

A REVIEW OF SELECTED NARRATIVE-CRITICAL  
CONVENTIONS IN MARK'S USE  
OF MIRACLE MATERIAL

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The impetus for this paper arose from an extended redactional analysis of the Markan miracles in juxtaposition with parallel miracles found in the other synoptists.<sup>1</sup> While a redactional investigation yielded profitable fruit, it became obvious that a literary-narrative study of the same material might well lend tremendous insight into how Mark, not primarily as a theologian or redactor but as a writer, crafted the story he has given to us.

The purpose here is to examine the Markan miracle narratives through the lens of a recent literary-critical approach. The value and legitimacy of redactional analysis has been sufficiently demonstrated by others, and the abiding place of redaction-critical studies seems to me to be a secure one.<sup>2</sup>

The last two decades of Biblical scholarship, however, have witnessed an upheaval both in approach and methodology toward NT studies. The dominant approach to Biblical studies for more than a century was the historical-critical method with its emphasis on historical concerns, grammar, and microlevel syntax.

The problem that scholars had with this old method was voiced by H. Frei: "The major limitation to all these approaches is that they fail to take seriously the narrative character of the Gospels."<sup>3</sup> M. Powell agreed:

They [the gospels] are intended to be read from beginning to end, not dissected and examined to determine the relative value of individual passages. In focusing on the documentary status of these books, the historical-critical method attempted to interpret not the stories themselves but the historical circumstances behind them.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See D. Ellenburg, *An Analysis of the Markan Use of Miracle as Enacted Parable* (dissertation, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> See the tension between J. B. Muddiman, "The End of Markan Redaction Criticism," *ExpTim* 101 (July 1990) 307–309, and R. Stein, *Gospels and Tradition: Studies in Redaction Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). I concur with Stein's insistence on the abiding value of redaction criticism for evangelicals.

<sup>3</sup> H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale, 1974) 19.

<sup>4</sup> M. A. Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 2. In one sense I agree with Powell: An appreciation for the gospels as stories that must be understood in light of their total narrative is needed. On the other hand I am not comfortable with Powell's ignoring the fact that the documents are authoritatively rooted in history and that they stand as God's Word regardless of the reader's response to them.

This perceived need for a more literary approach to the gospels prompted a host of scholars to set about analyzing them from the perspective of how they invite the reader to participate in and respond to their stories.<sup>5</sup> The first literary forms in the NT to be examined in this way were the parables. Important studies were those of R. W. Funk, D. O. Via, J. D. Crossan and N. Perrin.<sup>6</sup>

The discipline of literary-critical analysis of the gospels grew enormously through the 1970s and 1980s. Four of the more significant methods that are currently employed are structuralism, rhetorical criticism, reader-response criticism and narrative criticism.<sup>7</sup> Of the four, narrative criticism is the most productive and palatable. It is productive in terms of seeking out the intended meaning of the author, and it is palatable to evangelicals who maintain the doctrine of inerrancy. This article focuses primarily on narrative-critical concerns, although some crossover into other disciplines is inevitable.

#### I. IRONY IN THE MARKAN MIRACLES

The subject of irony in Mark's gospel has received much attention since scholars began subjecting the gospel to narrative-critical analysis and, more particularly, rhetorical analysis.<sup>8</sup> Probably the most extensive and recent treatment of this characteristic in the gospel of Mark is that of J. Camery-Hoggatt,<sup>9</sup> who was influenced heavily by W. Kelber's parabolic treatment of Mark<sup>10</sup> and by G. Bilezikian's study of tragic action in the gospel.<sup>11</sup> Camery-Hoggatt was undoubtedly correct in asserting that the Markan ironies are intentional and that irony plays an integral factor in Mark's overall strategy of composition.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.* 3 for more discussion on the genesis of the new approach.

<sup>6</sup> R. W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God* (New York: Harper, 1966); D. O. Via, Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967); J. D. Crossan, *In Parables* (New York: Harper, 1973); N. R. Perrin, "The Evangelist as Author: Reflections on Method in the Study and Interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts," *BR* 17 (1972) 5–18.

<sup>7</sup> For a comparative analysis of these disciplines see M. A. Powell, "Types of Readers and Their Relevance for Biblical Hermeneutics," *Trinity Seminary Review* 12 (1990) 19–34; for extended analyses of narrative and reader-response criticisms see S. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale, 1989). Cf. also *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (ed. J. C. Anderson and S. D. Moore; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), which focuses on narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, deconstructive criticism, feminist criticism and social-scientific criticism.

<sup>8</sup> Important early studies on the function of irony in the gospels include W. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974); M. Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1977); G. Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> J. Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel* (SNTSMS 72; ed. G. N. Stanton; Cambridge University, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> W. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> Bilezikian, *Liberated*.

<sup>12</sup> Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony* 178–181.

W. Lane also recognized the presence of irony throughout the gospel. He commented on the interpolation of Jesus' trial into the account of Peter's denial in Mark 14:65–72:

The irony inherent in the situation is evident when the force of juxtaposing verse 65 and verses 66–72 is appreciated. At the precise time when the court attendants were heaping scorn and ridicule upon Jesus' claims to be the Messiah, the prophecy that Peter would deliberately deny him was being fulfilled.<sup>13</sup>

Such privileges enjoyed by the reader to follow events that are happening simultaneously for two sets of characters are found throughout Mark's gospel with his use of ironic "double meaning."<sup>14</sup>

The primary interest here, however, is the role of irony in the Markan miracles. Mark clearly made much use of irony in his narrative strategy, and many aspects of Mark's use of miracle material have an ironical tone to them. One example of this device is found by juxtaposing the Gerasene demoniac pericope (5:1–20) with the storm incident that precedes it (4:35–41). The people's response in 5:17 to Jesus' casting out the demon is just as perplexing to the reader as the disciples' fear in 4:41 after Jesus had stilled the storm. Both reactions are inappropriate from the reader's perspective because by this time he knows more about Jesus than the characters in the story do.

The irony exists because the reader understands that Jesus is not malevolent, and Mark arranged the two stories to stress that fact. By reiterating certain themes in the two stories (the great storm's being calmed corresponding to the calm of the demoniac), Mark deepened the resonance between the accounts. It was the calm that terrified the disciples. Likewise, it was the calm of the demoniac that prompted an equally ironic reply on the part of the townspeople.<sup>15</sup>

Careful analysis of the Gerasene passage reveals both a recurring theme and a modified chiasmatic structure:

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| v. 2 | <i>[anthropos] ek tōn mnēmeiōn<br/>en pneumati akathartō</i>  |
| v. 3 | <i>hos tēn katoikēsīn eichen en tois mnēmasin<br/>kai oude alysei ouketi<br/>oudeis edynato auton dēsai . . .</i> |
| v. 4 | <i>kai oudeis ischyen auton damasai . . .</i>   |
| v. 5 | <i>nyktos kai hēmeras en tois mnēmasin</i>  |

Both the structure and the imbedded irony in this passage militate against any notion that the gospel is the product of an objective redactor or editor only.

<sup>13</sup> W. L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 541.

<sup>14</sup> Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony* 3. See also R. C. Tannehill, "The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," *Semeia* 16 (1979) 79.

<sup>15</sup> For further evidence of irony in this pericope see Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony* 134–138; W. Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 32.

Irony is present in the feeding stories in Mark as well. D. Schmidt noted how the disciples in the feeding episodes are presented as saying and doing things that have a different and sometimes contrary meaning from another perspective—especially that of the reader, who already knows the outcome of the story:

During the first feeding they innocently ask, “Are we to go out and buy half a year’s wages worth of bread and donate it for their meal?!” (6:37). Even after Jesus shows them how to feed such a crowd in a desolate place, Mark reports that “they hadn’t understood about the loaves” (6:52). The second feeding story then would seem to give them a second chance. However, Mark has them saying, “How can anyone feed these people bread out here in this desolate place?” (8:4). The reader surely remembers what the disciples do not.<sup>16</sup>

Such irony is found throughout the Markan miracles. Obviously Mark wished to create a story world in which the miracles served a function far beyond merely recounting historical wonders. He desired the miracles to enact in the visual world a representation of the kingdom of God that had arrived in the person of Christ.

## II. NARRATIVE SPACE AND THE MARKAN MIRACLES

One of the reasons that narrative criticism is beneficial is that it views the gospels as stories crafted by careful writers who created in those stories a world that must be understood and appreciated. This critical methodology recognizes that every story encompasses three elements: events, characters, settings. This article is concerned with the miraculous events in the gospel and their contribution to the overall Markan scheme.<sup>17</sup> A brief consideration of the literary role of the settings in the gospel is needed at this point.

Narrative critics generally define settings as related to locale, time and circumstances. The primary interest here is the settings that pertain to location or sphere found in the Markan miracles. Powell commented on the importance of such settings: “They include the physical environment in which the characters of the story live as well as the ‘props’ and ‘furniture’ that make up that environment.”<sup>18</sup> Space will allow us to analyze only three such settings that figure prominently in Mark: the sea, the wilderness, Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup>

The importance of the sea is implicit in Mark’s gospel. No less than forty-nine times the sea is referred to or directly brought into the Markan narra-

<sup>16</sup> D. D. Schmidt, *The Gospel of Mark* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1991) 14. I agree completely with Schmidt’s assessment of how Mark created irony in the feeding passages. I do not agree with Schmidt that the chap. 8 feeding is a doublet of the chap. 6 feeding. Further, I maintain that both feeding miracles are based on separate historical events but that Mark’s redaction and arrangement of them show his concern to point out the irony of the disciples’ incomprehension.

<sup>17</sup> See Powell, *Criticism* 35–50, for a much more extended analysis of the narrative approach to events in the gospels.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 70.

<sup>19</sup> E. S. Malbon provided an extended analysis of narrative space in *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark* (San Francisco: Harper, 1986). She defined three types of space in Mark’s gospel: geopolitical, topographical, architectural.

tive. No other topographical setting receives this much attention in Mark's gospel.<sup>20</sup> The obvious relationship between the sea and the miracles in Mark is stressed in two ways: by the number of miracles that take place on the sea, and by the placement of all references to the sea in the first half of the gospel.<sup>21</sup>

In Mark's story the sea is a place of chaos and destruction as well as of instruction and fellowship. For Jesus the sea served parabolically as a place into which to cast a mountain by faith (11:23) or throw someone with a millstone tied around his neck (9:42). In the events of the Markan story the herd of two thousand swine and the demons possessing them are destroyed in the sea. Likewise a dramatic storm at sea threatens to destroy Jesus and the disciples. That scene served both to demonstrate Jesus' faith and his dominion over the forces of nature (and evil) and to test the disciples and reveal their lack of faith.

Regarding the importance of the sea in Mark's gospel, Powell said:

At one point, Mark even describes Jesus as teaching from a boat (4:1). Thus, Jesus himself is pictured as being on the sea. . . . Such images are fraught with possibility for the mediation between spatial opposites.<sup>22</sup>

Such settings in Mark create an unquestionable link with both the content of Jesus' parables and his teaching of the inbreaking kingdom.<sup>23</sup>

One encounters the wilderness in Mark early in his gospel. First, John the Baptist appears "in the wilderness" (1:4); then Jesus is "driven out into the wilderness" (1:12–13); later Jesus goes "out into the wilderness," and Peter comes to him (1:35); and finally Jesus and the disciples withdraw to "the wilderness" and a multitude comes to them (1:45; 6:31–32, 35; 8:4). Four times in the opening chapter Mark points the reader toward this place, which is important from a mythical or symbolic, not spatial, standpoint.

U. Mauser has written one of the most definitive studies of the wilderness motif in the gospel. He pointed out that the Jewish Scriptures offered two major foci for interpreting the wilderness: (1) a place of divine testing and divine providence, and (2) a place of prophesied transformation in the end time or messianic age.<sup>24</sup> Both aspects are incorporated into the Markan scheme of *erēmos*. Mauser averred: "The wilderness is the place that threatens the very existence of Yahweh's chosen people, but it is also the stage which brightly illumines God's power and readiness to dispel the threat."<sup>25</sup>

Mark makes evident that the wilderness in his story carries a dual significance: At times it is a hostile and threatening atmosphere, at other

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>21</sup> Not a single reference to the sea as a setting occurs after Mark 8:14. The number of miracles drops off sharply after this point as well.

<sup>22</sup> Powell, *Criticism* 71.

<sup>23</sup> This discussion has only introduced the relevance of the sea in Markan narrative. For more extended treatments, see D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 63–72; Malbon, *Narrative* 76–79.

<sup>24</sup> U. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness: The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and Its Basis in the Biblical Tradition* (SBT 39; ed. F. Filson; London: SCM, 1963) 21.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 51.

times it is a place of preparation. D. Rhoads and D. Michie commented on the highly symbolic significance of the wilderness as the location of testing for the disciples and demonstration of the power of God in Christ. Regarding Jesus' miracle of bread in that place they asserted:

God's abundant provision of bread is all the more dramatic against the harsh barrenness of the place, and once again the setting provides an association with the desert where God provided manna through Moses.<sup>26</sup>

Such emphasis given to the settings in Mark argues for the view that the miracles performed there are intended to convey a deeper, parabolic meaning.

Just as the sea and the wilderness provide key narrational settings in Mark's gospel, so also does Jerusalem. For E. S. Malbon, Jerusalem in Mark represents "geopolitical" space, an important type of setting concerning spatial areas of the earth that are defined by human-made boundaries of civic or governmental units.<sup>27</sup>

The reader of Mark's gospel gradually becomes aware that Jerusalem is Jesus' ultimate destination. The journey to Jerusalem is often designated as "the way" in Mark, and some have argued that this journey provides the thematic structure to the whole story of Mark.<sup>28</sup> In Mark, when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem earlier hostilities and conflicts that transpired in Galilee intensify (11:27–12:40).

Structurally the Markan story is ingenious. For a third time Mark reminded his hearers that Jesus was on his way ultimately to Jerusalem (10:32–34) but for the first time mentioning Jerusalem specifically. On the "way up to Jerusalem" (10:32) the last healing miracle takes place, a healing appropriately involving blindness. Mark brilliantly connected the healing story to the preceding pericope about the ambition of James and John by the questions Jesus asked the two disciples (10:36) and Bartimaeus (10:51). Once again the reader is presented with what he does not expect from the narrative: Bartimaeus demonstrated true discipleship, while the disciples still clamor for prominence.

After Jesus arrives in Jerusalem the lone remaining miracle is the cursing of the fig tree. It is likely that the cursing incident was for Mark an acted or dramatized parable symbolizing the bankruptcy of Jerusalem, its temple, and the system that they represented. J. D. Kingsbury agreed:

"Jerusalem" is a place of danger and condemnation to death. Jesus' enemies are at home here, and from here scribes and Pharisees come to Galilee to attack him and his disciples. And the "Temple," the house of God's presence and the seat of the religious authorities' power, is a place of intense conflict: Prior to his passion, Jesus' last great confrontation with the religious authorities occurs here.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Rhoads and Michie, *Mark* 66.

<sup>27</sup> Malbon, *Narrative* 46–49, 120–131.

<sup>28</sup> See W. Kelber, *The Kingdom of God in Mark: A New Place and a New Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 45–65; W. Swartley, "The Structural Function of the Way (*Hodos*) in Mark's Gospel," *The New Way of Jesus* (ed. W. Klassen; Topeka: Faith and Life, 1980) 73–86.

<sup>29</sup> J. D. Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 4.

The creative work of Malbon demonstrates that narrative analysis of space and setting in Mark can serve as the basis for an entire volume. This study has attempted merely to demonstrate the possibility of a parabolic dimension as well as a spatial dimension in the settings of the Markan miracles. The gospel is rooted in an historical, geographical and cultural context. But within that milieu, symbolic overtones are added to the spatial locations. Malbon insisted on a similar approach to settings in the gospel:

The Gospel of Mark seems . . . to manifest a parabolic dimension as well as a mythic dimension, and the reversal of the expected connotations of Galilee and Jerusalem would appear to be a significant manifestation of this parabolic dimension.<sup>30</sup>

### III. LITERARY ROLE OF CHARACTERS IN THE MARKAN MIRACLES

The persons or groups inhabiting the world of a story are significant features of that story, and they are created by the author to fulfill a particular role in that story.<sup>31</sup> One can recognize a number of prominent players in the Markan drama, but three are discussed here: Jesus, the disciples, the religious authorities.

Mark's Jesus is immediately announced as the central, dominant figure in his narrative (1:1). The reader of Mark is placed in a strange category of people: Only he, God, Satan and demons know precisely who Jesus is from beginning to end in the gospel. Mark's writing is unique in that so much of the identity of this main character is revealed and vindicated primarily through his miracles, not his teaching.

Jesus' ultimate conquest over Satan receives veiled attention in 1:12–13, but Mark makes his miracles of exorcism demonstrate the ongoing extent of that initial conquest (1:21–28; 3:7–12; 5:1–20; 9:9–29). Jesus' authority over uncleanness is not so much enunciated by Jesus as enacted visibly in the number of times Mark has Jesus in contact with ceremonial uncleanness (1:40–45; 5:21–43) in his miracles. Jesus' compassion for the multitudes surfaces in the context of the miraculous in Mark. He sees the crowds as sheep without a shepherd and sets about doing just what a shepherd would do: He leads (teaches) them in 6:34 and feeds them in 6:30–44; 8:1–9. Even the righteous indignation of Jesus is couched in the framework of a miracle (11:12–20).<sup>32</sup>

More than in any other gospel the identity of Jesus in Mark is revealed through his miraculous deeds. Kingsbury agreed:

<sup>30</sup> Malbon, *Narrative* 49. See also E. S. Malbon, "Mark: Myth and Parable," *BTB* 16 (1986) 8–17.

<sup>31</sup> Powell, *Criticism* 51. Again this terminology is not an attempt to dispense with the historical veracity of the people, events and locations of Mark's gospel. One must admit, however, that Mark created a story far different from that of Matthew or Luke, and an analysis of how he used characters, space and events within his narrative is a fair one.

<sup>32</sup> See also Tannehill, "Gospel" 57–95; A. Howe, *The Teaching Jesus Figure in the Gospel of Mark: A Redaction-Critical Study in Markan Christology* (dissertation, Northwestern University, 1978).

As one observes Jesus throughout Mark's story, one discovers that no discrepancy exists between what he says and what he does. On the contrary, *Jesus' teaching is embodied in his behavior, and his behavior attests to the truth of his teaching.*<sup>33</sup>

In Mark's gospel Jesus both espouses and provides the reader with the only correct evaluative point of view because he always acts, speaks, thinks and believes in ways that accord with God's point of view. Certainly all three synoptists present Jesus consistently in this light, but Mark more precisely casts him in this light through the use of his miracles.<sup>34</sup>

That the disciples of Jesus are portrayed more harshly in the gospel of Mark than they are in either Matthew or Luke is well known. Scholars have for years pointed out the negative way in which Mark casts these characters as dull, blind and benighted. N. Petersen argued that the reason lies in understanding the story time as over against the plotted time in Mark.<sup>35</sup> Kelber, on the other hand, cogently argued that the reason for the obtuseness of the disciples as Mark presented them was that Peter and the other apostles were associated with the Jerusalem church, whose authority the gospel calls into question.<sup>36</sup> More radical was the postulation by T. Weeden that Mark intended completely to rob the disciples of their apostolic credentials.<sup>37</sup>

Such explanations are unnecessary. Much more sense can be made of Mark's negative presentation of the disciples if one realizes their literary role in the story that he produced. The disciples are portrayed honestly—with all their human foibles—by Mark, but this is not to say that they are painted negatively on the canvas of the narrative. In fact Mark leads his readers to care about the disciples of Jesus in ways that he or she does not care about the opponents of Jesus because Jesus himself cares deeply about them.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the narrative the disciples' lack of understanding surfaces, appropriately, in the miracle pericopae. In the first storm episode the narrative presents a parallel of their fear with their lack of faith, both of which manifest their inability to grasp Jesus' full identity. Also their lack of faith parallels their incomprehension in the first feeding episode, which in turn

<sup>33</sup> Kingsbury, *Conflict* 7 (italics mine). For more on the literary role of Jesus in Mark's story see Rhoads and Michie, *Mark* 103–116; J. D. Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

<sup>34</sup> For more on point of view and its importance to a narrative see Powell, *Criticism* 23–25; N. Petersen, "Point of View in Mark's Narrative," *Semeia* 12 (1978) 97–121.

<sup>35</sup> N. R. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 69–73, 77–79.

<sup>36</sup> Kelber, *Kingdom* 64–65.

<sup>37</sup> T. Weeden, *Mark—Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 52–69. Kelber noted the difficulty with following Weeden's argument: "Prior to 8:30 Mark presents a picture of a Jesus saturated with *theios aner* miracles. Peter's confession (8:30) to such a Jesus summarizes this christology which in turn is refuted by Jesus' suffering Son of Man (8:31). Hence, at 8:31 the whole christology of 1:1–8:30 is exposed as wrong!" Kelber, *Kingdom* 63, citing Weeden, *Mark* 52–69.

<sup>38</sup> Powell, *Criticism* 57.

leaves them terrified when Jesus comes to them walking on the water in the second storm-at-sea miracle. A climax comes when, in yet a third scene containing the boat and the bread, they are anxious about not having enough food. Not understanding the power of faith nor the significance of the miracles that have just been performed before their eyes, they are rebuked by Jesus for being blind and deaf (8:14–21). It cannot be coincidental that the next two miracles in Mark's story deal with the deaf and blind.

A narrational reading of Mark allows one to see that the author did not seek to discredit the disciples. Rather, his realistic portrayal of them provides the reader with a twofold insight: (1) Jesus accepted these men for who they were and transformed them into men of faith, and (2) their question "Who then is this?" (4:41) energizes the entire gospel. This question remains open for the reader to answer for himself.<sup>39</sup>

The religious authorities comprise a third major set of characters in Mark's story. Powell noted that in each of the synoptic gospels religious leaders are presented as characters who espouse a point of view opposed to God. But the manner in which this is construed differs among the three books.<sup>40</sup>

Mark cast these authorities in a negative light early in his story by the use of an ironic twist: The very ones claiming to have religious authority are described in 1:22 as not having authority. Mark's Jesus reinforces the negative role of these characters when he states in 12:24 that they understand "neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." Throughout the miracles the characters dutifully play out their parts in harmony with what the reader expects from them. They misunderstand the authority and power of God present in Jesus at the home in Capernaum (2:1–12) when he pronounces forgiveness on the victim of paralysis. Later, in their most vitriolic attack on Jesus other than the arrest and trial, they attribute his power to Beelzebub. Mark masterfully inserted this exchange (3:22–30) within the discussion of Jesus' family (3:20–21, 31–35).<sup>41</sup>

The religious leaders in Matthew, Mark and Luke appear as flat characters in that their actions and words are consistent and predictable.<sup>42</sup> These opponents of Jesus are consistently blind to the rule of God. Their blindness coincides with that of the disciples, but Mark understandably leads the reader to sympathize with the latter. Rhoads and Michie rightly observed: "The religious leaders choose not to 'see' that God's authority is behind Jesus' acts of exorcism, healing, and pardon. They require a 'sign' and yet do not see

<sup>39</sup> R. M. Fowler offered valuable insights into the role of the disciples in the miracle pericopae in Mark. Cf. R. M. Fowler, *Loaves and Fishes: The Function of the Feeding Stories in the Gospel of Mark* and *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

<sup>40</sup> Powell, *Criticism* 60.

<sup>41</sup> Both Matthew and Luke place this exchange in proximity to an exorcism miracle. Why did Mark omit such a miracle if one were applicable here? Although the Markan scheme is unusual in light of his focus on miracle as parable elsewhere, the true-family-of-Jesus issue was doubtless more important to him at this point.

<sup>42</sup> Narrative critics classify characters as either flat, round, or stock characters. See Powell, *Criticism* 51–67, for a good discussion of characters and their role in narrative analysis.

the signs given.”<sup>43</sup> What is interesting is the way that the parables of Jesus about the rule of God serve only as obscure riddles to these opponents—a phenomenon analogous to the effect the miracles have upon them.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

An extended synthesis of narrative-critical conventions focused on the miracles in Mark would doubtless prove interesting. Such an investigation would yield valuable insights into the study of Mark’s use of miracles. Mark’s method of creating his story can be determined by reading his gospel through the lens of narrative criticism. His use of miracle within the overall framework of that story is equally discernible through such a reading.

No doubt exists that the author of Mark’s gospel tells a dramatic story and weaves the tale to create powerful effects on the reader. Integral to that story are the miracle pericopae. Narrative criticism is sympathetic to the theory that the miracles function in Mark’s world of events in the same way that the parables function in word. Redaction criticism does not dispel such a notion, but a narrative reading allows for a wider appreciation of just such a possibility.

<sup>43</sup> Rhoads and Michie, *Mark* 118.