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Making Disciples by Performing Miracles: A Study in Mark

Jonathan Rivett Robinson — July 14th, 2019

The two principle themes of Mark's gospel are Christology – the person and identity of Jesus Christ – and discipleship, what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

While the miracle accounts in Mark are frequently discussed in relation to the theme of Christology, their significance for discipleship is, in general, less developed. In this study on the Gospel of Mark I will attempt: 1) to show that Jesus' miracles are linked to his ministry as a teacher, and thus discipleship; 2) to relate the Christological meaning of the miracles to discipleship; 3) to argue that Jesus performed his miracles in part as an example to his disciples; 4) to show how the miracles also function as formative parables that are to shape the disciples' faith and understanding; and finally 5) to relate this survey to our present day context in twenty-first century Aotearoa. This short article will have the character of an overview, and so I do not pretend to be offering an exhaustive or detailed account. What I hope to do is persuade you, whether you agree with every detail or not, that the miracle accounts in Mark are a valuable source for reflection upon what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Why Did Jesus Perform Miracles?

In the Gospel of Mark most of Jesus' miracles occur in response to human need.[1] A woman is sick, she is healed (Mark 1:30-31). A child is demonised, she is delivered (7:25-29). The disciples are scared they will drown, the storm is stilled (4:35-41). The crowd is hungry, the thousands are fed (6:30-44; 8:1-10). Generally, Jesus' miracles serve to restore the ordinary.[2] Only the fig tree curse is negative in effect (11:12-21) and only the feeding miracles generate an abundance over what is needed (6:30-44; 8:1-10).

As Craig Blomberg argues, the Markan miracles also demonstrate the nature of the kingdom which Jesus preached (Mark 1:14-15).[3] Outsiders to Israel, such as a leper (1:40-42), a haemorrhaging woman (5:25-34), or gentiles (5:1-20; 7:24-37), are included in the new kingdom's sphere of influence. Unlike the kingdom of Israel, protectively bound by the purity regulations of Leviticus, Jesus does not get contaminated by the

impurity he touches. Instead, his own holiness and purity are contagious. Lepers are cleansed by him (1:40-42). Evil spirits are overcome by him (1:21-27; 3:11-12). The kingdom Jesus heralds is an inclusive, boundary-crossing, restorative, and victorious kingdom.

The miracles can also be seen as fulfilment of scripture. The Old Testament promises of healing and restoration for Israel (e.g. Isa 58:8; Jer 33:6), of inclusion for the gentiles (e.g. Isa 52:10; 56:3), and of victory over hostile spiritual and temporal forces (e.g. Zeph 3:17; Zech 12:7), are fulfilled (at least in part) in Jesus' miraculous actions.

There is also a complicated relationship between Jesus' miracles and the faith of the beneficiaries. Often the beneficiary of a healing will be commended for their faith (5:34; 10:52). However, after waking Jesus to save them from the storm, the disciples are scolded for their lack of faith (4:40). The father who admits to having doubt is not refused (9:24). While faith often initiates miracles, for Mark miracles do not produce faith, rather, fear and wonder are the standard responses (2:12; 4:41; 5:17, 20).^[4] Notably, the Gospel of John and Luke-Acts have a very different perspective on this (e.g. Luke 5:1-11; John 2:1-11).

It has also been observed that the Markan miracle accounts bear some resemblance to parables.^[5] Some miracles mimic parables, for example, the cursing of the fig tree in Mark (Mark 11:12-25) and the Lukan parable of the fig tree (Luke 13:6-9). Further, Jesus also uses miracles to teach an object lesson regarding forgiveness (Mark 2:1-12) and Sabbath law (3:1-6). As Brian Blount helpfully notes in this respect, it is possibly significant that of the first four times Jesus is called a teacher (*didaskale*), out of a total twelve times in Mark's Gospel, it is as part of a miracle account (4:38, 5:35; 9:17, 38).^[6] The only time he is called Rabbi (*Rabbouni*) is during the healing of blind Bartimaeus (10:51). In the possibly miraculous episode of provision for a room to celebrate the Passover (14:14), Jesus is also called "the teacher" (*didaskalos*). Six of the thirteen occurrences of Jesus being named teacher (including 10:51) in Mark are associated not with teaching *per se* but with demonstrations of supernatural power. There is no clear distinction between Jesus the teacher and Jesus the miracle worker, such as we might expect if teaching and miracles were separate strands of tradition. Either there is no strict dichotomy for Mark between Jesus' ministries of teaching and of miracles, or perhaps there is a deeper connection between them?

If Jesus is "teacher" even – or perhaps especially – when he is performing miracles, what does this mean for the disciples? Perhaps, as those who followed their teacher around, their first role in relation to the miracles was as witnesses. If so, what was it they were witnessing?

Discipleship as Witness

It might be assumed that Jesus' performance of miracles was part of what made him unique. However, historians will generally note that miracles are frequently attributed to rabbis, royalty, and other heroes, throughout antiquity.^[7] Even the NT gives evidence that contemporary with Jesus there were other exorcists and other healers at work (see Mark 9:38; 5:26 respectively). However, comparison of such accounts does suggest some important differences.

First, Jesus is unique in the quantity of miracles attributed to him. As Evelyn Ashley observes, there is simply no other character in literary antiquity who is recorded as performing so many miracles.^[8]

Second, the miracle accounts are of a different quality to those recorded of other figures. This is evident in a number of aspects, but particularly with the apparent ease and personal access to supernatural power that Jesus demonstrates. Jesus neither prays to God, nor uses a powerful name to perform his healings and exorcisms. His command is enough. This qualitative aspect could be summed up as "authority." This is, of course, an assessment made by many of those who witnessed the miracles (Mark 1:27).

As well as witnessing Jesus' supremacy as a miracle worker, the disciples would also witness the way Jesus' miracles reflect episodes and themes from the Jewish scriptures. As Barry Blackburn has decisively argued, it is the Jewish scriptures rather than Greco-Roman literature which provide the strongest parallels for Jesus' miracles.^[9]

In Jesus' public miracles he is revealed as God's agent; the healer and deliverer of Israel. Like Elijah and Elisha, he heals the sick and restores dead children to their parents (Mark 5:21-43; cf. 1 Kgs 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 4:8-37). Like David, he delivers from evil spirits and defeats demonic legions (Mark 5:1-20; cf. 1 Sam 16-18).^[10] Like Moses, the hungry people of God are fed in the wilderness (Mark 6:30-44; cf. Num 11).^[11] However, those miracles witnessed only by his disciples expand these scriptural Christological insights further. Only the disciples see how the wind and waves obey him and how he walks upon the water as if it were the dry land (Mark 4:35-41; 6:45-52). These two sea miracles serve to identify Jesus with YHWH who calms the storm in Jonah 1 and who walks on the sea in Job 9:8 (LXX). When Jesus curses the fig tree in Jerusalem he symbolically enacts God's prerogative as judge of his people, depicted in prophetic texts such as Jeremiah 8:13.^[12]

In this way, the miracles teach Jesus' disciples about himself. They are Christological in that they prove Jesus' uniqueness and power and reveal his relationship to the history of Israel and to the God of Israel. The disciples, by witnessing all of Jesus' public miracles and Jesus' private miracles, are given a more complete and a more profound picture of his identity than the public. They are thus also uniquely positioned to be the post-resurrection witnesses who share what Jesus said and did, and whose words become the basis of the earliest Gospel traditions. However, the disciples do not remain passive onlookers of the miracles.

Discipleship as Participation and Imitation

A second part of the role of Jesus' disciples was to share their teacher's life and to emulate and imitate him. [13] We see, to a limited extent, this dynamic of participation and imitation with regard to the miracles.

First, the disciples participate in the feeding miracles. In both the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand Jesus blesses the food (6:41; 8:6-7). However, it does not multiply in his hands but as the disciples give it out. [14] They are not simply witnesses of Jesus' power. They also become agents of Jesus' power.

Second, the disciples perform their own healings and exorcisms. In Mark 6:7-13, Jesus sends his disciples out, two by two, to imitate his own ministry. They are to preach, to cast out demons and to heal the sick, just like Jesus. However, unlike Jesus' ministry, there is a noticeable ritual aspect to this. They only cast demons out in Jesus' authority – not their own, and they heal by anointing with oil – something Jesus never does. At one point they are unable to cast out a demon, apparently because of a lack of prayer, but then Jesus casts out the same demon without praying (9:14-29). Schmücker rightly observes, because the disciples exorcise in Jesus' name and heal by his command, "even when Jesus does not appear to be working miracles, Jesus turns out to be the true miracle-worker." [15]

The disciples do not imitate all of Jesus' miracles though. They do not perform any equivalents to stilling a storm or parabolic judgement upon fruit trees. But could this be a failure on their part? In Mark 4:40 the disciples are rebuked for a lack of faith and it is not explicit why. Are they supposed to have rebuked the storm themselves? The disciples apparently do not pray enough to cast out all types of demons and Jesus calls them "faithless" (9:14-29). In 11:23, as the disciples wonder at the withered fig tree, Jesus tells them that with faith they could move this mountain. This is not the metaphorical "mountain" of motivational posters – which is figuratively some issue in your life but definitely not an actual mountain – but a specific "this" mountain, referring to the temple mount, and by implication, the coming destruction of the Jerusalem temple. [16] While we do not see the disciples performing such miracles, Mark has not completely shut the door on the disciples ever doing so, but has rather left it slightly ajar. Thus, the disciples are to participate in and imitate Jesus' miracle working.

Discipleship as Revelation and Formation

As already noted, in the Gospel of Mark, miracles do not result in clear-cut faith but in amazement and fear. The ambiguous question "who is this?" in 4:41 is paradigmatic of the confusion and uncertainty generated by Jesus' performance of miracles. Heinrich Baarlink says the disciples are "dazzled rather than enlightened" by the miracle. [17] Notably, some other observers even argue Jesus' power comes from Beelzebul/Satan (3:20-30).

This uncertainty generated by the miracles contributes to the Markan theme of ignorance, secrecy, and ambiguity around Jesus' identity. However, in subtle ways, Mark's narrative suggests that this confusion is not a failure on Jesus' part but part of the necessary process of revelation. In the section Mark 7:31-8:26 there are two healing miracles unique to Mark. In fact they are the only Markan miracles not included in any other Gospel. These miracles bookend Jesus' harshest words to his disciples about their incomprehension:

"Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?"
(Mark 8:17-18)

Anyone with teaching experience can probably relate to this. Jesus' frustration seems apparent. Has he failed as a teacher? Yet the healing miracles at either end of the section do not show an immediate healing but a gradual process of opening the ears of the deaf (7:31-37) and of opening the eyes of the blind (8:22-26). As with Jesus' explanation of the parables in private to his disciples away from the crowd (4:10, 34), these miracles are also explicitly performed in private away from the crowds. Likewise, in private, Jesus is gradually opening the ears and eyes of his disciples to who he is. Indeed, in the very next section (8:27-20) we have the pivotal first declaration of Jesus as the Messiah. The disciples *are* growing in their

understanding of who Jesus is.[18] The Gospel is not uniformly negative about the disciples. Baarlink rightly argues that in the same parts of the Gospel that emphasise the disciples' incomprehension, there is also clear mention of their vocation, mission, preaching, and performance of miracles.[19]

By positioning these two unique miracle stories (7:31-37; 8:22-26) in this way, Mark gives them a symbolic parable-like function. What is it that the disciples are being reprimanded for? The words of 8:17-18 echo Jesus' commentary on understanding the parables in Mark 4:12. Rather than outsiders to the kingdom, this time they refer to the disciples' failure to interpret the two feeding miracles.[20]

“When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?” “Twelve,” they replied. “And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?” They answered, “Seven.” He said to them, “Do you still not understand?” (Mark 8:19-21)

What is it that they do not understand? It is not a parable but the esoteric message of the two feeding miracles (cf. also 6:52). Encoded in the number of loaves and baskets of broken pieces is a message that the disciples haven't quite yet grasped.[21] The feeding miracles also have a parable-like meaning. It is a mystery which, pondered over time, will form the disciples' faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Thus, in Mark's Gospel, Christological revelation is not a discrete event where suddenly someone knows who Jesus is and believes in him. The miracles are not signs that anyone can read. This is why Jesus can say to the Pharisees, “No sign will be given” (Mark 8:12).[22] Instead, profound questions are raised which will lead the disciples to the truth about Jesus eventually, *if* they persevere in seeking it.

In Mark's Gospel, the last healing miracle is also the last calling of a disciple; the healing and calling of Bartimaeus (10:46-52). A number of features in this account are significant. Bartimaeus is the eleventh-hour disciple (cf. Matt 20:1-16). He has missed all of the miracles that the disciples before him had witnessed. He overcomes the hostile crowd's attempt to deter him and is consequently called by Jesus, but his eyes are opened only when he moves from calling Jesus “Son of David” (a messianic title), to “*Rabbouni*” – “my teacher”. From the miracle accounts we are used to Mark's use of Aramaic at moments of Jesus' power (e.g. Mark 5:41; 7:34), but here it is Bartimaeus whose Aramaic word pops out from the Greek text, alerting the reader to a truly significant change taking place. This is the only transliterated Aramaic word in Mark that doesn't also receive a Greek translation. Bartimaeus, having demonstrated both his perseverance and his changed perspective follows Jesus, not on another tour of Galilee performing miracles, but to Jerusalem and the cross.

Jesus' final public and final healing miracle in the Gospel of Mark is not focussed on Jesus as prophet or as God, not even on Jesus as Messiah. But it is focussed on Jesus as the teacher, “*Rabbouni!*”, whose true disciples follow him in the way of the cross. As Paul Achtemeier observes, Bartimaeus, the only recipient of healing to be named in the Gospel of Mark, is presented here as an example of faithful perseverance, opened eyes, and immediate decisive following of Jesus on the way.[23] Thus the miracle has both a formative impact upon Bartimaeus and offers an exemplary and formative parable-like function for the reader: Will we persevere, overcome the hostile crowd, drop our preconceptions, and unhesitatingly follow Jesus?

What Then Can We Say About Miracles and Discipleship Today in Aotearoa New Zealand?

If we identify as Jesus' disciples today, what does the Gospel of Mark lead us to expect in our own experience? Should present-day disciples be witnesses, imitators, and being-transformed interpreters of Jesus' miracles? Should we see the Christological, the exemplary, and the formative-parable-like functions at work in miracles in the church and in the world? I would like to offer a few unsystematic thoughts.

First, the expectation given by Mark is that Jesus' disciples will perform miracles of healing and deliverance. These reflect the nature of Christ and his kingdom. Such miracles were public in the Gospels and their witness served to make Jesus known and respected, without giving full knowledge of who he was. Witnessing to such miracles today could well serve the same limited purpose. However, as a caveat, not all of those among Jesus' disciples are described as performing miracles, only the twelve.[24] This may allow for a particular gift for some and not others (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-11).

Second, while we cannot escape the fact that faith and miracles are connected, Mark's Gospel provides an important counter-balance to the theme in Luke and John of miracles creating faith (Luke 5:1-11; John 2:1-11).[25] The supernatural can be a confusing and frightening thing to encounter. Miracles are likely to be events that have significance on a number of levels and require communal reflection, discernment, and integration to properly understand. What a miracle might mean in regard to the one who performs it, the one who receives it, and the message it holds for the church should not be considered self-evident or simple.

Third, while in Mark faith often leads to miracles, the power does not come from the recipients' faith but from the person of Jesus. Several miracles happen without mention of faith or in the presence of doubt (e.g. 3:1-6; 4:35-41; 9:14-29). Thus, some contemporary teaching where the onus is on the Christian to have enough faith to make a miracle happen is not biblical. The Gospel pattern is that miracles only depend on Jesus who responds freely to our need.

Finally, the perspective of Mark is that the disciples never quite "get it" within the Gospel narrative. Presumably they get it later, reflecting on Jesus' life in the light of the cross and empty tomb. No amount of miracles witnessed first-hand is enough to fully reveal Jesus without the cross and resurrection.[26] Thus, miracles on their own are inadequate to teach Jesus' disciples who he is. Indeed, as Schmücker argues, the miracles can only be properly understood after Calvary, just as the miracles themselves anticipate and inform what happens in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.[27] Baarlink frames a similar thought, that just as there is no glory without the cross, equally there is no cross without glory.[28] This too is worth pondering. Consequently, we should be warned against preaching and practising miracles without a greater focus upon the call to take up the cross and follow Jesus to Calvary. For Mark, this, and not miracles, is the *sine qua non* of discipleship.[29] As Jesus says in Mark 8:34, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

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[1] Robert Meye, "Psalm 107 as 'Horizon' for Interpreting the Miracle Stories of Mark 4:35-8:26," in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of George E. Ladd*, ed. Robert A. Guelich (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 7.

[2] Reinold Schmücker, "Zur Funktion der Wundergeschichten im Markusevangelium," [The Function of the Miracle-Stories in Mark's Gospel] *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84 (1993): 6.

[3] Craig L. Blomberg, "The Miracles as Parables," in *The Miracles of Jesus*, ed. Gordon Wenham and Craig L. Blomberg, Perspectives 6 (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 1986), 328.

[4] Otto Betz and Werner Grimm, *Wesen und Wirklichkeit der Wunder Jesu: Heilungen - Rettungen - Zeichen - Aufleuchtungen* [The Nature and Reality of the Miracles of Jesus: Healings - Rescues - Signs - Illuminations], ANTI 2 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1977), 8–10.

[5] E.g. Blomberg, "The Miracles as Parables"; Timothy Milinovich, "The Parable of the Storm: Instruction and Demonstration in Mark 4:1–41," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 45, no. 2 (May 1, 2015): 88–98.

[6] Brian K. Blount, "Jesus as Teacher: Boundary Breaking in Mark's Gospel and Today's Church," *Interpretation* 70 (2016): 184.

[7] See, e.g., Wendy J. Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[8] Evelyn Ashley, "The Miracles of Jesus," in *The Content and the Setting of the Gospel Tradition*, ed. Mark Harding and Alanna Nobbs (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), 402.

[9] Barry Blackburn, *Theios Anēr and the Markan Miracle Traditions*, WUNT 2 40 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991); also, the obvious emphasis Mark puts upon Jesus' miracles renders the hypothesis that Mark writes his gospel to counteract a view of Jesus as such a Greco-Roman "divine man" improbable, so Heinrich Baarlink, *Anfängliches Evangelium: Ein Beitrag zur näheren Bestimmung der theologischen Motive im Markusevangelium* [The Initial Gospel: A Contribution to the Definition of the Theological Motifs in the Gospel of Mark] (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1977), 283.

[10] It should be noted that David's deliverance of Saul from the evil spirit is the only instance of anything like an exorcism in the Hebrew Scriptures. As a result, traditions around David as an exorcist continued to develop in early Judaism (e.g. 11Q5; LAB 60). Likewise, the son of David, Solomon, accumulated legends about his ability to control evil spirits (see Josephus, *Antiquities* 8:46-47 and the pseudepigraphal *Testament of Solomon*). In the Septuagint, of course, we also have the story of Tobit delivering Sarah from the demon Asmodeus with the help of the angel Raphael and some fish offal (Tob 6-8). None of these traditions are close parallels to the exorcisms of Jesus. However, because of these traditional associations of David and his son with exorcism, it is easy to see how exorcisms – however performed – could be open to a messianic

interpretation. In Mark 5:1-20 Jesus is styled both as a supreme exorcist but also singlehandedly putting an army (“legion”) to rout. A comparison of Mark 5:1-20 and LXX 1 Sam 16-18 reveals many further intertextual connections. These cannot be explored here but I have done so extensively in my PhD work which I hope to publish in the future.

[11] Blomberg, “The Miracles as Parables,” 339.

[12] Blomberg, 330; Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2016), 76.

[13] M. J. Wilkins, “Discipleship,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1992), 188.

[14] The text specifically states that what Jesus gives to his disciples is the five bread and two fish (Mark 6:41), therefore the multiplication must occur between that and “all ate and were filled” (6:42). Furthermore, if the food had been multiplied in Jesus’ hands the vast amount of it would have been too much for the disciples to carry! If we are to read the narrative realistically, the multiplication must have happened as the disciples passed it out.

[15] Schmücker, “Zur Funktion der Wundergeschichten im Markusevangelium,” 4.

[16] M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 324.

[17] “Eher blendet als erleuchtet” [Blinded rather than enlightened], Baarlink, *Anfängliches Evangelium*, 280.

[18] This point relies on the observation that in Mark individual miracles are not interchangeable. Each supplicant (and therefore associated miracle) is “integral to a particular place in the plot development ... each one plays a unique role in the precise context in which she or he appears in the plot.” David Rhoads, *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2004), 68.

[19] Baarlink, *Anfängliches Evangelium*, 284.

[20] Blomberg, “The Miracles as Parables,” 328.

[21] In their defence, the precise significance of these numbers, or if there even is one, is still debated today. At the least, they demonstrate Jesus as the shepherd of Israel (Mark 6:34) who is a new Moses, teaching and feeding in the wilderness, and they help lead to Peter’s confession of Jesus as Christ/Messiah (8:35).

[22] Schmücker, “Zur Funktion der Wundergeschichten im Markusevangelium,” 7.

[23] Paul J. Achtemeier, ““And He Followed Him”: Miracles and Discipleship in Mark 10:46-52,” *Semeia* 11 (1978): 122.

[24] This is not to say others outside of the twelve do not also perform miracles. In Mark 9:38-41 someone who is not even one of the disciples is found using Jesus’ name to cast out demons. The point is, in Mark, no *disciple* of Jesus outside of the twelve is described as performing a miracle. This is in contrast to, e.g., Luke 10:1-12 where the mission of the twelve (Mark 6:6-13; Luke 9:1-6) is greatly expanded to seventy others.

[25] While faith is not specifically mentioned in Luke 5:1-11, the miraculous catch of fish is presented as a transformative moment for Simon Peter, James and John, who are prepared by the miracle to then answer the call of discipleship and follow Jesus.

[26] Arguably, “wer die Gottessohnschaft nur in Zeichen und Wundern sucht, legt ein dämonisches Bekenntnis ab.” [whoever seeks the divine son-ship only in signs and wonders lays down a demonic confession (cf. Mark 1:24; 5:7)], Joseph Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* [The Gospel of Mark], RNT (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1981), 44.

[27] Schmücker, “Zur Funktion der Wundergeschichten im Markusevangelium,” 18–20.

[28] Baarlink, *Anfängliches Evangelium*, 281.

[29] Rhoads, *Reading Mark*, 45.