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INTRODUCTION
DEFINITIONS AND CONTEXTS FOR HEALING

In every age and in every social setting, a primary concern of human beings is health. This concern manifests itself in two distinct modes: (1) the eagerness to maintain the health of the body, and the negative corollary, which is the overcoming of sickness; (2) the basic human need to discern some framework of meaning by which the cause of sickness, suffering, and disability can be understood, and by which these universal experiences of frailty and vulnerability can be incorporated into a view of the world and humanity's place within it. The importance of these issues for the New Testament is broad and deep, as is apparent from the gospels, the Acts, and the various letters. Of the approximately 250 literary units into which the first three gospels are divided in a typical synopsis,[1] one fifth either describe or allude to the healing and exorcistic activities of Jesus and the disciples. Of the seven "signs"[2] reported in John to have been done by Jesus, four involve healing or restoration. Of the seventy literary units in John, twelve either describe his healing activity or refer to the signs which he performed.

Often overlooked is the importance Paul attached to healing. He lists healing and working miracles among the charismatic gifts (I Cor 12:9–10). Later in that chapter, where he is describing these gifts in order of importance, he ranks miracles and healings after the gift of teaching (I Cor 12:28–30). In II Cor 12:12, "signs, wonders and miracles" – which presumably include healings – are indicated as "the signs of the apostle" that have been performed among the Corinthian Christians. Far from viewing miracles as falsely prized by his opponents in Corinth,[3] Paul draws attention in Rom 15:19 to the power of signs and wonders which have been accomplished by him, through the Spirit, as divine confirmation of his ministry throughout the entire quadrant of the Mediterranean world, stretching from Jerusalem to the Adriatic.

This interpretation of "signs and wonders" is assumed by the

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author of Acts, who builds on the biblical phrase (2:19, quoting Joel 2:28–32), finding in the "mighty works and wonders and signs ... which God did through [Jesus] in your midst" (Acts 2:22) the divine attestation of Jesus as "Lord and Christ" (2:36). The signs and wonders attributed to the apostles throughout Acts (2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 14:3; 15:12) are represented as divine confirmation of the apostolic undertaking and are specified in the apostolic prayer (4:30) as pre-eminently works of healing. Similarly in Hebrews, "signs, wonders and miracles" are described as confirmatory activity of the Holy Spririt in the midst of God's people (Heb 2:3–4). In James 5:13–16, the efficacy of prayer in accomplishing healing is asserted.

James mentions, however, that the prayer for healing is to be accompanied by an "anointing ... with oil" (5:14). Does this imply that the early church was combining simple medical technique with healing in response to prayer? Are we to see, as scholars have often suggested, a similar medical or even magical technique in Jesus' application of spittle to the tongue of the deaf-mute in Mk 7:33 and to the eyes of the blind man in Mk 8:23? Is Jesus adopting, or being conformed by the bearers of the tradition to patterns of miracle-working, or medicine, or magic that were alive in the world of the first century? Or, to phrase the question from another perspective, to what extent does the healing tradition of the New Testament display continuity with the biblical and post-exilic Jewish world view(s) on the subject? Or is the perception of healing in the New Testament and early Christian tradition largely derived from standard patterns in the Graeco-Roman world?

Before turning to an analysis of these healing traditions of Judaism and the late Hellenistic world, it may be useful to offer a preliminary discussion and definition of the three major modes of healing – medicine, miracle and magic – which are in competition with each other during this period. As we shall see, it is often the case that, in any given document or tradition, distinctions among them become blurred, but as heuristic devices it is essential to trace how each of these terms represents a significantly different approach to healing with regard to both the cause and the cure of human afflictions. In the main body of the present work, Chapter 1 focusses on the attitudes toward healing within Judaism in the biblical and post-biblical periods. Chapter 2 traces the development of medicine in the Greek and Roman worlds, with special attention to those phases contemporary with the New Testament. Chapter 3 discusses the phenomenon of miracle, and the reactions to it from the Roman world. The final

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chapter looks at magic, from the perspective of ancient evidence as well as from that of modern interpreters.

The modes of healing with which each of these chapters is concerned can be defined in ways which sharply differentiate each from the other. Yet historically, they occur in documents and contexts which imply the shading over from one category into another. Of great importance, furthermore, is to recognize that during the period of our inquiry – and perhaps at any time – none of these three strategies for dealing with the problems of sickness and health was a firmly fixed entity, but that instead each developed in distinctive ways under the influence of the changing social and cultural context. And even from one socio-cultural setting to another during any single epoch, there were significant variations which must be taken into account if faithful historical analysis and reconstruction are to be achieved. Convenient for the chronological and conceptual purposes of our inquiry are the towering medical figures who left an enduring impress on the history of medicine and health in the western world and whose lifetimes bracket the Graeco-Roman period: Hippocrates (460–350 B.C.) and Galen (130–200 A.D.). Hippocrates figured importantly in the period of classical Greek philosophy, as mention of him in the writings of Aristotle attests.[4] Galen represents himself as the recoverer of the Hippocratic tradition, and as such has had a dominant influence on the subsequent history of medicine, in both the medieval Arab world and in the post-medieval West.[5] Yet running concurrently with the medical tradition, at times in competition with it, and at other times overlapping with it, were the two other means of dealing with sickness and suffering: miracle and magic.

These three related sets of phenomena may be defined as follows. *Medicine* is a method of diagnosis of human ailments and prescription for them based on a combination of theory about and observation of the body, its functions and malfunctions. *Miracle* embodies the claim that healing can be accomplished through appeal to, and subsequent action by the gods, either directly or through a chosen intermediary agent. *Magic* is a technique, through word or act, by which a desired end is achieved, whether that end lies in the solution to the seeker's problem or in damage to the enemy who has caused the problem. Since each of these instruments of health presupposes a different theory of the cause of sickness or disability, it is essential to differentiate some of the ways in which sickness is understood as originating. These include the theory that human difficulties are the work of demons, for which exorcism is the appropriate cure; or that

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they are the results of a magical curse, for which counter-magic must be invoked; or that they are functional disorders of the body, which call for medical diagnosis and a prescribed remedy.

Complicating the picture of the various modes by which human health was sought in this period is a series of factors. In literature and documents from the Graeco-Roman period there is evidence of debates about whether or not the gods were involved in human healing, and if so, by what means. For example, Asklepios was viewed simultaneously as the patron of physicians and as the beneficent god who acted directly to heal suppliants. In addition, those who claimed to perform miracles were charged by their detractors with doing magic. And indeed, some features of miracle-working resemble the techniques of magicians, just as the magicians invoke the names of the miracle-working gods. In an older study of the relationship between medicine, magic and religion, W.H.R. Rivers, who discussed the inter-relation among these phenomena, observed that physicians, miracle workers and magicians may all seek to overcome a disease by abstracting some evil factor from the body, or by treating something which has been connected with the body (such as hair, sweat, excrement, or food). For us to differentiate among the modes requires, therefore, an exact knowledge, not only of the rites performed, but also of the presuppositions and assumptions about reality in general and the human condition in particular, in order to determine in which category the healing action falls.[6] If the technique is effective of itself in overcoming a hostile force, then the action is magical. If it is viewed as the intervention of the god or goddess, then it is miraculous. If it is a facilitating of the natural function of the body, then it is medical. In his introduction to Rivers' study, G.E. Smith observes with regard to healing in what we would call primitive societies:

> The fundamental aim of primitive religion was to safeguard life, which was achieved by certain simple mechanical procedures based upon rational inference, but often upon false premises. Primitive medicine sought to achieve the same end, and not unnaturally used the same means. Hence in the beginning religion and medicine were parts of the same discipline, of which magic was merely a department.

He continues this assessment with the observation that in some cultures the three factors are nearly indistinguishable, while in others, "the name of medicine can hardly be said to exist, so closely is man's

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attitude toward disease identical with that which he adopts toward other classes of natural phenomena''. To differentiate a religious from a medical approach to healing, Smith observes, requires that one take carefully into account ''a certain attitude toward the world''.[7]

It would be a serious historical error to assume, however, that the medical approach to health was the province of the intellectuals, while religion and magic were left to the ignorant, or that intellectuals universally respected the medical profession and shared its basic outlook. Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, in fact deplores the rise of the medical profession, which he regards as having come to Rome through an invasion of crafty, unscrupulous Greek charlatans. Instead of relying on the traditional natural remedies which he admires (XXIX.1), the so-called medical art has taken over, which is ''lucrative beyond all the rest''. These physicians have abandoned the substances which nature intended for healing and which are everywhere available at little or no cost, and instead insist on extremely costly medicaments from foreign lands, and require the services of their laboratories (*officines*). These highly popular and economically successful developments, Pliny declares, attest to ''the fraudulent disposition of mankind, combined with an ingenuity prompted by lucre''. These medical schemers promise everyone ''an extension of life – that is, if he will pay for it''. One of Pliny's chief candidates for medical charlatanry was the well-known Greek physician, Asclepiades, who turned to medicine after having failed to earn enough as a rhetorician. Developing his theories largely on the basis of conjectures, and tailoring his cures to suit the needs and comforts of his gullible clients, the latter enjoyed enormous popularity and financial success – all without training or experience in medicine. The chief factor in his success, Pliny asserts, is ''the follies of magic'' (XXVI.9). Pliny finds support for his point of view about medicine from Cato, whom he quotes concerning physicians:

> They are a most iniquitous and intractable race, and you may take my word as the word of a prophet, when I tell you that whenever that nation [= Greece] shall bestow its literature upon Rome it will mar everything; and that all the sooner if it sends its physicians among us. They have conspired among themselves to murder all barbarians with their medicine; a profession which they exercise for lucre, in order that they win our confidence, and dispatch us all the more easily. Have nothing to do with physicians![8]

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Pliny's own approach to matters of health assumes that the basic principles of healing are ingredient in the natural order. Nature has seen to it that medicines are everywhere available, even in the desert, so that there are "at every point ... wonderful examples of that well-known sympathy and antipathy" (*Nat. Hist.* XXIV.1). We shall see that in medicine from the earliest time the principles of sympathetic and homeopathic treatment are basic for therapy. We might ask parenthetically whether these remedies represent medicine or magic. Pliny observes that for all forms of life and for every inanimate substance there is a pairing of opposites. These natural remedies have been "provided everywhere", cost nothing and are easily discovered – things that in fact are basic to the support of life (*Nat. Hist.* XXIV.1.4).

Later, Pliny continues, human deceit and profiteering led some men to set themselves forth as experts in these matters, but unlike those who shared folk remedies, these schemers charged fees for their services and prescribed costly remedies from distant lands, and did so for personal profit. The necessary medicaments "form the daily dinner of even the poorest" and could be found "in the kitchen garden" (XXVI.21.5). If only that fact were recognized, then "none of the arts would be cheaper than medicine". These medicaments are available throughout the natural world, even in animals (XXVIII.120). Why, then, have these universally available resources been neglected, replaced instead by the costly prescriptions of the professionals?

It is the fault of the medical profession itself. Those who pioneered in that profession attributed the origins of their art to the gods, especially to Asklepios, apparently to lend an aura of sanctity to their enterprise, even though legend reported that the god had been struck by lightning for bringing someone back to life (*Nat. Hist.* XXIX.1.3). At Cos, where there was a shrine to Asklepios that was visited by the ailing, who left behind testimonies to the healing powers of the god, the founder of the Greek medical tradition, Hippocrates, was born. Taking advantage of the burning of the Temple of Asklepios, Hippocrates had developed a medical clinic at Cos, which launched medicine as a revenue-producing enterprise. After sketching the leading figures and the various schools of thought which developed in the medical tradition after Hippocrates in Greece, Alexandria and Sicily, Pliny renews his attack on Asclepiades and his successors who made enormous fortunes as physicians to the emperors (XXIX.5.6–8). Pliny concedes that "with great distinction" Hippocrates had laid down rules for medical practice, including

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abundant advice about the use of herbs, but gradually this tradition, he charges, "degenerated into words and mere talk", with more interest in listening to lectures than in searching out medicinal plants (XXIV.6.11). It was in the late first century B.C. that Pliny's favourite medical villain, Asclepiades, had come from Bithynia to Rome (fl. 90–75 B.C.) and had taken the people of Rome by storm. Though he was a professor of rhetoric and wholly lacking in medical experience or knowledge of natural remedies, he had developed a theoretical system which, Pliny says, "brought round to his view almost the whole human race, just as if he had been ... an apostle from heaven" (XXVI.7.13). The five basic rules of his system are neither exceptional nor exceptionable: fasting from food, abstinence from wine, massage, walking, carriage-riding. In addition, his modes of therapy included rocking beds, baths of hot water and hot air. Pliny's chief objection to Asclepiades was that he was so powerfully influenced by "Magian deceits" that he destroyed confidence in all herbal remedies (XXVI.9.1).

The objections Pliny raised to magic are even stronger than those he made concerning medicine. He regarded magic as an exploitation of medicine, by which its practitioners claimed to "promote health ... under the guise of a higher and holier system". It was his opinion that magic had increased its appeal by adding both religion and astrology to its approach to human health. So great was the interest and so spread across the intellectual spectrum, he notes, that even philosophers such as Plato, Pythagoras, Empedocles and Democritus went overseas to learn it (XXX.2.9), just as it had influenced the Jews, such as Moses (XXX.2.11). It had spread throughout the western part of the empire, although it had originated in the East. It had become an obsession of even the emperor, Nero, whose "greatest wish was to command the gods". Pliny thought that the essentially fraudulent nature of magic was apparent in that even gullible Nero, after having devoted such enormous wealth and energy to its pursuit, eventually abandoned it (XXX.5.15). Yet even as Pliny was denouncing magic as "detestable, vain, and idle", he acknowledged that it had what might be called "shadows of the truth" (XXX.6.17). Revealing is the fact that when Pliny begins to describe the remedies prescribed by the magicians – which he does at great length – they are scarcely distinguishable from those that he represents elsewhere in *Natural History* as natural remedies. Indeed, he slips into such phrases when he is presenting the magician's cures as "I find that" and "very useful too" (XXX.10.30; 11.31). Even after characterizing the magicians

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as "fraudulent charlatans" (XX.8.27) in connection with their claims about the magical powers of the hyena, he reports that "a sure safeguard against miscarriage is an amulet of gazelle leather containing white flesh from a hyena's breast, seven hairs from a hyena and the genital organ of a stag" (XXVIII.27.98). Or again, he merely states without comment, pejorative or otherwise, that "the extreme end of the hyena's intestine prevails against the injustice of leaders and potentates, bringing success to petitions and a happy issue to trials and lawsuits, if it is merely kept on the person" (XXX.27.106). It is as though Pliny, having outwardly denounced magic, is unconsciously persuaded by the claims of its partisans.

Clearly for Pliny, and for others in the Roman world, as we shall see, the distinctions that they make between natural healing, medicine and magic have nothing to do with what might be styled in our modern era as rational cause-and-effect, to say nothing of so-called scientific objectivity. As we shall have occasion to note, modern historians of science have tried to read these distinctions back into the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The question is not whether hidden powers produce visible results. On that there would be wide agreement. The question for us to ask is: in what framework of meaning are these powers understood as being at work?

When we raise this kind of question, the issues surrounding health can perhaps be brought into focus through the posing of two further questions for which the various segments of the Graeco-Roman world gave decidedly different answers. (1) By what powers can human beings gain and retain good health? (2) To what extent is the human condition the result of inescapable factors constituted by nature itself, and to what extent can effective appeal for aid or access to power be made through superhuman agencies? As we have already observed, there were not simple answers to these questions during the major period of our interest – from the late Hellenistic period to the end of the second century and the close of the Antonine era. Our aim is to clarify the relationships among these three approaches to healing – medicine, miracle and magic – rather than to trace the history of any one of them in detail. In the process we shall examine the evidence from the centuries before and after the birth of Jesus in the context of the various socio-cultural settings in which the phenomena appear, bearing in mind the different assumptions about reality that are implicit in and expressed through the evidence.

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HEALING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND POST-BIBLICAL TRADITIONS

Although the New Testament authors were living, thinking, and writing within the larger context of the Graeco-Roman world, they were all in varying degrees, in overt and subtle ways, influenced by the Jewish tradition out of which Christianity emerged. It is essential, therefore, in assessing the New Testament evidence concerning healing, that we examine as well the biblical and post-biblical evidence concerning health, healing and medicine. The direct and indirect references within the New Testament to this aspect of tradition remind us that these dimensions of the Jewish heritage were indeed present in the consciousness of the early Christians, even though they did not merely reproduce the attitudes and practices of their spiritual ancestors.

1. Stories of healing

Stories of healing are relatively rare in the Old Testament. The first is the curious narrative in Gen 20 of the death threat addressed to Abimelech, who had taken Abraham at his word and acquired Sarah (Abraham's wife) to be his concubine on the basis of Abraham's (half-true) declaration that she was his sister (Gen 20:12). After the deceived king showered Abraham with gifts, the patriarch prayed to God, who healed Abimelech, his wife and female slaves – who had been stricken with barrenness (Gen 20:18). Thus is established a direct cause-and-effect relationship between human disability and divine action. In this case, the inability of the monarch's wives to bear children is the immediate consequence of his having inadvertently violated a divine statute against adultery. As we shall see, this story reappeared in a new form in post-biblical Judaism.

Analogous direct effects of divine judgments on the disobedient or unworthy are evident in the story of Saul's having become disqualified to serve as Israel's king (I Sam 16). Saul's disobedience in

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failing to destroy the booty captured from the Amalekites results in the Spirit of Yahewh being withdrawn from him and replaced by an evil spirit *from Yahweh* (16:14), which torments him. Saul is advised by his servants to find someone to play the lyre when the evil spirit is upon him, so that "you will be well" (16:16). David is found to perform this role, with the result that "whenever the evil spirit from God was upon Saul", David played the lyre, so that "Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him" (16:23). Both the spirit possession and the remedy for it are provided by God.

The most explicit accounts of healing through a divinely-endowed agent of God appear in the Elijah–Elisha cycles of I and II Kings. There are the story of Elijah's healing of the widow's son (I Kgs 17) and the reports of the death and restoration to life by Elisha of the son of the Shunamite woman (II Kgs 4), and of Elisha's cure of Naaman's leprosy (II Kgs 5). On the negative side of these manifestations of divine power through the prophets are the narratives of the death of Ahaziah, along with the soldiers sent to summon Elijah to help him (II Kgs 1), and the curse of leprosy which befell the greedy Gehazi, who had asked for and received compensation from Naaman (II Kgs 5). There are parallel accounts in II Kgs 20 and Isa 38:16–20 of the sickness of Hezekiah and of his recovery, which is assured by a divine sign (the shadow on the sun-dial reverses direction; II Kgs 20:9–11). His restoration to health is followed, however, by the prophetic announcement of the fall of the dynasty and the captivity of Judah in Babylon (II Kgs 20:16–19). Both the sickness and the healings are manifestations of God's control of history and of human destiny. The achievement of the divine will is effected through the prophet or chosen agent of God.

In Lev 13–14 elaborate procedures are detailed for diagnosing leprosy[1] and for cleansing those who had been afflicted with the disease. It is difficult to determine whether the cleansing process is understood as effecting a cure, or (as is more likely) it constitutes a public declaration that someone is ritually fit for readmission to the Israelite society.[2] The elaborate procedures outlined in Lev 14 include the killing of a bird, the dipping of another bird in its blood, the sprinkling of the blood on the leprous person, and the release of the living bird, apparently as a way of getting rid of the pollution (14:2–9). After the afflicted has shaved off hair, beard, eyebrows, and washed his clothes and his body, he is pronounced clean.

Similar processes are ordered for cleansing the houses of those

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