

THREE

Signs and Wonders

One of the most striking things about Mark's Gospel is the amount of space that he devotes to Jesus' miracles. Clearly Mark considered them important, for he would not have given them the prominence that they have if he had not regarded them as significant. The fact that Mark found these stories in the tradition indicates that the church before him had also seen them as relevant and important. The questions we have to ask are: Why did Mark regard them as so important for the gospel about Jesus? What truth did he think they conveyed?

The miracle stories in Mark fall into two broad groups: apart from the general summaries of Jesus' activity, which refer to large numbers of people being healed, we have thirteen miracles of healing which are described in some detail, and five so-called 'nature' miracles. The healing miracles can be divided again into a further two groups: the first consists of exorcisms, and the second of other healings, which are perhaps best described as restorations. Let us look first at the exorcisms.

The very first miracle in the Gospel falls into this category, for it is the account in 1.23-28 of the man with an unclean spirit who confronts Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum. The story is a typical account of an exorcism: the demon recognizes Jesus and speaks to him; he, in turn, rebukes the demon, commands it to be silent and expels it. The demon obeys, and the final convulsion and cry of his victim show that the exorcism has been effective; the miracle ends with the astonishment of the onlookers. There are, however, some

features in this narrative that make it of particular interest. First, in Mark's account the exorcism is closely linked with the teaching that Jesus gives in the synagogue, which amazes his hearers by its authority. It is apparently while Jesus is teaching that the unclean spirit protests; and at the end of the narrative, Mark links the crowd's astonishment at the exorcism with their astonishment at the teaching.¹ The teaching of Jesus and his power over unclean spirits are seen as facets of one event: both are carried out with authority, for Jesus speaks as one who expects to be obeyed. The second interesting feature in this story is the way in which the unclean spirit addresses Jesus. As is often the case in exorcism narratives, the recognition of Jesus by the unclean spirit is spontaneous. The man has not been brought for healing to Jesus – indeed, in Mark's Gospel Jesus is not yet known as a healer – but simply reacts to his presence and teaching in this alarming way. But it is apparently the unclean spirit who is most alarmed, for he not only recognizes who Jesus is – the Holy One of God – but also realizes what he is doing: 'Why are you interfering with us? You have come to destroy us.' The use of the plural suggests that this one representative of the supernatural world speaks for the whole host of demons who are now confronted by the power of God in Jesus. He is the Holy One of God; he has come, not merely to deal with one unclean spirit, but to destroy the whole army of unclean spirits who serve their master, Satan. Already, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, we see the significance of Jesus' fight with Satan: the defeat of the general means the rout of the troops. The *unclean* spirits are being destroyed by the *Holy* One of God, who is armed with the power of the Spirit of God.

The next references to exorcisms are general ones: Jesus heals many – Mark cannot tell us about them all. The summaries of healing miracles include references to demons and unclean spirits, who never fail to recognize Jesus, and who are silenced by him.² These accounts prepare us for the next

passage we need to examine, in 3.21-35. This is, in fact, not an exorcism narrative at all, but the account of a conversation between Jesus and scribes from Jerusalem, who have apparently come to Galilee to see what is happening. Up to this point, Jesus has met opposition from local scribes and Pharisees, but these men from the capital would be big-wigs with considerably more authority. Whereas the controversies with the local men have centred upon Jesus' attitude to religious practice, these men are interested in the nature and source of Jesus' authority; but their objection to Jesus is presumably the same - namely the manner of his teaching, and his unconventional interpretation of the Law's demands. Since they disapprove of his teaching and his religious practice, they take exception to *all* his activity. His exorcisms, which are, as readers of the Gospel know, performed in the power of the Spirit of God, are attributed by these men to Satan: in contrast to the acknowledgment by the unclean spirit that Jesus is the Holy One of God, we have the declaration that he is possessed by Beelzebul! The activity of Jesus cannot be ignored: his extraordinary authority over demons must derive from *some* supernatural agency; and since his teaching and attitude do not agree with theirs, and since they are the guardians of the Law of God, then the logical and inevitable inference is that his power is satanic.

: In reply to this charge we have three sayings of Jesus, possibly delivered by him on separate occasions, but used here together by Mark, since they are all relevant to the theme. First, the idea that Satan is warring against himself is shown to be illogical, in the parable of the divided kingdom or household: if this explanation is to be rejected, then the scribes must think again about the nature of the authority which Jesus exercises. Then the true explanation of Jesus' activity is supplied in the parable of the strong man, whose household is being plundered by someone who has bound him; this saying is perhaps a play on the name given to

Satan – Beelzebul, which means ‘Lord of the house’³ – and clearly the meaning is that the strong man Satan has been bound by someone stronger, namely Jesus, who is now plundering his household. The parable is reminiscent of Isa. 49.25, where God declares that he will take the captives from the mighty, and rescue the prey of the tyrant. The picture of the strong man being bound and plundered takes us back once more to Mark’s prologue, not only to the description of the battle between Jesus and Satan, but also to John’s declaration that Jesus was mightier, stronger than himself. Satan is bound, and in his expulsion of the demons Jesus is rescuing his captives and plundering his household. The final saying speaks of the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Whatever difficulties this saying involves, the context makes quite plain how Mark understood it. Jesus spoke these words, he says, because the scribes had said: ‘He has an unclean spirit.’ What they *should* have said, of course, as the prologue has made clear, was: ‘He has the *Holy Spirit*.’ The religious leaders of Israel have seen supernatural power at work in Jesus, but instead of recognizing it as the work of God’s Spirit, they have attributed it to Satan. The irony of it is, that in doing this, they have identified *themselves* with the kingdom of Satan: they see good as evil, and call truth falsehood – and *vice versa*. This is why they ‘never have forgiveness’, but are ‘guilty of an eternal sin’. Men’s reaction to the *actions* of Jesus is as critical as their reaction to his *words*; those whose hearts are hardened and whose eyes are blind are unable to see the truth, and so they call white black, and place themselves outside the kingdom.

The next passage concerning an exorcism is the story of Legion in chapter 5. In this strange story we have many of the features of a typical exorcism narrative: the plight of the sufferer is described in considerable detail, and this is followed by the spirits’ recognition of Jesus, the command to them to depart, and the proof that the cure has been successful in the destruction of the pigs and the picture of the

ex-demoniac clothed, seated, and in his right mind; finally we have the astonishment of the crowd when they hear of it. There are, however, several interesting features in this particular account. One is the fact that this poor man believed himself to be possessed, not by one unclean spirit, nor even by seven, but by a whole legion of them – and a Roman legion consisted of over six thousand men. As though to prove the vast number of spirits involved, Mark describes the man's colossal strength: 'No one could bind him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been bound with fetters and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the fetters he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him.' No one had the strength to subdue him because he had the strength of six thousand demons – but a few verses later we find him sitting with Jesus, clothed and in his right mind: he has met the stronger one, Jesus. Jesus has no need to bind the man himself with a chain, for he has already bound Satan, and now he has vanquished six thousand of his followers. Confronted by Jesus, the legion of unclean spirits is powerless, and demonstrates its weakness by feebly trying to adjure the Son of God in the name of God! Once again, we see the consequences of Jesus' battle with Satan: the whole satanic kingdom is crumbling.

Another strange feature of this particular story is the conversion that takes place between Jesus and the unclean spirits. The latter, apparently realizing that their time is up, admit defeat, but, anxious not to leave the neighbourhood, request that they may be allowed to enter a neighbouring herd of pigs; since these are unclean animals this would seem a suitable arrangement, but as it turns out, the move is scarcely an intelligent one, for the pigs rush into the sea and are drowned! What are we to make of this strange narrative? Did the unclean spirits suffer the same fate as the pigs, or were they merely rendered homeless once more? And why did Jesus allow the spirits to enter the pigs and destroy them? Modern readers tend to be worried by this story, and by

Jesus' apparent lack of concern for either pigs or owners. But *Jesus* is concerned with releasing a human life from the power of Satan. No doubt Mark believed that when the demons were expelled by Jesus they had to find another home – if not in the pigs, then perhaps in another human being; better that unclean animals should be destroyed than another man or woman! Probably, then, Mark supposed that the destruction of the pigs involved the destruction of their tenants – otherwise, the demons would move on and do damage elsewhere. The prophetic words of the demoniac in chapter 1 are fulfilled: Jesus has come to destroy the whole of Satan's army of unclean spirits.

When the twelve disciples are named in chapter 3, Mark tells us that Jesus appointed them 'to be with him, and to be sent out to preach, and have authority to cast out demons'. The authority Jesus gives to his disciples, like his own, links together the activities of preaching and exorcism. The same link reappears in chapter 6, where Jesus sends the disciples out, and they preach and cast out demons. In spite of their success on this mission, however, Mark's final account of an exorcism by Jesus, in chapter 9, arises out of the failure of the disciples to expel a demon. Jesus, coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration, is met with the news that the nine disciples left below had been unable to cast the demon out of a possessed child. The precise term used by Mark is one meaning that they did not have the strength – the same verb that he used in 5.4, in telling us that no one had the strength to subdue the man possessed by a legion of spirits. This time there is no conversation between the spirit and Jesus – but that is hardly surprising, since the spirit is described as dumb. The conversation on this occasion takes place between Jesus and the child's father, and is concerned with faith: Jesus, who has the faith which enables him to do all things, stands in contrast to the faithless generation with which he has to bear. It is perhaps because of the faithlessness of the present generation that spirits like this have been

able to take such a hold on their victims; certainly the disciples demonstrate their lack of faith when they fail to cast out the unclean spirit, and the child's father, who doubts Jesus' ability to do so, is equally faithless. But this story is not meant to be an example of faith-healing; rather, it serves to demonstrate the vital link between the attitude to God which Mark here terms faith, and which is demonstrated in prayer, and the spiritual power which is able to defeat evil. Those who believe have their life in the kingdom, as Jesus has, and are able to grapple with Satan and defeat him; but the disciples are not yet wholly committed – like the child's father, their cry is still 'I believe; help my unbelief!'

There is one other miracle belonging in this group of exorcisms, and that is the cure of the Syrophenician woman's daughter in chapter 7. The interest here, of course, is in the conversation with the mother – perhaps the most difficult section in the whole Gospel. Why does Jesus at first refuse to help, and then grant the woman's request? We shall perhaps find the clue to this problem if we look at the other occasion in Mark's Gospel when Jesus failed to perform a mighty work – namely in his own home town (6.1–6). In this account there is clearly a link between the refusal of the people to believe that Jesus is anything but an ordinary local boy risen above himself and his inability to do mighty works. Once again, we should not think of this connection between faith and healing simply on the level of faith-healing: what the inhabitants of Nazareth lacked – like the scribes from Jerusalem – was not the belief that Jesus had the ability to heal, but faith that the power of God was at work in him. To them, he was only the carpenter, the son of Mary. Because they fail to respond to his teaching, they cannot share in the salvation he brings: the signs of the kingdom of God are not given to those who refuse to understand their meaning. Once again, we see the link in Mark's Gospel between what Jesus says and what he does: when one is rejected, the other is withdrawn. The miracles belong within the context

of the whole Gospel – and that means they are part of the proclamation of the kingdom of God. They are not wonders, to be marvelled at, but signs of God's grace.

Now in the case of the Syrophoenician, Mark has emphasized that the woman is a Gentile, and is therefore not a member of the nation of Israel, to whom the Messiah is sent. She requests a mighty work on behalf of her daughter – but since Jesus has not proclaimed the kingdom to Gentiles, she is requesting a miracle out of the context of the gospel, a mighty work detached from the kingdom itself, a crumb fallen from the table. Jesus must refuse her request: the exorcism cannot take place as it were in a vacuum, but only within the context of the advancing kingdom. But now, by her reply to Jesus, this woman acknowledges that Israel has something that the Gentiles do not have – namely, the source of nourishment; she recognizes that what she requests belongs to something greater, and shows some glimmering of understanding concerning the kingdom itself – in other words, she demonstrates true faith. And Jesus says: 'For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.'⁴

In two of the four miracle stories that we have examined, the demons declare *who Jesus is*: they acknowledge his power and authority over them, and obey his commands. Their expulsion is part of Jesus' conquest of Satan. In the other two, the emphasis is on the attitude of those who seek help, and on their *faith in Jesus*. All these narratives are christological: the miracles are not isolated phenomena related because of their interest, but integral elements in the advancing kingdom of God, brought by Jesus. It is because they present men and women with the challenge of deciding their response to Jesus that they find a place in Mark's Gospel.

Turning now to the other group of healing miracles, we may perhaps deal with these more briefly, simply noting some of their more interesting features. First, we notice that the details of some of the stories remind us of those in the first

group; the most notable example is the story of the leper (1.40–45). There is in fact no hard-and-fast line between the exorcisms and the miracles of restoration. The leprosy which made the man unclean, the fever that attacked Peter's mother-in-law (1.30f.), are regarded as personal forces which must be expelled, like the unclean spirits, if the victim is to be cured. And since these forces are hostile to God, the establishment of God's kingdom involves their overthrow. Once again, we see how Jesus' miracles are an incursion into the kingdom of Satan, which stands opposed to the rule of God. The anger and indignation which were roused in Jesus by his encounter with the leper, and which perplexed later scribes, were surely directed against Satan himself, for the leper was in his bondage, quite as much as the demoniacs. Sometimes Mark uses the word *mastix*, scourge, of disease (3.10; 5.29, 34); probably he thinks of the scourge as being in the hands of Satan. Similarly, when he speaks of a fetter which binds a man's tongue (7.35), he probably sees this as another example of Satan's handiwork. The release of men and women from bondage of any kind is part of the salvation promised in the Old Testament and now experienced in Jesus. Like Luke (4.16ff.), Mark may well have had in mind the description in Isa. 61 of one who is anointed with the Spirit of God in order to announce good tidings – the news of liberty for captives, and release for those who were bound.

Another Old Testament promise that we see being fulfilled in Mark's Gospel is Isa. 35, which describes the salvation which awaits God's people:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then shall the lame man leap like a hart,
and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.

Mark may well have had this passage, too, in mind as he spelt out the way in which Jesus restored men and women to health; certainly the unusual word for 'dumb' (*mogilalos*)

that he uses in 7.32 is found also in this passage, but nowhere else in the Greek Bible. In the healing miracles of Jesus, we see the saving activity of God himself, and Mark underlines this by using the verb 'to save' – a verb which is usually used in the Old Testament of God's salvation of his people – in the stories of Jairus' daughter, the woman with a haemorrhage and blind Bartimaeus. The miracles of restoration, no less than the exorcisms, demonstrate what we learned in the prologue: the time of salvation has arrived in the person of Jesus, in whom the renewing, creative Spirit of God is at work. For any disease which attacks a man or woman or child destroys the wholeness of life intended by God at the creation. The ears and eyes and lips which do not function, the withered hand and paralysed limbs, the lifeless body of the child and the feeble body of the woman from whom life is draining away, belong to a world where nature itself has gone astray, and is in the control of demonic forces: such things must give way before the power of God and his kingdom.

The same principle is to be seen in the nature miracles – in particular, in the stories of the stilling of the storm in chapter 4, and the walking on the water in chapter 6. The former of these again takes the form of an exorcism narrative, with Jesus addressing the wind and sea with words that he uses elsewhere in speaking to demons, and we need to remember that Mark would probably have attributed the storm to demonic powers. In the Old Testament, the sea is a frequent symbol for the powers of chaos and evil, which can be overcome only by God himself. The story ends with the awed words of the disciples: 'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?' The question is left unanswered, but for readers of the Gospel there is no need of an answer; in the words of the psalm:

Their courage melted away in their evil plight;
they . . . were at their wits' end.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress;
he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed (Ps. 107.26-29).

Again, in the second story, when Jesus walks on the water and says 'It is I', it is possible that Mark intends us to link these words with the name of God - 'I am'. Certainly he would expect us to understand Jesus' action in walking on the water as an example of divine authority, since it was God alone who 'trampled the waves of the sea' (Job 9.8). Once again, we find that these stories, as handled by Mark, are primarily christological in their intention: they challenge us with the question posed by the disciples: 'Who then is this?'

Many commentators, however, from the early church fathers onwards, have seen a further significance in these two narratives, and interpreted them allegorically of the help brought by Christ to his persecuted church. Typical is Dennis Nineham's comment on the stilling of the storm:

At times it might almost seem as if Christ was asleep while the Ark of his Church was being buffeted by waves of persecution and suffering; but from this story they could learn that he was in fact by no means indifferent - in response to their prayer, even if it was not accompanied by perfect faith, he would arise and deal with the forces arrayed against them.⁵

Similarly, Alan Richardson writes about the walking on the water:

It might seem to the Christians, toiling hard at the oars against the mounting waves and contrary winds of persecution and opposition, that they were making but little headway; but at the darkest hour of the night the Lord

would come – not as a phantom, but in His full reality, powerful to save – treading on the waves of the storm, and bringing peace.⁶

Faced with a consensus of opinion stretching from Tertullian to Nineham, it may seem foolhardy to question this interpretation! And, of course, there is no doubt that the stories were interpreted in this way from very early times: just as the parables were given allegorical interpretations, so, too, the miracle stories were applied to the situation of the early Christian communities, and interpreted symbolically. The question, however, is whether *Mark* intended the stories to be read in this way. Since there is nothing in the stories as he relates them to indicate that he meant us to give them this kind of allegorical interpretation, it would seem that Richardson has gone too far when he concludes: 'That St Mark intended this kind of interpretation to be read into his narratives seems to be beyond all reasonable doubt.' Certainly we should not allow these ideas (which were no doubt explored in many expositions of these particular stories in the early Christian assemblies) to distract from the overall impression which Mark is trying to build up of Jesus' divine authority.

A symbolic interpretation of another kind has been given to the other pair of 'nature' miracles – the two stories of the feeding of the multitudes. It may well be that these were originally variant traditions of one story, but it is clear from 8.19–21 that Mark is aware of what he is doing, and has not accidentally repeated himself. Why, then, does he include both accounts? For the popular, symbolic explanation we may turn once again to Richardson, who writes:

In telling the two separate stories he is symbolizing the offering of salvation 'to the Jew first, but also to the Greek' . . . From the time of St Augustine the suggestion has been known that the Feeding of the Five Thousand

represents Christ's communication of Himself to the Jews, and that of the Four Thousand represents His self-communication to the Gentiles. The disciples need have no anxiety concerning Christ's ability to supply spiritual food to the whole Gentile world.⁷

In support of this interpretation Richardson argues that the crowd fed in chapter 8 were probably thought by Mark to be Gentile, because the last place to be mentioned was the district of Decapolis in 7.31; maintains that the fact that Mark uses two different words for 'basket' (the first of which is distinctively Jewish) on the two different occasions; and suggests that the numbers involved in the two stories are significant. The five loaves fed to the five thousand are said to symbolize the five books of the Law, while the twelve baskets left over symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel. The seven loaves fed to the four thousand and the seven baskets left over could represent either the seven deacons in Acts 6 or the seventy nations of the Jewish world. Richardson concludes:

In view of this wealth of accumulative evidence it is impossible to doubt that St Mark intended his readers to understand the interpretation of the feeding miracles which has been suggested above.

Once again, however, Richardson has more than overstated his case. To the 'wealth' of his evidence we may reply: first, that Mark's geographical references are vague, and that it is by no means certain that the four thousand, some of whom have come a long way, are in fact Gentiles; if this is the point of the second story, Mark's failure to make the point clear is quite extraordinary. Secondly, that though Mark does apparently distinguish between the two words for 'basket', this may well be due to his sources; moreover, though one term may refer to a type of basket used only

among Jews, this does not mean that the second, more general word indicates a basket used only by Gentiles. Thirdly, that something very serious is wrong with the arithmetic. Five loaves for the Pentateuch is understandable (though one hardly expects to find Mark suggesting that Jesus feeds the crowds with the Jewish Law!), but one might expect the twelve tribes of Israel to be symbolized by the number in the crowd (perhaps twelve thousand) rather than by the surplus basketfuls. Even more problems arise in the second story: how can seven be said to equal seventy? And why should four thousand people be fed?

This kind of interpretation reflects an imagination which has been allowed to run riot; no doubt the stories were interpreted in this way from an early date, but if Mark had intended us to understand them as feedings of Jews and Gentiles, he would surely have given us bigger and better clues. As it is, his summary of the two stories in chapter 8 suggests that he believes that the meaning of these two accounts stares us in the face. What, then, is their meaning? There are points of contact between these two narratives and the account of the Last Supper in chapter 14 which suggest that Mark, like John (in John 6), had in mind the spiritual significance of the feeding. But both stories centre on the satisfaction of physical hunger, and that must be their primary significance. The provision of food in the desert for those who are hungry inevitably reminds us of the way in which, in the past, as part of the salvation which took place at the Exodus, God had fed his people with manna in the wilderness. The picture of one whom we know to be the Messiah feeding his people ought to point us also to the great messianic feast which lay in the future. These two ideas of course belong together, for what happened at the Exodus was seen by the Hebrew prophets as the pattern for the salvation of God which lay in the future, and sometimes this hope was expressed in terms of being fed once again by God: 'On this mountain,' declared Isaiah, 'the Lord of hosts will

make for all peoples a feast of fat things, of fat things full of marrow' (Isa. 25.6). Later, we find the rabbis drawing a parallel between Moses and the Messiah: 'As the first redeemer caused manna to descend, so shall also the last redeemer cause manna to descend.' If these are the clues to Mark's understanding of the feeding stories, they suggest that these miracles, like all the others, are seen by Mark as indications that the time of salvation announced in the prologue has arrived. The feeding of the people, like their healing, is a sign of the wholeness of life which is found in the kingdom.

Mark clearly considered these two feeding miracles to be particularly important and significant. Perhaps this is why he includes both accounts. When in 6.52 he describes the terror of the disciples at seeing Jesus walking on the water, he explains it by saying: 'They were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.' Mark obviously believed that if the disciples *had* understood the significance of the loaves, they would have understood also that Jesus had power over the wind and the waves: if they had realized why and how Jesus was able to feed the people, they would have expected him to be able to control the elements. A similar interpretation is given in chapter 8, but this time it is found in the mouth of Jesus himself. Following the account of the second feeding we have the request of the Pharisees for a sign. How absurd their request seems in such a context! They fail to see what is there to be seen; naturally Jesus refuses their demand. This leads into a discussion between Jesus and his disciples in a boat, in which Jesus warns the disciples: 'Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod,' while they, with what seems incredible stupidity, discuss the fact that they have brought no bread with them. Possibly Mark has at this point inserted an isolated saying of Jesus into the conversation about bread, for the warning against leaven seems to interrupt the rest of the paragraph.

But why should he place the saying at this point? Professor Nineham, in his commentary, suggests that Mark incorporated it here 'because the reference to bread in v. 14 provided as good a context for it as he could find'.⁸ But did Mark not see any closer link than this between Jesus' words and the rest of the conversation? And why did he think the disciples needed to be warned against the Pharisees' leaven? The two questions answer each other, for what the Pharisees and the disciples share in common in Mark's view, to greater or lesser degree, is obtuseness,⁹ a lack of understanding which renders them incapable of comprehending the evidence which is placed before them. The Pharisees have seen Jesus heal men's bodies and exorcize demons, and yet they demand a sign; the disciples have twice seen Jesus feed vast numbers of people, and yet they are worried because they have forgotten to bring bread. The same hardness of heart has been demonstrated by Herod in his treatment of John. What, then, is the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod? In rabbinic writings, as in the New Testament, leaven is usually used of an evil tendency in man which pervades and corrupts him altogether. Matthew's version of this saying interprets it of teaching, Luke's as hypocrisy, while modern commentators take the words as a warning against the false piety of the Pharisees and the godlessness of the Herodians or the hostility of them both. None of these suggestions, however, has much relevance to the context in which Mark has set the saying. I suggest that he understood 'leaven' as that rigid attitude which affects the whole personality, making men self-righteous, uncomprehending and hard-hearted, so that they are unable to see the evidence that is placed before them, or to accept the truth when it is presented to them. This influence has completely pervaded the leaders of the nation, and the disciples, by their complete failure to understand the significance of the healing miracles, show that they are in danger, as Jesus suggests, of being equally blind to the truth.

In the ensuing conversation, we are reminded of the details of the two feedings. Are the numbers significant in themselves? And why is the miracle repeated? Are we to think of Jews and Gentiles being fed, as so many commentators argue – or is it perhaps simply that since Israel was fed again and again in the wilderness, Jesus does the same now? The numbers of people and loaves involved underline the significance of what takes place, while the insistence on the large quantities of food left over on both occasions demonstrates the superiority of what is taking place now, through Jesus, to what took place at the Exodus – for the distinctive feature of manna was that it could *not* be left over, but had to be consumed at once. But what was to happen to the broken fragments? This, surely, is where the Gentiles come in. Moses fed Israel in the wilderness, and now Israel is fed again by her Messiah, but in the story of the Syrophenician woman Mark has already shown us that while the children are fed first, even Gentiles may gather up the crumbs that fall. In the gathering up of the broken fragments, we see hints of the future mission of the disciples to the Gentiles; Jesus himself may be able to preach only to Israel, but his followers will take the gospel to the world.