PARALLEL GUIDE 17
The Ministry of Jesus, Part II

Summary

The miracles of Jesus are the basis of the first part of this chapter. In our skeptical and scientific era miracles may be a source of embarrassment. To understand the account of Jesus' miracles, we must place them in their background of time and place as well as correct some common misconceptions. The second portion of this chapter is about the title "Son of God." The chapter closes with a discussion of the Lord's Prayer.

Learning Objectives

• Learn the difference between healing miracles and nature miracles

• Explore some common misconceptions about miracles

• Learn the role and significance of the miracle stories in the Gospels

• Learn the significance of the title "Son of God"

• Discuss the meaning and eschatological purpose of the Lord's Prayer

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. What experiences have you had in your life that you thought were miraculous?

Take time to reflect on what this means to you and in what ways your interpretation corresponds to the function of the miracle stories in the Gospels.

2. Rewrite the Lord's Prayer in your own words. Make a collection of various versions of the Lord's Prayer.

Preparing for Your Seminar

We live in a world dominated by technology and science. Every day new discoveries lay bare superstitions and unexplainable events. Be prepared as a person of the twenty-first century to discuss the use of the concept of miracles, especially as found in the New Testament.

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Chapter 17
THE MINISTRY OF JESUS, PART II

Jesus’ Mighty Works: The Problem of Miracles

According to the New Testament, Jesus was not only a teacher, he was also a worker of miracles. Attitudes to Jesus’ miracles have varied enormously. According to the eighteenth-century philosophical theologian Joseph Butler, it was . . . an acknowledged fact that Christianity offered itself to the world and demanded to be received upon the allegation of miracles publicly wrought to attest the truth of it in such an age; and that it was actually received by great numbers in that age, and upon the professed belief of the reality of these miracles. (1902, 8.3)

For the liberal Protestant critics of the nineteenth century, however, the miracles of the Gospels were an embarrassment, an element in the tradition to be either ignored or explained. This is still the attitude of many who are faced with the NT traditions. Since the word “miracle” is used in a variety of senses (as when some spoke of the British army’s successful withdrawal from the beach at Dunkirk in 1940 as “miraculous”), it may be useful to be clear about its meaning. In the present context we use the word as described by John P. Meier:

A miracle is (1) an unusual, startling, or extraordinary event that is in principle perceivable by any interested and fair-minded observer, (2) an event that finds no reasonable explanation in human abilities or in other known forces that operate in our world of time and space, and (3) an event that is the result of a special act of God, doing what no human power can do. (1994, 512)

For many people the premise is simple: “Miracles don’t happen.” Their conclusion is therefore equally

simple: “The Gospels are mistaken.” If one grants even the possibility that the events in the Gospels might have happened at least in some circumstances, then the evidence that Jesus did mighty acts is formidable. Mighty acts are attributed to Jesus by every known strand of tradition about him including those that are hostile. Rabbinic tradition spoke of him as a sorcerer (e.g., b. Shabb. 104b). Here the criteria of consistency and multiple attestation must apply.

The Ancient World and Miracles: A Misconception

Some assert that we need not take the Gospel accounts seriously because it was normal for records of miracles in ancient times to gather around charismatic personalities. But for a modern New Testament scholar to say, “miracles were everyday events in an age in which every village had its own wonder worker” (Richardson 1958, 95) is sheer exaggeration. Records of other exorcists exist from this period besides Jesus (Matt. 12:27; Luke 11:19; Acts 19:13). We possess accounts of charismatic chasidim who were “men of deed,” and of a few pagan wonder workers such as Apollonius of Tyana. Apart from highly critical references to those whom intelligent people generally regarded as charlatans preying upon the foolish and ignorant (a phenomenon from which no age, including our own, is free), the list of those for whom miracles

are seriously and consistently claimed is actually very short, and the claims made, even for them, are limited.

The miracles of the chasidim are presented as arising out of their lives of prayer and the closeness of their relationship to God. Accounts of their miraculous deeds at times border on flippancy (for example, the story of Honi the Circle Drawer’s prayers for rain, m. Ta>an 3.8). As evidence of God’s love for the chasidim, miracles are not disregarded, but the miracles in themselves are far less important for the compilers of the tradition than the wisdom and sanctity of those who perform them.

It is not very different in classical tradition. Philostratus, the biographer and admirer of Apollonius, records Apollonius’ greatest feat. It was said that he had raised a dead girl to life. But Philostratus tells the tale with distinct skepticism and clearly regards it as a nonessential part of his hero’s real greatness (Life of Apollonius of Tyana 4.45).

In short, miracles and credulity were not nearly as common among either Jews or pagans as Richardson and others have claimed. Our sources contain no known parallel to the mass of extraordinary acts attributed to Jesus, in regard to either their type or their number. There is nothing “normal” at all about the accounts of Jesus’ miracles.

The Evangelists and Jesus’ Miracles: A Further Misconception

Some hold that the miracles are inserted into the Gospels in order to substantiate the church’s claims for Jesus’ divinity. The church certainly used Jesus’ miracles in this way at later periods in its history. But the writers of the NT do no such thing. Paul never mentions Jesus’ miracles, although he and others note that there have been miracles in the church (Rom. 15:18-19; Gal. 3:5; 1 Cor. 12:9-10; 2 Cor. 12:12; cf. Heb. 2:4; Acts passim). The Gospels draw no conclusions at all about Jesus’ person from his miraculous acts. By contrast, the well-attested charge that Jesus drove out demons with the help of the prince of demons (Mark 3:22b; Matt. 9:34; Luke 11:15) makes it clear that the evidence of the miracles alone made it perfectly possible to draw what the evangelists would have regarded as wrong conclusions about him. Against what we have just said, scholars sometimes appeal to two texts. One is Jesus’ reply to the Baptizer’s question (Matt. 11:2-6 // Luke 7:19-23), in which Jesus cites various acts, some of them miraculous, as evidence that he is the “coming one.” If we are to understand this passage correctly, it is important to realize that it is the quality of Jesus’ actions that suggests that he is the “coming one,” not the fact that some of them happen to be miracles. The actions are all acts of grace, offering hope and liberation to the afflicted. They are works of the

kingdom. The non-miraculous preaching of the good news to the poor is just as important as the miraculous raising of the dead. The preaching to the poor is the climax and crown of the whole. The miraculous itself, as miraculous, is not presented in this passage as evidence of Jesus' role in the kingdom.

The other passage sometimes used in this connection is from Luke: "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you"

(Luke 11:20). Here an examination of the context makes it clear that the miraculous, in and of itself, proves nothing about Jesus for good or ill. An entire debate is being conducted around the possibility that Jesus' miraculous acts may in fact be demonic. Jesus' response demands that consideration be given to the significance of an alternative possibility, namely that he works, like Moses, "by the finger of God."

The Miracles in the Gospels

At this point it may be appropriate for us to look at the miracles as they appear in the gospel traditions. They fall into two obvious categories: the healing miracles and the so-called nature miracles. (John P. Meier has rightly pointed to the limitations of "nature miracle" as categorizing any particular type of "mighty work" by Jesus [Meier 1994, 874-77]. In many respects each "nature miracle" is unique. Nevertheless, the phrase, at least for the purposes of inventory, is a convenient label for those acts of the Savior that are other than the healing of individuals.)

Healing miracles are done in response to human need. This, at the deepest level, is their only explanation. According to Mark, Jesus cleansed the leper because he was "moved with pity" or perhaps, as the less-well-attested reading has it, "moved with anger" at his suffering (1:41; NRSV margin). He raised the son of the widow of Nain because he "had compassion for her," Luke says (7:13). He "looked around at them with anger," grieved at the hardness of heart of those who were critical of his healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:5). These kinds of motivation are not stated with particular frequency by the evangelists, but then, as we have noticed, it is not a characteristic of Greco-Roman biographers to tell us much about their heroes' thoughts.

The resemblance between the miracles of Jesus and those of the Galilean chasidim is perhaps that with him, as with them, the miracles seem to spring from intimacy with God. In Jesus this intimacy seems to be naturally expressed in a life of forgiving and healing (Mark 2:9-12; cf. John 3:2; 11:41-42). There are also differences between the miracles of Jesus and those of the chasidim. The most obvious is the sheer number and consistency of the "mighty acts" attributed to Jesus.

Jesus' healing miracles have an important place in the Gospels and, in certain cases, what seemed miraculous to the ancients need not seem quite so inexplicable to us. Modern research into the relationship between disease and mental states and into the effect of powerful personality on psychosomatic illness leaves us no reason to doubt that at least some of the symptoms treated by Jesus were amenable to such treatment.

Many readers who take seriously the stories of Jesus' powers of healing have considerably more difficulty with the so-called "nature miracles," such as the calming of the sea, the feeding of the multitude, and walking on water. The early form critics simply dismissed these narratives as legend. However, the matter is not quite as simple as it appears. Jesus' calming of the waters and his feeding of the multitude are actually better attested than any other single mighty act (excluding the Resurrection) in the entire tradition. They are the only acts recorded by both the Synoptics and John. Two of the nature miracles, moreover, are preserved in what seem to be the remnants of a sequence—feeding, crossing the water, the dispute about bread, and a dispute among the disciples—for which, particularly in the case of John,

historical reminiscence actually seems the most likely explanation
(Mark 6:30-54; 8:1-33; John 6:1-70).

What are we to make of this material? One solution is to suggest that perhaps the nature miracles were not actually quite as amazing as they appear to be in our records, or at least that they do not transcend the normal laws of creation. It is suggested that they do not really meet the criterion of our description. Thus, with regard to the "walking on water," it has been suggested that the Greek idiom describing the event may simply mean "on the shore." With regard to the calming of the storm Vincent Taylor in his commentary on Mark suggested that "the miracle was probably a miracle of divine providence. Jesus trusted in God and his trust was not deceived. . . . [He was] sustained by the belief that 'his hour was not yet come'" (Taylor 1957, 273). As for the feeding of the multitude: that, perhaps, was an acted parable like the Last Supper itself—a sign of the messianic banquet.

Vincent Taylor's explanation is the most convincing, since it seems to preserve some of the real value of the event as the gospel traditions understood it. Others seem merely to be rationalizations and leave the inevitable question: If that was all that happened, why did anyone bother to remember it? Or at least why did anyone bother to remember it like that?

The nature miracles all have something in common with the miracles of Moses. He, too, showed mastery of the waters (Exod. 14:21-29) and fed his people in the wilderness (Exod. 16:1-36). This connection has not escaped the attention of John at least (6:30-51). Have the nature miracles been invented by the church to show that Jesus was like Moses, in accordance with the rabbinic principle that "the last redeemer will be like the first"? Possibly. But then one wonders why the church did not do a better job of it. The walking on the water and the stilling of the storm are not, after all, much like the crossing of the Red Sea. Theudas offered to divide the Jordan—a good deal better resemblance! If this was the reason for the narratives, why is it not clearer? Only John refers to Moses in the way implied by this suggestion, and then only in connection with the feeding.

The nature miracles remain a puzzle. We are too much a people of the twentieth century not to be troubled by them; yet the various modern "explanations" seem to create as many difficulties as they solve. In the last analysis we can say only that something very extraordinary appears to have happened on these occasions, something that caused many to marvel and some to see a sign of the sovereignty of God. In the matter of the nature miracles, as indeed in the whole tradition of Jesus' mighty acts, we are forced back to the basic rule of historical study well stated by Raymond Brown: "Historicity should be determined not by what we think possible or likely, but by the antiquity and reliability of the evidence; and as far back as we can trace, Jesus was known and remembered as one who had extraordinary powers" (Brown 1994, 2.1468).

The Significance of the Miracles

The miracles are characteristically linked to faith (Mark 4:40; 5:34, 36). Faith does not necessarily mean one is free from all doubt or hesitancy, but one must exhibit some willingness to respond, some attempt at trust
(Mark 9:21-29).
In one of those

passages in the Gospels whose embarrassing nature makes it certain to be ~~authentic~~genuine, Mark records that where faith was not present, Jesus could not act (Mark 6:5; cf. the parallel at Matt. 13:58 and note how Matthew has rephrased the verse to make it less embarrassing).

Faith is a response, a relationship, an attempt at commitment, an acting with the "conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). Such a response to Jesus brings the experience of being set free. As the Gospels put it with a verbal play that is impossible in English, through faith in Jesus those who trust him are "made well" (Mark 5:34) or "saved" (Luke 7:50). The expressions in Greek are identical, and the fundamental meaning of the key verb (Greek: *sozesthai*) is "to be set free" from whatever oppresses. If forgiveness is needed for that liberation, forgiveness is given. If a miracle is needed, a miracle is given (Mark 5:25-34). These are works of the kingdom. Perhaps this is what lies behind the nature miracles. At certain moments, in an exchange too deep to be recalled except in its most obvious external signs, those with Jesus experienced a wholeness (shalom) wherein waters no longer threatened and food was God's gift.

Be that as it may, Jesus' miracles commend themselves to us not as works done with a view to exhibitionism, but rather as the normal expressions of the life and power of one such as he. The greatest miracle recorded in the Gospels is, if the evangelists are right, Jesus' own person. His "mighty works" are merely the natural expression of that person. They are the product of the "divine power" that worked through him, that "something greater" than Jonah, or Solomon, or even the Temple itself, that was present in him (Matt. 12:6, 41, 42) (Bowman 1962, 737).

The miracles were not offered as "signs" to convince. Jesus is distinguished in this respect from other messianic pretenders because he does not offer and indeed consistently refuses such signs (Luke 11:16, 29; Mark 8:12 // Matt. 16:4). The mighty acts of Jesus were not offered as signs, but for this very reason they were signs for those who see. The evangelist John correctly refers to them as such throughout his Gospel. Jesus himself points to them as he grieves over the towns of Israel. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."

(Matt. 11:21; cf. vv. 22-24)

As the parables are signs for those with ears to hear, so the miracles are signs for those with eyes to see. They are manifestations of the sovereignty of God, present and active in a new way in the world. To those who refuse to see, they are merely riddles or, worse, they show that Jesus really is in league with the demons (Mark 3:22-27; Matt. 12:24-29; Luke 11:14-23).

It is striking that in Mark's Gospel, when Jesus expresses concern about the failure of his disciples to appreciate the meaning of his mighty acts, he appeals to exactly the same text of scripture as he does in reproving their failure to understand his parables, namely Isaiah 6:

"Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?"

(Mark 8:17-18; cf. 4:10-12; Isa. 6:9-10)

Jesus, the Son of God

Various strands of tradition in the Gospels show the title "Son" or "Son of God" being applied to Jesus (Mark 1:1; John 1:34) and accepted by him (Matt. 11:27). What does it mean?

If it is assumed that Aramaic or Hebrew lies behind these expressions, we cannot make any useful distinction between "the Son of God" and "(a) Son of God." The particular grammatical form used in Aramaic and Hebrew does not allow this distinction, so the presence or absence of the definite article in the Greek text—and hence in our English Bibles—can tell us nothing about the sense of the original Aramaic. (In any case we ought to be aware that at times our English Bibles tend to insert the definite article before "Son" even where it does not occur in the Greek: e.g., Mark 1:1, where a strictly literal translation would be "Beginning of the

Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God.")

In the Bible and in late Judaism generally "son of God" means "righteous person." Hence, "if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him" (Wisd. 2:18). "Beloved are Israel, for they were called sons of the Omnipresent; but by a special love it was made known to them that they were called sons of the Omnipresent, as it is said, 'You are the sons of the LORD your God'" (m. `Abot 3:14, quoting Deut. 14:1).

The idea of "sonship" seems to have reflected a feeling of close filial relationship with God among the *chasidim* of the time. Various holy men, according to tradition, were so commended by the bat qol (the heavenly voice: literally "daughter of a voice"). Rabbi Meir was declared from heaven to be "Meir my son" (b. Chagigah 15b), and Chanina ben Dosa to be "Chanina my son" (b. Ber. 17b). Even critics recognized the intimacy of the chasidim with God. It was said of Honi the Circle Drawer: "You are petulant before God, and yet he performs your will as if you were a son importuning his father" (m. Ta`an. 3.8).

Into this background certain details of Jesus' ministry as described in the Gospels fit well, such as the bat qol at his baptism and at the Transfiguration, twice declaring him to be God's "beloved son" (Mark 1:11; 9:7; Matt. 3:17 and Luke 3:22; Matt. 17:5 and Luke 9:35), and his apparently characteristic way of addressing God in prayer, "Abba, Father" (Mark 14:36; cf. "Q" Matt. 11:25-27 // Luke 10:21-22; see Chapter Eighteen). Jesus, like the chasidim, is also addressed by his adversaries as "Son of God" (Mark 3:11; Matt. 4:3, 6), although the adversaries are described as demonic.

The title "Son of God," applied to Jesus by himself or others, at least reflected both his and their sense of his intimacy with God and God's intimacy with and care for him. Do we have grounds to think that Jesus saw himself or was seen by others in any sense as uniquely God's son, that is, as God's son in a way different from the sonship of other righteous people? Possibly.

"Son of God," though not in itself messianic, was used in the first century as a designation for Israel and hence for the King Messiah who would represent Israel. Some claim that both Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14 have been found in Qumran documents in such connections (see 4Q504 3.4-7; 4Q246 2.1 [possibly!]). There is in any case no parallel in any of the traditions about other chasidim to the number of times that Jesus is described in his filial relationship to God and at least one text that we have good reason to regard as authentic shows Jesus speaking of himself as uniquely God's son. This is the saying about the time of the end in Mark 13:32: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." As we have already noted, this text fits the criterion of distinctiveness since it attributes ignorance to the Son; but it also attributes a sonship to Jesus that places him above the angels.

Finally, there are the declarations about Jesus' sonship by the heavenly voice. These speak of him not just as "my son," as in the case of other chasidim, but as "my Son, the Beloved," adding, "with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). As James D. G. Dunn suggested some years ago, it is certainly possible, though of course not provable, that we have here some entrée into Jesus' personal experience at his baptism (Dunn 1975, 63). When challenged about the source of his authority, Jesus is said to have appealed to John's baptism (Mark 11:27-33).

Jesus and the Lord's Prayer

There is a certain note of comedy in Jesus' teaching about prayer in the Gospels (e.g., Luke 11:5-13). The relationship between God and the child of God is so simple and natural that it seems almost ludicrous to suggest that there could be any question about it. There is no reason to suppose that this part of the tradition is not historically correct. We therefore examine the Lord's Prayer against this background.

According to Luke the prayer is offered as a model for disciples (Luke 11:1-4). There is no reason to suppose otherwise. The same purpose is implied by Matthew, who presents the prayer among other instructions to disciples in the Sermon on the Mount

(Matt. 6:9-11).

The versions offered by the two evangelists differ in detail. Scholars suppose that Luke may have better preserved the "original" form, since Matthew's version bears more signs of being shaped by liturgical usage (see, for example, the greater formality of the opening address). From the beginning the Lord's Prayer may not have been so much a fixed formula as a pattern of praying, so that differences of detail would not have been important. Jesus' personal prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36) could be regarded as a third "version" of the prayer, since it certainly has the same basic elements (affirmation of the primacy of God's will and personal request), although the order and wording are different.

For our discussion we work from the shorter, Lukan form, although we can occasionally refer to Matthew's longer text when necessary. We might translate Luke's Greek as follows:

> Father,
> Thy name be hallowed, Thy kingdom come,
> Our bread of the Day, give us today,
> And forgive us our sins—for we forgive our debtors.
> And do not bring us to the Trial.

Consider first the address to God as Father. God is not often called "Father" in the Hebrew Scriptures, and then only in relation to the chosen people or their king. The notion of the universal fatherhood of God is unknown to the Bible. Fatherhood implies authority, of course, but also tenderness and compassion:

Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me. For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name."

(Isa. 63:15b-16)

Even though the patriarchs themselves abandon their own offspring, God will not forsake them. That is the meaning of the fatherhood of God for Israel. So it is natural for the Psalmist, having enumerated God's acts of compassion and forgiveness, to conclude,

As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. (Ps. 103:13)

In later Judaism "Father" seems to have become an important way of addressing God in penitence or affliction. At his moment of grief Sirach prayed: I cried out, "Lord, you are my Father" (Sir. 51:10).

Comparison of the opening of the Lord's Prayer with traditions about Christian prayer hinted at in Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6 (cf. also 1 Pet. 1:17) suggest that Jesus not only invited his disciples to pray to God as their Father, but also taught them to use the more intimate Aramaic form, Abba, which was characteristic of his own prayer (Mark 14:36). Prior to the fall of Jerusalem, teachers of children would have them use Abba or some similar expression in place of the divine name as a mark of respect. So Jesus invites his disciples to pray as he does himself, with the innocence and confidence of children (cf. Mark 10:14-15; Matt. 18:1-4).

The next two petitions ("thy name be hallowed, thy kingdom come") remind us strongly of elements in the ancient Jewish Qaddish: Magnified and sanctified be God's great name . . . . May God establish the kingdom

during your life and during your days . . . .

The prayer is eschatological and its eschatology is futuristic. In one sense the petition is ridiculous. Who is this disciple who presumes to tell God that God's will may be

done? What is the point of such a prayer? None at all, unless it is seen as a privilege, the privilege of God's child freely to affirm the purposes of God, not as slave but as beloved. So the child confidently requests, "Abba—I delightedly unite myself with your purpose. Do what you have promised!" We might compare Mary's response to the angel at Luke 1:38, where the Greek optative with which she says "let it be" (the nuance of the optative is virtually untranslatable into English) expresses not merely her compliance, but her eager joy in complying.

Yet with the Lord's Prayer there is another side—a yearning for the fulfillment of God's promise. How long, O Lord, how long? How long shall we pray and you remain silent? How long shall we hunger and thirst for justice and not be satisfied? (cf. Rev. 6:10; 22:20)

Petitions that relate primarily to God's will are followed by petitions relating primarily to our need. The meaning of the first—which we have translated "Our bread of the Day, give us today!"—is the most disputed in the whole prayer. The problem is the Greek word epiousion, which we have translated "of the Day" (NRSV "daily"). The word is rare and its meaning very uncertain. Among interpretations offered by various ancient translators were "continual," "for our need," "daily," "supersubstantial" (by the church father Jerome, who connected it with the Eucharist), and "for tomorrow" (cf. NRSV margin). Among interpretations favored by modern scholars are "necessary for existence," "for the current day," "for the following day," and "for the future" (cf. BAGD 1979, 296-97).

The arguments are highly technical. The word may have been intended to translate the Aramaic *machar*, "of tomorrow," a word used to refer to the consummation of all things. "The Day" referred to is therefore the great day, the day of the coming of the kingdom. The prayer asks for the bread of the messianic banquet. This may at first be disappointing to many who have understood and valued the prayer as a simple request for the meeting of ordinary human need, but that aspect of things is not omitted. The prayer asks for the experience of the heavenly banquet now. Give us today our bread of the day! In the ordinary needs and interchange of life itself the child of God prays for that one thing necessary if such life is to be truly seen and truly lived: the experience now of final meaning and hope.

The next clause is also a prayer for the final experience to begin at once: forgiveness! Forgiveness means the cancellation of debts. Sinners that we are, it is the one gift we shall need for ourselves in the last time. But we also need it now, for how can we live without it? "Forgive us," the children of God pray, "as we forgive!" "Cancel our debts. See, we cancel the debts that others owe to us!" This is the one clause in the prayer that could be understood as inviting a reward for merit, but that is not the intention. Forgiveness cannot be earned, for it means the cancellation of debts. One might in theory earn enough to pay a debt, but to have a debt canceled is always a gift. The words "as we forgive our debtors" simply reflect what is involved in forgiveness. To live as forgiven is to take forgiveness seriously as a basis for living, and to take forgiveness seriously as a basis for living is to be forgiving. "We accept the gift—see, we forgive!" says the prayer. Jesus notes of the woman who was a

sinner that she was clearly a forgiven person who had accepted God's forgiveness. The loving quality of her behavior shows this

(Luke 7:47).

Matthew gives particular emphasis to the importance of this part. Immediately after giving the prayer, he quotes Jesus saying:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

(Matt. 6:14-15)

It cannot be emphasized too much that this forgiveness is not, or at least not primarily, a matter of emotion. It is an act of will. Forgiveness means canceling a debt. Regardless of how we may feel, do we insist that our debtors pay up or not? Exactly that point is made in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:23-35). There is some confusion in the two versions of the Lord's Prayer over the words "debt" and "sin" (cf. Matt. 6:12; Luke 11:4). That is because the word for "debt" in Aramaic was used to mean "sin." The two versions are therefore merely different translations of a common original.

The final clause, "And bring us not to the Trial," refers to the ultimate trial—the temptation to apostasy. It is not that the child of God is not concerned about other sin, but simply that all other sin can in time be dealt with, so long as we have not turned our backs upon God.

As we can see from Matthew 6:13 (NRSV margin), some ancient manuscripts add the ascription of glory to God that is familiar to most Christians from their prayers. Even if this was not a part of the original basic pattern of the prayer, it is not incorrect to add it. Such a prayer would normally have concluded with words of praise and hope.

The whole prayer is thus eschatological, concerned with the last things. This did not (and does not) mean that it is remote. God's sovereign power is at work in a new way in the world. Already the last things are near (Mark 1:15). We address our Abba and look for the end; and so we expect our bread—the bread we must have to meet our common need—to be for us also the bread of life. This is what it means to "repent" (or think again) in the light of the kingdom (Mark 1:15; cf. Matt. 4:17). The process is not without pain. The element of comedy in the teaching about prayer does not mean that the prayer is always easy or its answer obvious. God's silence, the final "Lord's Prayer" in the Gospels, is answered by a cross (Mark 14:36).

Jesus and Women

In every strand of tradition Jesus' relationships with women were perceived as open and accepting. The criterion of consistency, therefore, leaves us no room to doubt that they were such. For Jesus, the presence of the kingdom rendered irrelevant and obsolete the partitions and distinctions of a patriarchal society. In the perspective of the kingdom the widow's two mites are worth more than the rich men's treasure, and those who trust God are all brothers, sisters, and mother of the Messiah (Mark 12:41-44; 3:35).

Both criteria, of consistency and of distinctiveness, oblige us to take this aspect of the record of Jesus' ministry seriously as historical reminiscence. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza puts it, "Not the holiness of the elect but the wholeness of all is the central vision of Jesus" (1984, 121).

Jesus, the Sinners' Friend

Again and again Jesus announces that the kingdom is for sinners: tax collectors and harlots. The traditions

uniformly assert that Jesus called into his fellowship the notorious sinners. The parable of the great supper (Matt. 22:1-14; Luke 14:16-24) suggests that God's kingdom includes everyone who chooses to come. The story of the woman who was a sinner reminds us that, even when normal standards of obedience are apparently shattered, people may still exhibit in their lives and behavior a quality that shows they have accepted forgiveness and are children of the kingdom

(Luke 7:36-50).

End of chapter

Miraclesback

But no discussion of miracles is complete without some mention of David Hume.

Beelzebus[back]

I've always thought the argument "how can his kingdom stand?" less than convincing. Granted that the devil can do nothing good, he might perhaps, for strategic reasons, refrain from doing evil. His failure to stop someone from casting out demons might be a kind of strategic withdrawal.

at the deepest levelback

I don't understand this.

Psychsomatic illness[back]

Yes, but doesn't that somewhat diminish their miraculous nature? Or should we (I'm being serious, not sarcastic) make a case for two classes of miracles - those with greater and lesser divine intervention?

and his trust was not deceivedback

So in effect he did a miracle.

Historicity[back]

But anyway, as St. Paul says, if you don't believe in the biggest miracle of them all, the Resurrection, you're wasting your time,

Optative[back]

What, you don't know what the optative is, and they don't explain it? It's a mood that exists in Greek verbs, like the indicative and subjunctive, but it isn't found in English. It shows a desire that whatever the verb is about should happen. In dialect "It should be according to thy word" gets pretty close, but in standard English "Let it be" is a prefectly fine translation. A word of wisdom, you might say.

machar[back]

I hate it when someone makes a point that I can't examine, and then uses it to promote a theory that flies against what is common and natural, and what I learned at my mother's knee. And notice the slippery slope from "the word may have been intended" to a flat statement that the prayer is about the messaianic banquet.

consistency and distinctivenessback

We have to be a bit careful not to try to have it both ways.