

Jesus as Healer in the Gospel of Matthew, Part II: Jesus as Healer in Matthew 8–9



Author:
Richard A. Culpepper^{1,2}

Affiliations:
¹James and Carolyn McAfee
School of Theology, Mercer
University, United States

²Faculty of Theology,
North-West University,
Potchefstroom Campus,
South Africa

Corresponding author:
Richard Culpepper,
culpepper_ra@mercer.edu

Dates:
Received: 07 Mar. 2016
Accepted: 15 Aug. 2016
Published: 28 Nov. 2016

How to cite this article:
Culpepper, R.A., 2016, 'Jesus
as Healer in the Gospel of
Matthew, Part II: Jesus as
Healer in Matthew 8–9', *In
die Skriflig* 50(1), a2116.
[http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/
ids.v50i1.2116](http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/
ids.v50i1.2116)

Copyright:
© 2016. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.

This exploration of the healing narratives in Matthew 8 and 9, guided by current scholarship in the fields of medical anthropology and social-scientific study of ancient Mediterranean culture, shows that when viewed in their historical and cultural context these biblical narratives point us toward a more holistic understanding of healing that may encourage contemporary movements in this direction. In this context, the goal is 'healing' the person rather than simply 'curing' the disease. The goal of restoring persons to a state of well-being and social reintegration into their families and communities requires attention to the emotional, social and spiritual well-being of persons as well as their physical health. A critically and culturally informed interpretation of Matthew's healing narratives may therefore promote the broader understanding of healing in view of these biblical stories.

In part I of this article, we developed a methodological approach to the healing narratives in the Gospel of Matthew, drawing from work in the fields of medical anthropology, Second Temple Judaism, narrative criticism and implied ethics. In this part, we turn to the concentration of healing stories in Matthew 8–9. We will look in particular for ways they contribute to major Matthean themes, the didactic function of these stories and their implications for bioethics.

Reading the healing stories in their literary context

Before turning to the healing stories, we must note the importance of two further elements of the gospel narrative that guide our reading: the virtues that are explicitly introduced in these chapters, and the location and structure of this collection of healing stories.

Explicit references to ethical virtues in Matthew 8–9¹

On the way to identifying the narrative's implied ethics, the reader should take note of its explicit ethical references. Indeed, the values named throughout the Gospel are relevant, but for this inquiry we will limit our attention to the ethical norms and virtues that appear in these two chapters. Of particular interest is the only reference to physicians (*ιατροί*) in Matthew (9:12). Jesus responds to his opponents: 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice"' (9:13). The quotation is from Hosea 6:6 (LXX). Later in this section, two blind men come to Jesus with the pointed request, 'Have mercy on us' (9:27). Finally, the summary statement at the end of the section, which reports that Jesus went about the cities and villages 'curing every disease and every illness' (*πᾶσαν νόσον καὶ πᾶσαν μαλακίαν* – 9:35), explains that he 'had compassion (*ἐσπλαγγίσθη*) on them' (9:36). Compassion and mercy appear therefore as primary impulses for Jesus' healing ministry.

The Structure of the collection of miracle stories in Matthew 8–9

The structure of the material in Matthew 8–9 provides further clues to its emphases. These chapters contain three units of miracle stories with two, three or four healings in each one with teachings on discipleship interspersed between the three triads:

- Unit I
- 8:1–4 Jesus cleanses a leper
- 8:5–13 Jesus heals a centurion's servant
- 8:14–17 Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and others
- Teachings on Discipleship
- 8:18–22 Sayings on discipleship²

1. All further references to the Gospel of Matthew will be indicated only by chapters and verses.

2. Compare Davies and Allison (2004a:117), who put 8:16–17 with 8:18–22.

Read online:



Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

Unit II	
8:23-27	Jesus stills a storm
8:28-9:1	Jesus heals the Gadarene demoniacs
9:2-8	Jesus heals a paralytic
Teachings on Discipleship	
9:9	Jesus calls Matthew
9:10-13	Controversy over eating with tax collectors and sinners
9:14-17	Controversy over fasting
Unit III	
9:18-26	Jesus heals a woman and restores life to a dead girl
9:27-31	Jesus heals two blind men
9:32-34	Jesus heals a mute man
Conclusion	
9:35-38	Summary report and transition

One may gather from the placement and structure of this section of the Gospel that it illustrates Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, and provides examples of the in-breaking of the kingdom through Jesus' works. Jesus heals persons from various social groups: a leper, a centurion's servant, a family member of his in-group, a Gadarene, a 'ruler' (ἄρχων – 9:18) and an unclean woman. He also heals persons with various illnesses: leprosy, paralysis, fever, demons, haemorrhage, blindness and muteness. He even restores a dead girl to life. His compassion crosses social boundaries and his power to heal is effective with even the most debilitating illnesses (blindness and paralysis-conditions that made one totally dependent on others), the most socially alienating (leprosy and haemorrhaging), the most powerful demons (the Gadarene demoniac) and the most extreme condition (death). Shortly later, in Matthew 11, Jesus responds to John the Baptist's disciples:

Go and 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. (v. 4-5)

The list of illnesses approximates those named in Isaiah:

26:19 'Your dead shall live,
their corpses shall rise'.
29:18 'On that day the *deaf* shall hear the words of a scroll,
And out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the *blind* shall see'.
(see also Isa 42:7, 18)
35:5-6 'Then the eyes of the *blind* shall be opened,
And the ears of the *deaf* unstopped;
Then the *lame* shall leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the *speechless* sing for joy'.

The echo in 11:5 of Isaiah 61:1, 'he has sent me to bring good news to the poor', which serves as the keynote of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 4:18), confirms the connection of the list of illnesses with fulfilment of Isaiah (cf. Baxter 2006:49; Carter 2010:489-491). Jesus' healing ministry, as the following exposition makes clear, demonstrates the fulfilment of Scripture, the breaking down of boundaries, his power over evil and the restoration of persons to wholeness (*shalom*) and community through Jesus' ministry. The healing

of the sick confirms the coming of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus announced. Matthew connects Jesus' healing to his proclamation of the kingdom in the summary statements that bracket these chapters (4:23; 9:35-38) and having established Jesus' role as healer in these chapters Matthew inserts references to Jesus' healing ministry strategically in summary statements later in the Gospel (11:5; 12:22; 14:34-36; 15:29-31).

We can now turn to the individual healing accounts in Matthew 8-9, paying particular attention to their implications for bioethics.

Reading the healing stories in Matthew 8-9 for their implied ethics Jesus cleanses a leper (8:1-4)

It is often stated that biblical 'leprosy' (described in Lv 13-14) is actually not leprosy or Hansen's disease. An accurate diagnosis of the disease, however, is not important to understanding the healing narrative and may even distract us from the dynamics of the story. John Pilch's guidance (2000) is again instructive:

The symptoms presented are not a code but rather condense in an appropriate idiom a series of personal tragedies. The flaky skin and underlying redness begin to make one stand out from the crowd. If declared unclean, such persons must remove themselves from the community and should be shunned (Lv 13:45-46). In collectivistic, that is group-oriented societies, such excommunication is devastating. It is the equivalent of a death sentence. The words *leprosy* and *leper*, as used in the Bible, certainly carries [*sic*] these meanings above all. (p. 41)

The rabbis devoted an entire tractate of the Mishnah to leprosy (m. Neg.) and R. Johanan claimed 'leprosy is equal to death' (b. Sanh. 47a; 2 Ki 5:7). With Pilch's explanation in mind, it is immediately striking that the leper asks not to be healed, but to be made clean. His condition, whatever its modern diagnosis might be, has made him 'unclean'. It is not that he is contagious, but that he is defiled. The practice of ostracism of lepers was not peculiar to Hebrew law, as the following report in Herodotus (*The Histories*) confirms:

The citizen who has leprosy or the white sickness may not come into a town or consort with other Persians. They say that he is so afflicted because he has sinned in some wise against the sun. (1.138; cf. Boring, Berger & Colpe. 1995:64; Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.281)

Contact with him or with any of his bodily fluids might not make another person sick, but it would certainly render them unclean (m. Kelim 1:3; Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:73). Therefore, it is also noteworthy that, although in other instances Jesus heals by a word or by sending the person to wash, in this instance he extends his hand and touches the leper. Pilch (2000) explains:

Touching is the way power is transmitted, so that Jesus' touch is an effective conduit for healing power. But perhaps in these instances the touching draws significance not so much from showing no fear of pollution but from physically symbolizing an acceptance back into the community. (p. 52)

Jesus' command, 'Be made clean!' expressed in the passive, may be a circumlocution – common in Matthew – carrying the meaning, 'By God's power be made clean'. The exercise of power is always significant in healing stories. The leper acknowledges and perhaps appeals to Jesus' power. He prostrates himself before Jesus and affirms his certainty that Jesus can make him clean. Whether personally or as God's agent, Jesus can make the man clean and restore him to the community. Instead of the leprosy rendering Jesus unclean, Jesus dramatically delivers the man from his uncleanness: 'purity flows from Jesus to the leper' (Evans 2012:185; Viljoen 2014a:6). Jesus affirms his willingness to exercise his power, which at least in retrospect after Jesus' quotation of Hosea 6:6 regarding mercy, calls attention to Jesus' compassion for the leper. Jesus' instructions to the man he has cleansed, are noteworthy. He forbids the man to tell others; he does not want the attention or acclaim that will come from such notoriety. On the other hand, he orders the man to complete the process of his restoration to society by showing himself to the priest so that his return to cleanness can be verified and he can be accepted back into the community (Lv 14:2-32; Viljoen 2014a:3). Like a disciple, the man is charged to 'go' and to offer 'testimony', which, while it may connote 'a prophetic condemnation of the religious leaders of Israel and their practices' in Mark (Broadhead 1992:260, 264), in Matthew it foreshadows the witness of the disciples (10:6:18) and perhaps the 'cleansing' of the temple (Wilson 2014:46). The leper, now clean, will offer the prescribed offering that underscores in yet another way how Jesus has come not to abolish, but to fulfill the Law (5:17).

The first healing story, following the Sermon on the Mount, demonstrates not only Jesus' power in word and deed, but also illustrates the nature of the purity required of Jesus' followers. In the beatitudes, Jesus declared, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God' (5:8; cf. Ps 24:3-4). Purity rituals were exceedingly important among Jews in the Second Temple period – perhaps as an effort to maintain identity and reinforce boundaries in response to the cultural upheaval brought about by Hellenization and Romanization, oppression and the introduction of foreign religious cults during this era. *Miqva'ot* [ritual baths] and stone vessels (that resisted impurity) were common in Galilee as well as in Jerusalem. Issues of purity divided Jews (e.g. Pharisees and Essenes) and were maintained not only by priests, but also by many laity (Harrington 2010:1121). In this highly charged context, Jesus illustrates the coming of the Kingdom and its transformation of ritual purity into ethical purity of heart (Viljoen 2014a:6).

Jesus heals a centurion's servant (8:5-13)

The exercise of power is given particular prominence in the healing of the centurion's servant. The centurion, as a man with authority, expects Jesus to use his power in the same way: simply give an order. He approaches Jesus respectfully, addressing him as 'Lord' or 'Sir' (κύριε). His servant or child (παῖς), is paralyzed and suffering (literally 'being tormented') terribly at his home. Jesus offers to come with the centurion

and heal his servant, or as some read the Greek syntax, he questions whether he should do so (Wilson 2014:53; Boring 1995:226; Evans 2012:187).

The centurion demonstrates compassion and mercy, seeking help for his servant, and has faith that Jesus can heal him. He also demonstrates humility: he is not worthy to have Jesus come to his home – a quality Matthew's readers might have found surprising in a Roman officer.³ If Jesus will just say the word and the servant will be healed. The demons afflicting his servant will respond to Jesus' authority with the kind of immediate obedience the centurion could expect from his subordinates. Jesus' first response is to the centurion's extraordinary faith – faith such as Jesus has found nowhere in Israel. Moreover, he is the first of many Gentiles who will eat with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (8:11). The boundaries between Jew and Gentile will be overcome and the excluded will be included. On the other hand, 'the heirs of the kingdom' will be excluded.

Then, Jesus grants the healing in the manner the centurion requested. He commands the centurion—not the demon afflicting the servant—to 'go' (cf. Jesus' command to the leper to 'go' in 8:4). Again, Jesus commands the healing indirectly and using the passive: 'let it be done for you [*by God*] according to your faith'. Faith and the exercise of power are both important in this story – so much so that the healing becomes secondary to the centurion's faith and the exchange between him and Jesus (Luz 2001:8). Not only does Jesus not withhold healing from a Gentile and a soldier (cf. 5:41), but he praises the man's faith. He does so by giving it supremacy over any response he has encountered in Israel. By implication, compassion, mercy and the work of the kingdom in restoring health supersede the boundaries of Israel and any ostracism of Gentiles or hatred of Roman soldiers. One kingdom has bowed to the supremacy of another, the kingdom of heaven, and the agent of that kingdom has responded graciously, granting the request of the Roman centurion.

Laura Anderson (2009) has analysed the 'microeconomies' of the four Matthean stories in which a supplicant requests healing on behalf of someone else. The story of the centurion and his servant is the first of these, followed by the leader and his daughter (9:18-19, 23-25), the Canaanite woman and her daughter (15:21-28), and the father and his son (17:14-18). Each develops a pattern of three exchanges: a locational, a healing and a conflict exchange. For example, the centurion comes to Jesus (locational exchange). Jesus seems to assume that he will need to go to the centurion's home to heal his servant (a second locational exchange), but the centurion leads Jesus to realise 'the commanding power of his words as a means of healing' (Anderson 2009:562). The centurion's challenge is also 'instrumental in changing Jesus' mind about outsiders, thereby allowing the potentially subversive microeconomy to emerge' (Anderson 2009:563); many outsiders will be included, while insiders will be excluded.

³ Davies and Allison (2004a:120) note that the centurion may actually have been an officer serving Herod Antipas and not a Roman soldier (also see Meier 1994:721).

Anderson (2009:558, 570) notes that while Jesus heals in all of these stories, some are also excluded or rejected in all of them (the crowd at the leader's house, the gentile 'dogs', and the 'faithless and depraved generation'). In each case, inclusion or exclusion is based on one's faith (Anderson 2009:570).

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and others (8:14-17)

In contrast to the previous healings, which occurred in public space, this one occurs in a private venue. Elaine Wainwright (2006:143-146) and Walter Wilson (2014:72) both observe that Jesus had to traverse social as well as spatial boundaries to enter into this woman's private space in Peter's house in Capernaum. Matthew reports that Jesus found Peter's mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. Fever was not understood as a symptom of an infection, but as the disease itself. In this instance, in the home of one of his disciples, there is no request for healing and no expression of faith. Walter Wilson (2014:66) notes that this is the only healing story in Matthew in which no dialogue occurs. The healing occurs by means of touch and the fever leaves her immediately. Description and confirmation of the healing are provided by the brief report that 'she got up (ἡγέρθη) and began to serve him (διηκόνει)' (8:15). In other words, she was able to resume her role in the home and the community. The Greek terms, however, open further nuances. Peter's mother-in-law did not just 'get up', she 'was raised' – the same term that is used in the gospels for the resurrection of Jesus (27:64; 28:6, 7; cf. 9:25; 14:2). Her healing came about through the same power that was active in Jesus' resurrection. Recovery from illness should be understood in terms of divine power and it signals the coming of the kingdom. Similarly, the term for 'serving' occurs elsewhere in Matthew in reference to the work of angels (4:11), discipleship (20:26; 23:11), and Jesus' ministry (20:28). It will also be the norm by which the eschatological judgement occurs (25:44; Hagner 1993:208-209).

The first triad of healing stories ends with a summary report and a quotation from Isaiah. The gossip network functioned efficiently and word of her healing spread through the community with the result that neighbours brought demon possessed and sick people to him to be healed that evening. Matthew omits Mark's report for that day was the Sabbath. Therefore, they waited until the Sabbath had ended before carrying people to Jesus for healing. The report is a summary of healings, similar to 4:23-24, 9:35 and 10:1:

- 4:23-24 καὶ θεραπεύων πᾶσαν νόσον καὶ πᾶσαν μαλακίαν ἐν τῷ λαῷ ...
καὶ προσήνεγκαν αὐτῷ πάντας τοὺς κακῶς ἔχοντας ποικίλαις νόσοις καὶ βασάνοις
συνεχομένους [καὶ] δαμονιζομένους καὶ σεληνιαζομένους καὶ παραλυτικούς, καὶ ἐθεράπευσεν αὐτούς.
- 8:16-17 δαμονιζομένους πολλοὺς καὶ ἐξέβαλεν τὰ πνεύματα λόγῳ καὶ πάντας τοὺς κακῶς ἔχοντας ἐθεράπευσεν, 17 ὅπως πληρωθῇ τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου
λέγοντος· αὐτὸς τὰς ἀσθενείας ἡμῶν ἔλαβεν καὶ τὰς νόσους ἐβάστασεν.

9:35 καὶ θεραπεύων πᾶσαν νόσον καὶ πᾶσαν μαλακίαν.

10:1 ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν πνευμάτων ἀκαθάρτων ὥστε ἐκβάλλειν αὐτὰ καὶ
θεραπεύειν πᾶσαν νόσον καὶ πᾶσαν μαλακίαν.

Matthew's summaries and the quotation from Isaiah provide a glossary of terms for illnesses and some indication of the causes assigned to them. The phrase πᾶσαν νόσον καὶ πᾶσαν μαλακίαν is repeated in 4:24, 9:35 and 10:1. νόσος is a general term for sickness, disease or malady. μαλακία, a term that is not used by any of the other evangelists, means softness, delicacy, passivity or effeminacy (cf. μαλακοὶ in 1 Cor 6:9; Pilch 2000:82-84). βασάνος refers to pain. Matthew 4:24 lists three types of afflictions: δαμονιζομένους (8:16, 28, 33; 9:32; 12:22; 15:22), those possessed by demons; σεληνιαζομένους (17:15), those who are 'moon struck'; and παραλυτικούς (8:6; 9:2, 6), those who are paralysed. The demon possessed were debilitated in various ways, becoming fierce (8:28), mute (8:32) and blind and mute (12:22). τοὺς κακῶς ἔχοντας (4:24; 8:16; 9:12; 14:35) is even more vague, referring simply to those who are sick, who literally 'have it badly'. κακῶς can also describe the extremity of those who are demon possessed (15:22) and the suffering of the moon struck (17:15).

Jesus heals the Gadarene demoniacs (8:28-9:1)

Following the sayings on discipleship and the account of Jesus' stilling of the storm, which in Matthew serves as a further teaching on discipleship, Jesus and the disciples arrive on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus encounters two Gadarenes. Craig Evans (2012:197) calls this 'the eeriest episode in the life of Jesus'. If ancient culture attributed illness to demons, here in the middle story of the middle triad of Matthew's collection of miracle stories, Jesus meets the evil powers directly, and the proleptic reports of exorcisms in Matthew's earlier summary statements are fulfilled (Wilson 2014:117-119).

The area of the Gadarenes was in the Decapolis, the loose federation of Gentile cities east of the Jordan River. Jewish attitudes toward Gentile pollution, illustrated by Isaac's admonitions to Jacob in the following passage in Jubilees, form the backdrop of this story:

And you also, my son, Jacob, remember my words, and keep the commandments of Abraham, your father. Separate yourself from the gentiles, and do not eat with them and do not perform deeds like theirs. And do not become associates of theirs. Because their deeds are defiled, and all of their ways are contaminated, and despicable, and abominable. They slaughter their sacrifices to the dead, and to the demons they bow down. And they eat in tombs. And all their deeds are worthless and vain. (Jub 22:16-17; Boring *et al.* 1995:72)

There Jesus is met by two fierce demoniacs who come out of the tombs and prevent anyone from passing that way. The details underscore the wildness of their demon possessed state, their uncleanness and the danger they presented to others. Their fierceness may also serve as a connection

providing continuity with the 'great' storm on the sea in the previous pericope, although the reaction of the disciples to the demoniacs is not reported. The demon possessed men approach Jesus with a salutation ('Son of God') and two questions: 'What have you to do with us?' and 'Have you come here to torment us before the time?' The demons know who Jesus is and they address him with a Christological title and a reference to the eschatological judgement, both common Matthean themes. The encounter is abbreviated from Mark's account (Mk 5:1-20), with the result that the demons anticipate that they will be cast out of the men and ask to be sent into the herd of swine. The swine would have been a further index of Gentile uncleanness for Matthew's Jewish and Jewish Christian readers. The theme of crossing boundaries that we have seen in the earlier healing stories is exaggerated in this one. Jesus crosses to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, where he encounters two demon possessed, unclean and violent men who live in tombs not far from swine. Jesus does not enter into conversation with the demons as in Mark, nor does the exorcism require any magical rites or incantations.⁴ Jesus banishes the demons with one word, in keeping with Matthew's summary in 8:16. The demons ask to be 'sent' (ἀποστείλον) – just as in the next section: Jesus will give his disciples power over the unclean spirits and 'send' (ἀποστέλλω) them out (10:1, 16). Jesus says, 'Go', the same word with which he dismissed Satan in 4:10. The parody at the expense of Gentiles continues as the swine rush down the bank into the sea and are drowned – just as the Egyptian soldiers were drowned in the sea when the Israelites crossed to the other side (Ex 14:26-31; see Wilson 2014:120). The swineherds then become witnesses, going into the city and reporting everything that happened to the demoniacs. The whole city came out to meet Jesus, but they begged him to leave their area.

This healing account therefore addresses issues of power, boundary crossing and defeating the invasive demonic forces (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:79-80). The significance of this exorcism, as illustrative of Jesus' work in ushering in the power of the kingdom and delivering humanity from dehumanising powers, becomes clear when Jesus later answers the charge made at the end of this section that he casts out demons by the power of the prince of demons (9:34). He declares, 'But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (12:28). Although Jesus has the power to deliver men from the demons with one word, he accedes to the request of the townspeople and crosses back to the other side (9:1). Therefore, this story is as much about the power of the gospel, which was being preached among Gentiles by the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, as it is about healing.

Jesus heals a paralytic (9:2-8)

Back in his own town (Capernaum), Jesus heals a paralytic. Like the preceding healing stories, this one carries extra

4. See the text of the magical papyrus PGM 4.3007-3085 in Boring *et al.* (1995:69-70).

freight and advances the themes of these two chapters in Matthew. In this instance, the pericope is a hybrid of a healing miracle and a controversy dialogue or pronouncement story. The paralytic is presumed to be a sinner, and Jesus both forgives his sin and heals his paralysis. The conflict is not between Jesus and the demonic here, but rather between Jesus and the scribes who accuse him of blasphemy. The plot of the story is driven by this conflict and by the opposition between what Jesus knows and what the others, especially the scribes, do not know.

When the paralysed man is brought to Jesus (Matthew omits the details in Mk 2:1-12) Jesus 'sees' (i.e. knows) their faith and assures the paralytic that his sins are forgiven. When the scribes say to themselves, 'This man is blaspheming', Jesus 'sees' their thoughts and asks them why they think evil in their hearts. He poses to them the question: Which is easier, to say his sins are forgiven or to heal the man? But so that they may 'know' the authority of the Son of Man to forgive sins (1:21), he commands the paralytic to rise and immediately he did so. Herbert Bassler (2009:223-224) explores two options for interpreting Jesus' question that he posed the easier task first or second. In either case the difficulty lies in confirming that the man's sins have been forgiven.

Jesus' word (i.e. the power that is present in all his pronouncements and teachings) is again effective – implicitly confirming the authority of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in the Gospel. Jesus has demonstrated the power of the kingdom both to restore and forgive, and to defeat the illness and turn aside the accusations of his opponents. Moreover, the healing occurred both to restore the paralytic to health and so that the scribes might know the authority of the Son of Man. When the crowds 'saw' what had taken place, they glorified God for giving such authority to human beings.

The power to still storms and vanquish demons is also able to bring forgiveness for sins. In the traditional view of illness and healing, illness was due to sin and thus healing is also a sign of forgiveness. Forgiveness and healing, moreover, are the other side of vanquishing evil. In this regard, Jesus is again portrayed as the agent of the kingdom of heaven in whom the eschatological powers are already at work on earth. There is also a corporate dimension to this story. The incapacitated paralytic is brought to Jesus by others, and when he is forgiven and healed the crowds respond with awe, glorifying God 'who had given such authority to *human beings*' (9:8). This inclusive, plural reference is striking. Ulrich Luz (2001:29) observes that it is the authority of the 'Son of Man' that empowers 'human beings' to forgive sins. Walter Wilson (2014) therefore comments:

This means that the announcement of forgiveness is not the end of the story but the beginning. Having been transformed into both recipients and agents of the Son of Man's authority, the forgiven are now drawn into a social and eschatological drama, and it is only from this perspective that one can understand the full meaning of healing. (p. 159)

Jesus heals a woman and restores life to a girl (9:18-26)

Matthew preserves Mark's 'sandwich' construction, intercalating the healing of the haemorrhaging woman with the raising of the synagogue leader's daughter, but in the course of abbreviating Mark's account from twenty-two verses to eight verses, it drops the reference to the synagogue, making the designation ('ruler', 'leader') somewhat ambiguous (cf. Mt 9:18 – ἄρχων; Mk 5:22 – ἀρχισυναγωγὸν; and Lk 8:41 – ἄρχων τῆς συναγωγῆς). Eugene Boring (1995:237) interprets the change as deliberate and significant: 'Matthew transforms the Markan "leader of the synagogue" ... into a civil administrator.' In several ways, these related stories escalate Jesus' healings and their thematic implications: the desperate father has faith that Jesus can raise his dead daughter, the woman has suffered for 12 years, the woman's healing is reported using language with theological overtones of salvation, and, like Elisha (2 Kgs 4:32-37), Jesus raises the dead girl.

The girl's father approaches Jesus and kneels before him (see 8:2; 15:25; 18:26). Mark relates that his daughter was at the point of death (ἐσχάτως ἔχει – Mk 5:23), whereas in Matthew and Luke the girl has already died. Matthew and Luke may be escalating the story from a healing to a raising of the dead or they may simply both be clarifying Mark's somewhat ambiguous reference. Regardless, the father's request expresses great faith in Jesus' ability to overcome even death.

While they are making their way to the man's home, a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years, and therefore living in pain, impurity and shame all this time, moves to touch Jesus' garment, confident that she will be healed if she can do so. Mark reports that she had 'endured much under many physicians, and spent all that she had; and was no better, but rather grew worse' (Mk 5:26).⁵ Both she and the girl's father represent new levels of faith in the Gospel of Matthew, since Jesus has not raised a dead person (11:5), nor has anyone been healed simply by touching his clothing (14:36; Mk 6:56). In contrast to the leader's approach to Jesus with his request, even while he was at dinner (9:10), the woman seeks to gain healing without attracting attention to herself or even speaking with Jesus (Wilson 2014:208). Matthew (following Mark) reports that the woman thought that if she could 'only'⁶ touch his garment she would be ἐσῳθῇ (Mt 9:22), which means to be delivered or restored to a state of wellbeing, but because elsewhere it carries the theological sense of being 'saved' or gaining salvation, that nuance may be suggested here also, where Jesus responds to the woman's faith (Wainwright 2006:151-152). The previous healing story, after all, made the connection between healing and forgiveness of sin and thus the double *entendre* appears to be deliberate. Luz (2001) points out that:

5. When Alec McCowen recited the Gospel of Mark in theaters in England and America, his audiences laughed in response to this comment at the expense of physicians.

6. R.H. Gundry (1994:173) comments: 'Only a word, only a touch—such emphases show that Jesus' authority is so great that for miraculous cures it needs but little exercise.'

the saving is more than the healing. Matthew expresses that first by relating that Jesus grants salvation to the woman because of her faith and only then by telling her about the healing. (p. 42)

Matthew construes the healing differently than Mark. In Mark's account her bleeding stopped instantly when she touched the hem of his garment and Jesus felt that power had gone out from him (Mk 5:29-30). In Matthew, however, Jesus knows the woman's thoughts (as he knew what the scribes were saying – 9:3), turns, sees her and assures her, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well' (9:22). Then, but only then, is she healed. Thus, the healing does not take place by the magical power of Jesus' garment, but by his perception of her need and her faith, and by the power of his word, assuring her that she was received as a 'daughter' and that she was healed (Boring 1995:238; Evans 2012:207). By recognising the woman as 'daughter', Jesus has given the socially and religiously ostracised woman status, inclusion and social standing, 'relations defined not by patriarchal household but by the divine kingdom: in the language of medical anthropology, she has been both "cured" and "healed"' (Wilson 2014:210).

When they arrive at the man's house, the mourning is already starting. When Jesus sees that the flute players have come and there was a great commotion, he drives them away, saying, 'the girl is not dead but sleeping' (9:24). They laughed at him. When they had dispersed, Jesus goes in (again to the home's private space), and grasps the girl's hand. Matthew omits Mark's report of Jesus' command to her in Aramaic (ταλιθα κουμ – Mk 5:41), probably to avoid any hint that the resuscitation was the result of a magical incantation rather than Jesus' personal authority as God's son.⁷ The result is reported with striking brevity and understatement: 'and the girl got up'. The miracle is so great that there is no need to embellish it in any way.

In these related healing stories, Jesus comes in contact with a bleeding woman and takes a corpse's hand. Both actions brought uncleanness (Lv 15:19-33; Nm 19:11-12; cf. Keener 1999:305; Viljoen 2014b). Nevertheless, although Jesus has declared that he did not come to abolish the Law, there is no indication that he performed the required ritual of purification. Moreover, although Matthew greatly abbreviates Mark's account of the haemorrhaging woman's healing, he adds the detail that Jesus wore a garment with tassels (9:20; cf. Viljoen 2014b:458), a practice that reminded Jews to live in obedience to the Law (Nm 15:38-41; Dt 22:12). The assumption at work in Matthew's account of these healings is stated by Davies and Allison (2004b:130): 'Instead of uncleanness passing from the woman to Jesus, healing power flows from Jesus to the woman.' Implicitly, these intertwined healing stories illustrate how Jesus fulfilled the laws of purity. Rather than becoming unclean from the touch of the bleeding woman or from taking a corpse's hand, Viljoen (2014b) comments that:

7. Luz (2001:42, n. 18) comments: 'The Matthean abbreviations are often interpreted as designed to reduce the magical elements ... However, Matthew does not omit the "most magical" feature, viz., touching the hem of Jesus' garment' (see my commentary above on Matthew's report of the woman's healing).

life flows from Jesus ... Death and its associated impurity are conquered. ... Jesus has yet again brought the Kingdom of heaven a step closer. With his coming, the purity laws are fulfilled. Jesus enacts the intention of the Law. (p. 465)

Jesus heals two blind men (9:27-31)

The story of the two blind men's healing emphasises Jesus' identity as Son of David and the role of faith in healing. Like Mark (Mk 8:22-26; 10:46-52), Matthew has two stories of healing the blind, but in Matthew both stories report the healing of two blind men (20:29-34; cf. 21:14). Davies and Allison (2004a:142) note on the basis of the exclusion of the blind from Jerusalem in 11QTemple 45:12-14 that 'blindness for an ancient Jew could involve not simply poverty and hardship but also religious alienation'.

As brief as this story is, we are told that the blind men 'followed' Jesus (like disciples) and that they addressed him with, 'Son of David', which is at least for Matthew a Christological title. This is significant, because, rather than their healing leading them to become disciples as in Mark 10:46-52, Matthew emphasises that it is their faith that leads to the restoration of their sight. Earlier in this section, Jesus has been addressed as 'Lord' (8:2, 8, 21, 25) that may be only a title of respect, and 'teacher' (8:19). The title *Son of David*, which occurs in both stories of the healing of blind men in Matthew, has particular meaning in the first Gospel (Duling 1978; Baxter 2006). Jesus is introduced in 1:1 as 'the son of David, the son of Abraham', and the genealogy gives special prominence to David (1:6, 17, 20; cf. 12:23; 15:22). The title *Son of David* foreshadows the references to David in the entry into Jerusalem (21:9, 15) and Jesus' question to the Pharisees regarding how the Messiah is the 'Son of David' in 22:42-45. Solomon is the only king to be called by this title in the Old Testament (1 Chr 29:22; 2 Chr 1:1; 13:6). By the 1st century, the title had acquired other associations, however. It appears in the Pss. Sol. 17:2 and 4Q Patriarchal Blessings 1.3-4 as a messianic title (cf. Is 11:1; Jr 23:5-6; Ezk 34:23-24; cf. Dupont-Sommer 1961:314-315). Elsewhere, Solomon is regarded as an exorcist, healer and magician (T. Sol.; Meier 1994:689-690; cf. Luz 2001:48). These associations suggest interesting interpretations for the blind men's address to Jesus. If the title was associated with Solomon, or at least one known for his mercy and healing (Is 29:18; 32:1-3; 35:1-10; 61:1-4), it would have been quite natural for blind beggars to use it to attract the attention of one who might be able to help them.⁸

The blind men call out for Jesus to have mercy on them that is almost ironic following Jesus' quotation of Hosea 6:6, 'I desire *mercy* not sacrifice', in response to the Pharisees earlier in the chapter (9:13). Jesus tests their faith: 'Do you believe ...?' (9:28). Then, after they affirm their faith, saying, 'Yes, Lord', he responds, 'According to your faith let it be done to you' (9:29), illustrating that the prayers of those who have faith will be answered (cf. 21:22). And their eyes were opened.

The final twist in this story comes with the discrepancy between their affirmation of faith and the granting of their

sight, on the one hand, and their failure to obey Jesus' command not to tell others what had happened, on the other. As blind men they could perceive Jesus' identity, follow him and affirm their faith in him (cf. Wilson 2014:258). Nevertheless, after they receive their sight, they disobey. Jesus has warned his disciples that not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom (7:21), and at the end of the Gospel the risen Lord instructs his disciples that discipleship requires observing all that he had commanded (28:20). Here then is a word for Matthew's church of 'wheat and tares' (13:24-30): Even those who have faith and follow Jesus may not be true disciples. Once again, healing, especially in the Matthean sense, entails much more than being cured.

Jesus heals a mute man (9:32-34)

This story is so abbreviated that it is little more than a summary statement and, interestingly, while Matthew mentions the healing or exorcism of mute persons in 11:5, 12:22 and 15:30-31, they always appear in summary statements. The exorcism or healing is not even described and it is not even made clear that Jesus was the healer. Still, it introduces some new elements into this carefully composed collection of stories: the reference to Israel and the opposition of the Pharisees whom Malina and Neyrey (1988:60) call 'the moral entrepreneurs of Israel's purity system'.

Following a change of location notice, the narrator reports that a mute person was brought to Jesus. There is no other attestation of faith. Here the emphasis lies on the response to the healing. Neither Jesus' words nor those of the one who was healed are reported – only the words of those who witnessed the healing.

The man's condition is attributed to demon possession and, since Jesus' work as an exorcist has been described in the story of the Gadarene demoniacs, there is no need to report the details here. That the man is able to speak confirms that the demon has been driven out of him. Two responses follow, characterising Israel's responses to Jesus. The crowds exclaim in amazement that nothing like this had ever been seen in Israel. The Pharisees, on the other hand, charge that he is able to cast out demons, because he exercises the authority of the demons' ruler (see the doublet of this story in 12:24-32, where Jesus responds to this charge; Malina & Neyrey 1988:59). Being unable to deny the exorcism, they attribute it to demonic rather than divine power. Therefore, the working of miracles does not assure a response of faith and, in their opposition to Jesus, they foreshadow the ultimate rejection in the crucifixion.

The summary statement in 9:35-38 draws this collection of three triads of miracle stories to a conclusion. It is similar to the summary in 4:23-25. Jesus teaches, preaches and heals in the cities and villages. The reference to 'every disease and every sickness' reminds the reader of the healings that have just been reported. That Jesus was moved by compassion is reemphasised with an allusion to the description of Israel as 'sheep without a shepherd'

⁸These sentences were originally published in Culpepper (2007:353).

(Nm 27:17; 1 Ki 22:17; 2 Chr 18:16). By implication Jesus is characterised as Israel's Davidic shepherd (see Baxter 2006 who connects Jesus' healing activity and the 'Son of David' title to Ezk 34). The metaphor changes to one of harvest and the closing verse provides a transition to the sending out of Jesus' disciples in the next chapter.

While Matthew refers to Jesus' healing ministry in summary statements later in the Gospel (11:5; 12:22; 14:34-36; 15:29-31), there are only four other healing stories in Matthew – each of them plays a strategic role in the Gospel's portrait of Jesus as healer and bringer of the kingdom. The healing of a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (12:9-14) affirms that healing is doing good and is therefore allowed on the Sabbath. The healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter (15:21-28) extends healing – and implicitly the kingdom – to Gentiles, reaffirming the boundary crossing that had already taken place in the healing of the Gadarene demoniacs in 8:28-9:1. The exorcism of the possessed boy in 17:14-18 leads to a short dialogue with the disciples on the power of faith (17:19-21). Finally, the healing of the two blind men in 20:29-34, the last healing story in the Gospel, a doublet of 9:27-31 with echoes of the healing of the blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52, returns to the themes of Jesus as the 'Son of David' and the healings as works of mercy and compassion.

Implied Ethics of Jesus' Healings in Matthew 8-9

Implications of Jesus' role as healer in the gospels

The ancient Mediterranean and Jewish contexts are assumed in the gospels. Therefore, what is distinctive is Jesus' role as a healer, the relationship between healing and the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven in his person and ministry, and a heightened significance accorded to the role of faith in healing.

Healing is an important part of Jesus' work and ministry in all four gospels (although the Gospel of John contains no exorcisms). Matthew in particular, lists teaching, preaching and healing as Jesus' characteristic and defining activities (4:23; 9:35). His work as a healer or exorcist demonstrated his authority as the Messiah, the power of the Spirit with which he had been endowed at his baptism and the nature of the kingdom of heaven. Healing was an integral part of his vocation and people came to him for healing. It was important that they have faith in him – at least faith that he could heal them. As a healer, Jesus accepted everyone who sought his help: a centurion, gentile demoniacs, lepers and a bleeding woman. He crossed geographical, cultural, social and religious barriers in his healing. He crossed the Sea of Galilee to a gentile region with tombs and swine. He entered the private space of homes, and he touched the unclean, lepers and a corpse that would have rendered him ritually unclean. In doing so, he also encountered opposition, ridicule and hostility from those who disapproved of his ministry, while he received and healed those in need, restoring them to health and wellbeing.

Implications of the healing stories in Matthew 8 and 9

Many of the characteristics of Jesus' work as healer in Matthew as well as the other gospels are evident in the collection of healing stories in Matthew 8 and 9. Nevertheless, four elements can be highlighted as distinctive, if not altogether unique to Matthew.

First, for Matthew, Jesus' healing ministry was a fulfilment of Scripture. The accounts of healing by Elijah and Elisha, in particular, and references to healing in Isaiah lie behind Matthew's healing stories. In 8:17, the evangelist comments: 'This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases"' (Is 53:4; cf. Baxter 2006:49). Jesus' healing work, against the background of Moses and the prophets, confirmed that Jesus fulfilled the scriptures and was indeed the new Moses. Like Elijah and Elisha, Jesus healed a leper (2 Ki 5:1-14) and raised a dead child (2 Ki 4:32-37); just as, like Moses, he crossed the sea, fed a multitude and brought new teachings on righteousness.

Second, Matthew emphasises that Jesus was moved by compassion (9:36; 14:14) and mercy (see 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30, 31). Matthew quotes Hosea 6:6, 'I desire mercy ...' twice (9:13; 12:7; cf. 23:23), whereas this verse is not quoted in any of the other gospels (cf. Mk 12:33). That is to say that Matthew makes it clear that, for Jesus, healing was not just professional – it demonstrated his compassion for suffering people, both Jews and Gentiles.

Third, Matthew draws a link between healing and discipleship. We have seen that Matthew often uses the healing stories to teach a lesson on discipleship. He marvels at the faith of the centurion and teaches on the inclusion of Gentiles (8:10-13). The three triads of miracle stories are interspersed with teachings on discipleship (8:18-22, 23-27; 9:9, 10-13) and Matthew's account of the stilling of the storm in 8:23-27, turns the nature miracle into a lesson on discipleship. The healing stories serve Matthew's interest in affirming Jesus' authority–authority over demons and authority to forgive sin. The healing stories also instruct the church on its role in forgiving sin (9:8), showing mercy (9:13), and its need to obey Jesus' commands (9:30-31) and to take up its role in the teaching, preaching and healing ministry of the kingdom (9:37-38; cf. 10:1-2).

Fourth, Matthew uses characters in the healing stories as ethical models. Richard A. Burrige (2007:222) has developed an approach to New Testament ethics based on the thesis that 'ancient biographical narratives were written to encourage the imitation of their central subject', and Dale Allison (2005:149) agrees that Matthew 'makes Jesus a model for emulation'. The Gospel is addressed to the church and therefore the early followers of Jesus may have heard or read these stories, listening for where they might find themselves in them. Our reading of these stories adds support for those who see a strong didactic role for the First Gospel. At various points the healing stories provide models for the church. They elevate the

importance of faith in Jesus. Persons come to Jesus with faith that he can heal them. Jesus responds to their pleas, in some instances commenting on their faith (the centurion, the woman with a haemorrhage), and heals them. Various characters act out compassion and mercy – virtues Jesus references explicitly – by bringing others for healing (the friends of the paralytic) or seeking healing on their behalf (the centurion and the father of the dead girl). Finally, Jesus sends persons who have been healed to bear witness (the leper). In each of these instances the stories hold up exemplary actions for the reader's reflections. Jesus' followers, it may be suggested, are to emulate such models of fidelity to Jesus' teachings and healings.

Conclusion

This exploration of the healing narratives in Matthew 8 and 9, guided by current scholarship in the fields of medical anthropology and social-scientific study of ancient Mediterranean culture, shows that. When viewed in their historical and cultural context, these biblical healing narratives point us toward a more holistic understanding of healing that may encourage contemporary movements in this direction. In particular, the goal of healing rather than simply curing, that is, the goal of restoring persons to a state of well-being and social reintegration into their families and communities, requires attention to the emotional, social and spiritual well-being of persons as well as their physical health. A critically and culturally informed interpretation of Matthew's healing narratives may therefore promote the broader understanding of healing in view in these biblical stories that might lead to greater collaboration between healthcare professionals, counsellors and ministers.

The ways in which the Gospel of Matthew develops the mimetic role of Jesus and the didactic function of the stories may also lead the church to further reflection on its role in the healing process and its responsibility as an advocate for all who are suffering, broken and alienated.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

References

- Allison, D.C., Jr., 2005, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation past and present*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids.
- Anderson, L., 2009, 'Healthy economics or cautionary tales? The narrative microeconomics of four Matthean healing stories', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological studies* 65(1), Art. #320, 16 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v65i1.320>
- Basser, H., 2009, *The Mind behind the gospels: A commentary to Matthew 1-14*, Academic Studies Press, Boston.
- Baxter, W., 2006, 'Healing and the "Son of David": Matthew's warrant', *Novum Testamentum* 48(1), 36-50.
- Boring, M.E., 1995, 'The Gospel of Matthew', in L.E. Keck (ed.), *New interpreter's bible*, vol. 8, pp. 87-505, Abingdon, Nashville.
- Boring, M.E., Berger, K. & Colpe, C. (eds.), 1995, *Hellenistic commentary to the New Testament*, Abingdon, Nashville.
- Broadhead, E.K., 1992, 'Mk 1,44: The Witness of the Leper', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 83(3/4), 257-265.
- Burridge, R.A., 2007, *Imitating Jesus: An inclusive approach to New Testament ethics*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Carter, W., 2010, 'Jesus' healing stories: Imperial critique and eschatological anticipations in Matthew's gospel', *Currents in theology and mission* 37(6), 488-496.
- Culpepper, R.A., 2007, *Mark*, Smyth & Helwys, Macon. (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary).
- Davies, W.D. & Allison, D.C., 2004b, *A Critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew (Matthew 8-18)*, vol. 2, T&T Clark, London. (International Critical Commentary).
- Duling, D.C., 1978, 'The therapeutic Son of David: An element of Matthew's christological apologetic', *New Testament Studies* 24(3), 392-410.
- Dupont-Sommer, A., 1961, *The Essene writings from Qumran*, transl. G. Vermes, World Publishing Co., Cleveland/New York.
- Evans, C.A., 2012, *Matthew*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. (New Century Bible Commentary).
- Gundry, R.H., 1994, *Matthew: A commentary on his handbook for a mixed church under Persecution*, 2nd edn. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Hagner, D.A., 1993, *Matthew*, vol. 1, Word, Dallas. (Word Biblical Commentary, 33-34).
- Harrington, H.K., 2010, 'Purity and impurity', in J.J. Collins & D.C. Harlow (eds.), *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, pp. 1121-1123, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Keener, C.S., 1999, *A commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Luz, U., 2001, *Matthew 8-20*, transl. J.E. Couch, Fortress, Minneapolis. (Hermeneia).
- Malina, B.J. & Neyrey, J.H., 1988, *Calling Jesus names: The social value of labels in Matthew*, Polebridge, Sonoma, CA.
- Malina, B.J. & Rohrbaugh, R.L., 1992, *Social science commentary on the synoptic gospels*, Fortress, Minneapolis.
- Meier, J.P., 1994, *A marginal Jew: Rethinking the historical Jesus: Mentor, message, and miracles*, vol. 2, Doubleday, New York.
- Pilch, J.J., 2000, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from medical and Mediterranean anthropology*, Fortress, Minneapolis.
- Viljoen, F.P., 2014a, 'Jesus healing a leper and the purity law in Matthew', *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 48(2), Art #1751, 7 pages. doi:10.4102/ids.48i2.1751
- Viljoen, F.P., 2014b, 'The law and purity in Matthew; Jesus touching a bleeding woman and dead girl (Matt. 9:18-26)', *Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif (NGTT)* 55(1&2), 443-469, <http://ngtt.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/535/555>
- Wainwright, E.M., 2006, *Women healing/healing women: The genderization of healing in early Christianity*, Equinox, London.
- Wilson, W.T., 2014, *Healing in the Gospel of Matthew: Reflections on method and ministry*, Fortress, Minneapolis.