

Chapter 3

A silver coin in the mouth of a fish (Mt 17:24-27) - A miracle of nature, ecology, economy and the politics of holiness

This essay is an exercise in engaged hermeneutics with a view to the miracles of nature in the New Testament, while avoiding the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. It demonstrates Matthew's understanding of Jesus' emancipatory living in terms of a cultural anthropological interpretation of God's uniqueness and holiness. It places emphasis on the symbolic representation of the Jewish-Christian belief that the one and only God may not be portrayed in any manner, and the connection this has with the miracle story about Peter miraculously finding a silver (Tyrian) coin in the mouth of a fish from the Sea of Galilee, through Jesus' intervention. The following questions receive attention: How were the miracles of Jesus approached hermeneutically in the past? What are the place and role of Mt 17:24-27 within the immediate and broader context of the Gospel of Matthew? For our understanding of this passage, what is the implication of the recent archaeological discovery of silver Tyrian coins with images of sea-creatures? With a view to the exploitation of society's weak ones and the believer's relationship with his/her environment, how should this Peter-pericope be interpreted?

1. INTRODUCTION

For many Christians today the theology that matters is not the order and logic of dogmatic theology but the exegesis of Scripture. What does the Word of God mean? Prior to this issue is the question of hermeneutics: How do we find out what Scripture means? In the past two or three decades the field of hermeneutics, including biblical hermeneutics, has been in unprecedented ferment. Different new directions have come into being. In the middle of the 1980's it was said that the 'map' of biblical studies looked different from the 'map' drawn in the 1970's when

historical criticism had ruled the way. Two new routes were added during the 1980's. '[O]ne route is that of *literary criticism* and the other that of *sociology*' (Petersen 1985:ix; my emphasis). However, biblical hermeneutics has become even more complex during the 1990's. A new route is criss-crossing the other, namely post-modern theological concerns (cf Wright 1992:13-14). Within this new paradigm ecology, economy, politics, cultural anthropology and inter-religious dialogue are brought together in the exegetical enterprise. I call this interest in biblical studies 'engaged hermeneutics'.

In engaged hermeneutics the relation of reader and text is taken for granted. We have become increasingly aware of the fact that as the readers of the Bible we are bringing our own social worlds to the world of the text while we are trying to make sense of it. This is also a point made by the so-called theologies of liberation as the most prominent product of engaged hermeneutics. More specifically, it is the people's struggle against exploiting structures that is taken as point of departure. The struggle to create a sustainable environment, for example, is a theme often linked with, but not exclusive to the theology of liberation. It is possible to distinguish between a so-called 'ecology theology' and a 'theology of liberation'. The latter refers to social systems, while the former refers to ecosystems. Yet, socio-ecological alliances are created for a variety of reasons. For example, environmentalists are up in arms about the presence of toxins in their environment, because they pose a threat to the health of the inhabitants, or because they destroy the ecosystems and poison plants and animals. For example, some hold that the fate and interests of our exploited earth are similar to those of exploited humans.

We cannot deny that since the industrial revolution, the exploitation of the earth's riches has often gone hand-in-hand with the exploitation of society's weak ones - women, children, and laborers without legal recourse. The struggle for human rights has both an ecological and an economic base. In addition, the demand for human rights today encompasses much more than legal aspects. Political interests and religious convictions also play a strong underlying role. The net result of this is that ecology, economy, politics and religion are intertwined.

2. THEOLOGY AND NATURE: A CONTROVERSIAL RELATIONSHIP

The exploiting structures we are talking about are, in other words, those of contemporary experience, a set of ecological, economical and political conditions often very different from those in which the people of biblical times lived. The liberation theologians are often criticized for a hermeneutic fallacy: they place pre-industrial biblical facts in a modern field of social relations. Specifically, the Jewish-Christian tradition is accused by supporters of the so-called 'planetary ecology', like

Gregory Bateson (1972) and Fritjof Capra (see Schoeman 1990:284), of the viewing human being as the lord of the house and not as a guest in the house of Nature. The expression 'planetary ecology' implies that a human being is part of a larger social context, but that *mind* or *spiritual reality* (cf Schoeman 1990:282) is not a quality of humankind alone. It is immanent to all living systems, including sociological and ecological systems. Capra (1982:316) states that the environment is exploited because it is seen as being 'mindless'. 'Our attitudes will be different when we realize that the environment is not only alive but also mindful, like ourselves.' On the other hand, if human beings destroy their environment they destroy themselves. Capra admits that the emphasis he places on social involvement¹ has been stimulated by Bateson's 'planetary ecology'. Bateson, who called himself a 'monist', developed a description of the 'world' 'which did not split the universe dualistically into mind and matter, or into other separate realities. He often pointed out that the Jewish-Christian tradition, while boasting of monism, was essentially dualistic because it separated God from his creation' (Capra 1989:85).

However, it is highly debatable that the creation traditions of the Old Testament represent God in his act of creation as being alienated from creation, causing it to be no more than an object of exploitation and manipulation. It is true that the Jewish-Christian tradition does not view God the creator as a part of creation, nor does it regard creation as part of God. But this does not mean that no communal relationship developed between God and his creation. Just as there is no God other than the God of the covenant, there are no people other than the people of the covenant. To be truly human means to be with God. In other words, it is intrinsic to the Jewish-Christian tradition to see God as both immanent and transcendent:

Christians have sometimes been uneasy with the notion of God 'permeating' creation, thinking it sounds like a more Eastern way of thinking. Yet it is intrinsic to the Jewish-Christian tradition to see God as both immanent (everywhere present) and transcendent...The widespread notion of God as only transcendent seems to be associated with the popular image of God as being 'out there' or 'beyond' the universe, and not 'here'.

(Borg 1987:118 note 11)

1. Capra (1989:75-89) refers to 'the worldwide Green movement, which emerged from a coalescence of ecology, peace, and feminist movements...civil rights movements [which] demanded that black citizens be included in the political process; ...the free speech movement...and the student movements....'

This dialectical combination of God's transcendence and immanence also exists in Rabbinic teaching. In his comprehensive summary of the teaching of the Talmud and the Jewish rabbis on ethics, religion, folklore and jurisprudence Rev Dr A Cohen writes as follows:

What, in Rabbinic teaching, is God's relation to the world? Is He thought of as transcendent and far removed from His creatures, or is He considered as being near to, and in contact with, them? The true answer is to be found in a combination of both ideas. The Rabbis did not look upon the two conceptions as contradictory or mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary.

(Cohen 1968:40)

Yet God's ontological status differs from the ontological status of creation. In the Jewish-Christian tradition creation has a beginning, is not eternal but transitory, and is not the highest good. In contrast, God had no beginning and is eternal. Creation is dependent upon the one and only God for its authentic existence. God's nature is *his nature*, *God's doing is his doing and God's love is his love*. This point of view, namely that God's community with his creation is *his doing* because he is the one and only God, is to be seen in various places in Scripture. Thomas Wright draws the following conclusion in his significant 1992 publication on the historical and theological questions surrounding the origins of Christianity:

To what sort of speech, then, is Christian theology (whether in the first or the twenty-first century) committed? Christians find themselves compelled to speak of the creator and redeemer god as God, the one God; not a Deist god, an absentee landlord, nor one of the many gods that litter the world of paganism, nor yet the god who, in pantheism, is identified with the world; but the God who made and sustains all that is, who is active within the world but not contained within it!

(Wright 1992:135)

In other words, monotheism yields to the acknowledgement of God's total otherness, based on his uniqueness. But God's otherness does not mean that God is not permeating creation or that creation is subjected to manipulation and exploitation. However, it is nevertheless true that the faith in God's uniqueness, as we shall see, can lead and indeed did lead, particularly in the case of the Sadducees

and the Pharisees during the late Second Temple period², to discrimination, social injustice and ostracism. On the other hand, it has become evident in and through the Jesus-events in particular, that trust in God as Αββα ('Father') and Ἐμμανουήλ (God-with-us) cannot in any way be reconciled with social manipulation and exploitation.

This study can be seen as an exercise in engaged hermeneutics with a view to the miracles of nature in the New Testament, while avoiding the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. We wish to demonstrate Matthew's understanding of Jesus' emancipatory living by placing emphasis on the symbolic representation of the belief that the one and only God may not be portrayed in any manner, and the connection this has with the miracle story about Peter finding a coin in the mouth of a fish from the Sea of Galilee, through Jesus' intervention (Mt 17:24-27). The setting for this miracle of nature is the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and Peter are the protagonists in this narrative.

I will attend to the following questions: How were the miracles of nature approached hermeneutically in the past? If God's uniqueness is studied from a cultural anthropological perspective, what will be the outcome? What are the place and role of the particular Peter-pericope within the immediate and broader context of the Gospel of Matthew? How should this miracle of nature be understood in terms of the social context of the Gospel of Matthew? How should these narratives be interpreted with a view to the believer's relationship with his/her environment, while avoiding the hermeneutic heresy of misplaced concreteness? These questions will naturally be investigated very briefly.

3. HERMENEUTIC EXPLORATION

3.1 How have the miracles of nature been hermeneutically approached in the past?

Since the Enlightenment many Christians do not regard biblical truths as being simply timeless, idealized truths. Many believers today realize that biblical truths

2. Although the Gospels' portrayal of social groups and coalitions in first-century Palestine, like the scribes and Sadducees, and especially the Pharisees, can be interpreted as demonstrating some of the social injustices and dichotomies, recent studies of early Judaism(s) have shown there were many different views within all those groups, and a sharp distinction between Jewish as legalistic, exclusivist, etc. and Christian as faithful, inclusivist, etc., is not historically correct. It is also important to remember that the literary function of a group, like the Jewish authorities as portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew, may be quite detached from actual history.

may be applied normatively to the present without one's losing sight of their literary and social historically contingent reality. Viewed thus, biblical hermeneutics not only has a theological point of departure and a direction, but will also have both a social historical and a literary background.

Insights gained in the realm of modern literary science have made the interpreter aware of the socio-linguistic and pragmatically communicative functions of the *form* (genre) of texts. As regards the literature of the New Testament, a distinction on the macro-level is made between the Gospels, Acts and Revelation as *narratives* and the Epistles as *argumentative texts* (see Vorster 1977a:18-20; Lührmann 1989:10-15). On a micro-level a distinction may be made between apothegmatic (paradigmatic) narratives, metaphorical narratives and miracle stories. The communicative intent of a narrative could be simply to inform, or to persuade. Consideration of the basic communicative intention attached to the choice of a particular form enables the interpreter to discern what should and what should not be expected from the text, as well as the nature of the questions the interpreter is expected to ask regarding the text.

Apothegmatic (paradigmatic) narratives are texts whose persuasive power is not, for example, based on a *parable* or a *miracle* as a communicative strategy. For our purposes they can pass as 'micro-narratives'. Metaphoricity functions as the determining communicative strategy in the parable as a narrative, while it is the *supernatural* and the *extra-sensory* in the case of the miracle story. In his research into the miracle stories of the New Testament, Gerd Theissen contended that first-century readers in effect apparently identified with the supernatural and the extra-sensory. In this respect he refers to a comment made by Origen to Celsus, namely that people exchanged their gentile faith for that of Christianity, on the very basis of Jesus' miracles.

The miracle stories of the Bible have either a one-sided defensive or a one-sided alienating effect on the rational human being since the Enlightenment (cf Betz & Grimm 1977:2-5). As far as the first reaction (one-sided defensive) is concerned, we find that in fundamentalistic circles the belief that miracles could indeed be performed is defended in that their factuality is simply unquestioned (cf Brown 1984:137-168). Another type of 'defence' of the possibility of the occurrence of miracles consists in interpreting Jesus' miracles as anticipated references to modern medicinal and psychiatric therapy and release from psychogenic suffering (see Jeremias 1971:92; cf the discussion by Van der Loos 1986:80-113).

The hermeneutical enterprise, whose influence on the 'rational human being' has been described as 'one-sided alienation', can be seen as a dialectical undertaking attempting to bridge the 'alienation' between our reason and the

supernatural and extra-sensory. It is regarded as 'one-sided' because it does not, in a pragmatic sense, take fully into account the social background against which the miracle story is played out. In this respect Rudolf Bultmann's demythologization program is probably best known. According to Bultmann (1955:44) miracles are 'images', 'symbols'. Through his hermeneutic program he tries to identify the 'authentic existence' which has been cloaked in a primitive, supernatural belief in miracles (see Bultmann 1955:44-45). Such 'belief' is 'faith without credibility' and is based on 'misconception' (Bultmann 1955:45).

Similar hermeneutic attempts to counter alienation are also found among other New Testament scholars, namely Eduard Schweizer (1971), Joachim Jeremias (1971) and Walter Schmithals (1970). According to Schweizer (1971:44) Jesus' miracles are 'signs', they are actions pointing away from themselves to something else. Schweizer claims that it is clear that Jesus did not perform miracles in order to misuse his 'divine power' for the sake of proof, but to indicate something totally different *beyond* these miracles, for which the faithful believer is still waiting'. Jeremias (1971:86-96), in turn, saw Jesus' miracles as a means of depriving Satan of his powers and a prolepsis to the *eschaton*. According to Schmithals (1970:25) the 'truth' about Jesus' miracles is of a kerygmatic nature and takes place to this day in the miracle of faith as a result of freedom from anxiety and fear, and the unconditional love for all humankind brought about by the kerygma.

Gerd Theissen (1983) strongly criticized the kerygmatic exegesis because it does not really take into account the social and humanitarian relationships behind the miracle stories of the New Testament. He finds it problematic when we too readily lose sight of the reality of the fear of illness, hunger and death by simply approaching such texts cognitively and thus converting their social everyday meaning into ethereal ideas. Theissen convincingly shows that in antiquity the miracle stories functioned amid social conflict, and then as the legitimization of certain ideological interests. Theissen (1982:186) regards his own sociological approach as being a direct continuation of the *Sitz im Leben* idea of the historical critical *form criticism* (see also Osiek 1984:3). According to this view certain Jesus-traditions took on *forms* displaying particular relationships with each other in respect of structure and content, depending on the function they fulfilled in the early Christian communities. Seen thus, there is a direct correlation between the 'form' in which a tradition is handed down and the 'social milieu' (*Sitz im Leben*) in which it developed. This *Sitz im Leben* is the result of the customs prevailing in a certain culture at a certain time, and which assigned such an important role to speakers and readers, that specific literary forms were regarded as essential methods of communication. However, a distinction should be made between the different contextualizing levels regarding

the time of the early church. A miracle story in which Jesus is the miracle worker could have taken on another form with its own intensity when it was functionally employed in the Aramaic Palestinian Jewish-Christian community. Within a Hellenistic-Jewish or Hellenistic-Gentile community it could assume other forms that, in turn, became functional there.

Historical-critical research has argued, for example, the story about Jesus' miraculous multiplication of loaves did not have the same function in Palestinian Jewish-Christian circles that it usually had in the missionary Hellenistic-Gentile kerygmatic situations. In the world of the Gentiles Jesus' power and authority over other competing gods and miracle workers was often accentuated through a miracle story. The story of Jesus' miraculous multiplication of loaves was, however, transmitted in such a manner in Jewish Hellenistic community circles that it lost the special character of a *miracle story*. According to a *form critical perspective* this specific narrative adopted the 'form' of communion catechesis, functioning as instruction in which the disciples' intermediary role is emphasized by the handing out of bread to those who were socially scorned, such as Gentiles, tax-collectors and the disabled (see the previous essay). There are indications in the New Testament that there were some Judaic-Christians who, like the Pharisees, did not want to accommodate these peripheral groups in socio-religious institutions like the temple, synagogues, households, meals and communion (see inter alia Theissen 1987:117).

Theissen (1987:120, 207) himself has an interesting view of the possible *social milieu* of the 'multiplication of loaves' within the context of the historical Jesus. The Gospels mention that certain people in Galilee, certain influential (Herodian) women in particular, were helping to support Jesus and the twelve out of their own means (see Lk 8:3 and the reference to Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna). According to Theissen this could explain the astonishing fact that Jesus and his followers could make a livelihood without either working or begging. It could also provide the background for the accounts of the miraculous multiplication of loaves. When benefactors sent him bread, fish and fruit in this manner, and it was suddenly produced before the eyes of the many hungry people around him, such as the blind, the lame and other disabled, it could appear to be a miracle to these poor people who were not used to so much food. And when one believes that there is enough food to go round, one loses one's fear of going hungry and brings out the few fish and the bread one has hidden away for oneself, and shares them.

Theissen's social historical interpretation of texts should be judged as part of the first recent present-day attempts in biblical studies to take in a more serious exegetic light the social environment of, inter alia, the narratives about Jesus' miracles. Today the sociological aspects are taken into consideration much more

and in a more scientific manner in the study of the miracle stories. The so-called social scientific explanation are producing increasingly better explanatory results. The work by Bruce Malina & Jerome Neyrey (1988) on Jesus' exorcism of demons is such a book. This work mainly deals with the possible social background of the so-called Beelzebul pericope (see Mt 12:22-32) and a 'Christology' labelled a 'Christology from the side'. In this approach Jesus' names (titles) are seen as labels by which Jesus of Nazareth was either acknowledged by his followers as prominent and virtuous or considered by his enemies as being deviant. In the Mediterranean world of the first century a virtuous person was one who was able to recognize and maintain the prescribed social boundaries. This meant, for example, that one did not mix with people in certain despised positions, especially not in terms of the purification prescriptions regarding what was clean and what unclean. This also made it possible for people to make a living within limited means and obligations. According to Malina & Neyrey, Jesus acted as *patron* to the *clients* of the community who could not defend their own honor, such as the sick who were also regarded as being unclean by the Pharisees. Jesus' kindness towards these people was thus experienced as an anomaly by the Pharisees. All communities, including the first-century Mediterranean community, had methods of removing anomalies. One of these was to declare the person causing the anomaly a public danger. Thus, instead of being seen as the patron of the community and the sick, Jesus was declared the leader of demons (Mt 9:34). According to Malina & Neyrey, Jesus was denounced as a wizard.

Theissen's work, which was originally published in German in 1974 contains - as is to be expected - many generalizations and is not characterized by the conscious use of social scientific models that were developed in sociology as an independent discipline (cf Elliott 1986:1-33). Theissen also neglected to explain the conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees and Jesus' kindness towards the 'crowds' who lived in Galilee in the 'land of the shadow of death' (Mt 4:12-17; 23-25), unlike Malina & Neyrey who explained them by employing certain sociological perspectives in which aspects of 'honor' and 'shame', 'patron' and 'client' played a role. Theissen interpreted the miracle stories against the background of a conflict situation in first-century Galilee, which he described in broad terms only. According to him the tension that existed was mainly that between the people of the villages and those of the cities.

The miracle stories and, in particular, certain miracles of nature such as the multiplication of the loaves, the walking on the water, and the miraculous finding of a coin in the mouth of a fish, are all directly linked, with Galilee as background. According to narratological theories (literary theories scientifically studying

narrative texts; cf Van Aarde 1991b:101-128) Galilee, however, not only serves as a background for certain characters, but also constitutes an area of interest in that it is the social environment contributing towards the characterization of the *dramatis personae*. In the Gospel of Matthew Galilee is called the 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (Mt 4:15). According to Theissen, Jesus' miracles were directed at the socially despised living in Galilee. This is explicitly stated in the so-called summarizing reports that interrupt the stories about Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels every now and then. Matthew 15:29-32 (see also Mt 4:23-25) serves as an example of such a summarizing report:

Jesus left there and went along to the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the *lame*, the *blind*, the *crippled*, the *dumb* and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the *dumb* speaking, the *crippled* made well, the *lame* walking and the *blind* seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for these people, they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way'.

(Mt 4:23-25; NIV)

On the basis of these texts it is clear that Jesus not only healed unhappy people with all kinds of illnesses and complaints, but that - according to the reports in the Gospels - these people were also the typical hungry 'multitude' the disciples had to feed with bread at Jesus' request, and who had inspired the miraculous multiplication of the loaves.

Theissen classified this 'miracle story' as a 'miracle gift' (*Geschenkwunder*). To this he added the miraculous catch of fish and the changing of the water into wine at the wedding in Cana. In these miracle stories Theissen identified the yoke of the fundamental socio-economic need of the people, which was relieved by Jesus. According to Theissen the rescue miracles on the Sea of Galilee take us to the world of simple fishermen, who are exposed to the dangers of the wind and the stormy waves in their little boats. In the report on the storm at sea in Acts 27 it is the person subjected to socially demoralizing circumstances, namely the prisoner, who is saved in a miraculous way.

Although the interpretation of narratives about 'miracles of nature' in the New Testament has taken the social background of this type of narrative into account since the *form critical method* was introduced, it is clear that this has been

only a very recent development, designed to account for the social conflicts reflected by these narratives in strict scientific terms. The perspective from which texts are approached in a social scientific manner is formed by the assumption that forces in society (whether transcendent or immanent) cause both social institutions and the people, things and places they represent, to be in constant conflict. This conflict is a result of conflicting interests and an evolutionary movement towards equilibrium in society. Developments in the sociological sphere, and the sociology of knowledge in particular, have taught us that values, including social values of a religious, cultural, political or economic nature, expressed in texts serve to legitimize theoretical beliefs regarding the first principles of reality - the essence of life. Religious values are communicated through language of analogy, such as parables, metaphors and other symbols. As such, a text is the product of the social world consisting of social structures (institutions) which are built on or arise from that which is metaphysical (see Berger & Luckmann 1967:1, 2, 15; Petersen 1985:x, 29-30). Society may therefore be represented as an institutional order.

The expression 'institutional order' implies that a balanced society consists of particular social institutions, one of which is the overarching one, while the other is integrated with it in subordinate fashion. Four basic social institutions or structures can allegedly be discerned within any society: *economy*, *politics*, *family life* and *religion* (see Malina 1986:152-153). In certain societies today the economy forms the basis of social relations. One may also find that politicians exercise control over economic and religious institutions. There are, however, societies in which families and the heads of families exercise the control. The Mediterranean world of the first century is an example. In such societies *religion*, *politics* and *economy* are embedded in an institutional order of *family life* which is primarily determined through birth and nationality (cf inter alia Hollenbach 1987:52; Countryman 1989:21). Bruce Malina put it as follows:

While all human societies presumably witness to kinship institutions, the Mediterranean world treats this institution as primary and focal....In fact in the whole Mediterranean world, the centrally located institution maintaining societal existence is kinship and its sets of interlocking rules. The result is the central value of *familism*. The family or kinship group is central in social organization; it is the primary focus of personal loyalty and it holds supreme sway over individual life.

(Malina 1989:131)

This is therefore tantamount to anachronism, misplaced concreteness, as well as reductionism, if the phenomenon of social injustice in New Testament times was to be understood only, or even primarily, in terms of modern economic, political and ecological concerns. Economic and political steps taken in the first century that led to ostracism, for example, should be interpreted in terms of the above social scientific model and perspective in the light of the primary familial structures of the period and the social, mythological and religious symbols representing these structures. The environmental issues which, in close alliance with contextual theology, are topical today should therefore be explained circumspectly from the data gained in the New Testament when it relates biblical data to the field of social relations. Our next step is therefore to gain a closer look into the circumstances and motivations in first-century Palestine that led to the social fact that the belief in God's uniqueness had tended to exploitation and ostracism. It boils down to a study of the notion of holiness in cultural anthropological terms.

3.2 God's uniqueness and the politics of holiness

The belief in God's uniqueness is expressed in a singular manner in the Decalogue. The Second Commandment, 'You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below', arises from the First Commandment, 'I am the Lord your God.... You shall have no other gods before me' (Ex 20:2-3). This resulted in the regulation prohibiting the portrayal of humans or animals on coins (see Theissen 1987:6-7) in a time when money was minted in Palestine for the first time since the Hasmonean period in the second century BC (see Ronen 1987:105). Traditionally, political rulers had been portrayed on coins. In the time of Jesus the Herodian rulers apparently avoided this custom to keep the peace amongst the Jews (see Ward 1988:85). To celebrate the founding of the city of Tiberias, Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea in the period 4 BC to AD 39, had himself portrayed on coins by a 'palm branch (reed - see Mt 11:7-8) swaying in the wind' (Theissen 1987:197; Ward 1988:60). He thus apparently obeyed the Jewish law. However, the figures of animals Antipas had in his palace were regarded as idolatry. Josephus (*Vita* 12) refers to it as follows: '...that house which Herod had built there, and which had the figures of living creatures in it, although our laws have forbidden us to make any such figures' (translation by Whiston 1978:4). At the start of the Jewish war in AD 66 these figures were the first to be destroyed by the Jewish rebels under Josephus (Josephus, *Vita* 12 = 65-69 - see Whiston 1978:4, 17-19).

Although Jews do not identify God with creation, God's covenantal deed demanded that the human being should live in 'holiness' before him because he is 'holy': 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy' (Lv 19:2; see also 1 Pt 1:16). God's 'holiness' should thus be regarded as inseparable from his 'uniqueness'. This becomes very clear in the Markan use of the *Shema* prayer by Jesus (Mk 12:29) and the scribe (Mk 12:32). Here this prayer's function is to act as introduction to the 'highest commandment', namely the instruction to love God and one's neighbor: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one'. This maxim can be regarded as an analogic formula in which the nature of human being's covenantal relationship with God - who is not a human being (see Hs 11:9b) - is implied indirectly. In everyday life the Jews saw this relationship with God expressed in the confessing *Shema* prayer.

From Old Testament times order in Israel as covenantal community was inseparably linked to the manner in which the *Shema* prayer constitutively functioned. The prayer can probably be regarded as the most basic religious belief appearing in both the Old and the New Testaments. Jerome Neyrey (1988:82) refers to it as 'God's creation-as-ordered'. It contains the confession that the God of Israel is the one God, implying that God distinguishes the people of his covenant, Israel, from all other nations. By implication God's 'holiness' is replicated on a human level. All things in creation should therefore be an expression of the divine order in respect of both classification and discrimination (Neyrey 1988:68). This 'divine order' is expressed specifically through the Greek word ἅγιος (= 'holy'). This word can also be replaced by the word τέλειος (= 'complete'/'whole'): 'Be perfect (τέλειωι), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (τέλειός)' (Mt 5:48). The cultural anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1966:54), expresses it in the following words: '...to be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is integrity, perfection of the individual and of the kind'.

To be as 'holy' as God is 'holy', thus meant to be suited to God. Cripples, retarded people and gentiles were therefore not acceptable to God and were not allowed to enter the cultic sphere in which God lived, the temple, or the assembly of the 'holy', the ἕκκλησία/ἐκκλησία (see Dt 23:1-8; cf Van Aarde 1990:251-263). This means that 'holiness was understood in a highly specific way, namely as *separation*' (Borg 1987:86).

To be holy meant to be separate from everything that would defile holiness. The Jewish social world and its conventional wisdom became increasingly structured around the polarities of holiness as separation: clean and unclean, purity and defilement, sacred and

profane, Jew and Gentile, righteous and sinner....'Holiness' became the paradigm by which the Torah was interpreted. The portions of the law which emphasized the separateness of the Jewish people from other peoples, and which stressed separation from everything impure within Israel, became dominant. Holiness became the *Zeitgeist*, the 'spirit of the age,' shaping the development of the Jewish social world in the centuries leading up to the time of Jesus, providing the particular content of the Jewish ethos or way of life. Increasingly, the ethos of holiness became the politics of holiness.

(Borg 1987:86-87)

Thus, the 'politics of holiness' amounts to the fact that socio-religious groups and coalitions, like the Sadducees and the Pharisees, regulated God's presence during the late Second Temple period. In terms of their idea of God his presence amongst human being was limited. The regulations, in terms of which God was declared to be present or absent, referred to the large number of purification prescriptions. This particularly applied to the temple, the temple accessories, the temple workers and the worshipers in the temple (see Neusner 1973a:15-26).

In Jesus' time it was a serious point of contention between the Sadducees and the Pharisees whether the temple rules should also be applied to everyday life (see Saldarini 1988:234). The theology of the Pharisees concentrated on their aim to replicate the temple and all that it included in everyday life. This replication of the temple community in everyday life had certain religious implications, namely that it legitimized social ostracism through declaring people to be estranged from God. 'Unclean' and 'imperfect' people, things and places were, in other words, seen as not belonging to the domain of the kingdom of God. People from such places who concerned themselves with such things were the 'sinners' who were under the influence of demons. It is with reference to this that Matthew refers to certain of the inhabitants of Galilee, the 'land of the Gentiles' (Mt 4:15), as those living in the land of the shadow of death (Mt 4:16). For these peripheral people, the *outcasts*, the 'people who lived in darkness', the gospel of Jesus, namely that the kingdom of heaven was near and that Jesus had the 'authority' to forgive them their sins, even though they were outside the temple area as place of atonement, was like the dawning of a light (Mt 4:16). This program of Jesus' activity and the people to whom he addressed it is summarized in Matthew 4:23-25 (NIV; see also Mt 9:35-38):

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures and the paralyzed, and he healed them....

(Mt 4:23-25; NIV)

John Pilch convincingly argues that healing incidents (for example 'lepers') in the gospels provide evidence that human illness 'were thought to be a source of pollution, not contagion, and that Jesus 'cure' invariably involved establishing new self-understandings so that these formerly 'unclean' and excluded from the holy community now found themselves 'clean' and within the holy community' (Pilch 1988b:60; cf also Pilch 1991:181-210). As indicated earlier, it has to be granted that Gerd Theissen was correct in that at least certain of Jesus' miracles were aimed at improving the fate of the socially scorned in Galilee, in particular. However, one should not lose track of the results of the historical-critical work done by Joachim Held (1961) on the miracle stories in Matthew, either. Held showed that the miracle stories were composed about a central theological theme. On the one hand 'aid-seeking people from the outside' approach Jesus *in faith*, and on the other the *little faith* of the 'disciple group' is striking. Although the miracle stories in Matthew are generally taken from Mark, one can easily detect a 'Matthean trend' in this regard (see Lange 1980:9). We shall now indicate how this trend is also to be found in the narrative regarding the miraculous finding of the silver coin - the exact amount necessary to pay Jesus' and Peter's temple tax - in the mouth of a fish.

4. MATTHEW 17:24-27 IN CONTEXT

Matthew 17:24-27 reads as follows in the New International Version. The italicized sections will be explained exegetically in the text that follows.

After Jesus and his disciples arrived in *Capernaum*, the collectors of the two drachma tax [τὰ δίδραχμα in Greek], came to Peter and asked, 'Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?' 'Yes, he does,' he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. 'What do you think, Simon?' he asked. 'From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes - from their own sons or from others?' 'From others,' Peter answered. 'Then *the sons are exempt*,' Jesus said

to him. 'But so that *we may not offend them*, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first *fish* you catch; open its mouth and you will find a *four-drachma coin* [στατήρα in Greek = silver coin]. Take it and give it to them *for my tax and yours*.³

(Mt 17:24-27; NIV)

This pericope consists entirely of Matthew's own material which is not found in the other canonical or non-canonical gospels. It should be understood in terms of the wider context of Matthew 13:53-17:27 and then as the latter part of it. Matthew 13:53-17:27 in turn constitutes the fourth of the five important micro-narratives in the Gospel of Matthew (see Van Aarde 1982b:21-34). The structure of the Gospel can be seen as consisting of five important speeches reportedly made by Jesus, preceded and followed by micro-narratives. Ulrich Luz (1989:36) calls this division the *center model* because Jesus' parable speech in Matthew 13 constitutes the focus of the whole Gospel. Matthew 13:1-52, again, is built up around the contrast between the disciples who hear and understand (verses 11-12), and the Galilean crowd who see and yet do not see, who hear and yet do not hear or understand (verse 13). This parable discourse, dealing with the kingdom of heaven, concludes with Jesus' question to the disciples (verse 51) whether they understand all these things, and their very definite 'yes' in reply. This definite 'yes' is repeated in the following pericope with the words 'Yes, he does' (Mt 17:25a). According to Matthew the 'insight' of the disciples is related to the particular role they need to fulfill in respect of the crowd. Joachim Held (1961:171) referred to this as a 'mediating role' and with regard to the miraculous feeding of the crowd he called the disciples 'die Mittler des Mahles' ('the mediators of the meal'). Dominic Crossan (1991:397) also comments that the disciples 'are either direct recipients or active mediators in the nature miracles'. How will the disciples fulfill their calling regarding the crowd? This question remains important throughout Matthew 13:53-17:27, as well as in the whole Gospel of Matthew (see Minear 1974:28-44).

With regard to the structure of Matthew 13:53-17:27 its threefold construction is noticeable³ (see Van Aarde 1982b:21-34; cf Luz 1989:43 note 39). These

3. My 'literary systematizing principle' (Luz 1989:38) by focusing on the figure of Peter is according to Ulrich Luz (1990:382 note 9) 'fragwürdig' and according to Donald Verseput (1992:6 note 2) 'improbable'. However, I am still convinced that Matthew's utilization of his own material deviating from the Markan structure, his composition of subsections according to the number three, and his repetition of key words and events, for example 'son of God' and Petrine-events, can be regarded as significant literary means which he used for his careful arrangement of subsections.

three subsections are Matthew 13:53-14:33; 14:34-16:20 and 16:21-17:27. Each of these units concludes with peculiar Matthean material in respect of Peter that does not occur in the Gospel of Mark or in the Sayings Gospel Q as Matthew's sources, namely *Peter walks on the water* (Mt 14:28-33), *Jesus' beatitude to Peter* (Mt 16:17-19) and *Peter and the payment of temple tax* (Mt 17:24-27) (see also Ellis 1974:132). Each of these three subdivisions focuses on 'insight' on the part of Peter, who is the mouthpiece of the disciples. When Peter walks on the water and the disciples acknowledge Jesus while professing: 'Truly you are the son of God' (Mt 14:28-33), the disciples' 'insight', which was mentioned in the preceding parable discourse, continues (Mt 13:1-52). The same could be said about the repetition of Peter's calling Jesus 'son of God' (Mt 16:16) in the second subsection and Jesus' beatitude to Peter, about Simon being addressed as 'Peter', and the pronouncements regarding the building of the church (ἐκκλησία) on this 'rock' (πέτρα) and the keys to the kingdom of heaven (Mt 16:17-19). This 'insight' of Peter, acknowledging Jesus as 'son of God', appears once more in the following micro-narrative and that is at the end of the third subdivision, the pericope about Peter's miraculous finding of the temple tax in the mouth of a fish (Mt 17:24-27). In this short narrative Peter opposes the temple authorities with an 'insight' that speaks of a perspective that resembles that of Jesus as portrayed by Matthew (see Kingsbury 1973:473). Yet, in every instance the evangelist allows the disciples' 'insight' to be preceded by *little faith* (ὀλιγοπιστία). And this is an indication of the trend in the Gospel of Matthew according to which the disciples' perspective tends to reflect characteristics that resemble those of the elite and, in particular, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Against the background of the disciples' unexpected 'lack of understanding' of Jesus' loving and miraculous feeding of the socially scorned, and their 'mediating function' in this respect, he cautioned them as people of 'little faith' to be on their guard against the 'yeast' of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (Mt 16:5-11). And once again the evangelist mentions that the disciples indeed gained 'insight' (Mt 16:12).

In the Gospel of Matthew the 'faith' of the disciples (Peter) refers to their 'insight' into the identity of Jesus as the obedient and trusting son of God. To Jesus this meant the fulfillment of the requirement of the law of his heavenly Father to love unconditionally. On the other hand the disciples' 'little faith' refers to a 'lack of comprehension' about the nature of their calling, namely that they, as 'sons of God' (see Mt 5:45) should obey the will of the Father in heaven that is, they were to play a 'mediating role' in the relationship between Jesus and the Galilean crowds (see chapter 6 of Part I).

Instead of being Jesus' 'helpers' by acting as 'fishers of men' (Mt 4:19), the disciples tend to make common cause with Jesus' antagonists. The latter consist of the Pharisees in particular, who are portrayed as formalistic legalists because they do not realize that, according to the law of God, *compassion* is the most important (Mt 23:23). They are the 'blind guides' leading the blind (Mt 15:14; 23:24), and do not realize that God wishes to care for the 'lost sheep of Israel' as well (Mt 10:6-8) and does not want even one of the destitute to be lost (Mt 18:10-14).

The topographic situating of Matthew 17:24-27 in *Capernaum* accentuates the opposition against Jesus (see also Mt 11:23-24). In the Gospel of Matthew (and that of Mark) Jerusalem represents the 'theological interest' (*theologische Ort*) of Jesus' opponents (see Lohmeyer 1942:106-107). Capernaum is portrayed as an area of interest that is one with Jerusalem, the place where the temple is situated and from whence came the 'officials who collected the temple tax'.

In Matthew 17:27 reference is made to a *στατήρ*, the silver Tyrian⁴ coin which Peter found in the mouth of a sea-creature on the basis of an authoritative word from Jesus, and which served as payment for both Peter and Jesus' temple tax. In Jesus' time the *half-shekel* was the currency used for paying temple tax (see Montefiore 1964/5:62-63; Perkins 1984b:185-186). The requirement to pay a half-shekel tax is based on Exodus 30:11-16; 38:25-26 and Nehemiah 10:32-33. As a matter of fact, all references to the so-called 'shekels of the sanctuary' are from the Priestly document (cf Richardson 1992:517 note 35). Exodus 38:25 implies that the payment must be in silver. According to the Mishna (*Shekalim* III.4) this payment was to be made in the prescribed currency (see Strack & Billerbeck 1926:763-764). For the Jews of Capernaum as well as in other parts of Galilee and Judea ('elsewhere in the Mediterranean Jewish world the arrangements are less clear'; Richardson 1992:513) this had, from the Hasmonean period (cf Garland 1987:191) been silver Tyrian coins (*m. Bek.* 8.7; *t. Ketub.* 12; cf Richardson 1992:512). The reason why it should be *Tyrian* silver coinage was that the political rulers had prohibited the Jews in the Second Temple period from minting silver (cf Richardson 1992:517). Images of animals appeared on these coins, such as an eagle with a palm branch over its right shoulder on the one side and the god Melkart (or Herakles) on the other (see Hamburger 1962:433) with the inscription 'Tyre the holy and inviolable' (see Richardson 1992:517). Tyre was one of Israel's 'bitterest enemies' and the Tyrian shekels were therefore offensive (Richardson 1992:517-518). It is

4. 'The coin in the fish's mouth is probably, though not necessarily, a Tyrian shekel; it will do to pay both Jesus' and Peter's Temple dues' (Richardson 1992:519 note 45).

thus worth noticing that the inscription on the coins indeed changed during the first year of the control of Jerusalem by the Jewish Zealots in 67/68 A D, and again in the following year (cf Roth 1962:41-42). The change of the inscription *Tyre the Holy* to *Jerusalem the Holy*, and again to *Freedom of Zion* 'evidences Zealot control of the Jerusalem mint' (Crossan 1991:217) during the first (successful) stage of the first Jewish revolt.

Archaeologists recently found some very interesting silver Tyrian coins in Jordan (see Thompson 1987). The images that appear on these coins are those of *sea-monsters* known to us through Greek mythology, *sea-horses* and *dolphins*, or riders on the backs of these creatures (Thompson 1987:102). The rider can be regarded as a symbol of divine power over the 'creatures of the sea'. In the world of the Semites *Ba'al Shamem* was regarded as the god of both the sea and storms. According to Greek mythology the rider could be identified with Poseidon, who showed some resemblance to Melkart of the Semites. These silver coins were possibly minted on the orders of either Alexander the Great (examples of silver coins with images of the head of Ptolemy I or Antiochus IV, with Zeus on the other side are known to exist - see Hamburger 1962:431) or the Hasmonean rulers who came later.

As it was, the images of rulers, gods, and animals as their symbols or of the sea-gods themselves, constituted a contravention of the Second Commandment. It is therefore to be expected that Jews would not of their own choice have had such coins in their possession. However, 'if one lived at a distance it would appear that one did not have to pay in this currency (*m. Seqal.2.1,3*)' (Richardson 1992:513). Money changers were therefore necessary⁵ at the temple (see Mt 21:12) to make it possible for taxpayers to obtain the prescribed currency (see Neusner 1989b:287-290). Because of the fact that 'the Temple dues could be paid for a period of ten days....(t)he money-changers's tables were an essential part of the Temple-cultus: they received the Temple dues in the 'provinces' [in other parts of Judea and Galilee] transported them to Jerusalem; and in Jerusalem they changed the money offered in payment to the approved coinage' (Richardson 1992:513). The 'bankers' were allowed commission at a rate of 16,5 per cent on a half-shekel (*Shekalim* VI.I).

5. Although 'necessary' (Neusner 1989; Crossan 1991:357) and 'essential' (Richardson 1992) to the temple cult, in my interpretation of the payment of the temple tax (Mt 17:24-27) I disagree with Dominic Crossan that 'there was *absolutely nothing wrong* with any of the buying, selling, or money-changing operations conducted in the outer courts of the Temple. Nobody was stealing or defrauding or contaminating the sacred precincts' (Crossan 1991:357; my emphasis).

In the Septuagint the word 'shekel' is translated as τὸ δίδραχμον. Outside the Septuagint, in Josephus or Philo for example, τὸ δίδραχμον (singular) was the equivalent of a half-shekel. According to Matthew 17:24 the collectors of the temple tax asked Peter whether Jesus paid τὰ δίδραχμα (plural). The value therefore was the equivalent of two half-shekels. What the tax collectors probably had in mind was the commission they could earn. If the Tyrian στατήρ were used as payment, however, it would be unnecessary to exchange the money. Giving change was also avoided since a στατήρ was the equivalent of one shekel (two half-shekels) in those days, in other words a Septuagint τὸ δίδραχμον, and was therefore enough for two people (Strack & Billerbeck 1926:765, 773).

Matthew could have had two things in mind with this question. On the one hand there was the fact that certain Jewish groups refused to pay tax to the temple authorities. The Essenes (see Vermes 1975:42), for example, refused because they regarded the temple under the control of the Sadducees as being corrupt. This could probably also be attributed to the fact that it had to be paid in Tyrian currency which was regarded as idolatrous, because of the images of animals in flight such as eagles, or of animals in the sea such as dolphins and sea-horses, which appeared on the coins. Coins whose images have in fact been filed away have been found in the Qumran caves. On the other hand the tax collectors' question is meant to ensnare Jesus. He is expected either to agree or disagree with the formality of money-changing. And this practice of money-changing at the temple, which constituted a busy and profitable money market, was in reality coupled with social injustice. Every Jewish male (levites, Israelites, proselytes, and freed slaves) above the age of twenty was subjected to this (*Shekalim* I.1, 3, 5; cf Strack & Billerbeck 1926:726; Richardson 1992:513). It applied to a beggar, a self-supporting artisan, a day-laborer, a peasant from the country who owned no land, a rich aristocrat, a merchant, or others belonging to the so-called *retainers* group. If women, slaves or minors paid the temple tax it was accepted by the money-changers (at the tables in the temple or whoever were sent to collect it from peasants from the countryside) but not the payment of a gentile or a Samaritan (*Shekalim* I.1, 3, 5; cf Richardson 1992:513). However, according to the 'politics of holiness' women and children, cripples and the blind as well as the gentiles and Samaritans were excluded from entering the holy areas of the temple where the atonement ceremonies took place. Peasants and the poorer hired laborers on the farms of the rich aristocracy in particular (see Stambaugh & Balch 1986:91-92), also experienced great difficulty in fulfilling the prescribed requirements regarding the payment of the temple tax in silver Tyrian currency. Farm produce was a much more convenient means of payment (see Freyne 1980:280). Many people were therefore delivered into the

hands of manipulators of the money market, which led to the temple becoming a 'den of robbers' in Jesus' words (see Mt 21:12-13). The socially deprived, in particular, fell prey to these economic exploiters.

The temple is God's house and although one could argue, Jesus said, that duty and taxes for God's house are not collected from the sons of God's kingdom, Jesus' action bears testimony of his obedience to the cult. However, Jesus' statement that he did not wish to offend the temple authorities (Mt 17:27), did not mean that he agreed with their politics of holiness and exclusivism. Montefiore (1964/5:71) describes this attitude in the following words: 'To refuse payment would seem to deny the whole Jewish system of worship. This Jesus never did. He pointed to its inadequacies: he insisted on the priority of inward worship over outward observance. He stood here within the prophetic tradition: but like the ancient prophets he never directly attacked the cult as such, only its abuses.'

In Matthew 17:24-27 Jesus emphasizes the *freedom* of the *sons of God* in respect of any such exploitative and particularistic politics. Jesus represents the *true temple* (τοῦ ἱεροῦ μεϊζόν - Mt 12:6); following him as the son of God in obedience to the will of God gives new content to the temple cult (see Mt 24:2 and 27:51). The pericope about the payment of the temple tax could thus be described as an anticipation of the cleansing of the temple which took place some time later in Matthew's story (Mt 21:12-17) and during which Jesus, quoting from Jeremiah's temple speech (Jr 7:11), overturns the tables of the money-changers in the temple, and heals *the sick and the blind in the temple* (Mt 21:14) while the *children in the temple* (Mt 21:15) praise him as the son of God. Peter shows 'insight' (Mt 17:25a) into the implications of Jesus' point of view. His view is diametrically opposite to that of the Sadducees and the Pharisees; in other words, he shares Jesus' vision: '...they both know and do the will of the heavenly Father' (Kingsbury 1973:473).

Functioning as the end of the third subsection, in the broader context of Matthew 13:53-17:27, Matthew 17:24-27 resembles the endings of the other two subsections in that it is characterized by Peter's 'insight' into the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. This 'insight' actually reaches a far higher level than that of the others; it is an 'insight' that results in Jesus referring to *Peter as a son of God*. In other words, the micro-narrative Matthew 13:53-17:27, ends on a tense note: it seems as if the disciples had indeed heard and understood what was said (see Mt 13:52 once more)!

In spite of this, the 'little faith' recurs (see Mt 20:17-19). It culminates in the passion narrative (Mt 26:6-16; 26:56b; 26:69-74) and it continues even after Jesus' resurrection (Mt 28:17)! It is significant that the opposing words 'acknowledge' (προσκυνέω) and 'doubt' (διστάζω), used as the last reference to the disciples in

the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 28:17), also occur in respect of the disciples during the miracle of nature when Jesus walks on the water (Mt 14:31,33). This 'insight' as well as the 'little faith' of the disciples is expressed rather strikingly (see Giblin 1975:72). The open-end of Matthew's story is the question whether Jesus' vision had also become the vision of the disciples of Jesus. Or are these words Jesus uttered regarding 'hypocrisy' still valid?

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evil-doers!'

(Mt 7:21-23; NIV)

5. CONCLUSIONS

What existential experience could result from our interpretation of a miracle of nature such as the one we have discussed? Does the transmission of such a miracle of nature bear testimony to faith without credibility? Should we expect modern and even post-modern man to base his belief in God on the acceptance of the fact of Jesus' miracles? If so, does that mean that our belief in Jesus as the son of God is based upon irrationality, a *sacrificium intellectus*? Or is faith something you cannot see, a witness of something still hoped for? Should we therefore seek the motive *beyond* the miracle we are expecting in our own lives, so as to attach some meaning to our wretched existence in hopeful anticipation of a miraculous change? And if the narratives regarding Jesus' miracles during the time of the New Testament wish to proclaim God's superiority over gods (from the perspective of the Gentiles) or to show how Satan was deprived of his power (from the perspective of Judaism), of what importance is this message today? Should we apply it to combat belief in witchcraft and sorcery, spiritism and satanism? Or is the effect of engaging in the intention of the miracle to be found in the 'divine working' of another miracle - the miracle of faith because we have been set free from anxiety and fear and are now open to loving all people without reservation? And what about the criticism leveled against this type of kerygmatic exegesis? Was the essence of this criticism not the fact that it merely constituted idle talk which appealed only to the cognitive, while it did not take true cognizance of the social and humanitarian relationships which formed the basis of the narrating or transmission of Jesus' miracles?

The prohibition from minting silver demonstrates how Roman imperialism forced Jewish believers to contravene the First and Second Commandment. To pay the temple tax with a Tyrian silver coin was to be subjected to idolatry because of the image of an eagle or a fish (dolphin) as a symbol of a pagan sea-god on some of these coins. Simultaneously, it means to be subjected to the exploitation by the money-changers because Jews and especially Galilean peasants would not have had such coins in their possession. Against this social background the narrative about the miraculous finding of the silver coin in the mouth of sea-creature is probably told by Matthew for two reasons. On the one hand the superiority of Jesus as the son of God over the gods of the sea could have been portrayed by this narrative. It was because of the intervention and command of the son of God that the silver coin was found in the mouth of the fish. This miracle of nature portrays in other words the obedience of the pagan gods to the son of God. On the other hand, the fact that it was a silver coin that was found signifies also that Jesus rescued Peter from the abuses of the temple cult. However, this miracle story emphasizes Jesus' obedience to the temple cult and the law of God in spite of the fact that he paid the temple tax with a Tyrian coin. In other words, God's uniqueness and holiness is revered on the basis of the First and the Second Commandments in that he is not represented in a pantheistic manner - God is not absorbed by his creation and is not placed on equal footing with anything on earth, in the air, or in the sea. Matthew represented Jesus as the fulfillment of the covenant and humankind's loyal response towards God's loyalty. In this sense Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant because he shows through his conduct and teachings that compassion is the fulfillment of the law, of the rules of the covenant. Jesus therefore never denied that God was holy (Borg 1987:130), but his *imitatio dei* differed. '[W]hereas first-century Judaism spoke primarily of the holiness of God, Jesus spoke primarily of the compassion of God...(and) (j)ust as the ethos of holiness had led to a politics of holiness, so also the ethos of compassion was to led to a politics of compassion' (Borg 1987:130-131). Thus, the other aspect that Matthew aims to emphasize through payment of the temple tax is the way in which Jesus avoids the exploitation accompanying the practice of money changing, and which placed even greater emphasis on the evil of socio-religious ostracism of the peripheral groups of people. In contrast to the Essenes Jesus did not turn his back on the temple cult because of the corrupt practices (see Van Aarde 1991a:51-64). What is true is that he, like the Pharisees, wished for the temple service to be replicated in everyday life. However, with reference to the prophetic traditions such as those in Isaiah 56:7 (see Mt 21:13 and Jeremiah 7:1-15), he strongly criticized the exclusive *hypocrisy* of the Pharisees. He warned his followers not to participate in hypocrisy.

Existential experience of Jesus' miracles of nature with a view to humankind and his environment should, in order to avoid reductionism and anachronism, not be primarily or exclusively be made applicable to economic and political matters. We have indicated that the family institution represented the dominant social structure in the time of the New Testament. Accordingly, the temple was called the 'house of God' and it ruled life in an ordinary household. The 'impure', who could not enter the temple, also forfeited the care of an ordinary household. As 'a house of prayer for all nations' (Mt 21:13; Is 56:7) Jesus symbolically broadened the temple to include the socially scorned and ostracized, who could not meet God in the temple. Indeed, in his omnipotence God allows the rain in nature to fall on these people as well and he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike (cf Mt 5:45). The involvement of the believing community today in caring for the neglected elderly and children, and other 'homeless' people, is seen from a different perspective in the light of this.

6. A CONCLUDING REMARK ON A CONTROVERSIAL RELATIONSHIP

What do we learn about ecology from this miracle of nature? I think the answer here is: not much. But what about human being's relation to the environment - what were they like in Jesus' time? Galilee was the fertile land in which Jesus as *God-with-us* made the kingdom of heaven become a reality for mankind. The land with its sea and flowers, and paradoxically, the land of the shadow of death. It is an environment whose relationship with humanity was described as follows by Theissen (1987:76):

Galilee was a marvellous land - a land in which everyone could have enough to eat. Shouldn't this land be there for everyone? Couldn't one indeed come to think here that distress and misery should not be part of creation?

(Theissen 1987:76)

It is against this background that Theissen allows the Jew of that time, who could not but be stirred by Jesus' 'politics of compassion', to sing a song as a result of certain themes of creation in Psalm 104 about God in relationship to the human being and his/her environment:

Creator of the world
you are infinitely great,
surrounded by beauty
and bathed in light.
You can be traced in the riddle of time
and the mystery of space.
You are manifest in the wonders of the world
and hidden in the suffering of your creatures.
You sleep in the stone and dream in the flower.
You arouse yourself in the animal
and speak to men and women.
You change light into life
and rain into growth.
You make corn and wine grow
for all,
for poor and rich,
black and white.
Lord, yours is the earth,
your garden which you gave us.

(Theissen 1987:76)