Judaica: Neue digitale Folge 7 (2026)
https://doi.org/10.36950/jndf.2026.5
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The “Miracle-Mongers”: the Gospels at the Edges of Empire

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Abstract: *This study argues that the canonical gospels of the New Testament should be placed in direct conversation with paradoxographical writing. With their accounts of Jesus’ miraculous conception and birth, healings, and depictions of the peoples and traditions of Judea—a conceptually “foreign” territory in the imperial imagination—the gospel writers engage in the same ethnographic, aetiological, and paradoxographical project as their contemporaries. This brand of literary engagement is evident in the Gospel of Mark’s presentation of Jesus as a literary* thauma *or “wonder” in the tradition of paradoxography and epic, demonstrating that theological concepts like the “Messianic Secret” are better understood as a* topos *designed to be both didactic and tantalizing to Roman audiences. In addition to Mark, the article situates Philostratus’* Heroicus *within this same paradoxographical landscape, showing how its staging of autopsy, astonishment, and the conversion of a skeptical eyewitness parallels the gospels’ strategies for cultivating belief.*

According to Pliny the Elder, *mirabilia* or marvels were principally associated with the edges of Empire (e.g., Book 7 *passim*).[1] The art of paradoxography was a means of chron-

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This article is part of the Special Thematic Section *Nature Miracles and Paradoxography in Biblical Reception of the First Centuries CE* (2026); for the conceptual framework and an overview of the other contributions, see the introduction (https://doi.org/10.36950/jndf.2026.3).
My gratitude to Monika Amsler and Stephen Hebert for their insights and editorial guidance on this article. All errors are my own. I dedicate this piece to the memory of my dear friend and mentor David Konstan; I have written certain portions with his compositional style in mind as an homage.

[1] For more on *mirabilia* and its near cognates (e.g., *thaumata* and *miracula*) across ancient genres, including Pliny, an excellent resource is Petsalis-Diomidis, *Truly Beyond Wonders*. Petsalis-Diomidis cites multiple examples of *mirabilia* in Pliny on pp. 157–158, n. 22–29, including 7.74, 7.76, 7.78, 7.71, 7.87–90. To that catalogue, one might add the cyclopic tribe he locates north of the Alps in 7.9–10, known to fight griffins (*grypis*) around mines or quarries (*metalla*); the fleet-footed people of the Himalayas (*magna Imavi montis*) whose feet in fact face backwards (*aversis post crura plantis*), but who are unable to breathe in regions beyond the mountains (thus, one must travel to them to confirm this report), 7.11-12; certain people on the continent of Africa able to cure snakes bites with their saliva, 7.13-14 or remarkable individuals with miraculous body parts (*corpori partes… mirabiles*) with the ability to cure diseases, including King Pyrrhus who was able to cure splenic complaints (*cuius tactu lienosis medebatur*) with the big toe on his right foot (*pollex in dextro pede*), 7.20. India and Ethiopia (*India Aethiopumque*) are among the lands he reports are particularly awash in miracles or marvels (*miraculis*), including unnaturally long-lived persons (7.28–29), strange births (7.30), visible ghosts (7.32), and a variety of other phenomena best not repeated. Pliny often cites corroborating sources when making these claims (e.g., Cicero, Ctesias, Herodotus) and very much mirrors themes found in paradoxographers like Phlegon of Tralles. For more on Phlegon: *Paradoxographorum Graecorum Reliquiae*, ed. Giannini; *Phlegon of Tralles’ Book of Marvels*, ed. and trans. Hansen. The Latin in this footnote is cited

icling such wonders in writing—a sort of spectacle in print—in the form of vignettes, anecdotes, and annals on everything from unusual human births and bizarre creatures to exceptional lives, cosmic signs, and extraordinary tales of disease and healing. Not confined simply to lists, one could also find evidence of engagement with "wonder culture" in the works of so-called historians, *bioi*-writers, and novelists alike. Aulus Gellius, for instance, thundered along with Fronto and Apuleius about "sophistic producers of marvels" who attempted to "please the ear" of their audiences with "shabby… Greek wonder-tales"—the implication being that reading audiences were not only susceptible but primed for tales of the miraculous on the margins.[2]

The irony, of course, is that Gellius was guilty of the same practice; he was apt to quote Apion and Pliny, despite lamenting that they "merely wish to impress their audience with their miscellaneous collections of trivia."[3] And behind his *bon mot* was a truism of the Second Sophistic—"wonders-tales" had long been a tool for writers to foster belief, whether it be about the present or the past, about things human or divine.[4] From the Greek epics forward, as Emilio Gabba observed, "the miraculous and the fantastic… were regarded as a way of introducing the divine into the world of men [sic]."[5] While accusations of paradoxographical pandering could be used as a rhetorical cudgel against one's opponents (real or perceived), its practice remained pervasive.[6] Even Thucydides, the darling of sober history writing, was not immune to its appeal (e.g., the celestial phenomena he chronicles during the Peloponnesian war; 2.28, 4.52).[7] Meditating on the

from *Pliny Natural History*, *Volume II*, trans. Rackham. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[2] Keulen, *Gellius the Satirist*, 238. I also discuss several of these passages from Mark in Walsh, "City and Country," 324–342. For more on the perception of "narratives of wonder" as a "working tool of fiction" as well as its ancient and modern reception and popularity: Gerolemou, "Wonder-*ful* Memories in Herodotus' *Histories*," 133–151, cit. 133. Broadly, Gerolemou's edited volume is a fine resource for investigating the theoretical issues at stake in the discussion of wonder/miracle/*thauma* literature and provides excellent bibliographic references. To clarify: I am not attempting to argue that miracle stories only take place in far flung territories in this literature; my purpose in emphasizing this aspect is to highlight yet another key commonality with the gospels.

[3] Cited from Keulen, *Gellius*, 238. Another excellent source on Gellius is Howley, *Aulus Gellius and Roman Reading Culture*.

[4] I tend to define wonder and wonder-literature generously, given that it is often a feature within other genres of literature, as I discuss. I am partial to Tim Whitmarsh's definition of *thaumata* as a point of reference: "a peculiarly indeterminate epistemological position, between the plausible and the impossible" associated with the kind of storytelling and "exoticism" characteristic of writers like Herodotus; Whitmarsh, *Beyond the Second Sophistic*, 20. I also cite this definition in Walsh, "City and Country," 332.

[5] Gabba, "True History and False History in Classical Antiquity," 50–62, cit. 53.

[6] A useful volume cataloging the breadth and reach of paradoxographical literature and motifs across Greek and Roman literature is *Recognizing Miracles in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. Gerolemou. I also discuss the rhetoric of Thucydides and other historians along these lines in Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 60.

[7] Thucydides is often heralded as something of an "anti-wonder" champion *par excellence* who regarded "wonder-stories as fictional nonsense" or characteristic of "Herodotean" hogwash; Gerolemou, "Wonder-*ful* Memories in Herodotus' *Histories*," 134. This characterization of Thucydides, however, is likely too generous. For more on Thucydides' own engagement in miracle/wonder storytelling, consider Keyser, "(Un)natural Accounts in Herodotus and Thucydides," 323–351. Thucydides and Herodotus are so frequently contrasted

forerunning “miracles and portents” rife throughout Ctesias, Theopompus, and others, Gabba concluded:

> The result was the emergence of a literature which was specifically and explicitly paradoxographical; in some cases, for instance that of Callimachus, learned research was involved; but the result for the most part was a pseudo-historical literature, popular and escapist… The genre of literature which resulted, along with the exotic, the portentous, the abnormal, jumbled up myths, heroic legends, genuine historical and geographical data, scientific information… was a fascinating mosaic, which could always be further elaborated.[8]

Engaging, dynamic, iterative and, perhaps above all else, persuasive, the landscape of Greek and Roman literature was inescapably littered with the wonderous, the marvelous, and the miraculous.

The gospels should be placed in conversation with this category or genre of writing.[9] What the paradoxographical frame adds to existing narrative or rhetorical approaches is a more precise account of how the gospels calibrate reader assent to extraordinary

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in scholarship on history-writing and wonder literature, it borders on trite to acknowledge that they are antipodal. That said, it is worth noting that at least some of this construction is borne of modernity. Gabba (cited above) and, more recently, Suzanne Marchand have written persuasively about attitudes towards Herodotus taking a marked turn in the nineteenth century as scholars debated the terms of “real” history. Marchand explains: “By divorcing themselves from embarrassing connections to a ‘father’ [Herodotus] who had naively credited ‘oriental’ informants, recounted ‘superstitious’ tales about wonders and oracles, and failed to keep a straightforward political narrative, classicists and ancient historians believed themselves free to practice a grown-up, Thucydidean rather than Herodotean form of science. In examining the fate of Herodotean claims and approaches in nineteenth-century scholarship we can perhaps better appreciate the degree to which the new Thucydidean strictures left in limbo most of the poetry, philosophy, legal writings, and religious texts of the ancient Egyptians, Indians, Persians, and Chinese known to Europeans and the effect this had in creating the apparent splendid isolation of the Greeks from their Near Eastern ancestry. Those who did not jump on the new bandwagon were in danger of being treated as embarrassing”; Marchand, “Herodotus and the Embarrassments of Universal History in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” 308–348, cit. 309–310. Gabba, writing several decades earlier, noted that our contemporary obsequiousness over Thucydides is outsized, given his relative lack of popularity in antiquity (“Thucydides was read in a political sense for a very short period by very few people… [t]hereafter the work had few readers”) and difficulty (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Thuc.* 51: “the number of those who can understand Thucydides fully is limited, and even these cannot understand some passages without the help of a linguistic commentary”); Gabba, “True History and False History,” 51. Gabba concludes: “[w]e are always inclined to exaggerate the cultural significance of ‘elevated’ history writing in antiquity, not only in the [case] of Thucydides” because “it was translated into Latin and entered into European consciousness” and “its interests are relatively close to our own”; Gabba, “True History and False History,” 52. I belabor this footnote to convey that a reexamination of Thucydides’ literary influence is likely far overdue.

[8] Gabba, “True History and False History,” 53. I also discuss this quote from Gabba in Walsh, “IVDAEA DEVICTA,’” 89–114, cit. 95–96.

[9] I state this with the caveat that “genre” was not an ancient concept; as I argue elsewhere, formalist critics have long recognized that what we call genres are not strict demarcations: “genres do not exist in isolation: they are always defined in the [historical] context of a constellation of kindred forms, and exist in a dynamic tension with them;” Konstan and Walsh, “Civic and Subversive Biography in Antiquity,” 26–43.

claims through conventional cues of disbelief, amazement, and (implicit) verification. With their descriptions of Jesus' remarkable birth, healings, wonderworking, and their accounts of the peoples and traditions of Judea—a conceptually "foreign" territory in the imperial imagination—the gospel writers also engaged in precisely the same kind of pervasive ethnographic and paradoxographical project as their literary forerunners, contemporaries, and successors. This strong trajectory for the practice of chronicling *mera miracula* offers an alternative rationale for the writing of the gospels; traditionally, the gospels are presented as theological documents and, as such, their literary features are often interpreted in narrowly confessional or self-referential terms (e.g., interpreting the encoded misrecognition of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark as the so-called "Messianic Secret," to be discussed). But, while piety may account for the reception and later use of the gospels, it does not account fully for the motivations or decision-making(s) of the author-qua-author.[10] Circumscribing the gospels to a religious purpose also risks failing to recognize the full range of their literary strategies—among them, how discourses on belief or faith frequently dovetail with paradoxographical claims as a means for doubt-addled characters to realize that their trust is well placed. By breaking the gospels out of the still-too-common frame of theological and historical uniqueness, we are better able to assess both their place within imperial writing culture and the extent to which their techniques and interests would have appealed or resonated with a broad(er) Mediterranean audience.

In what follows, I begin with an analysis of the Gospel of Mark's presentation of Jesus as a literary *thauma* or wonder in the tradition of paradoxography and epic. As indicated above, this reading of Mark challenges the still-pervasive claim that Mark structures his narrative around "the Messianic Secret" (*das Messiasgeheimnis*)—a theory proposed in 1901 by William Wrede to explain why Jesus failed to reveal himself readily as the messiah in Mark's gospel.[11] Implicit for Wrede is an answer to an apologetic question centered on the historical Jesus and the early church; thus, the Messianic Secret offers a rationale not for a literary feature of Mark *per se*, but for a larger (and later) Christological problem.[12] I offer a reading that better articulates what Wrede refers to as "the concealment of the messiahship in Mark (*die Verheimlichung der Messianität*

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[10] I am loosely quoting Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 14.6.3: *atque ibi scripta errant, pro Iuppiter, mera miracula*. The context is that Gellius has been loaned a promising book by a friend and, eagerly retreating to read it, is disappointed to discover that it was filled with dubious claims. My reference here is tongue-in-cheek.

[11] Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*. To avoid damaging a brittle book, I largely worked from a digital 1913 German edition, occasionally consulting James C.G. Greig's 1971 English translation. In support of my claim that the Messianic Secret is "still-pervasive," an n-gram study of both English-language and German mentions of Wrede reveal that he has been continually cited since the 1900s and almost as much today in English as at the height of his popularity in 1909. In German, references to his work have steadily declined since 1970, but are still significant. Notably, specific references to the Messianic Secret have been rising since the 1970s in English. Of course, this data must be tempered by unknown variables (e.g., whether citations constitute endorsements of Wrede's theses or criticisms).

[12] Implicit to Wrede's concern is how to separate "what belongs to [the historical] Jesus, from what belongs to [the traditions of] the oldest church" (*was Jesus zukommt, vom dem, was der ältesten Gemeinde angehört*); Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis*, 1.

bei Markus)" or Mark's "theological, non-historical understanding of the messiahship (*einer theologischen, nicht-geschichtlichen Auffassung der Messianität*)" as, rather, evidence of paradoxographical storytelling.[13] When Jesus instills awe among his witnesses or commands discretion in response to the performance of a miracle or a wonder, its function is didactic; through these characters not only is Jesus' unique status revealed, but we also learn that in the Galilee, Jerusalem, and its surrounds, the fantastic is possible—and believable.[14] Whether pneumatic beings or bewildered peasants, these encoded *literary* eyewitnesses act as an avatar for the reader as the narrative unfolds.

The literary-witness-as-avatar is a device that continues among other paradoxographically-minded texts.[15] A later work that exemplifies this motif is Philostratus' *Heroicus* (ca. early third c. CE).[16] The story begins with a Phoenician sailor, stranded on the Hellespont, who encounters a devotee of the "resurrected" (ἀναβιῶναι; *Her.* 2.10) Homeric hero Protesilaus. This devotee, referred to in the text as the vinegrower (ἀμπελουργός), regales his newfound companion with an array of seemingly tall tales about the hero, Homeric history, the divine, monumental bones, local lore, and other extraordinary phenomena. Despite his initial mistrust, the sailor eventually comes to believe the vinegrower's claims, repeatedly professing his newfound faith and self-denigrating his former doubt. As with Mark, the textual eyewitness(es) and autopsy are encoded into the story as a rhetorical device—a stand-in for the would-be dubious reader, authorizing faith in the fantastic.

Unlike Mark, scholars are far more likely to link Philostratus' faith-speech to other aspects of his "self-reflexive literary sophistication," whether ecphrasis, "hyperpastoral" reverie, Atticizing, Sophistic critique of Homer and its related intertext, or other authorial peacocking.[17] Even among the rare scholars who acknowledge the *Heroicus*' resonances with Christian writings, the definition of faith (πίστις / *pistis*)—and "conversion" for that matter—becomes mercurial; when the Phoenician ultimately and repeatedly declares "I no longer disbelieve (ἀπιστούμενα)" (*Her.* 8.18), a common consensus is that any "resemblances between discourses of belief in the *Heroicus* and in Christian literature are passing ones."[18] However, it is unclear why faith in a Christian context is categorically

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[13] Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis*, 80.

[14] As is typical of many ancient narratives, which contrast an enchanted, innocence-coded countryside with the morally fraught polis in order to amplify the sense of marvel attached to rural scenes and figures; Walsh, "City and Country," 327.

[15] Another way to phrase "paradoxographically-minded" would be to say these authors are thaumatologists, a term Karen ní Mheallaigh deploys to indicate when a writer "discusses the nature of marvels" and for whom "wonder itself is a defining characteristic"; ní Mheallaigh, "Lucian's *Alexander*, 225–256, cit. 225–226.

[16] Whitmarsh makes an allied claim in his description of the *Heroicus*: "The Phoenician's passage from skepticism to belief, then, constructs him, provisionally at least, as one implied reader of the text"; Whitmarsh, *Beyond the Second Sophistic*, 103. Karen ní Mheallaigh also makes a similar observation about Lucian's self-portrayal in *Alexander*: "Lucian presents himself as an eye-witness in his own text"; ní Mheallaigh, "Lucian's *Alexander*," 236. Ní Mheallaigh provides additional bibliography.

[17] "Hyperpastoral" cited from Whitmarsh, *Beyond the Second Sophistic*, 107.

[18] Whitmarsh, *Beyond the Second Sophistic*, 104.

different from faith in any other kind of Greek or Roman discourse, particularly about matters concerning the gods.

A comparison between *Heroicus* and the Gospel of Mark, therefore, has the potential to reveal not only shared approaches to *thaumata* and paradoxographical subjects, but also the function of a term like faith in the imperial imagination more broadly. This is precisely the kind of redescriptive project called for by Jennifer Eyl and others who caution that our definitions often reflexively retain anachronistic theological meanings, hindering proper historical analysis of early Christian writings.[19] For our purposes, the function of faith as a stopgap for those who might doubt a thaumatic claim further links Mark's gospel to a particular *literary* strategy. Thus, it is paradoxographical interest—and not theology or amorphous Christological "secret"—that is a more coherent starting point for considering motifs of wonder in the gospels, disrupting our traditional methodologies.

1 Literary "Wonder" in the Gospel of Mark[20]

Wrede's argument in *The Messianic Secret* can be likened to a Bach fugue: inventive and maddeningly redundant. Accusing his colleagues of "suffering from psychological 'suppositionitis' which amounts to a sort of historical guesswork,"[21] he suggests that scholarship on the gospels boasts a too-easy intimacy with the inner workings of Jesus' mind (*eine…Intimität mit dem Seelenleben Jesu*), quipping: "one might doubt whether one is listening to a confident of Jesus or reading a novel (*dass man zweifeln möchte, ob man einen Vertrauten Jesu reden hört oder aber einen Roman liest*)."[22] Although not quite articulated as such, one of Wrede's aims is to provide an antidote to these speculative approaches, offering a more concrete meditation on Jesus' messianic self-awareness (*dem messianischen Selbstbewusstsein*), with a focus on Mark's gospel.[23] Thus, he proceeds by detailing moments in Mark's text in which Jesus' messianic status is either recognized (e.g., by, in his words, "demons")[24] or obscured. Throughout, he is apt to engage in the same speculative psychologizing to which he objects: "Jesus is apparently troubled…"

[19] J. Eyl, "Semantic Voids, New Testament Translation, and Anachronism," 315-339.

[20] Please see Walsh, "City and Country" for a more detailed consideration of Mark's gospel, *thauma*, and its possible relationship to Homeric and Vergilian epic themes.

[21] Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 3: *krankt an der psychologischen Vermutung, und diese ist eine Art des historischen Ratens*. I have kept aspects of Greig's translation here (esp. "suppositionitis") since it captures the tone of this passage. Both Wrede and Greig add emphasis to the first half of the sentence.

[22] Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 3.

[23] "To presuppose that they had any idea about this consciousness would be a complete misunderstanding of the Spirit of these writers" (*den Begriff seiner Entwicklung voraussetzen hiesse sogar den Geist dieser Schriftsteller völlig verkennen*); Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 5. Elsewhere, Wrede states that he is attempting to read Mark's account of Jesus on its own terms, without importing analysis or opinion from outside of the gospel, speaking of Mark's "internally consistent and historically comprehensible overall picture" (*dass bei Markus eine innerlich folgerichtige und geschichtlich verständliche Gesamtauffassung vorliege*) or "Mark's own view" (*die Auffassung des Markus selbst*); Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis*, 12.

[24] Specifically, the "demoniacs" (*dämonischen*); Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 9.

(*da Jesus offenbar besorgt*); "Jesus thought it important…" (*dass Jesus Wert darauf legte*); "Jesus deliberately kept his Messiahship a secret at first…" (*denn Jesus hat seine Messiaswürde zunächst absichtlich ins Geheimnis gehüllt*).[25] Populated by an abundance of sidebars, digressions, and grievances, the pith of his analysis can be elusive. At the end, he attributes a certain measure of agency to Mark as an author but views his literary choices as purely theological and ahistorical—ahistorical as it relates to the so-called historical Jesus and utterly divorced from any reflection on broader ancient Mediterranean writing or book practices.

Despite its shortcomings, the novelty of Wrede's work—and what has made it endure—is his framing of Mark's gospel in terms of "secrecy": why is it that Mark's Jesus appears to conceal his identity as messiah so vehemently? While other pneumatic beings readily recognize him (e.g., Mark 5:1–13), for much of the narrative, those whom Jesus heals or for whom he performs other miracles are left dumbfounded by what they have witnessed, or Jesus actively warns them against relating what they have seen. Wrede rejects previous suggestions that Jesus is expressing an "inner reluctance" (*eine innere Scheu*) about his fate or exercising a strategic need for the disciples to reach a greater spiritual maturity.[26] For Wrede, there are far too many options available to Mark to avoid such obscurity; therefore, the obscurity must be the point ("Was there no other, more natural way?").[27] Thus he draws two central conclusions. First, that:

> … during his life on earth, Jesus' messiahship is absolutely a secret and should be as such; no one—save Jesus' confidants—is supposed to know about it; but with the resurrection, it is unveiled.
>
> This is, in fact, the crucial idea, the underlying point of Mark's entire approach.

> *… während seines Erdenlebens ist Jesu Messianität überhaupt Geheimnis und soll es sein; niemand — ausser den Vertrauten Jesu—soll von ihr erfahren; mit der Auferstehung aber erfolgt die Entschleierung.*
>
> *Dies ist in der That der entscheidende Gedanke, die Pointe der ganzen Auffassung des Markus.*[28]

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[25] Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 9–10. NB: There are also several anti-Semitic remarks throughout which I will not translate—e.g., *er… die Jünger von einer jüdisch-sinnlichen Art der Messiasvorstellung befreien muss* (Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 10); *um den messianischen Glauben der Jünger von jüdischen Schlacken zu reinigen* (Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 14).

[26] Cited from Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 38, as a representative example of language/terminology. Wrede elaborates that some connect this "secret" to Jesus' desire to keep his status between himself and his Father (*Vater*). On the pedagogical development of his disciples, he writes: *Vor allem spricht man viel von seiner pädagogischen Absicht. Bei den Jüngern fürchtet er sinnliche Messiasvorstellungen, wenn er ihnen zu früh einen Gedanken gibt, für den sie noch nicht reif sind*; Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis*, 39. Wrede also provides references to the scholars with whom he takes issue or finds partial agreement.

[27] *Gab es keinen anderen, keinen natürlicheren Weg*?; Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 40.

[28] Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 67. I consulted Greig to clarify some aspects of this translation.

On this reading, Jesus is manifestly aware of his purpose and the resurrection becomes Mark's revelatory dividing line (*Scheidepunkt*), although Wrede does not fully articulate why this is the case ("Mark's idea is only partly and unclearly known to us").[29] Once again, he concludes that Mark's intention is theological, stating that a "historical motive" (*geschichtliches Motiv*) is "out of the question" (*kommt wirklich gar nicht in Frage*); elliptically, he reiterates that the messianic secret is a "theological concept" (*die Idee des Messiasgeheimnisses ist eine theologische Vorstellung*), borne of Mark's particular Christology (*Christologie*).[30] Mark's Jesus, in Wrede's estimation, is "supernatural" (*übernatürlich*), performing his "wonders" (*Wunderkraft*) by the "power of the Spirit" (*Kraft des Geistes*), able to be understood or witnessed by God alone (*dies Zeugnis kann in der That nur Gott geben*). Jesus goes unrecognized by mortals precisely because they are incapable of such knowledge (*menschliche Einsicht reicht nicht zu dieser Erkenntnis hinan*).[31] Later, Wrede connects this claim to his analysis of wonder or astonishment in the gospel; those who lack faith (*Glauben*) likewise lack knowledge (*Einsicht*), resulting in amazement (*Staunen*) and fear (*Furcht*).[32] The manifold scenes of wonder and *thauma*-language in Mark's gospel are, therefore, effectively treated by Wrede as a curious by-product of Mark's greater focus on the nature of Christ and the significance of Jesus' resurrection.

In a section titled "Mark as an Author" (*Markus als Schriftsteller*), Wrede restates that Mark's activity is dogmatic (*dogmatisch*) and theological (*theologisch*),[33] making passing references to Mark's rough-hewn brevity (*kurz*) and nonsensical historical details (*Sinnlosigkeiten*).[34] Vague talk of the line between Mark's inventiveness and possible source material never ventures beyond fleeting comparisons to the canonical gospels.[35] Likewise, Mark's structure and discourse on wonder and faith are not considered relative to what is found elsewhere in Greek and Roman literature.

Yet, what Wrede frames as the mystery or secret inherent in the Gospel of Mark is quite commonplace and intelligible as a form of *thauma*-writing. The recognition or misrecognition of heroes and/or signs (*sēmeia*) are rife throughout Homer, Vergil, and their ilk—as are states of wonder or even bewilderment in response to unexpected or miraculous events.[36] When expectations about a given figure or, sometimes, the natural

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[29] … *wird der Gedanke des Markus nur halb und unklar erkannt*; Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 71.

[30] Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 66. Emphasis removed from original in this citation.

[31] Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 73.

[32] Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 104.

[33] At times he also refers to Mark's content as "semi-dogmatic" (*halb dogmatisch*); Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 132.

[34] *Geschichtlich verstanden enthält Markus eine ganze Anzahl schlimmer Sinnlosigkeiten*; Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 134. In this section, Wrede also refers to Mark's "general and vague" practical details (*allgemein und unbestimmt*), as well as his poor story construction; Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 130.

[35] *aber daneben hat er sie in einer ganzen Reihe anschaulicher Vorstellungen ausgeprägt, ob er diese nun selbst geschaffen oder bereits vorgefunden hat*; Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis,* 134.

[36] On *sēmeia* in the epics and its resonances in Christian literature, the work of Dennis R. MacDonald is particularly instructive. On the Gospel of Mark specifically: Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

order are subverted, the gravity of those moments are easily conveyed through the other witnessing characters in the text.

One such example is Camilla in the *Aeneid* who, when passing through a sea of eyewitnesses, leaves them in a state of astonishment:

> *illam omnis tectis agrisque effusa iuventus*
> *turbaque miratur matrum et prospectat euntem*
> *attonitis inhians animis, ut regius ostro*
> *velet honos levis umeros, ut fibula crinem*
> *auro internectat, Lyciam ut gerat ipsa pharetram*
> *et pastoralem praefixa cuspide myrtum.*
>
> At her all the youth who have poured out of the houses and fields and the crowd of mothers marvel, and they watch her as she goes, mouths agape, minds astonished, how a royal ornament covers her smooth shoulders with purple, how a pin binds up her hair with gold, so that she herself carries a Lycian quiver and a shepherd's myrtle staff with a spear point fixed to the end. (*Aen.* 7.812–817)[37]

Camilla so transfixes those she encounters that they are described as practically dumb-founded. She functions as a literary marvel because she embodies an extreme inversion of expectation; as *bellatrix* she is, by nature, paradoxical. It is this paradox—not some essential mystery or secret—that evokes amazement, wonder, fear, or confusion among her eyewitnesses. And, in turn, those characters mirror for the reader that something truly remarkable is afoot.

Mark deploys this same strategy with gusto.[38] When Jesus arrives in Capernaum (1:21–28), he teaches with such power and influence (ἐξουσίαν) that the people in the synagogue are rendered astonished (ἐξεπλήσσοντο; 1:22). Proceeding to reprimand an unclean pneuma in their midst, once again, the witnesses are described as "amazed" (ἐθαμβήθησαν) and are left questioning amongst themselves. Thus, from the onset of the gospel, Jesus is established as an otherworldly figure—a "wonder"— and a puzzling rival to the local *grammatici* (γραμματεῖς; 1:22) and other authorities.[39]

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[37] My translation is partially indebted to James R. Townshend, "Camilla and Virgil's Aesthetic of the Grotesque," unpublished paper presented at the Antiquities Interdisciplinary Research Group (AIRG) at the University of Miami, 2020, with slight modifications.

[38] Again, I review several of the following passages in Mark in Walsh, "City and Country," 334, 338–341 in more detail. I have slightly modified those descriptions, removed some discussion in the interest of space, and added the original Greek, with attention to copyright concerns.

[39] Another small but revealing test case appears in Mark 3:21, where Jesus' family seeks to restrain him because people are saying "he is out of his mind" (ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη). Within the narrative logic of thaumatic storytelling, the claim functions more straightforwardly as another instance of the incredulity *topos*: proximity to the marvelous destabilizes ordinary perception, and characters register the encounter as madness, excess, or loss of composure. Read this way, Mark 3:21 coheres with the gospel's repeated pattern of astonishment (ἐξίστασθαι/ἐκστασις), fear, and disbelief as narrative proxies for the reader's own threshold of plausibility. Alternative approaches to this passage have historically included associating Jesus' "madness"

Following Jesus's first appearance in Mark's Gospel and the subsequent confusion and wonder this engenders (e.g., ἐθαμβήθησαν; 1:27), Jesus returns to his pied-à-terre in Capernaum and draws an inquisitive mob. They bring a paralyzed man to the scene and Jesus rebukes his doubters by healing him (2:9–12). As he rises from his floor mat and heads for the door, everyone (πάντας) is "astonished" (ἐξίστασθαι) and, praising God, exclaim "We've never seen anything like that before!" (ὅτι Οὕτως οὐδέποτε εἴδομεν; 2:12). As with Camilla, the astonishment of the crowd is not resolved before the vignette closes; throughout the gospel one marvel is proceeded by another with the onlookers variously astounded or bewildered and left questioning—and sometimes fearing or resenting—what they have just seen and heard.

Entering Gergesenes, Jesus next encounters the "demoniac" (δαιμονιζόμενον)—a man possessed with "unclean pneuma" (πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ; 5:2) calling themselves "Legion" (5:10). A group of herdsmen (βόσκοντες) who witness Jesus cast Legion into a herd of neighboring swine "flee and told [what happened] in the city and the fields" (ἔφυγον καὶ ἀπήγγειλαν εἰς τὴν πόλιν καὶ εἰς τοὺς ἀγρούς; 5:14), consequently drawing a crowd back to Jesus. Seeing the demoniac "sitting, having been clothed and in his right mind" (καθήμενον ἱματισμένον καὶ σωφρονοῦντα; 5:15) frightens the group (ἐφοβήθησαν; 5:15) and Jesus is asked to leave. The now-former demoniac attempts to join Jesus on his forward journey, but Jesus instructs him to return to Decapolis to tell his story. The episode tersely concludes with the thaumatic phrase: "and all marveled" (καὶ πάντες ἐθαύμαζον; 5:20).

The motif continues. At the raising of Jarius' daughter, the witnesses are immediately struck with "great amazement" (ἐξέστησαν… μεγάλῃ) to such an extent that they nearly go out of their minds (ἐκστάσει; 5:42). Astonishment strikes again when Jesus, casually "walking on the sea" (θαλάσσης περιπατοῦντα; 6:49) during a windstorm, encounters the disciples on an imperiled boat. "Terrified" by this sight and thinking Jesus a ghost (φάντασμά), the disciples start screaming until Jesus instructs them to "pull yourselves together . . . do not be afraid" (Θαρσεῖτε... μὴ φοβεῖσθε; 6:50). Once aboard, the winds calm, and the disciples are "very much exceedingly astounded" (λίαν ἐκ περισσοῦ… ἐξίσταντο; 6:51). Jesus continues with them on their journey to Gennesaret, where he is bombarded once more by throngs and continues to teach and perform healings, and Mark tells us that he specifically withholds his signs (*sēmeia*) from the Pharisees (8:11–13). Throughout, the crowds are continually awestruck (e.g., ἐξεθαμβήθησαν; 9:15) and left questioning (e.g., "they were exceedingly astonished" [περισσῶς ἐξεπλήσσοντο λέγοντες πρὸς ἑαυτούς]; 10:26).

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to similar claims about philosophers and holy men (cf. Plato, *Phaedr.* 249C–D; Philo, *Ebr.* 36 § 145—46) or to passages like Psalms 68:8–9: "For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that shame has covered my face. I became alienated from my brothers and a stranger to the sons of my mother." See, for example, the commentary on this passage in Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, 227. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this piece who noted that for those inclined to read redactional features as reflective of intra- church politics, this kind of family division could be interpreted as representative of fractures within the would-be Markan community, a similar kind of theological interpretation of a clear literary feature of the text as we find with Wrede's "Messianic Secret."

Mark peppers these thaumatic encounters with Herodotean-like "facts" about the Jewish sects (e.g., "For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands," 7:3) and the territories Jesus visits in this eastern edge of Roman empire, with names and places detailed (e.g., Capernaum, Perea, Gennesaret, Gerasene, and so forth). Again, each of these episodes correspond structurally and thematically to the accounts of wonder found elsewhere in imperial literature, invoking the same motifs and framing found among other thaumatologists. Far from mysterious, Mark uses the motif of wonder to convey the significance of Jesus' actions and reinforce why faith in his claims about this Judean wonderworker are warranted. This is arguably most evident in Mark 5:24–34 when Jesus passively heals the so-called hemorrhaging woman (*γυνὴ οὖσα ἐν ῥύσει αἵματος δώδεκα ἔτη*; 5:25); as he makes his way through the crowd, she grabs his cloak, and Mark describes a "power" (δύναμιν; 5:30) emanating out of him without any deliberate action on his part. Sensing what has happened, Jesus seeks her out and, after a short exchange, he declares that her faith (*πίστις*) has healed her. The more one believes in the unbelievable, the closer one is to divine power and knowledge.

What is particularly striking about this episode is that Mark narrates the healing as simultaneously involuntary and empirical: δύναμις "goes out" from Jesus as a detectable force, and Jesus himself registers it as a measurable event (5:30). In other words, the marvel is not presented as a private interior experience but as an encounter that leaves narrative traces—felt in the woman's *σώμα*, noticed by Jesus, and then publicly disclosed through questioning. The woman's fear and trembling (5:33) are not incidental psychological detail; they cue the reader to the gravity of the (divinely charged) exchange. At the same time, the pressing crowd and the disciples' bafflement ("You see the crowd… and yet you say, 'Who touched me?'") provide a controlled dose of skepticism that mirrors what an audience might reasonably ask. Mark thus stages belief as the successful resolution of a plausible doubt—the reader is invited to move from incredulity about causation ("How could a touch do this?") to assent through the narrative's own internal logic and verification. The declaration that "your faith has healed you" functions less as a doctrinal abstraction than as the rhetorical hinge that makes the marvel intelligible and repeatable within the story's wonder economy.

2 Philostratus, Autopsies, and Faith

Thaumata are linked to the concept of faith insofar as those confronted with a given "wonder" often find themselves in a position of doubt.[40] This association with faith can be implicit or explicit as the reader—and, often, the embedded or eyewitness characters— must contend with whether they are able to assent to the (sometimes seemingly preposterous) propositions before them.

[40] Whitmarsh, *Beyond the Second Sophistic*, 103.

Philostratus offers a particularly amusing and salient account of this trope in his *Heroicus*.[41] Reputedly in the literary circle of patron Julia Domna, Philostratus' fanciful dialogue between a skeptical Phoenician sailor and a devotee of the hero cult of Protesilaus engages a number of the strategic elements of *thauma*-writing and paradoxography discussed to this point, including the presentation of increasingly fantastic "facts"—from supersized skeletal remains of the Homeric heroes, to claims about Protesilaus' postmortem appearances, designed to correct Homer's apparently faulty record.[42] Ultimately the sailor finds himself convinced of the validity of the cult and ends the dialogue unwilling to set sail again until he has heard more details, via his interlocutor, from the fallen demigod "come back to life" (ἀναβεβίωκεν; *Her.* 58.2).

As briefly indicated above, the *Heroicus* might seem like something of a novel choice for comparison with the gospels; it is not often cited by scholars of early Christianity—and arguably with good reason given its relatively "late" date.[43] But I suspect it has resisted discussion not only because of methodological hesitations related to chronology, but also because of the inherent difficulty involved in determining channels of literary influence or dependence on the basis of widely shared imperial *topoi*. Take, for example, the introduction to the Loeb Classical Library edition of *Heroicus* in which the author recognizes the similarities between the "phenomenon of literary conversion" and faith in the story and "Christian conversion-dialogue."[44] While acknowledging their compelling similarities, the author nonetheless concludes: "In any case, most scholars of early Christianity and secular literature would agree that it was Christians who adapted to pagan dialogues, not the other way around."[45]

It makes little practical sense to assert that non-Christian writers would be wholly unaware or actively ignore their Christian contemporaries, as Celsus and Lucian demonstrate.[46] The trick is detecting engagement with Christian literature when the purpose of a so-called pagan piece of writing is not critique or satire.[47] It is quite conceivable that by the early third century texts like the letters of Paul, gospels, or even martyrologies

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41 While we know of three writers by the name of Philostratus, scholarly consensus is that the author of *Heroicus* is also the author of *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana, Lives of the Sophists*, *Gymnasticus*, and *Imagines*; Rusten, "Introduction,"5.

42 Rusten, "Introduction," 8.

43 Important exceptions include Whitmarsh, *Beyond the Second Sophistic*, 104, discussed above, as well as several contributors to *Philostratus's Heroikos. Religion and Cultural Identity in the Third Century C.E.*, edited by Bradshaw Aitken and Berenson Maclean, including contributions by Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean, Hans Dieter Betz, and Jackson Hershbell. It is understandably more common for Philostratus to be linked to Christianity via *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*.

44 Rusten, "Introduction," 41–42.

45 Rusten, "Introduction," 43.

46 Celsus via Origen and Lucian's *The Passing of Peregrinus*.

47 I have argued, for example, that there is good reason to suspect the author of the *Satyricon* is aware of Christian texts and discourse, which would set a precedent for cross-germination at least one hundred years before Philostratus; Walsh, "The *Satyrica* and the Gospels in the Second Century," 356–367.

were in the purview of an author like Philostratus.[48] At the very least, acknowledging similarities between Christian and "secular" texts (which, to be clear, also speak of the gods and are plainly not "secular") simply treats Christian materials as "normal" Greco-Roman writings, thereby avoiding the brand of insularity characteristic of approaches like Wrede's which presume that an author's perceived theological aims are their sole or primary influence. It makes comparison possible and breaks these writings out of their conceptual silos. As such, we are better able to evaluate how Mark, like Philostratus, strings together a series of vignettes on the peculiar and the miraculous and seeks to prove their case through autopsy.

The *Heroicus* begins with the Phoenician sailor stranded on the Hellespont, awaiting a favorable wind and hoping for a sign that it will be a "fair voyage" (εὐπλοίας; *Her.* 1.2). He finds himself in a distant, bucolic setting, with shady foliage, abundant crops, and a babbling stream—a truly Pan-like environment, literarily ideal for an experience of the divine (cf. 5.2).[49] At the foot of a shrine and statue to the hero Protesilaus, he is buttonholed by a local vinegrower (ἀμπελουργός) who challenges the sailor's skepticism about worshipping the Homeric heroes. The vinegrower dominates the majority of the dialogue, unveiling increasingly fantastic details about the heroes, their deeds, their colossal remains, and the events at Troy.[50] The exchange is punctuated by moments of the sailor's doubt ("By Athena, Vinegrower, *that* I do not believe ['απιστῶ]!"; *Her.* 3:1; 7:9; 7:11–8:2) or blatant mistrust of any "mythical" stories (ἀπίστως… τὰ μυθώδη) not verified by an eyewitness (ἑωρακότι; *Her.* 7.9). The vinegrower, in true Platonic fashion, insists that the sailor assent to his claims before divulging more.[51]

In the course of their conversation, the vinegrower reveals that he is in regular communication with the "resurrected" Protesilaus (ἀναβιῶναι; *Her.* 2.10) and keeps his daily company (ξυνών τε αὐτῷ; *Her.* 4.10). He even reinforces their intimate connection by referring to himself throughout as "we."[52] Indeed, Protesilaus is such a vital third party that the vinegrower claims that the hero takes regular exercise on an adjacent racecourse (οἱ δρόμοι; *Her.* 3.6); manifesting in physical form "four or five times a month" (τετράκις τοῦ μηνὸς ἢ πεντάκις; *Her.* 11.3), he describes his other-worldly friend as nearly fifteen feet tall, regal, ruggedly handsome, and generally pleasing to the senses (*Her.* 10.2–4), confessing that when they embrace, he finds himself lingering at his neck after greeting him with a kiss (τῆς δέρης ἐμφορεῖσθαί; 11.2).

The bond between God and man was forged in supplication; the vinegrower was once an elite educated man, "attending lectures and studying philosophy" (διδασκάλοις χρώμενοι καὶ φιλοσοφοῦντες; *Her.* 4.6) in the urban center. At a time of personal trial, the hero advised him to abandon city life and return to forest and field. The vinegrower and

[48] Mills, "Pagan Readers of Christian Scripture," 481–506; Luijendijk, "The Gospel of Mary at Oxyrhynchus," 391–418.

[49] Rusten, "Introduction," 32; cf. Livy 1.21.3, Pl. *Phdr.* 230 BC.

[50] Rusten, "Introduction," 35.

[51] Also cited by Whitmarsh, *Beyond the Second Sophistic*, 103.

[52] Rusten, "Introduction," 36; the vinegrower uses indirect speech throughout to indicate, as Rusten puts it, he is "talking for two" (e.g., accusative and infinitive with ὡς).

his divine sponsor now coexist in an atmosphere of seemingly ideal reciprocity; he tends the crops and livestock, and, in turn, the demi-god acts as his grammaticus, protector, and informant (*Her.* 8.9). And no task is too small for Protesilaus; the vinegrower boasts that if he comes upon a mortally heavy bolder while digging, the hero cheerfully steps in to till the earth (*Her.* 11.4).

As informant, Protesilaus also provides details about athletic and battlefield agones "unknown to many [poets]" (*μήπω τοῖς πολλοῖς δῆλα ὄντα*; *Her.* 13.2), and corrections to the Homeric record (e.g., "Protesilaus disapproves [*οὐδὲ… ὁ Πρωτεσίλεως ἐπαινεῖ*] of Homer in this case"; *Her.* 25.13). And he is not a bashful deity, easily making his presence and favor known to others worthy of his council.[53] In one particularly amusing anecdote, an adulterous couple arrive at the temple looking for divine validation; Protesilaus responds by inciting a dog to bite their rear ends. The hero then appears to the cuckolded husband in a dream to warn him of his wife's treachery and forewarn that the bites are fatal (*Her.* 15.4).[54] Each of these fantastic vignettes serves the same purpose as found in the paradoxographical and thaumatic examples discussed to this point: they posit validating eyewitnesses and consequently instill faith.

As soon as the sailor asserts that only eyewitness testimony can sway his doubts about the vinegrower's claims, the vinegrower begins to pepper his ripostes with all manner of rhetorical bystanders and provocations, designed to cultivate the sailor's confidence:

> Vinegrower: "And yet… Hymnaios of Peparethos… sent one of his sons to have me ask Protesilaus about a similar marvel (θαύματος)…" (*Her.* 8.9)
>
> Vinegrower: "If you don't believe me (*ἀπιστῇς*), we can sail there…" (*Her.* 8.9–13)
>
> Sailor: "… But what about the heroes you said walk upon the plain of Troy looking warlike, when were they seen (*ὤφθησαν*)?"
>
> Vinegrower: "I said that they *are* seen (ὁρῶνται): they are seen today, tall and godlike, by the cowherds and the herdsmen (*νομεῦσι*)…" (*Her.* 18.1–2)[55]

Philostratus' vinegrower challenges the doubting sailor to witness the fantastic outcropping of bones he describes for himself. And he doubles-down on his claims by referencing all of those who have seen the marvel (θαύματος) for *themselves*, who require no further confirmation. So convincing is the vinegrower in his campaign, that at each turn the sailor not only finds himself convinced, but his faith reinforced (e.g., "From

[53] Philostratus makes clear he is referencing the poets (ποιηταῖς) later in *Her.* 23.1.

[54] On heroes exacting justice on mortals, see Rusten, "Introduction," 24–29. I may be guilty of taking some liberties in my translation of the location of the dog bite, although I believe the affected area is implied in the Greek.

[55] Some Greek texts include an address to the Phoenician in the vinegrower's dialogue; because I have been citing Rusten's Loeb with such frequency, I have followed the Loeb's Greek in this instance, with some modifications to the translation.

now on, vinegrower, I will be on your side and allow no one to disbelieve [ἀπιστήσει] you"; *Her.* 17.6)[56] with *pistis* and its cognates used to communicate the sailor's assent.

Here Philostratus makes autopsy perform double duty. On the surface it is a methodological concession to skepticism ("sail there and see"), but rhetorically it is an instrument for producing assent without ever actually requiring the journey. The offer itself signals confidence and converts the vinegrower from a mere storyteller into a quasi-historiographic guide, while the repeated invocation of rustic eyewitnesses (cowherds, shepherds) supplies the narrative with a distributed network of verification. These bystanders are not simply window dressing; they function as surrogate "readers" within the text—figures who have already crossed the threshold from disbelief to knowledge by virtue of sight. The sailor's skepticism, staged and reiterated, therefore becomes a controlled proxy for the audience's resistance, allowing belief to appear hard-won rather than gullible. In that sense, the dialogue performs the paradoxographical trick of making the incredible feel testable—even when the reader cannot verify the marvel firsthand, the text supplies credible eyes and bodies that have done so on the reader's behalf. *Pistis*, then, is not introduced as an exceptional religious category but as the narratively appropriate response to marvels that are insistently framed as visible, local, and witnessed.

Likewise, the phenomena which the Sailor sanctions are labeled by the vinegrower as *thaumata* throughout the dialogue. Take, for example, their discussion on the remains of Orestes and the bronze horse of Lydia:

> Sailor: It seems wise for me to disbelieve (ἀπιστεῖν) stories like these, vinegrower… you say nothing on your own authority, unless you talk about Protesilaus.
>
> Vinegrower: *If* I were fond of telling stories (μυθολογικὸς), I would have told you about Orestes' body, which the Spartans found in Nemea—it was seven cubits tall!—or about the body of the Lydian bronze horse, buried in Lydia still before the time of Gyges (πρὸ Γύγου ἔτι); the marvel (θαῦμα) appeared after an earthquake to some shepherds (ποιμέσιν)… (*Her.* 8.1–5)

Not only does the sailor come to find the vinegrower's story credible in this instance—"my disbelief was foolish! (ἀνοήτως δὲ ἠπίστουν)!" (*Her.* 8.18)—he goes on to meditate on the nature of his own astonishment (θαυμάζειν): "although I was inclined to express my astonishment (θαυμάζειν), I did not show it (τεθαύμακα), for what is done by the gods must be wise (σοφὸν) (*Her.* 9.4). Belief and disbelief are also framed in this narrative in a manner akin to what is found in the historiographical tradition: as a dichotomy between knowledge and ignorance. In such constructions, proper research (*historia*) or first-hand experience allows one to reach a proper conclusion. Philostratus's vinegrower demonstrates as much when he convinces the sailor that outcroppings of colossal bones

[56] An interesting subplot of *Heroicus* is that the hero will not reveal how one is resurrected or clarify any of the character's questions (e.g., *Her.* 5.2: "Whether it is a place where someone might come *back* to life (ἀναβιῴη), I do not know"). See *Her.* 58.2: "I won't ask you any more how he came back to life (ἀναβεβίωκεν), since you say he considers this a sacred (ἀβεβήλῳ) and forbidden (ἀπορρήτῳ) topic."

on Cos, Phrygia, and elsewhere are the remains of a long-lost civilization of giants and heroes:[57]

> Sailor: I would have been willing to travel beyond the sea to find such a marvel (θαῦμα)…
>
> Vinegrower: But, stranger, you must not believe (πιστὰ) what I have claimed until you sail to the island of Cos, where the bones of the first earth-bound men, Meropes, are on show… disbelief (ἀπιστεῖν) in such things must have been common even in Heracles' day, since after he killed Geryones in Erythia—the largest being he ever encountered—he dedicated the bones at Olympia so that his feat would not be dismissed as unbelievable (ἀπιστοῖτο)
>
> Sailor: You are fortunate in your research (ἱστορίας), vinegrower... For my part, I was ignorant of such great bones, and out of ignorance I disbelieved (ἠπίστουν)... I no longer disbelieve (ἀπιστούμενα). (*Her.* 8:14–18)

This exchange between the vinegrower and the Phoenician is explicitly framed by *thauma* (8:13)—that which previously seemed implausible is demonstrated or confirmed through a credible eyewitness account. Indeed, the Phoenician establishes that nothing short of an eyewitness will convince him to "believe mythical stories" (φημὶ γὰρ ἀπίστως διακεῖσθαι πρὸς τὰ μυθώδη; *Her.* 7.9).

Convincing those of little faith about the veracity of "historical" events has a notable forebearer in Herodotus. Herodotus not only cites general claims about eyewitnesses, but he also employs the art of personal autopsy (αὐτόπτης) to confirm the seemingly fantastic. He begins his *Histories* with one such "test-case of Herodotean veracity"—Arion of Methymna's sojourn on the back of a dolphin to Taenarum (1.23-24).[58] Prefacing the episode as a "major *thauma*" (θῶμα μέγιστον), he attributes it to the Corinthians and Lesbians (who he states are unequivocally in agreement on the matter) and thereby primes his audience for even more astounding—and authorized—wonders to come.

Autopsy also serves as a verifying tool, with Herodotus repeatedly sanctioning his information even more directly (e.g., "I have seen myself [αὐτόπτης] as far as the city of Elephantine, and beyond that I have learned by listening and inquiry [ἀκοῇ ἤδη ἱστορέων]"; *Hist.* 2.29). François Hartog convincingly charts the use of eyesight and "eyewitness" as "an instrument of knowledge" in Homer and throughout philosophical

[57] Whitmarsh, *Beyond the Second Sophistic*, 104-105; also see Mayor, *The First Fossil Hunters*.

[58] Hall, "'Romantic Poet-Sage of History'," 46–70, cit. 57. Note Hall's humorous anecdote on nineteenth century interpretations of the historical value of this passage: "The dolphin issue clearly troubled some nineteenth-century scholars resident far inland, who felt the need to demonstrate that the dolphin-ride was scientifically impossible. Karl Klement's Vienna dissertation on Arion, in 1898, argued earnestly that Arion's ride on the dolphin could not be regarded as historical… Klement feels the need to emphasize that the dolphin is really 'a gluttonous wild beast' ('eine gefrässige wilde Bestie') and so could not be ridden." Evidently Romantic historiography continued to grapple with the same panoply of doubts as the imagined ancient reader.

and medical literature from the Ionian school forward.[59] As he summarizes in reference to the specific rhetoric of marvels: "To say that one has seen it with one's own eyes is both to 'prove' the marvel, and the truth: 'I have seen it, it is true and it is true that it is a marvel'."[60] Beyond Mark, another author who notably invokes knowledge via autopsy—albeit it, second-hand—is the writer of the Gospel of Luke (e.g., *αὐτόπται* in Luke 1:2) who, incidentally, liberally applies the language of *thauma* to his characterizations of Zechariah (Luke 1:21, 63) and, of course, Jesus (e.g., 2:18, 33; 4:22; 7:9).

Finally, turning back to Herodotus, personal witness is also embedded in his narratives through the words and deeds of his characters. When Candaules challenges Gyges to gaze upon his wife in secret, he invokes the same motif of witness and belief: "Gyges, I think that you do not believe (*ἀπιστότερα*) what I tell you of the beauty of my wife; men trust their ears less than their eyes (*ὦτα γὰρ τυγχάνει ἀνθρώποισι ἐόντα ἀπιστότερα ὀφθαλμῶν*), so you must gaze upon her naked" (*Hist.* 1.8). And, as we have seen, Philostratus employs the same challenge liberally through his character of the vinegrower; rounding out the vinegrower's extended tale about colossal bone finds is his monologue on drinking wine from a serpentine skull:

> And yet, about four years ago, Hymnaios of Peparethos, a friend of mine, sent one of his sons to have me ask Protesilaus about a similar wonder (θαύματος). For on the island of Ikos… he happened to be digging up some vines, when the earth rang under the shovel, as if hollow. When they cleaned it away, there lay exposed a body twelve cubits tall, and in its skull was a living snake!... The skull alone, when we poured wine into it, was not filled even by two Cretan amphoras!" (*Her.* 8.3–12)[61]

Whether at the shores of a distant sea, in the remote countryside of Roman Judea, or at the tip of a spade, wonders, miracles, and fantastic tales were both a source of knowledge and a testable part of reality across the ancient Mediterranean. At the hands of Roman writers, one strategy for conveying the monumentality of an event or a sign—and a strategy for indicating its divine significance—was to guide the reader into identifying with characters or claims that reinforced belief even when bordering on the unbelievable. This edge-of-your-seat writing was well-established, engaging, and—above all—challenged and activated the imagination. And, if one was ever in doubt, the literary (eye)witness at least guaranteed that you didn't have to take the author's word for it.[62]

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[59] Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 261–262. Hartog cites Aristotle and Heraclitus on this matter to great effect: "We prefer sight, generally speaking, to all the other senses. The reason for this is that, of all the senses, sight best helps us to know things, and reveals many distinctions" (Meta. 980a25); "the eyes are more trustworthy witnesses than the ears" (22 B 101a).

[60] Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 261.

[61] For more on intertext and discourse on the "wonder-serpent" and its connection(s) to miraculous events and wonderworkers (historical and literary): ní Mheallaigh, "Lucian's *Alexander*, 240–243.

[62] I am loosely adapting LeVar Burton's famous phrase "you don't have to take my word for it" from the children's television series *Reading Rainbow* (1983–2006).

Read this way, something like the "Messianic secret" looks less like a christological puzzle to be solved and more like a recognizable strategy for staging marvel and guiding reader response. It also helps explain why "faith" language so often accompanies thaumatic claims: it functions rhetorically to convert incredulity into assent rather than signaling a uniquely Christian theological preoccupation.

Finally, this paradoxographical framing has implications for reception. Wonder literature provided ancient readers with interpretive habits for evaluating the improbable—habits that rely on precisely the cues Mark emphasizes (disbelief, fear, amazement, and appeals to witnessing). If the gospels were legible within that broader repertoire of reading practices, then their early uptake need not be explained only through theological commitments internal to Christian communities; it also reflects the broader reception of thaumatic narrative as persuasive, pleasurable, and culturally familiar writing from the empire's margins.

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