to his hero.³ The same caution also applies to the Jewish world. That is not to say that early Judaism did not believe in miracle, for of course it did; but it was at the same time suspicious of anything magical, and also held to the supremacy of *torah* and *halakhah* as the guiding principles of life, and not even miracle could overrule that.

3. See below, n. 29.

But it is true that, generally, miracles were accepted as both possible and actual.

We may divide the extra-biblical parallel material into two, for convenience – Jewish and Hellenistic. Perhaps this is rather an artificial division, for of course Hellenistic (diaspora) Judaism was a very important phenomenon, and even Palestinian Judaism had been greatly influenced by Hellenistic thought and practices.⁴ For practical purposes, however, this is a useful distinction.

Jewish miracle workers

Within Judaism, there are two miracle workers of prime importance mentioned in rabbinic sources, as well as a more diverse group of persons in the works of Josephus.

The first, chronologically, was Honi the Circle-Drawer. Little is known about him, mainly one incident when he prayed for rain. This story is recorded in the Mishnah, and expanded in the Talmud.⁵ He lived in the first century B.C., was from either Judea or Galilee, and although not openly critical, the Jewish sources do not give the impression of showing wholehearted approval of his actions. The epithet 'circle-drawer' may even hint at magic. The Midrash does praise him, comparing him in stature with Elijah, but this may simply be because both were rain-bringers.⁶ He is also mentioned by Josephus, who records his death.⁷ It is interesting that Josephus is more sympathetic to him – he is 'a frightened man and dear to God', and also that he was stoned to death by Jews (whom Josephus calls wicked!) for refusing to become involved in a plot against the king. The similarities to Jesus are obvious: a man, perhaps from Galilee, who performs miracles and is a holy man; it is hoped he would use his powers to help overthrow the government, and when he refuses he is killed; his own people were suspicious of him, but he gained greater approval from others in the wider, Hellenistic world.

The other individual in Jewish sources is Hanina ben Dosa. More is known about him. He is a more important figure and a closer contemporary of Jesus, having lived in the first century A.D. He came from Galilee, and was a disciple of Yohanan ben Zakkai. Like Honi, he is mentioned in the Mishnah and Talmud, was a holy man and man of prayer, and worked miracles. He is able to pray for the sick, and they recover. His great piety is illustrated by the story that once, while in prayer, a poisonous snake bit him. Unharmmed, he continued in prayer. but the snake died, after which the saying went round, 'Woe to the man

4. As shown by Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, London, 1974.

5. *Ta'anith* 3:8. *bTa'anith* 23a, which explains the circle as that in which Habakkuk stood while waiting for his revelation (Hab. 2:1). This may be an attempt to legitimise a magical technique.

6. *Genesis Rabbah* 13:7.

7. *Antiquities* 14:22-24.

bitten by a snake, but woe to the snake which bites R. Hanina ben Dosa'.⁸

Several other miracles are attributed to him, including the healing of the sons of Gamaliel and of Yohanan ben Zakkai. There are similarities to the miracles of Jesus. For example, Gamaliel's son is healed from a distance with the words 'go home, the fever has left him'⁹ – compare the centurion's son (Matt.8:5-13) and the Canaanite woman's daughter (Matt.15:21-28). Apart from these similarities, however, there is another important element in the Hanina tradition (which does not appear in that of Honi), namely the theme of wisdom. As well as being a miracle worker, Hanina is depicted as a wise man. So, for example, his saying about wisdom and the fear of sin is recorded in the Mishnah.¹⁰ This combination of miracle worker and wise man is an important one, which also appears in the Hellenistic example of Apollonius (see below), and also in the case of Jesus. It is probably for his reputation as a wise (and devout) man that Hanina is praised in the Talmud.¹¹ It is his reputation as a man of wisdom – a sage – which gives him respectability in the rabbinic sources and not his miracles alone for, as Neusner has said, 'none of the stories about him is quintessentially pharisaic.'¹²

These two figures, Honi and Hanina, show certain similarities to Jesus: their Galilean connections (possible, or certain), unorthodoxy, miracle working, wise sayings (Hanina), the suspicion of their contemporaries leading to death (Honi). It seems that the miracle worker was a threat to the orderliness of torah and its halakhic interpretation. Occasionally these two things came into direct conflict, as when Rabbi Eliezer was involved in a dispute about a point of interpretation. He tried to prove his case by miracles, including making a stream flow backwards, but was immediately ruled out of order by his companions, who declared that miracles cannot settle matters of interpretation of the law.¹³ The Talmud also asks, as a sort of retrospect on the days of miracles, why they happened in the past but no longer (a sentiment which might be familiar to many modern Christians!).¹⁴

The Jewish miracle worker tradition, then, shows similarities to Jesus. But whereas in Judaism the miracle worker was an object of suspicion,

8. *Tosefta Ber.* 2:20, expanded in *bBer.* 33a.

9. *bBer.* 34b.

10. *Aboth* 3:10-11, 'He whose fear of sin comes before his wisdom, his wisdom endures; but he whose wisdom comes before his fear of sin, his wisdom does not endure'. Translation by H. Danby, Oxford, 1933.

11. *bTa'anith* 24b, 'The whole world draws its sustenance because [of the merit] of Hanina my son.' Translation from Soncino Press, ed. I. Epstein. Also in this section he is able to make rain cease or begin.

12. J. Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70*(Part 1), Leiden, 1971, p 396.

13. *bBaba Mezi'a* 59b.

14. *bBer* 20a, 'R. Papa said to Abaye "How is it that for the former generations miracles were performed and for us miracles are not performed?"'

and ultimately discredited (possibly as a reaction to Christian claims about Jesus), miracle was, and remained, an essential element of the gospel.

Josephus

A number of individuals mentioned by Josephus, either in his *Jewish War* or *Antiquities of the Jews* (and some, in both), are relevant for this discussion. Although unrelated to each other, they are often treated together as a group since they promised to give signs, led popular movements, and awaited an intervention of God on behalf of his people. Different modern writers call them by different names such as 'messianic prophets' or 'sign prophets', and even differ in the lists of these which they consider.¹⁵

They are to be dated in the first century A.D. (c. 40-70), and two of them are mentioned in the Gamaliel speech in Acts 5:36f. although it seems the 'Theudas' referred to there is not the same one in Josephus, or there would be a problem of chronology.¹⁶ Also, in Acts 21:38 Paul is mistaken by the Roman commander for another of them, 'the Egyptian'.

Without discussing these 'sign prophets' individually, which would take too long, let us simply comment on their significance. Josephus does not in fact call them 'messiahs'. Indeed he refers to Theudas as a deceiver of charlatan (*goēs*). It seems probable, however, that they were messianic pretenders, as their mention in the Gamaliel speech may suggest. If this is so, then their promising to perform a sign as well as their expectation of God's intervention is interesting, and again the parallels with Jesus are apparent. More comment will be made later on the significance of these examples, but the final examples of parallel miracle material come from the Hellenistic world.

Hellenistic parallels

Magic and miracle were not uncommon in the Hellenistic world: indeed, it has a magical tradition all of its own.¹⁷ We will concentrate on the most relevant example for the New Testament. There are also other examples of individuals and cults, such as the healing cult of Asclepius,¹⁸ but the best literary parallel is Philostratus' biography *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. Apollonius is the best documented example of a

15. Compare D. Hill, 'Jesus and Josephus' "messianic prophets", in E. Best & R. McL. Wilson, eds, *Text and Interpretation*, Cambridge, 1979, pp 143-154, with P. W. Barnett, 'The Jewish Sign Prophets - A.D. 40-70. Their Intentions and Origin', *New Testament Studies* 27, 1980/1, pp 679-697.
16. See the balanced treatments by F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, London, 1951, p. 147 and I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Leicester, 1980, *ad. loc.*
17. See J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*, London, 1974.
18. For a useful summary, see Howard Clark Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World*, New Haven & London, 1983. pp 78-104.

Hellenistic miracle worker, and has often been seen as the example *par excellence* of the 'divine man' (*theios anēr*), although this category has now been discredited. Philostratus' biography is a remarkable work, drawing on at least two, and possibly three, written sources, as well as Apollonius' own letters, and such oral tradition as could be gathered. It was published not before 217 A.D. and was probably intended largely as a defence of Apollonius against charges of being a wizard. It may have had some success in this respect, since Eusebius later wrote a treatise against the *Life* accusing Apollonius of that very thing.

Apollonius was an itinerant sage who visited parts of the world famed for their wisdom – India, Mesopotamia and Egypt. Philosophically he was a Pythagorean. Living in the first century A.D. he was contemporary with Jesus, and is thus not too remote either geographically or chronologically to be a relevant parallel. It is his activity as a miracle worker which is most interesting for our purpose. There is no record of such activity before he visited the Brahman sages in India, where he witnessed several healings. He himself took no part in these but, it seems, learned the secret of how such cures were effected. He spent four months there, 'and he acquired all sorts of lore both profane and mysterious'.¹⁹ Only after this did his own miracles begin.

Once begun, we see similarities with the gospel miracles. For example, he cures a demon-possessed young man;²⁰ he raised a dead girl to life from her funeral bier²¹ (compare Jairus' daughter, or the widow of Nain's son²²). He was also able to free his leg miraculously from its shackles while in prison²³ (compare Paul and Silas in Philippi²⁴). These are just a small selection of the numerous comparisons which might be made with his miracles. There are also other aspects of his life which bear comparison. He had supernatural insight into people (compare Jesus, who 'knew what was in a man', John 2:25), predicted future events, purified a man who had committed a crime (Jesus forgave sins); and his attitude to religion and morals was one of reformation, trying to recover first principles (Jesus 'cleansed' the Temple). The examples could be multiplied, but let us finally note his conflict with the authorities, and death. The emperor Domitian considered him a threat, brought him to trial, and although acquitted he made an exit from the courtroom by disappearing – much to the consternation of Domitian! After this he inexplicably appeared elsewhere in a manner perhaps reminiscent of the

19. Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F. C. Conybeare, London, 1912, III, 50.

20. *Ibid.*, IV, 20.

21. *Ibid.*, IV, 45.

22. Matt. 9:18-26; Mk 5:21-43; Lk. 8:40-56, and Lk. 7:11-17.

23. Philostratus, *Life*, VII, 38.

24. Acts 16:26.

comment that 'Philip was found at Azotus' (Acts 8:40).²⁵ To make the comparison with Jesus complete, one account of his death was that he was miraculously taken up to heaven, after which he appeared to others, particularly sceptics, to convince them that his soul was immortal.²⁶

Apollonius worked miracles. But he was also a wise man (a sage, *sophos*). This theme in the *Life* is a strong one, even more so than in the accounts of Hanina ben Dosa. In places, Philostratus' biography resembles a natural history lesson on the areas visited by Apollonius. This resembles some aspects of the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, such as the account of Solomon, 'who spoke of trees, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish' (1 Kings 4:34). This particular aspect of wisdom is not prominent in the gospels' portrayal of Jesus. There is another description, however, which is common. Apollonius is 'divine' (*theios*), and even 'a god' (*theos*).²⁷

Assessment

What are we to make of all this parallel material? It has been mentioned in some detail, because it is the most relevant material chronologically, sociologically and geographically to the gospel material. But what bearing does it have on the question posed: why did Jesus perform miracles? We will discuss briefly what answers several scholars have recently given to this question. First, however, one point must be borne in mind.

In the parallel material mentioned, we have a diversity of miraculous experience, but all recorded from different standpoints: those of Honi and Hanina in the Mishnah and Talmud are somewhat sceptical of their orthodoxy, and indeed the Talmud tries to shape Hanina into more of an orthodox rabbinic figure. The Josephus account of Honi is from a different perspective – he is a just man, dear to God, who was killed by some worthless Jews. The point to be noted is the point of view, or even open bias of the document. This will be determined both by the attitude of the writer and that of his intended readership. The same point holds for the 'sign prophets' in Josephus: just because he calls Theudas a deceiver does not mean that the man was one. Likewise, because he refers to none of that group as 'messiahs' does not mean that they did not consider themselves as such. So too with Philostratus, whose *Life of Apollonius* is heavily biased in his favour. This does not mean that the biographer was totally uncritical, for he was aware of his sources, and even deliberately avoids using one.²⁸ Nor is he uncritical of the miracles, as in the case of the

25. Philostratus, *Life*, VIII, 10.

26. *Ibid.*, VIII, 31; cf. John 20:24-29.

27. *Ibid.* II, 17; III, 18; VIII, 6.

28. *Ibid.*, I, 4.

girl apparently brought back to life, where Philostratus comments that he does not know whether she was really dead or in a coma.²⁹ Generally, however, Apollonius is presented in a very positive way. Nor can we rule out the possibility that the *Life* was written, at least in part, in response to Christian claims about Jesus and the apostles. Although Conybeare, in the introduction to his translation, rejects this,³⁰ the similarities are too great for this not to be a factor. The issue is not whether or not Apollonius actually performed such deeds, as Conybeare suggests, but rather hinges on their manner of presentation in the *Life*.

Recent views of the miracles of Jesus

In order to give a brief account and assessment of the scholarly work on the gospel miracles from the last two decades, and especially the last few years, we will select four major scholars who have different views.

1. G. Vermes The view of Geza Vermes is contained in his book *Jesus the Jew*,³¹ as well as in more detailed articles. He sees Jesus as a Galilean charismatic, similar to other holy men like Honi and Hanina. A comparison with these other figures helps to explain Jesus' activities, as does the connection with Galilee. It was an area of more unorthodox Judaism, where (unlike Judea) the miraculous was expected much more as a part of everyday religious experience.

The similarities between Jesus and these other Jewish figures cannot be denied, as we have seen (above), nor can Vermes' detailed knowledge and skilled handling of the Jewish material. His view is not, however, a totally satisfactory explanation of Jesus, for it does not explain his conflict with the authorities and his death. Performing miracles was not in itself an outlawed activity, and certainly Hanina did not forfeit his life because of his miraculous activity (quite to the contrary). Yet Jesus was killed, and the charge against him was not unconnected with his claim to do a sign (Mk 14:58; Matt. 26:61). The Talmud also makes the connection: 'Yeshua . . . is going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy.'³² It seems that Jesus' miracles touched Judaism at its most sensitive points – the law and the Temple – and so Jesus was considered a political threat, and (like John the Baptist) removed for political expediency.

Ellis Rivkin³³ also sees Jesus as a Jewish charismatic, but unlike Vermes he sees this as the very cause of his death. Charismatics were considered dangerous, and Jesus, whom Rivkin calls a 'charismatic of charismatics,' lost his life for this reason. Again, however, this does not

29. *Ibid.*, IV, 45.

30. Note 19 (above) for full reference, p XIII.

31. G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, London, 1973.

32. *bSanh* 43a.

33. E. Rivkin, *What Crucified Jesus?* Nashville, 1984.

fully explain Jesus, for in the parallel material we not only have examples of miracle workers who were *not* killed (such as Hanina), but also of prophetic figures or leaders of popular movements who did *not* perform miracles, yet *were* killed (such as John the Baptist, who 'did no sign', John 10:41). The connection is not a simple one.

Viewing Jesus simply as a Jewish charismatic is not therefore an adequate explanation of his total life and ministry, including his death.

2. A. E. Harvey In chapter five of his book *Jesus and the Constraints of History*,³⁴ Anthony E. Harvey discusses 'the intelligibility of miracle'. He takes account of the parallel material we have mentioned, but considers that the key to understanding Jesus' miracles is to be found in the eight examples involving the healing of deaf, dumb, blind or lame. These, he says, were without precedent in Jewish culture and therefore represent the unique part of Jesus' miraculous ministry, at least in his own culture. They are to be understood as eschatological miracles, such as those described in Isaiah 35:5f. Jesus, in performing these healings, was attacking human limitations which constrain man and prevent his moving forward to a better world.

The main point in favour of Harvey's approach is that he interprets the miracles in terms of the Old Testament and not simply in terms of the parallels. Yet, at the same time, he allows the Jewish parallels to disqualify most of the gospel miracles from his consideration: any type of miracle of Jesus which was also known in the Jewish world cannot be used to help us understand the meaning of Jesus' miracles! The significant ones are thereby reduced to eight, but even those eight, as Harvey says, have parallels elsewhere, such as the shrines of Asclepius at Corinth and Epidaurus. We may agree that not all of Jesus' miracles were done to 'show' something: healings could have been performed simply because he was asked. But even so, the fact that he complied with such requests must be significant. By this approach, Harvey fails to explain the significance of most of the miracles (over thirty others in the gospels of which we have some detail), including the so-called 'nature' miracles. No statistician would be happy with a conclusion based on such a small and unrepresentative sample.

3. Morton Smith The title of Morton Smith's book *Jesus the Magician*³⁵ leaves nothing to the imagination! Drawing widely on background material, particularly the Greek magical papyri, he tries to show that the activity of Jesus was similar to that of other magicians in the ancient world. The gospels are seen as suppressing the magical practices of Jesus (a view also expressed by J. M. Hull³⁶).

We cannot deny that some of the activities and methods employed by

34. London, 1982.

35. New York, 1978.

36. See above, n. 17.

Jesus were similar to other miracle workers, and even magicians; to deny this would be to alienate Jesus from his own cultural environment (a position which would be detrimental to any view of the historical Jesus). Generally, however, the gospel portrait is extremely restrained in such things. And as far as such accusations from other sources are concerned (such as in the Talmud, see note 32 above), the explanation is quite simple: the easiest way to discredit an opponent is to accuse them of magic. The Beelzebul controversy in the gospels is eloquent testimony to that, but it does not mean that there is any truth in the charge.

Smith is a renowned scholar, and this book is based on a great deal of research. Like some of his other opinions, however, it must be seen as an example of the fringes of scholarly opinion.

4. E. P. Sanders 'Miracles and crowds' is the title of a chapter in E. P. Sanders' book, *Jesus and Judaism*.³⁷ In this, the most recent of the books we will discuss, he refers to the parallel material as well as the work of previous scholars. He is cautious about assigning Jesus to any particular religious category, but does say that he was more like Theudas than Honi or the Hellenistic magicians. The miracles of Jesus show that he cannot be considered simply as a teacher, but are compatible with viewing him as an eschatological prophet.

Sanders' work is well documented. Its major shortcoming, however, is that the conclusions are based on the form critical approach, and particularly the criteria for authenticity. The result of this is that much gospel material is rejected as having nothing to tell us about the historical Jesus, including the reply to John (Matt. 11:5f; Lk. 7:22f) and the saying about casting out demons (Matt. 12:28; Lk. 11:20). The whole thesis of the book, in fact, is based on such judgements, to the extent that he is able to reduce the 'almost indisputable' facts about Jesus to a few brief points.³⁸ It seems that this goes against the general trend in recent scholarship, which suggests that we can know a good deal about the historical Jesus.

At the same time, however, Sanders will not allow any conclusions which are unwarranted or without evidence, which is commendable. In this case, though, it means that his answer to the question of why Jesus performed miracles is rather inconclusive. Jesus may (or may not – it cannot be proved) have seen his exorcisms and healings as a sign of the arrival of the kingdom.³⁹ 'The miracles constitute a fact about Jesus' career, but they do not tell as much as could have been desired.'⁴⁰

Conclusion

What has been attempted in this paper is to sketch the background to

37. London, 1985.

38. *Ibid.*, p 11.

39. *Ibid.*, pp 157f.

40. *Ibid.*, p 172.

the gospel miracles in terms of the main Jewish and Hellenistic parallels, and to see what recent writers have made of this in terms of understanding Jesus. In conclusion, let us now outline some of the lessons to be learned from such a survey, as we try to do full justice to the gospels as well as the parallel material.

First, recent work on the miracles should warn us against the danger of unwarranted assumptions, for example that miracles in Judaism were regarded as proofs of messiahship. Messianic expectation in Judaism was not directly linked with miracle,⁴¹ and we have examples of a diversity of miracle workers with differing messianic pretensions (or none). One not yet mentioned is Simon bar Kochba, who was hailed (at least by Rabbi Akiba⁴²) as messiah, yet performed no miracles. For an authentication of Jesus' messiahship, the miracles themselves are not sufficient. That is not to say that they demonstrate nothing, for they do: in the words of Nicodemus, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no-one can do these signs you do unless God is with him' (John 3:2). It is interesting that, in Jesus' ministry, miracles are seen to authenticate his teaching, both stemming from the same 'authority' (Mk 1:27). Such a definite connection is not made in the Jewish material.

Secondly, there is the danger of categorisation. Should Jesus be regarded as a sign prophet, a charismatic, an eschatological prophet, a magician, or a preacher and teacher, or in some other category? Although such descriptions may help us to understand aspects of Jesus' ministry, they are not always helpful for they are only part of the larger mosaic, and fail to explain adequately the totality of his ministry. Socio-religious factors can influence how a person behaves, but at the same time it would be a mistake to imagine that people necessarily act in a particular way because they are conscious of falling into such-and-such a category. In any case, Jesus defies such attempts at categorisation. At times, for example, he refuses to give a sign when asked,⁴³ and his ministry shows a unique combination of miracle worker, teacher and wise man. Indeed, this is how Josephus describes him: 'a wise man . . . a doer of wonderful works . . . a teacher.'⁴⁴ This description is confirmed by the gospel record, and makes Jesus distinct from his contemporaries.

Thirdly, we must note the shortcomings of conclusions which are based on the 'criteria of authenticity'. Any such method will produce a picture of Jesus which is quite eccentric,⁴⁵ and will alienate him from his Jewish background. In studying Jesus, we must be aware of what he had in

41. See G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, Cambridge, 1927, II, p 349.

42. *yTa'anith* 68d.

43. Mk 8:12; Matt. 12:39, 16:4; Lk. 11:29.

44. *Antiquities* 18:63. Whatever opinion is held on the rest of the 'Testimonium Flavianum', with its description of Jesus as the messiah, there is no reason to doubt this part.

45. See D. Hill, *op. cit.*, p 144.

common with his background, as well as the differences.⁴⁶ Nor can we separate the activity and sayings of Jesus from those of the early church to the degree which some scholars would like.

Finally, on a more positive note, comparison of the gospel material with the parallels helps us to see Jesus in his own day, and how background information (Jewish and Hellenistic) can help us to understand him.

46. Such as in the study by J. Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism*, London, 1980.