

# Jesus as Healer

BY JOHN J. PILGH

**As a folk healer, Jesus restored meaning to people's lives. The Gospel of John challenges disciples to do the works Jesus did "and greater works than these." Are we engaged in life-giving or death-dealing deeds? Are we restoring meaning to life, or robbing it of the meaning intended by the Creator?**

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**W**hen a "royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum" begs Jesus "to come down and heal his son" (John 4:46-47), what image do we form? Missing from the gospel story are the scientific tools of diagnosis and cure that we associate with medical care today. Instead Jesus speaks an authoritative word, "Go; your son will live" (4:50).

Interpreting the biblical stories of Jesus as healer involves three steps, which may be summarized this way. First, we must understand our own culture very well. Second, we must know the first-century Middle Eastern culture well. Third, we must build bridges between the two cultures. Only in this way can we begin to appropriate the Bible for our personal and community life. In this article I will focus mainly on understanding Jesus as healer in the context of the beliefs and values of first-century Middle Eastern culture.

## **WHO CAN HEAL?**

The basic Israelite beliefs were that God sends sickness for a divine purpose (see Exodus 15:26 and Leviticus 26) and that God is the one and only healer. With the spread of Greek culture following Alexander the Great's conquests in the fourth century B.C., Israelites had to wrestle with the idea that some human beings claimed to have the ability to heal. This struggle is evident in the reflections of Ben Sira on Greek healers (anachronistically called "physicians" in many translations of Sirach 38:1-15). While this sage

repeats the traditional belief that God is still the one and only healer (38:9), he advises consulting human healers to whom God has surely imparted relevant insight (38:2a). In other words, in the Israelite tradition a healer was a broker of the gift of healing from God.

Jesus as healer therefore ought to be understood as someone who brokers healing from God to sick people (cf. John 9:3). When the passive voice occurs in biblical healing reports, it points to God as the agent. To the man with the skin problem who seeks his help, Jesus says, "Be made clean!" and immediately "he *was made* clean" —by God, of course (Mark 1:41-42). God is the benefactor, the agent, the patron; Jesus is the intermediary, the broker; and the sick person is the beneficiary, the client. Scholars identify this grammatical feature of the passive voice verb as the divine passive or the theological passive. It identifies God as agent without having to mention God's name.

Ben Sira's reflections on healers often are interpreted as referring to "professional" healers. This is another anachronistic reading, for the word "profession" today is ill-defined and often used solely to invoke prestige. The profession of medicine as we understand it came into existence only within the last one hundred and fifty years. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, the so-called "professional" healers were actually philosopher-types who healed people through therapeutic regimens of self-analysis, confession, and forming correct beliefs about the world.

Healing by persons who are not "professionals" falls into the social scientists' category called "folk." These ordinary people in every culture who are able to help sick people are folk healers who know the folk wisdom and utilize folk remedies. The National Institutes of Health studies such healers, and a number of scientific journals are devoted to research on this topic. Jesus the healer is best understood as a folk healer in his culture. Some folk techniques that Jesus used were laying on hands or touching the sick person (Mark 1:41), using spittle (Mark 8:23) or mud (John 9:6), pronouncing powerful words —like *talitha cum* (Mark 5:41) or *ephphatha* (Mark 7:34) — and the like.

Prior to Antony van Leeuwenhoek's microscope in 1674, it would have been impossible to know about germs and viruses (the major causes of physical sickness), so folk healers essentially reflected upon presenting symptoms. Thus, Scripture describes the Gerasene man as "Night and day... howling and bruising himself with stones" (Mark 5:5), or the moon-struck young man as "often [falling] into the fire and often into the water" (Matthew 17:15), and so on. We cannot even be certain that blindness or paralysis in antiquity describes the same reality we know today.

## **WHAT DOES HEALING MEAN?**

Another piece of information is necessary in order to understand Jesus as healer. What does healing mean? What does a healer do? Medical anthro-

pology provides us with answers to these questions and a very helpful set of definitions for understanding the healing activity of the Mediterranean man, Jesus.

To begin with, *well-being* is the human experience in which everything in our lives goes well: not only are we physically healthy, but also the family is fine, the finances are in order, and so on. Loss of well-being is a misfortune—a child becoming addicted to drugs or a partner proving unfaithful would be examples.

Misfortunes in the area of human health are termed *sickness*. Sickness is a physical reality; something is physically wrong with the human body. Medical anthropology has developed two concepts for understanding this reality: disease and illness. These are explanatory concepts that assist an analysis and discussion of the reality, sickness. Disease and illness are not the realities.

*Disease* describes sickness from the perspective of our current scientific, biomedical theories. The term is at home in our attempts to identify a physical problem, discover its cause, and propose a remedy. The remedy, or “cure,” consists of removing or arresting the cause of the physical condition in hopes of restoring well-being or returning to an approximation of well-being. As already noted above, such a perspective was impossible before the invention of the microscope. Disease is a relatively recent concept, essentially Western by nature, and it changes often with advances in knowledge.

In contrast, *illness* interprets the sickness—the underlying physical condition—within a socio-cultural perspective. Illness is concerned with loss of meaning in life due to physical impairment or loss of function.

*Healing*, then, refers to restoring meaning to life whether the person’s physical condition improves or remains the same. For instance, the fever that afflicted Peter’s mother-in-law impeded the fulfillment of her domestic role. When the fever left her, she rose and served the visitors (Luke 4:38-39). Jesus the healer restored meaning to the life

of Peter’s mother-in-law. The biblical story shows no interest in the cause of the problem, or whether the problem ever recurred again.

Consider then the difference between being cured and being healed. Scientists admit that cures are rare. A person in remission from cancer, for example, must remain in that state for five years before science will declare the person “cured.” Thus, some cancer survivors who do not live five years

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after reaching remission are not considered “cured,” technically speaking. Healing, in contrast, occurs if the person wants to be healed. Human beings are meaning-seeking persons. Life is intolerable if it makes no sense, if it has no meaning. Most people eventually rediscover or find new meaning in life whatever may or may not happen to their physical condition.

In summary, Jesus was an influential intercessor with God, the one and only healer. Jesus’ role was that of a folk healer who acted perfectly in accord with folk traditions of his Middle Eastern culture. The results of Jesus’ healing activities in each case were that he indeed did restore meaning to people’s lives. We have no way of knowing, scientifically, the conditions which Jesus treated. We do not have any “before and after” markers (tests, X-rays, and the like). Nor do we know whether any of the conditions recurred. In other words, biblical writers do not inform the reader about the disease. They rather present the illness and how the illness was managed by healer and client.

Finally, it is important to recognize that no Bible translation reflects the concepts just presented. The words “sickness,” “disease,” “illness,” “cure,” and “heal,” among others, are used indiscriminately. The contemporary reader must determine in each case what the reality was and what the real outcome might have been.

### **WHO ARE THE SICK?**

The Gospels give summaries of Jesus’ healing activity: for instance, “and he cured [not in the sense defined above] many who were sick with various diseases [not in the sense defined above]” (Mark 1:34). They also list specific problems that he encountered: “Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matthew 11:4b-5).<sup>1</sup>

Setting aside the anachronistic biomedical, or disease, perspective on these events (i.e., that the persons were blind or lame or suffering from leprosy, and so on), the illness perspective reveals that the sickness problems Jesus enumerated made a person profane or impure. Illness situates a person outside the boundaries of God’s holy (exclusive) community. The sick violate God’s command and desire: “You shall be holy [exclusive and whole], for I the LORD your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2; cf. 11:45 and 20:7). These words were spoken to the entire congregation of Israel (indeed, the words “you” and “holy” are plurals), and they bind every individual in the community. When these sicknesses (blindness, lameness, and so on) afflict a priest, that priest is disqualified from offering sacrifice (Leviticus 21:16-24). By extension, the ordinary Israelite afflicted with such problems would similarly be excluded from approaching God.

It would be fair to generalize and say that sickness problems in the Bible are essentially purity problems. They remove a person from God’s holy

community – “He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp” (Leviticus 13:46). They rupture a person’s relationship with God. Such a person is not permitted to approach God until the problem is remedied. Thus, these problems of sickness recorded in Scripture are best interpreted as illnesses rather than diseases.

### **JOHN’S VIEW OF JESUS THE HEALER**

In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, which report many “mighty deeds” worked by Jesus (and not exclusively deeds of healing), the Gospel of John reports just seven “signs.” Jesus refers to his deeds as “works” (John 5:36) and makes this astounding promise: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these...” (John 14:12). The Greek word *erga*, which is translated in these verses as “works,” was used in the Septuagint to point to God’s works, the greatest of which are the creation of the world and the redemption of Israel from bondage. In creation, God gives life to all creatures, including human beings. In redeeming the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, God restores meaning to life. Jesus’ and his disciples’ healing works, John is suggesting, flow from God’s primal creative and redeeming actions.

It is possible to cluster the seven signs of Jesus reported by John into two groups: life-giving works and meaning-restoring works. Life-giving works include restoring to life the son of a royal official in Capernaum

(4:46-54), feeding the huge crowd (6:1-14), and raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44). Meaning-restoring works include providing exquisite wine for a wedding at the height of its celebration (2:1-11), restoring a lame man to mobility (5:1-18), calming a stormy sea (6:16-21), and restoring sight to the man born blind (9:1-41). Once again adopting the explanatory concept of illness

to understand these works, it is clear that in each case (even non-sickness events) Jesus the healer restored meaning to people’s lives. The same can be said for any and all of the Synoptic reports of Jesus’ mighty deeds.

John’s view presents a challenge to contemporary disciples who would like indeed to do the works Jesus did “and greater works than these.” Adopting the social science perspective offered by medical anthropology,

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believers can ask: Are we engaged in life-giving deeds or death-dealing ones? Does our activity restore meaning to life or does it rob life of the meaning intended by the Creator? How we can share this meaning with the sick and despairing people we encounter or to whom we minister?

### **HOW JESUS BECAME A HEALER**

One of the first titles ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth in the gospel tradi-

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tion is "Holy Man." The demon in the synagogue at Capernaum shouted out: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24). In all cultures, the holy person (man or woman) is characterized by two qualities.<sup>2</sup> This person has ready and facile access to the realm of the deity or the spirit world; he or she has experiential familiarity with this realm. Furthermore, the

holy person brokers favors from that world to this one, and these favors often include life-shaping information but most especially healing. The holy person is primarily a spirit-filled ecstatic healer.

Anthropologists identify six steps in a person's call and initiation into being a holy person across all cultures. Relating these steps to the biblical world and adapting them to a contemporary believer's life is enlightening and challenging. The obvious first step is that the spirit world makes contact with the candidate. This can take the form of adoption or possession. In the life of Jesus, this contact took place at his baptism: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). In this contact, the spirit identifies itself (second step). In the case of Jesus, since he is called son, the contact is from his father in the realm of God.

This of course is just the beginning. The holy person must now acquire the necessary ritual skills in dealing with the spirit world (third step). Jesus demonstrates this skill especially in the experience of his testing (Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13).<sup>3</sup> The compliment paid to Jesus at his baptism has to be tested. Is he really beloved? Will he remain loyal to his father if he is tested? Thus the next experience is that Jesus' loyalty is put to the test by a spirit. The test is cast in a form very familiar in daily Middle Eastern life: challenge and riposte. If a person is challenged, that person must respond with a riposte, with a quick and winning thrust like an expert in fencing. Jesus demonstrates his mastery of this skill. It was likely not impromptu. He has been preparing for this moment, this kind of show-

down, by honing his skills. The outcome is success. He defeats the spirit and is not defeated by the spirit.

How did Jesus acquire these skills? They were not innate; Jesus needed a teacher (fourth step). Like holy persons, Jesus would be tutored by both a spirit and a real life teacher. Mark notes that after the test of Jesus' loyalty, "angels waited on him" (1:12). While scholars believe this means that angels fed him,<sup>4</sup> in the perspective we are taking here, the angels could well have been tutoring Jesus. Anthropologists would recognize them as "spirit guides" or spirit teachers. As for a real-life teacher, we need look no further than John the Baptist, whose disciple Jesus was for a while (John 3:22-24). The holy man John the Baptist undoubtedly taught Jesus the requisite skills.

The fifth step is to develop a growing familiarity with the possessing, adopting spirit. In the life of Jesus, this is evident in the event called the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-10; Matthew 17:1-9; Luke 9:28-36). This experience took place in an alternate state of consciousness (ASC). Human beings of all times and cultures routinely move in and out of more than thirty-five identified levels of consciousness or awareness throughout the day (including trance, day-dreaming, sleep, and so on). In the biblical tradition, the ASC is God's favored medium for communicating with human beings.<sup>5</sup> On this occasion, God assures Jesus in his ASC of the divine mission entrusted to him. In their ASC, the disciples of Jesus learn from God about Jesus' importance: "Listen to him!" more than to Moses (the Law) and Elijah (the Prophets).

The final step in becoming a holy person is to enjoy ongoing alternate state of consciousness experiences. This is certainly evident in the ministry of Jesus. The Father reveals things to Jesus (e.g., Matthew 11:25-27), Jesus is certain God hears him always (John 11:41-42), and Jesus communicates with God often (John 12:27-30).

## **CONCLUSION**

A contemporary disciple who would like to heal as Jesus heals faces strong but not insurmountable challenges. To begin with, the believer should pursue and develop the vocation given at baptism: to become a holy person. This would involve the six steps to becoming a holy person. Then as a holy person, the believer will have experiential familiarity with the realm of God (including God!) and strive to broker healing grace from that realm to the human sphere.

In the final analysis, what the believer as holy-person-healer can share with the sick and despairing today is a sharpened understanding of the meaning God intended life to have whatever the actual physical condition of the body.<sup>6</sup>

## **NOTES**

1 Such lists also indicate that God's redeeming work is occurring through Jesus' ministry (cf. Isaiah 29:18-19 and 35:5-6). Compare this to Jesus' sermon in Nazareth (Luke

4:18-19) which is based on this passage in Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor" (Isaiah 61:1-2b).

2 Anthropologists refer to the holy person as a "shaman." Since that word is most properly used of Siberian Tungus, however, we do well to follow the Israelite tradition and understand Jesus as a holy man. The Israelites recognized two kinds of holy men: a *saddiq* (an ordinary person who did his best to observe God's law) and a *hasid* (one who was so concerned to please God that he went beyond the basic requirements).

3 While traditionally called "the temptations of Jesus," the spirit's challenges are strictly speaking not temptations. Moreover, since no other human being experiences such challenges—for example, to "command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Matthew 4:3b; cf. Luke 4:3b)—Jesus' experience is not something his followers can imitate.

4 This event has similarities to the ministering angel feeding Elijah in the wilderness when he runs away to escape Queen Jezebel's wrath (1 Kings 19:1-8). The idea of angels feeding those blessed by God occurs in *Life of Adam and Eve*, a pseudepigraphal Jewish writing from the first century A.D. which purports to describe the events after Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden: "[Adam said,] 'let us arise and look for something for us to live on, that we fail not.' And they walked about and searched for nine days, and they found none such as they were used to have in paradise, but found only animals' food. And Adam said to Eve: 'This hath the Lord provided for animals and brutes to eat; but we used to have angels' food'" (3:3c-4:3a, italics added).

5 Compare Jeremiah's conversation with Yahweh (Jeremiah 1), Isaiah's experience of Yahweh attended by Seraphs in the Temple (Isaiah 6), and Ezekiel's remarkable visions of Yahweh's chariot, the scroll to be eaten, the resurrection of the dry bones, a new Temple, and so on (Ezekiel 1, 2, 37, and 40).

6 For further reading on the distinction between healing and cure, see Daniel Moerman's *Meaning, Medicine and the "Placebo Effect,"* Cambridge Studies in Medical Anthropology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). I develop the themes in this article further in *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000) and *Visions and Healing in the Acts of the Apostles: How the Early Believers Experienced God* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2004).



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