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Harold Remus
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Chapter 1

Jesus as Healer: Prologue

By the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Mark Jesus' reputation as a healer is firmly established by the author. Amid throngs of people, he is sought out by the sick. In one such scene, a man named Jairus, a leader of a Jewish synagogue, approaches Jesus and begs him to come and heal his daughter (5:22–23).

On the way to Jairus' house, however, there is an interruption (5:25–34). A woman approaches Jesus from behind, touches his cloak, and is immediately healed of the hemorrhage that has long plagued her. Jesus, perceiving "that power had gone forth from him," stops and asks who touched his cloak, whereupon the woman comes forth and tells her story.

It is a story typical of many, not only in the ancient world but in our own day as well. For a dozen years the woman has consulted physicians about her problem, exhausting her financial resources in the process – all to no avail. In her desperation she turns, as do many in our day, to a person who would today probably be labeled a "faith healer." She has already likely exhausted what we today commonly call "home remedies" and "alternative medicine." One third of Americans, it is reported, turn to alternative medicine every year – this despite the annual expenditure of billions on conventional medicine in the health-care industry. Incurable, chronic illnesses account for much of this, especially of the sixty percent of those Americans over sixty-five who turn to "unproven therapies." But poverty, or the fear of being impoverished by conventional

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medical treatment, as the woman was, also has something to do with this phenomenon.

The cost of health care today drives debates on the subject, not only in the United States, but in other countries as well. There is a crucial difference between the woman's world and ours, however. For a person laid low by sickness in her day there were no medical "safety nets," as there are in most of the so-called developed world today. Debilitating illness, or disability resulting from an accident while working, could mean descent into poverty and an untimely death. It was a world in which health was prized as the ultimate good. In the words of Aelius Aristides, a well-known orator who lived in the next century after Jesus, without health "one can neither make use of the good things of the soul nor enjoy any success whatever" (*Oration* 45.18). The modern equivalent is the television commercial that concludes, "If you've got your health, you've got just about everything." Aristides' own story of sickness makes clear that, while health was the highest good, people in his day did not bring to sickness the expectations we commonly have: that we will not *stay* sick; that a drug, an operation, a transplant will restore us to work and family. We are more apt to be surprised if we do *not* get well than if we do. Indeed, it has been suggested that one reason for the decline of institutional religion in the Western world is precisely this expectation: one has medical science, one doesn't need God.

For the hemorrhaging woman, and for Aristides, it was the reverse: restoration to health was iffy, expectations of recovery were low. Aristides' many ailments had led him to abandon his career. His story is both parallel to, and decidedly different from, the story of the woman in the Gospel of Mark. Together, however, they tell us much about the means people in the Greco-Roman world employed to deal with sickness and disability; their stories thus set the stage for seeing Jesus as healer in his own time.

Home remedies

The most common means of treating an ailment would be home remedies. Aristides does not mention any, but it is hardly possible that he, along with others in his day, would not have been acquainted with many such. They are known to us especially from ancient treatises on agriculture, which deal with the sicknesses not only of animals but also those of humans. In his *De Agri Cultura* (c. 160 BCE), for example, Cato, a farmer's son who rose to prominence in Rome, offers a recipe for laxative wines (secs. 114, 115), another for wine to retain urine (122) and to treat gout (123), and still others for various internal problems. His cure-all, however is cabbage (156–57). Cut up and taken internally, straight or in a mixture, raw or cooked, it would prevent indigestion, relieve bowel irritation, act as a purgative, and facilitate urination. Applied externally as a poultice and sterilizer, it would heal wounds, boils, fistulas, nasal polyps, and dislocations. Even washing a patient or a baby with the urine of a cabbage-eater would be medicinally beneficial, he says. In some cases, Cato recommends chanting to heal dislocations (140) – an indication of belief in the power of words, evident also in accounts of Jesus' healings (see chapter 2 below).

Readers of the Bible may recall similar remedies: the figs Isaiah instructs King Hezekiah's servants to apply to the king's deadly boil (2 Kings 20:1, 7); the draining and bandaging of bruises and sores and bleeding wounds (Isa. 1:6; cf. Luke 10:34); oil and wine applied to wounds or for healing generally (Isa. 1:6; Luke 10:34; Mark 6:13; James 5:14); the wine recommended for stomach trouble (1 Tim. 5:23). The dividing line between home or folk medicine and the medicine practiced by physicians was not so sharply drawn as it is today, however, and some of the treatments mentioned may have been recommended or employed by physicians.

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Physicians and medicine in Jewish writings

Physicians are mentioned several times in the Bible. Those in Joseph's employ embalm his father Jacob (Gen. 50:2). King Asa turns to physicians, rather than to the Lord, to heal his feet (2 Chron. 16:12). Various folk sayings or proverbs assume that, when sick, one turns to a physician, presumably when home remedies fail (Jer. 8:22; Matt. 9:12//Luke 5:31). This is what the woman with the hemorrhage had likely done; so, too, Aelius Aristides. It is what the Roman writer Varro (116–27 BCE) recommends in his treatise on farming (*De Re Rustica* 1.16.4). The author of the Gospel of Mark tells us nothing about how the physicians treated the woman and what it was that she had suffered in their care. There was a considerable stock of medical lore devoted to women, notably the treatise *Gynaecology* by the eminent Greek physician Soranus of Ephesus (98–138 CE), which influenced medicine down into the early modern period. There were also women physicians, medicine being one of the few professions open to women. Whatever the gender and credentials of the physicians consulted by the woman in the gospel account, treatment inappropriate to a woman, which a number of women today have been protesting, may have contributed to what she had had to endure “under many physicians” (Mark 5:26).

Anything the Bible may say about the theory and practice of medicine has to be read from between the lines. However, Jewish writings current in Jesus' day and geographical area provide more information about physicians and medicines and other forms of healing then. *Sirach* (or *Ecclesiasticus*), the book of proverbs from around 180 BCE by the Jewish sage Jesus ben Sira (“Son of Sirach”), offers fulsome phrase of physicians for their skill, which (among other things) employs medicines prepared by pharmacists. All these – physicians, their skills and medicines, healing itself – are seen as gifts “from the Most

High" (*Sirach* 38.1–8). *Jubilees*, a writing from the mid-second century BCE, traces the Jews' knowledge of healing to a book written by Noah recording what angels had taught him about healing – "by means of herbs of the earth" – such illnesses as were caused by evil spirits (*Jubilees* 10.10.14). The Jewish historian Josephus, a near contemporary of Jesus born not long after Jesus' crucifixion, attributes directly to God the art of healing that wise King Solomon received to combat the diseases that demons inflict on humans; a charm said to have been composed by Solomon was used by a certain Eleazar, for example, to expel a demon in the presence of Vespasian, future emperor of Rome (*Antiquities* 8.45–46; see, further, chapter 2 below).

The Jewish War, Josephus' account of the Jewish revolt against Rome (66–73 CE), offers bits and pieces of information about medicines and physicians, and *Jewish Antiquities*, his lengthy retelling of the biblical history of Israel, embellishes the biblical accounts with details about medicine that he, along with other educated Jews, might have learned from Greek and Roman writers, or with which Jews generally might be expected to be familiar from their own experience. Josephus himself was the son of a midwife (*Life* 185), and through his involvement in the Jewish revolt he was acquainted first-hand with battle casualties and how they were treated. He mentions the medical help (Greek: *therapeia*) that the wounded received (*War* 1.246) and how three of his friends, taken down from the crosses on which they were crucified, received medical treatment, two of them in vain (*Life* 420–21). When King Herod is ill, he calls in his physicians (*Antiquities* 17.171), and in King Saul's illness Josephus assumes that the "servants" who in the biblical account advise Saul to seek someone to alleviate his mental state with music (1 Sam. 16:17) must have been physicians; however, the musician chosen – David – was, says Josephus, Saul's only (real) physician (*Antiquities* 6.166, 168).

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Besides attending to the sick, reports Josephus, physicians perform useful deeds such as circumcision (*Antiquities* 20.46). On the other hand, sometimes, because of their knowledge of drugs, they might be implicated in plots to kill the sick (14.368). Similarly, Josephus reports that King Herod's brother died when he ate a dish to which had been added poison obtained from a woman from Arabia, such women surpassing all others, he says, in their knowledge of drugs (17.62–63). He ascribes somewhat similar lore to the Essenes, the Jewish sect commonly thought to have hidden the scrolls found in our time in caves on the west bank of the Dead Sea: they investigate roots and stones for possible healing properties (*Jewish War* 2.136).

Josephus mentions various symptoms and medical procedures: amputation of wounded or diseased limbs (*Jewish War* 1.507; 6.164–65) as well as inflammation (1.507), which can spread and infect all the members of the body (4.406–07) – a passage that recalls 1 Corinthians 12:26, where Paul speaks in similar fashion.

Like Paul, Josephus in these passages is speaking metaphorically. That both authors have recourse to the language of disease and medicine does not mean they had medical training any more than the use of medical terminology by the author of Luke–Acts meant he was a physician (as some scholars have maintained; see chapter 4 below). What it does indicate is that educated persons were apt to be acquainted with some of the language of medicine, even as they are today, and that such language would come readily to mind in a world where disease could quickly become life threatening and medical treatment was unpredictable. Moreover, as was mentioned earlier, the line between the professional practice of healing and healing as practiced day to day in households or on farms – “folk” medicine – was not sharply drawn.

Greek and Roman medicine

In his treatise on agriculture, Cato's authority for the medical recipes he dispenses is tradition and experience: they have been tested by time and will work. Only once does he offer a theory in explanation: veins gorged with food cause disease (*De Agri Cultura* 157.7). Theory is a basic element, however, in the seventy or so treatises ascribed to, or associated with, a Greek physician named Hippocrates (469–399 BCE) – a name familiar to modern people through the “Hippocratic Oath.” Doctors today still profess its principles, if not the oath itself. The treatises themselves were consulted by physicians down to the rise of modern medicine in the nineteenth century. The Hippocratic doctrine of “humors” is reflected in our characterizing a person as being “in bad humor” or “out of humor.” “Nature” – Greek *physis*, whence the term “physician” – also figures prominently in Hippocratic theory. “Nature” designated the normal human condition, that is, health, from which illness or injury was a departure and to which the physician sought to return the patient. The physician must take account of the nature of humans generally and of the patient individually as well as of the nature of the disease. Nature is itself a healing power, and the physician's art was modelled after nature.

Alongside theory, the Hippocratic treatises offer insights into the day-to-day world of physicians as well as the suffering of those who came to them for help. In terse case histories the author of *Epidemics*, for example, describes the progress of disease from first symptoms to recovery or to death. Unlike the New Testament gospels, where the ill are rarely named and their symptoms only vaguely described, the case histories often give the patients' names, where they lived, and detailed descriptions of their symptoms. The exceptions are predominantly women: seventeen of the eighteen women in the case

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studies go unnamed, like the hemorrhaging woman in the Gospel of Mark.

The descriptions, at the beginning of *Epidemics* 1, of the seasons in which the epidemics occurred imply that such information was important to the physician. The treatise *Airs, Waters, Places* goes further. From it we learn that, like itinerant healers such as Jesus, at least some Greek physicians travelled from place to place. On arriving in an unfamiliar city, the physician needed to take careful note, not only of the seasons, but also of the soil, water, air, in short the climate and environment (*Airs* 1); knowing these would give clues to what the local maladies were apt to be (2). The treatise provides some answers for various geographical areas. Thus, in a city with hot winds and brackish water the people will suffer from nasal and digestive disorders (3), whereas those in a cold climate will exhibit quite different symptoms (4). For the assertion that water from snow or ice is bad, the author offers experimental verification: measure some water into a container, put it outside in winter to freeze, bring it in to thaw, and observe the decrease in quantity, which the author attributes to the disappearance of the highest and best portion of the water (8).

More intriguing than this bit of theory is another assertion, namely, that all diseases are "divine" (*theia*) (22). This puzzling comment is illuminated by another Hippocratic treatise, *The Sacred Disease*. It is an attack on those who profess to heal, by what we today would call "religious" means, an affliction characterized by symptoms we associate with epilepsy (the word *epilepsis* occurs in section 13 of that treatise). The New Testament gospels report the healing of a boy with such symptoms (Mark 9:14–29//Matt. 17:14–21; Luke 9:37–43). For the gospel writers the affliction is anything but "sacred": it is caused by a "demon" or "an unclean spirit" that is possessing the boy, for which the appropriate treatment is to address the

spirit and command it to depart (see chapter 2 below). Greek tradition labeled the disease “sacred” (*hierē*) or “divine” (*theion*) because of its extraordinary nature (*thaumasion*) (*Sacred Disease* 1) and because it was thought a deity had possessed the person and could be identified from the way the person’s behavior or speech resembled those associated with a particular deity (4). Those holding this view seek to treat the disease with purifications and incantations (2–4). For the author of the treatise this is a counsel of despair conceived by persons ignorant of its true causes; the author likens them to magicians, begging priests, and others whom he regards as charlatans (2). The disease is as “divine” as other diseases since it, like them, is caused by cold, sun, and winds – all of which are divine (*theia*) (21). Other diseases are no less extraordinary (1). The “sacred” disease can therefore be treated like any other disease by attending to its causes (which the author connects with the brain: 6–20) and the distinctive nature (*physis*) of the disease (1, 5, 21, 22).

Healers

The Hippocratic authors, and other medical writers such as Soranus of Ephesus mentioned earlier and the well-known physician Galen in the second century CE, were in possession of considerable medical lore belonging to their art. But when the physician’s art failed, then the patient might turn to a healer: the hemorrhaging woman to Jesus, and Aelius Aristides to Asclepius, the Greek god whose healings Aristides describes as beyond medical art. Both Jesus and Asclepius, alone in the ancient world, came to be called simply “The Savior,” and a rivalry developed between their followings. Aristides joined the poor and the rich (such as himself) who came to sleep in the Asclepius temple in Pergamum in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) in hopes of receiving a dream or vision from the god

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that would bring them healing. Aristides describes in detail the afflictions he suffered and the relief he received. Aristides' physician shrewdly cooperated in the treatments the god prescribed, no matter how outlandish and contrary to medical practice and to ordinary common sense they appeared. Galen reported that he had himself become a follower of Asclepius after the god healed him of an abscess. At the Asclepius temple at Epidaurus in Greece the healings recorded in the inscriptions there could well be summarized in the evangelist's description of Jesus' healings (Matt. 4:23, 9:35) and those of his followers (10:1): "every disease and every sickness."

The healing stories at Epidaurus, in the gospels, and in other ancient sources conform to a basic pattern. One might have expected that the author of Mark would begin with the hemorrhaging woman's approach to Jesus and then conclude with the "whole story" she recounts when she is discovered (5:33). Instead the author begins with (1) a description of her sickness, so desperate that conventional means of healing have failed. Then comes (2) the approach to the healer, followed (3) by immediate cure, and (4) proof of the healing. Other details are included that add drama – Jesus asks who touched him and the disciples protest that he is surrounded by people touching him, the woman comes forward and tells all – but the basic form is clearly discernible, in this and other healing accounts of the times.

An example from the second-century CE is a story recounted by one of the characters in Lucian of Samasota's satire of credulous believers in miracle: (1) a farm worker is on the point of death after being bitten by a deadly viper; (2) a healer is called, who (3) uses a spell and a fragment from the tombstone of a young woman to work a healing, (4) evidence of which is seen in the man's picking up the pallet on which he has been carried and returning to work (*Lover of Lies* 11). Such stories were commonly told about persons like Jesus known for