Jesus the Healer

Teacher Background

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Three aspects of Jesus' ministry to the sick and dying are particularly striking. First, he recognizes the vulnerability of the sick, in their need for care. Jesus touches these people, physically and spiritually, breaking through that barrier of disease which often makes people feel less than human. He touches the leper (Mark 1:41), lays hands on the blind man (Mark 8:22) and takes the hand of the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:54). His touch seems to say to them in their wretchedness and isolation: "You are worthwhile. Through God's loving touch, you are whole. I am with you."

Second, Jesus brings the "outcast" back into human society through his healing word and touch. He challenges the notion that sickness is the result of sin. The diseased were thought of as unclean, punished by God and cut off from God's holy people. When his disciples asked, "Lord, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to be born blind?" (John 9:2). Jesus replied, "Neither he nor his parents sinned." Jesus not only touches the outcasts, but welcomes them back into community, into God's own family.

Finally, Jesus reaffirms the need for spiritual healing. The paralytic lowered through the roof is first healed of his sins (Mark 2:5), while the man by the pool at Bethesda is warned, "Give up your sins so that something worse may not overtake you" (John 5:24).

Scripture records that death itself is overcome by Jesus. He raised Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:49-56), the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-17) and Lazarus (John 11:38-44). These miracles, of course, only restored earthly life. His own resurrection promises the fullness of eternal life. God's compassion for all people is revealed in the human touch of Jesus, in the restoration to community of those considered outcasts and in the salvific healing of sin and death. This is fundamental to the message of the Gospel.

Healing Narratives in the New Testament

One way of reading scriptural texts is to study the form of the text, that is, its generic structure. For example, most fairy tales begin with "Once upon a time..." then develop some sort of conflict, then show how the hero resolves the problem and finally end with "...and they lived happily ever after." In the New Testament most healing miracles are narrated according to a fairly regular pattern that typically consists of five stages (some scholars count only three, others count six or more different stages):

Introduction
The sick person's condition is described; the healer encounters the sick person, the sick person is brought to the healer, or at least someone tells the healer about the sick person.

Conflict
Often the healer first investigates what the sick person wants or needs; sometimes the healer hesitates or tests the sick person's readiness to be healed; sometimes other people intervene or delay the healing.

Action
The healing itself can be brought about either verbally, or through simple touch, or through more elaborate therapeutic means. Sometimes the healing action is only implied, but not explicitly described.

Confirmation
The fact that the healing has taken place is either asserted by the narrator or demonstrated through some action performed by the person who has been healed.

Reaction
Usually some reaction is reported for those who witnessed the event. In the Gospels, this response is often positive, involving praise given to God. Sometimes there are negative reactions from some opponents.