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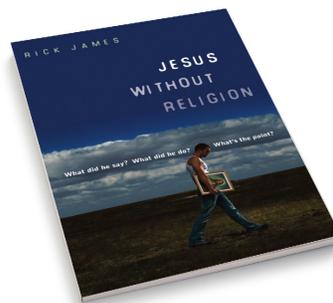
JESUS WITHOUT RELIGION

MARVEL—THE MIRACLES OF JESUS

JESUS WITHOUT RELIGION CHAPTER EXCERPT

Apologetic books typically present arguments for Jesus, stripped from the context of Scripture. While arguing for Jesus, we never actually meet Jesus. *Jesus Without Religion* provides an overview of the Gospels, and through reading sections of Scripture with brief commentary, the reader gets to know Jesus - what he said and what he did. And, where possible, apologetic arguments (everything from “Lord, Liar, Lunatic” to “Evidence for the Resurrection”) are imported into the commentary to provide gentle persuasion and assurance.

Jesus Without Religion paints a compelling portrait of Jesus and after finishing the book, the reader will clearly understand the words, works and claims of Jesus. The book concludes with a clear presentation of the gospel. JWR is one of few apologetic resources written to this generation of students.



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MARVEL

Super Power

No matter how great the stereo, music coming out of only one speaker will sound like it's being played on the intercom at Foodworld, which is why speakers—and ears, for that matter—are available in pairs. In the ministry of Jesus, his teachings and miracles were essentially two different speakers playing the same song, his miracles complementing and authenticating his teaching. And that's why the miracles of Jesus always had a point: Jesus was running a ministry, not a sideshow.

Here is the first recorded miracle of Jesus' ministry, the famed turning of water into wine.

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. (John 2:6-9)

Armed with the assumption that there is always a point, look for details in the picture that might hint at the message. See those massive stone water jars there? They kind of remind me of those Ten Commandment-engraved monoliths that Moses hauled down from the top of

Mount Sinai. Well, that could be a stretch, but regardless, the water inside the stone jars was used for “ceremonial washing”—a procedure prescribed in the Law of Moses that symbolically cleansed of moral impurity. So you have this stone-water-Law-of-Moses-ceremonial-cleansing-Old Covenant theme going on. Add to that the imagery of a wedding, including the bridegroom coming for his bride. So, as Jesus took the stone jars and turned the clear water inside into crimson wine, he was leaving behind a Post-It note saying something like “The Messiah (the bridegroom) has come for the bride (Israel), and my mission is to bring new life and meaning to the old commandments, establish a new covenant and cleanse sin—not symbolically by water but in reality through my blood.” Nuances of interpretation may vary, but you see the point—not the point of this miracle but the point about miracles having a point, which was my point.

The Gospels typically place Jesus’ miracles in direct relation to the teaching content before or after it. That Jesus’ miracles and message went hand in hand is without doubt; whether their correspondence was always so rigidly observed, is harder to say. The fact is, they were anything but random in nature and usually fell into one of the following categories:

- The miracle is an object lesson for the disciples.
- The miracle points to Jesus’ identity as the Messiah by demonstrating his power over sin, sickness, or Satan.
- The miracle exemplifies the importance of faith.
- The miracle in some way is evidence of divinity, manifesting power that is the prerogative of God alone.

While even the most skeptical of readers accept the basic historical reliability of Jesus’ teachings, his miracles require faith. But it should be acknowledged at the outset that Jesus’ miracles come with some pretty

weighty historical evidence, namely the testimony of his enemies.

They brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons." (Matthew 12:22-24)

Even Jesus' opponents did not deny his miracles, leaving them to ratchet down their attack to an argument about the source of his power (only one rung up in the hierarchy of argumentation from "Oh yeah? Sez who?"). It should also be remembered that this was not a naive audience; magicians, scam artists and peddlers of snake oil were as recognizable to the Jews back then as they are to us today. No, if discrediting Jesus' miracles or casting doubt on them was viable, it certainly would have been used against him, so we must assume that people known to be blind, saw, and those who couldn't walk, walked, and Jesus' enemies had to search elsewhere for ammunition to use against him. With that as our introduction, we'll double-click on each of the major categories of Jesus' miracles.

The Power of Faith

[In Capernaum] a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: “Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” (Luke 7:2-9)

Jesus said to them, “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.” He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith. (Mark 6:4-6)

Jesus’ miracles were seldom performed independent of a teaching message. But as these two stories demonstrate, they were seldom performed independent of faith, either. The three-plus years of Jesus’ public ministry were amazing days, so in the Gospels the word *amazed* is about as worn as the word *dude* is today. Yet the Gospels record only two times when Jesus himself was amazed, and both are emotional reactions to faith: Jesus stood amazed at the faith possessed by a Roman centurion and the apparent lack of it within the nation of Israel (Luke 7:9).

In speaking about miracles, I don’t mean “miracle” of childbirth or laughter or hope or antibodies or penicillin. I mean the type of miracle in which one minute there’s no one sitting next to you on the bus and the next there’s a penguin playing the mandolin—I mean things that don’t typically happen (no disrespect to the miracles that occur in the natural order of things).

There are, in fact, reports of modern-day miracles. You won't read about them at the newstand, though the *Enquirer* may cover the occasional sighting of Elvis over Tokyo or the birth of a human-goat child. But the reports are there if you know where to look.

The *JESUS* film project has taken the Gospel of Luke and put it on film. Having seen the film, I'm doubtful that it will be remembered for its cinematography. Or its acting. Or its special effects. Or its art direction. Or . . . Yet it's been translated into thousands of languages and dialects and shown around the world. At last count, almost two-thirds of the planet had viewed the film—more than 5.7 billion people, just eeking out *Zoolander* by 5.6 billion for the “most viewed film of all time.” In their annual reports, leaders of the *JESUS* film ministry relate with mild matter-of-factness stories of the blind seeing, the deaf hearing and hundreds of other miracles. Consider, for example, this account from Indonesia that I pulled out of their archives.

Mrs. Peni of Purwonegoro, Indonesia, had been blind for four years. But someone told her about the *JESUS* film, where Jesus heals a blind man. She asked her youngest daughter to guide her to the film showing so she could hear the story even if she couldn't see the picture.

When the scene was shown where the blind man asks Jesus to heal him. Mrs. Peni shouted out, “I want to see too!” A few moments later, as the film showed Jesus being nailed to the cross, her vision was restored.

At a town meeting some time later, the Muslim officials wanted to ridicule her and prove that she really had not been healed. They asked her to come to the front and light a candle. Mrs. Peni got up from her seat and confidently strode to the front. Then, as everyone watched, she picked up the matches and lit the candle. Forty

Muslims decided to trust Christ after seeing this.

The film team was brought back to her village because everyone wanted to see the film about the man who healed Mrs. Peni. Thirty-five hundred people attended the showing and a new church was started in the village.¹

Admittedly, it's not as enthralling as the birth of a human-goat baby, but still, it's pretty amazing. Now, perhaps there are alternative explanations to this being a miracle. Perhaps if she had been watching *Aliens* and had cried out to have four or five eyes and a retractable jaw full of carnivore teeth, she would have begun to grow them. Perhaps. But proving or disproving this story's veracity is not my point.

Here is the point: Some years ago I interviewed a member of the organization's leadership and remarked that their ministry used to publish these miraculous accounts but no longer did so, and I was curious as to why. The answer was as simple as it was disturbing: "We don't share those stories as much in the U.S., because where there is no faith, miracles actually produce skepticism. It does the exact opposite of what it was intended to do: encourage belief."

At a certain point, Jesus didn't feel compelled to feed people's insatiable appetite for the sensational. If that alone is what drew them, then sooner or later they would find other shiny objects to alleviate their boredom and stop coming to the show. His miracles were meant to encourage faith, not serve as a substitute for it. Those who humbly came to Jesus always found their faith rewarded. But those who remained passive or indifferent, demanding a sign or miracle, would find themselves waiting and waiting and waiting.

I think it's normal to seek evidence, proof and answers—to be in process in one's spiritual journey. But as G. K. Chesterton observed: "the purpose of an open mind is the same as that of an *open* mouth, that it

might close on something! The point of a journey is to arrive at a destination, and I suspect that those who always need more proof and are never satisfied with the answers they're given are not really looking to arrive anyplace.

Power in the Dark

When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" For Jesus had commanded the evil spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places.

Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"Legion," he replied, because many demons had gone into him. And they begged him repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss.

A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into them, and he gave them permission. When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting

at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.
(Luke 8:27-35)

Today, about the only place where the devil has credibility is within the music world, where rumors have always sold records. Legend had it that the Rolling Stones met with occult leader Aleister Crowley. Or perhaps that was Anton LaVey, author of the *Satanic Bible*. Groups like AC/DC and Ozzy Osbourne promoted Satanism with an evangelist's zeal, while groups like the Dead Kennedys and the Cramps looked like Satanists but were actually nihilists. And that's where things got really fuzzy. Marketing showed that Satanism sells, so then it was like *Where's Waldo?* with pentagrams hidden on all kinds of album covers. And, I mean, who isn't going to bite the head off a bat if it boosts record sales? But then again Mick Jagger never ages, so either he's smoking formaldehyde or, like, you know, he cut a deal with the devil. And, like I said, there have always been rumors.

The satanic hijinks of rock stars hold little interest for me. But since seeing the film *The Possession of Emily Rose* I've been insanely curious about the phenomenon of possession. I mean, does this stuff really happen, or should we see the story in Luke 8 as perhaps the healing of a man with primitively diagnosed Dissociative Identity Disorder? So I took it upon myself to do some research, my resume padded with the following credentials: I've seen the *Exorcist* several times; I have a theology degree, and I know the lyrics to "Highway to Hell—who could be better for the task?

My investigation began with the mother of all possession stories, *The Exorcist*. Fortunately, someone got there before I did, wondering similar questions, and so the research was already completed and contained in Thomas Allen's book *Possessed*, which chronicles the infamous 1949 exorcism. The most fascinating part of Allen's book is the appendix,

where he includes the actual diary of the presiding exorcist, the late Father Bowdern. Here are a few, rather creepy excerpts:

March 14: A stool flew across the room and landed with a loud crash, but no one was injured. The mattress of the bed shook, as on many occasions. The shaking continued for two hours.

March 16: Three large bars were observed to be scratched on the boy's stomach. The marks were sharply painful and raised above the skin similar to an engraving. The most distinctive marking was the word "HELL" imprinted on his chest. They would appear as we read through the exorcism.

April 7: During the praying, at least 20 scratches or brands appeared on the boy's body, usually at the mention of "Jesus." The first mark was clearly the number 4; several times four strokes or claw marks of various lengths appeared on his belly and legs. There was considerable profanity and crudeness concerning sexual relations with priests and nuns.²

The true-life case behind *The Exorcist* was witnessed, signed and verified by forty-six Jesuit priests, and the child experienced deliverance about the twenty-fifth day after uttering the word "Dominus," which is Latin for "Lord" or "Christ."

While such cases are not common, they are not anomalies either. Apparently each year the Roman Catholic Church records between 800 and 1,300 exorcisms, with Protestant churches reporting figures much higher.³ Pretty remarkable when you consider that one of the Catholic Church's criteria for an exorcism has been the victim's ability to speak in an ancient language without prior knowledge of it—*yipes*.

It would be inaccurate to say that modern medicine has relegated all such phenomena to the bloodletting, leech-sucking, witch-burning science of the Middle Ages. While Tourette's syndrome, schizophrenia and

Dissociative Identity Disorder have no doubt been wrongly labeled in the superstitious past, there continue to be cases that defy classification. One of the world's most renowned psychiatrists, M. Scott Peck, reports in his *Glimpses of the Devil* that there is an undeniable—though exceedingly subtle—delineation between psychological disorder and ontological (personal) evil, which he demonstrates through two modern clinical case studies. Peck believes that spiritual evil, in some cases, is the only rational explanation for attending symptoms and metaphysical phenomena, and that, at times, evil manifests itself in patterns that clearly betray intelligence.⁴

The bottom line is that this spiritual confrontation contained in the Gospels should not be dismissed as naive superstition. In fact, the description of Jesus' exorcism contains some resonant signs of authenticity. The story recounts that the man lived in the tombs, wore no clothes, was driven to a solitary place, had abnormal strength, and according to Mark 5:5, "would cry out and cut himself with stones." You find this same recurring behavior in most modern cases: an absorption with death, antisocial behavior, self-destructive actions and some sign of the paranormal. And, not incidentally, in almost every documented case study, such as that of *The Exorcist*, deliverance was secured only through appeal and acquiescence to Jesus Christ.

As demonstrated in the movies, the rite of exorcism has been performed by mere mortals, no doubt in a maelstrom of flailing hands, holy water and Shakespearean English. But the not-to-be-missed emphasis in the story from the Gospel—indeed, the very reason it was recorded—is that Jesus simply said, "Leave," and the demon did. This was not so much a power struggle as a case of the lifeguard saying, "Everybody out of the pool."

We've all heard the raw, reactionary interviews that follow horrific world events. Three common questions inevitably emerge: Why did God

allow this to happen? Is God judging us? What sort of evil people would do this? A lot of finger-pointing goes on, and by no means are people without guilt in these evil actions. But from a biblical perspective, a far from innocent party has somehow avoided indictment and slipped out unnoticed.⁵ Jesus' demonstration of power over the spiritual forces of darkness was as important in the first century as it is in many parts of the world today where evil, and not government, military, big business or organized crime, is the power to be reckoned with. In fact, in our sophistication maybe we've become the ones who are ignorant.

Power of the Kingdom

"A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?' "

At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." (Luke 7:16-22)

The situation was this: John the Baptist, forerunner of the Messiah, had been thrown into prison. Pacing around his cell, John began to won-

der, *Why, if I'm the herald of the Messiah, do I find myself in lockdown instead of occupying the highest office in Jerusalem?* Perhaps he had been mistaken about Jesus being the Messiah. (*Maybe it was another Jesus—Jezuz with a "z"?*) So he sent messengers to Jesus for affirmation, and Jesus' response . . . Well, it will make perfect sense after we take a short detour back to the beginning—the very beginning.

The story of Genesis 1—3, and especially the part about Adam and Eve, was meant to communicate certain fundamental truths about the human condition: why it is as it is and not as it should or could be. Genesis tells us that humankind was a unique creation endowed with the image of the Creator, which was manifested (among other ways) in their free will.

By its very nature, however, free will makes for two unimagined possibilities: a person can freely choose to love you, or they can choose to reject you, even hate you, even murder you. Risks notwithstanding, equipping us with the more powerful free will chip was a choice God freely made.

As the Eden story unfolds, humanity sins, and evil slithers its way into God's creation. The exonerating events of Genesis bear out that evil and corruption were not of God's making but rather the defect—and there is a defect—that resides in human sin and the perverse use of something intrinsically good: free will.

Sin breached the relationship between God and humanity, and when that was severed, like links in a chain, it uncoupled every relationship contingent to it: people with people (wars, murder, racism), man with woman (divorce, broken families), people with nature (alienation, pollution), people with themselves (guilt, shame, fear). Like a broken DNA sequence, the result has been all manner of deformity within creation: Eden now mutated into a mosh pit. Suffering is nothing more nor less than the negative experience of these severed relationships.

Something of the physics of our own experience corroborates the

Genesis account, with so many existential questions constantly merging and crashing into our thoughts with the sense that things ought to be different, that we were made for something better, that our lives should have purpose and meaning, that suffering is an unnatural intrusion, that contentment is an elusive phantom, that certain actions are not simply inconvenient but wrong—evil. I mean, why do we not simply accept life as it is, with all its brokenness? The world is not as it was meant to be, and we all know it. It's fallen and can't get up.

The Old Testament prophets predicted that the coming Messiah would usher in an unprecedented time of peace and restoration of the world: a return to its created state. Familiarity with the Old Testament brings recognition of a common biblical vocabulary employed by the prophets—a repetition of certain metaphors—to describe this messianic age of restoration. Here are two of the more frequent:

In that day deaf people will hear words read from a book, and blind people will see through the gloom and darkness. . . . When he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5, NLT)

Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert. (Isaiah 35:6)

I've watched religious programming where people in the audience are apparently healed. I mean, who really knows, right? But it seems to me that everyone in the audience suffers from the same kinds of maladies: something congenital, something malignant, something internal, something where I have no possible way of knowing if it's truly been fixed. Anyway, given the Old Testament context, it should be clear why Jesus' miracles repeatedly involved giving sight to the blind, hearing to the

deaf, and—I want to say “mobility,” but it sure sounds dumb—to the lame. It wasn’t that the majority of Israel’s population in the first century was blind or that working feet were a rare commodity. Jesus was making a point, with deliberate redundancy, to an audience familiar with the Old Testament metaphors, that the messianic kingdom—the kingdom of God—had arrived. Following in its wake, the deaf and blind were able to see and hear, as the lame triumphed over gravity.

And this is the message he gave John’s emissaries: the kingdom of God was wherever Jesus walked. “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Luke 7:22). This was certainly enough for John to interpret the inferred message: “I am the Messiah, and the messianic kingdom has indeed arrived.”

Though certainly not an unforeseen development, ultimately, Jesus’ rejection by his people postponed the full inauguration of the kingdom. It exists now in the form of a spiritual kingdom, with hearts and lives ruled by the Messiah. But there will come a day when the world will be made right, when the tears of sin, death and disease will be blotted from our eyes. “Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy” (Isaiah 35:6).

Absolute Power

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (Matthew 14:22-33)

How do you communicate not only that you are the Messiah but that the Messiah is actually God incarnate? This isn’t the sort of thing you can easily weave into the conversation—“Instead of asking God to bless the meal, why not ask me instead?” No, this is going to be a pretty delicate subject and one that Jesus would have to demonstrate, allowing people to do their own calculations on a separate piece of paper.

Jesus knew that an unqualified declaration could easily spark a riot, bloodshed, and an abrupt and premature end to his ministry. Israel under Roman occupation was so highly strung that even the introduction of caffeine into the populace could have triggered a revolt or all-out war. The Gospels note Jesus pulling away from the crowds, moving quickly on to other towns or preventing people from speaking about his identity.

At the source of these actions was a serious concern for the flammable fabric that was Israel.

Instead Jesus, with imaginative subtlety, acted out his message. But if his goal was to demonstrate that he was God incarnate, why not fly? Or turn a mountain into meatloaf? Or people into crescent rolls? (I think I'm hungry.) It could be argued that doing any miracle would have made the point about Jesus' divinity, but that's not really true. There are preachers on my cable channels apparently performing miracles, and I just think of them as being crazy—nice people, very nice hairstyles, but crazy. Also, miracles were performed by some of the great prophets of the Old Testament, so Jesus' choice of miracles would need to distinguish him from the more mundane role of prophet.

So, for example, why did Jesus walk on water? The answer is found in the Old Testament book of Job:

He [God] alone stretches out the heavens
and treads on the waves of the sea. (Job 9:8)

To Jews in the first century, this verse was common knowledge—everyone knew that God alone treads the seas. Had the Old Testament said, “God alone veileth himself in the cloak of a Virginia ham” (Virginia ham—*mmm*), then that would have been the miracle. And conversely, if he didn't want people to arrive at this conclusion, this would certainly have been the last thing he would do.

There is also something compelling (and shrewd) in this teaching style. Impressionist painters did something like this in their use of color: they found you could create a vivid green, for example, simply by laying blue and yellow side by side on the canvas, allowing the viewer to mix the color in their mind. Jesus' coupling of miracle with Old Testament Scripture seems to have produced this intended effect.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus performs many such miracles in or-

der to disclose his unique identity as the Son of God. And he often followed such demonstrations with statements that, when analyzed, were synonymous in content with the miracle, as with this healing of the paralytic:

Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." (Matthew 9:2)

Isn't that nice? Jesus was forgiving someone of all his sins. A generous offer, considering this man had never sinned against Jesus. In fact, he had never met Jesus. If the blasphemous implications are not obvious to you, try out a similar statement on a random shopper at your local supermarket.

The religious leaders weren't stupid, and it didn't take them long to decrypt the message. "The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, 'Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' " (Luke 5:21). Message received.

Or consider this subliminal advertisement. In the Old Testament book of Zechariah, there is a prophecy concerning a future day when God himself would visit Jerusalem.

On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem. . . . And on that day there will no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD Almighty. (Zechariah 14:4, 21)

And so as Jesus approached Jerusalem he stopped purposefully at "Bethany at the Mount of Olives," and then "on reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling [traders] there" (Mark 11:1, 15).

What? You thought he just lost his temper, overturning the tables of the moneychangers? No, he was enacting a message, wisely left unsaid.

A paradox remains just an oxymoron until you 'get it', and so it is with Jesus, the 'Servant King' and his 'subtle miracles:' miracles and messages holding the perfect note of ambiguity. Able to summon those with 'ears to hear' and avoid an all out confrontation, with those who wouldn't.

Impotent Disciples

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." (John 6:1-14)

The phrase "four score and seven years ago" is nonsensical outside the United States (and, I suppose, to those with SAT scores less than

200) because its meaning is culturally bound.⁶ Likewise, certain actions and phrases within the Gospels had the cultural resonance of the Gettysburg Address to their Jewish audience, but they're all but lost on us.

The crowds had walked hours to hear Jesus speak. It was now getting late, and being slightly east of nowhere, the people had no place to find a meal. Jesus asked his disciples how they were planning to address this brewing problem of five thousand hearty, agrarian appetites desperately in need of food. The disciples intelligently began to panic as they thought through the relatively few available options (pizza delivery was still two thousand years in the future). One disciple, Andrew, industriously rounded up several loaves and fish from a child's lunch but then asked forlornly, "How far will they go among so many?" Not very far, Andrew, not very far.

Once the disciples' energy and ingenuity were spent, Jesus took the portion they had mustered and turned it into a banquet large enough to feed an army—or five thousand peasants, as the case may be.

To the crowd, the miraculous appearing of bread enough to feed the masses—in the middle of nowhere—would have immediately brought to mind God's miraculous provision of manna in the wilderness for the starving Israelites (Exodus 16), underscoring Jesus' messianic identity (as well as his deity). But for the disciples, there was a different message altogether. When people were done eating, Jesus instructed his disciples to pick up the remaining scraps, and they gathered twelve basketfuls of leftovers.

Hold on! Twelve—where have we heard that number before? It's how many doughnuts are in a dozen? True, but I was thinking of the fact that there were twelve disciples and twelve baskets of food. This couldn't have been coincidence, so let's try to piece this together.

Once Jesus was gone, his disciples would be left to carry on the ministry. They would be responsible for meeting the spiritual hunger of the

masses, and yet, in and of themselves, they were inadequate for the task. Spiritually speaking, they represented the equivalent of a few loaves and a smelly fish.

Why the need for the lesson? Perhaps the disciples had become artificially buoyed by being in Jesus' inner circle and had lost sight of their inadequacy. Or more likely they were simply unaware of what Jesus knew only too well: his time with them was running out. But when Jesus put them on the spot, they became painfully aware of their lack. As public humiliation often does, this provided a teachable moment. Jesus stepped in and demonstrated, by way of a miracle, that through God's empowerment and provision they would have all they needed to accomplish their task—provided, that is, that God was always catering the affair. And later, as they gathered twelve basketfuls of leftovers, they would no doubt be sobered to the awesome responsibility and honor they bore as God's chosen vessels to feed his people.

And so the miracle of feeding the five thousand is not a lesson about how to share what's in our lunchbox. Among other things, it was an object lesson for the disciples. I might have lost a few people with that example, so here's a quicker and easier one.

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"

He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. (Mark 8:22-25)

I have no doubts about the potency of Jesus' saliva; I'm willing to bet that Jesus could have healed this guy's sight on the first shot if he had wanted to. But instead, the man's eyesight was only partially restored, his vision still blurred, able to make out contours but not details. Kind of sounds like the disciples doesn't it? Just listen to their discussion with Jesus immediately prior to this healing of the blind man:

"Be careful," Jesus warned [the disciples]. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."

They discussed this with one another and said, "It is because we have no bread."

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?" (Mark 8:15-17)

"Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees," says Jesus.

"I think Jesus is angry that we didn't buy any bread," say the disciples.

The healing of the blind man was meant to parallel the disciples' partial comprehension of Jesus and his mission. They saw, but they didn't see, not fully. They understood the broader contours but were confused by much of what Jesus did and said. This was another miracle as object lesson.

Throughout the Gospels, you'll find many of these after-school lessons for a class of disciples in need of special tutoring for final exams were drawing closer, when they would be left to carry on the ministry without their teacher.

Before leaving the subject of miracles, I want to mention a last and final layer of meaning contained within the miracles of Jesus. In the Gospels, physical disease, disability and death carry symbolic or metaphoric reference to the deeper reality of spiritual malignancy and souls terminally ill

from the effects of sin. For example, many people to whom Jesus spoke were spiritually blind: blind to their own sin, blind to their need for repentance, as well as blind to the identity of Jesus. Jesus' interaction with those who were physically blind certainly has this as a backdrop of meaning. Leprosy, another common disease in the Gospels, eats away at the skin all the while numbing the body's ability to perceive the damage (lepers lose the sensation of pain). If there were a better metaphor for the concurrent soul-ravaging and conscience-numbing effects of sin, I'd love to hear it.

First century Judaism took the connection between the spiritual and physical so concretely that those with such diseases were automatically labeled as "sinners." Thus to heal someone of blindness or leprosy intrinsically carried the meaning of spiritual forgiveness and moral cleansing. With that in mind we'll close this section with the haunting question that Jesus asked a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" (John 5:6)

"Do you want to get well?" I should think the answer would be rather obvious, but seen through a spiritual lens, as this man perhaps would have, it's anything but rhetorical. I mean, if you could be healed of lust or greed or anger or pride or lying, would you really want to? Just like this crippled man whose identity was defined by his disability, our lives too are arranged around such moral furniture and would look quite different without them. And what if "getting well" spiritually meant a painful amputation of a beloved habit, the denial of a personal passion or the death of a dream? Would you still want to be well? When the patient is our souls and not our bodies, everything changes. The issue is no longer "Can Jesus heal?" but "Do I want to get well?" And that's perhaps the better, more gospelsque, question to take with us from Jesus' miracles.