

# The Markan Nature Miracles and the Messianic Secret

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ONE must often wonder whether some undoubtedly great academic and intellectual theologians are, at the same time, real men of prayer. It must be apparent when studying the Life of Jesus, whatever doctrinal view about Him may be adopted, that He was undoubtedly above all things utterly prayerful, and enjoined on His followers the same constant practice of prayer. Therefore, even from a purely intellectual viewpoint alone, it should be patent that to pray beforehand about any study we are going to make about Him is an absolute necessity, if that study is to be of real value.

I am moved to express these thoughts because so often there seems to be among theologians a certain academic over-reaching of themselves in their Biblical researches, productive of massive and erudite theories of colossal learning which, none the less, appear to strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. For, more often than not, it seems to me the real solution of the relevant problem lies fairly easy of apprehension by a simple hypothesis, arrived at by sincere and humble prayer before we begin our task, and by a close adherence to the Bible *as a whole* as a basis for our conclusions, taking into consideration *all* that it has to say relevant to the situation under review.

We seem so easily to forget the words of our Lord, "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes," and His parallel assurance that before we can enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we must become first as little children: echoed in various passages in St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, about God making foolish the wisdom of this world to confound the wise.

In no respect does this seem more evident than in the current theories on the "Messianic Secret" in St. Mark, and its (apparent) infringement by the Nature Miracles.

Since modern science no longer insists upon a "closed-universe" these Nature Miracles are not now usually attacked as being impossible intrusions into such a closed system, but from the historico-philosophical angle, which says they are out of harmony with most of the healing miracles, and seem not only out of harmony with but unworthy of, the "*Deus absconditus*" of the Markan tradition as a whole, and, indeed, to portray a "*Deus revelatus*", and hence most probably must be regarded as largely legendary and non-historical.

Because of these two opposite Christological patterns in St. Mark, Dr. Vincent Taylor in his Commentary on St. Mark (1953) records that Dibelius speaks paradoxically of the Gospel as "a book of secret epiphanies". Dr. Taylor himself sees a danger of accepting a docetic Christ if we accept the Nature Miracles (Stilling of the storm, the Walk-

ing on the Sea and the Feedings of the two multitudes) at their face value. But, if we go all the way with these critics, in an over-stressing of the Pauline "self-emptying" we shall soon arrive at an Ebionite or slightly later Adoptionist, Christ. The balanced, Catholic Doctrine of the "God-Man", the Two Natures in the One Person of Christ is seen as the sanest, and that which is in accordance with *all* the facts as we have them.

This seems vividly clear in the Markan passage (ii, 1-12) recording our Lord's healing of the paralytic and, at the same time, claiming authority to forgive sins. We can even provisionally accept Dr. Taylor's and others' hypothesis that from 5b to 10a (the actual passage recording our Lord's forgiveness pronouncement) is an interpolation, and so the whole 1-12 a compilation : for Dr. Taylor gives weighty evidence for 5b-10a being an historical, and not a *Gemeindetheologie* account.

Now there is undoubted truth in the unuttered thoughts of the scribes (v. 7) that only God can forgive sins : nor does Jesus deny it : He goes on to say that He, the Son of Man, on earth has power to forgive sins. Without, then, in the least having denied that only God can forgive sins, His claim on earth to have that power too seems, quite clearly, to proclaim His twofold Nature—God-Man—in the One Person of Himself, Jesus, the Christ : His God Nature exercising forgiveness, His Man Nature, in utter union with His God Nature, pronouncing that forgiveness : the whole Person of Christ forgiving and proclaiming that forgiveness.

Now, how was He to proclaim clearly this truth about Himself? Had He gone about openly proclaiming His Messiahship, with the varied conceptions as to its nature current in His contemporary Palestine, some enthusiasts might have believed and followed Him with quite wrong ideas about that Messiahship, causing social and political tumult and disaster. On the other hand, the Scribes, Pharisees and Priests would have done what the High Priest and his followers did when, in His Own good time, Jesus, in the early hours of the first Good Friday, *did* admit openly to them His Status; namely, condemn Him to death : or He would have been put away as a lunatic (as we know His Own family at times declared He was).

No Ministry of Teaching and Healing would then have been possible : it would have ended almost as soon as it had begun : unless, by His miraculous powers, He had forced belief on all and sundry. But that would indeed have been an utter "*Deus Revelatus*" and, as well, one bound by no conditions of human existence.

Yet, when He finally left the world there had to be *some* who knew the truth about Him. And now, surely, the answer is simplicity itself. The whole key lies first in His final decision hammered out in the Wilderness Temptations, and secondly in His sure knowledge of His Father's Plan as revealed through human history.

The first resulted in His utter rejection of any "*Deus Revelatus*" scheme (the refusal to turn stones into bread, which could suggest the further idea of providing constant "bread for the masses", thus ensuring their devoted support through thick and thin : the refusal to leap, unharmed, from the Temple's pinnacle : a "*Deus Revelatus*"

act *par excellence*), and of any compromise with evil, the world and popular opinion (this is all contained in the subtle temptation to "worship the devil").

The second led Him to choose a select band of men from among His immediate following: for had not the Father chosen from the whole world one nation, Israel, to which to reveal Himself by stages, and, through them, eventually to the world? But even in its very best elements, the great prophets, Israel had nevertheless been an imperfect medium for Christ to incarnate through (for that, by the constant working of the Holy Spirit upon the nation as a whole and the great prophets in particular, is what the Word of God is constantly seen trying to do in the Old Testament). The Father had chosen this nation, Israel, to be the Word's eventual Body: and the selection had been narrowed down until only one Israelitess, a very young Maiden, had at last been found worthy to provide that Body for Him.

We can look back from our contemporary vantage point and see it all. When, to eleven of an original twelve chosen men, Jesus after His Resurrection gave the same power to forgive (or, as the case might be, not to forgive) sins, as we have seen Him claim for the Son of Man on earth, it is plain that Jesus sees those men as members, and leading members, of that Son of Man, who, with their duly authorized successors throughout the ages shall perpetuate the Son of Man on earth until He come again: shall be His Body, even as Israel of old had been chosen by God to be.

Now we can see that Dibelius's term for St. Mark's Gospel, "a book of secret epiphanies," is entirely correct and apt, and contains no paradox. For there was nothing out of harmony with Christ's God-Nature in His revealing Himself: only He must not reveal Himself to the wrong people: that is, unprepared people: and, to the people prepared, only step by step: and then the final confession of faith must come first from them: even as we read of David crying, "Thou art great, O Lord God: for there is none like Thee, neither is there any God beside Thee . . . Thou art that God, and Thy words be true . . ." (2 Sam. vii. 22, 28a). In other words, the manner of Christ's revelation must be wholly in accord with the nature of God's Revelation as recorded in the Old Covenant. And the Old Covenant, seen in relation to the whole *world*, is nothing other than "a book of secret epiphanies". For Jesus to have acted in any manner inconsistent with this would surely have been serious evidence *against* His God-head.

So Jesus chose the Twelve and "ordained" them (ποιῶ parallel with the Hebrew עָשָׂה used of ordaining priests): and He ordained them principally that they might be with Him and that He might send them forth to preach (St. Mk. iii. 14). And the main reason is "to be with Him": between any mission they would return and again "be with Him", to be further instructed: to see more of His Way of Life, both private and public. To them it was given to know the mystery of the Kingdom of God (St. Mk. iv. 11). If He veiled the spoken word to the people in general, yet revealed it to His disciples, then, though He veiled the Word Himself in action from the public, yet He would surely also seek to reveal Him to His disciples.

So they were chosen mainly to be with Him. To hear His Teaching : to see how in public and private He always acted according to His preaching : to see how constant and instant He was in prayer : and to see some of His mighty works, veiled from others.

In the matter of the two Feedings (accepting them for the moment, as separate occasions, and not a doublet), and the Walking on the Sea, and the matter of the storm on the lake, *who* was it *alone* knew each case without any doubt to be miraculous? Surely, the disciples. In the case of the Feeding, it was the disciples who having first suggested our Lord send the multitudes away to get their own food, were told to feed them with the five loaves and two fishes : having done so, and seen the result, they could have been in no doubt as to the certainty that a great miracle had been wrought by Jesus, whereas the vast multitudes sitting down in companies on the grass, would only be aware that their material hunger had been satisfied : the *manner* of this feeding would be hidden from them—whatever vague rumours might then and later float about.

But the disciples certainly knew, and were meant to : it was no *purposeless* miracle, as is sometimes suggested on the grounds that the 5,000 and the 4,000 could not have been in such an extremity of hunger that a creative act was necessary. It was part of Christ's *teaching* to those chosen to be "with Him". So with the Walking on the Water, and the storm on the lake. All that the occupants of the "other little ships" with them would be aware of was that the storm had abated, had been stilled. But *how* it had been stilled, they would be unaware. But not so the disciples in Jesus's ship : *they* knew. It was an effective sign for *them* : and so it is utterly natural and has a plain ring of factual historicity about it that they should now gather in the other end of the ship, probably more frightened now, in a supernatural sort of way, of the Figure of their Master at the other end, than they had been of the recent storm.

"What manner of Man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" Yes, it was the very crisis Jesus was forcing upon them : it was they who must decide without any clear, open announcement in words from Him. And despite all they were seeing of His Power they were quite at liberty to ascribe it, as some of His opponents did on at least one occasion, to Beelzebub. There was no compelling of their belief in any of these Nature Miracles, which were certainly, in great part, wrought to demonstrate His true Nature to those whom He had "chosen to be with Him" so that they might be taught by Him fully, and this was part of their training.

Because He ever held them up in prayer to His Father, they did *not* misinterpret the origin of His Power. They saw, also, His whole utterly good, consistent, Life. Such Power as His could not have its origin in any evil source : it must be from God.

So, again and again they must have asked in hushed whispers : "Who is He really? Of course, He *can't* be God Himself, but—?" It took a long time before that objection, so natural to a devout Jew, to seeing God Himself in a Man, however good, slowly died away. At first, they must have recoiled from the very idea as blasphemy of the highest degree. But He went on teaching them by signs. Until

at last, He felt it safe to ask them directly, first, Whom men were saying He was, and then Whom they said He was. And Peter's answer gave Him what He had been waiting for : *not* an authoritative pronouncement from Him to them : but a confession *freely drawn* from them, which had been what He had been working for all the time from the moment He had chosen them "to be with Him", the only possible way a true "*Deus absconditus*" could become a true "*Deus Revelatus*", without in any way infringing upon the free will of any of His creatures, including the specially chosen.

And immediately on their confession, He charged them to tell no man : because no others outside their immediate circle were prepared to receive the truth about Him, even as no nation outside Israel had been prepared to receive God's Old Covenant Revelation. In the fulness of time, at His appearance, at His Own chosen and appointed hour before the High Priest, He would proclaim Himself : for the time would then have come for Him to meet, fight, and undergo to overcome death.

So the Nature Miracles in St. Mark were never wrought for any advantage to Himself : to rescue Him from any otherwise fatal situation : that, indeed, would postulate a docetic Christ : but were all wrought as part of His whole training of the Twelve and His immediate circle of disciples, for His Resurrection, when it came, could only be to chosen witnesses : to those who, of their own free will, had beforehand accepted Him for what He truly was.

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## Peter's Bones

BY PROFESSOR R. K. HARRISON, PH.D.

**I**N his customary Christmas broadcast on December twenty-third, 1950, Pope Pius XII rather startled the listening world by the statement that the "grave of the Prince of the Apostles" had at last been found as the result of excavations underneath the Vatican. Though this announcement was immediately qualified by the admission that certain bones recovered from that locality could not be identified beyond doubt as those of the Apostle Peter, his remarks provoked a good deal of speculation in the academic world, and not least amongst archaeologists who had for some time been desirous of obtaining first-hand information about the progress of the excavations, which had then been going on for a decade.

Archaeological investigation of the site on which the Church of St. Peter stands is no new occurrence, though modern scientific methods naturally involve a somewhat different approach from that which was typical of earlier years. As long ago as 1615 it was known that the church of those days was situated above a pagan cemetery of a period between the second and fourth centuries of the Christian era.<sup>1</sup> But in 1939, a serious attempt was made to enlarge the crypts of the Vatican in response to the wish of Pope Pius XI, who had expressed a wish to be buried in the grottoes. Accordingly, work was commenced at a