



# Who is Jesus? Miracles and Mysteries

Chapter 2 of Miracles and  
Wonder

# The Gospel of Mark

- Earliest surviving account of Jesus' life
- More manifesto\* than biography
- Thematic Question: Who is Jesus of Nazareth?

\*a public statement that details the principles, intentions, and policies of a person or group; a declaration of goals and aims

# The Gospel of Mark

- Mark did not say what Jesus looked like.
- Mark was a follower of Peter and likely heard stories about Jesus.
- This gospel was written in the mid-60s to early 70s CE.

# The Gospel of Mark

Who is this man, Jesus of Nazareth?

- Mark says Jesus is the Messiah.
  - Anointed with the Spirit of God
  - Represents the Lord on Earth
- Mark focuses on Jesus' death and calls it "good news."

# The Gospel of Mark

## Jesus' Baptism:

- God's spirit descends on Jesus driving him into conflict with Satan.
- Jesus is transfixed by a vision seeing the skies torn apart and the Spirit of God descending and God's voice identifying him as "beloved son"

Mark's narrative becomes scripture..

- The narrative is modeled on Jewish sacred stories.
- He requires the reader to infer what Jesus' message is and who Jesus is by what Jesus DOES.



- ▶ Mark believes that Jesus' power to heal demonstrates and validates his claim to speak for God.

Jesus' power is evident when:

- He calls 4 men to follow him and they do.
- He heals a possessed man by commanding unclean spirits.
- He cures Peter's mother-in-law of a fever.
- Jesus heals a paralyzed man.

## Historical/Cultural Notes

- Evil spirits were the pathogens/diseases of today.
  - Hand washing, avoiding things like spoiled food, stagnant water, and dead bodies are prevention for both.
- There were no hospitals, doctors were expensive and ineffective.
- A powerful healer who did not charge money would be in great demand.



How did people feel about all of this?

- Curing people made Jesus famous and notorious.
- The healings alarmed his family. They thought he was out of his mind.
- He offended many in his hometown by his claims.
- His enemies used his miracles against him.

## Parables

- Mark 4:34: He did not say anything to them (the crowd) without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.
- Mark believed the parables were to hide meaning.

## Mark's narrative seems to say that:

- Jesus' actions serve as parables.
- Jesus' miracles were events to be deciphered.
  - Calms the storm at sea: Even the wind and sea obey him.
  - Healing of dead girl: Tells father "Don't be afraid, just trust."
  - Demons in Pigs: The demons asked and were allowed to enter pigs instead of being cast out of the man.

## Miracle stories were not unique.

- Jesus raised a widow's son during his funeral procession; Elijah raised a widow's son
- Apollonius of Tyana raised a girl at the time of her wedding
- 1<sup>st</sup> century rabbis became famous for healing
- Emperor Vespasian restored sight to a blind man and healed another's paralyzed hand.

Jesus' miracles had elements that included magical practices.

- Power words: Mark notes the exact Aramaic words Jesus used when raising the dead girl.
- Ritual acts: When Jesus healed the deaf man, he put his fingers in the man's ears, spat, and touched the man's tongue with his spittle and said "be open."

## Why did Mark include these details?

- Jesus' followers could also use these words.
- John tells of other people doing miracles in Jesus' name.
  - Jesus was okay with that.
  - They evoked the power of Jesus' name and God's spirit.



Jesus was met with suspicion and contempt in Nazareth, his hometown.

- Mark: He couldn't perform miracles because of their unbelief.
- Matthew says he couldn't do many miracles there and Luke leaves the episode out.

# Your Faith Has Healed You.

- Placebo effect?
- Rationalists: Miracles did not occur.
  - Legends, misunderstandings, exaggerations
  - Historian Crosson believes the significance is that Jesus reached out to marginalized people and that his compassionate response helped people recover from the illness of social isolation and rejection
- The gospel writers were promoting Jesus' message.

## What do many Christians believe?

- Miracles did occur.
- Some can still perform them today.
- Fundamentalists believe the Bible is literal.
  - Author believes that these people miss some of the most powerful messages encoded in the gospels.

# Psychosomatic Afflictions

- Loss of speech, paralysis, mental illness, blindness, etc.
- May be result of intense distress and can be spontaneously resolved if intense distress is eased.

These stories reflected ancient cultural perspectives.

- Galilean Judaism was a poetic mental universe filled with invisible spirits and hidden meanings for "those who have eyes to see."
- The gospel writers echoed familiar Bible stories.

Miracle	
Demons in the pigs	Despised Roman 10 <sup>th</sup> legion used the symbol of a boar.
Boat in the storm	Moses parting the Red Sea
Feeding of the 5000	Manna in the wilderness

## ➤ Who is this man? Seeing is the point.

- Jesus asks the disciples: “Who do you say that I am?”
- The story of the blind man whose sight was restored in two tries is a metaphor.
  - Peter answers: “You are the messiah.”
  - Jesus answers: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering.”
  - The disciples may have realized that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of Man after his crucifixion and resurrection.



## Did Jesus foresee his own impending death and future resurrection?

- Some scholars believe that Mark and other writers invented these prophecies after his death.
- Jesus was fully aware of the danger he was in.
- Jesus began to act out certain scenes deliberately as "signs."
- In Jesus' time, these beliefs used symbolism and were elements of apocalyptic thinking. (revealing God's hidden plans)

## What did Jesus expect would happen?

- His actions suggest that he had confidence that the Lord would shatter the Roman world order, and inaugurate God's kingdom.
- Jesus is arrested and brought before the chief priest who asks: "Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?"
  - Jesus answers: "Yes." and is sentenced to death.
  - He had to die to reign over man as part of God's plan.

# The Evidence

- There are no Roman records detailing Jesus' miracles.
- The accounts of Jesus' miracles come solely from the Christian Bible and scholars believe they were intended to validate Jesus' message and identity.
- However, some scholars argue that the disciples provided eyewitness accounts and that multiple attestations in the Bible demonstrate agreement that these miracles occurred.
- Early non-Christian sources like the Jewish historian Josephus and critical sources like Celsus mention Jesus performing "startling deeds" though they interpret them differently.

▶ The story of Jesus' life is so compelling that we are still talking about it today.

- What we infer from the New Testament gospels depends on what we treat as valid evidence, and what we choose to ignore.

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