

JESUS AS A MENTAL THERAPEUTIST

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MANY during recent times have come to feel that the narratives of the so-called nature miracles, attributed to Jesus in the gospels, are not to be taken literally, that wonderful as he was as a man, highly endowed as he seems to have been, he could not have walked on the water of a lake, could not have stilled a tempest, could not have satisfied thousands with a few small loaves, could not have turned water into wine and fermented wine at that, and certainly could not have raised the dead. They call attention to the fact that narratives of his most stupendous marvels are found in that last late fabrication, known to us more correctly as the Fourth Gospel, which manifestly was written by one who revealed no wish or effort to reproduce the actual life and thought of the Master; and they ask if it is not evident that with the passing of the years, ere the synoptic gospels reached their final phase, there was a growing disposition to attribute to him marvels of this character and if the narratives of these nature miracles do not belong to a period long subsequent to the date of his benign ministry and in consequence are purely imaginative? At the same time they remind us that most of the works of healing with which Jesus was credited in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are such as are wrought by mental therapeutics in our time and that in consequence they are not to be classed in the same category as the supposed miracles because they reveal no supernatural influence. Even Schmiedel in his article on the *Gospels*, *Encyc. Biblica*, col. 1884, in speaking of miracles which he is unwilling to believe were ever wrought by Jesus says: "This power (manifested in miracles of healing) is so strongly attested throughout the first and second centuries that, in view of the spiritual greatness of Jesus and the imposing character of his personality, it would indeed be difficult to deny it to him."

Hence it seems that a more careful study of everything which throws light upon the narratives of Jesus' works of healing is

demanding in the interests of sane thought in this time of exhaustive and searching criticism. It is possible, so chary have most scholars been in their handling of the biblical sources of the life of Jesus, that the full significance of certain gospel statements has been overlooked; so that we who are less hesitant and are possessed of a wider knowledge of the claims and achievements of the mental therapists of today are able to understand and elucidate them and in so doing may serve the cause of truth, and in serving it may reverently render the Christ himself a real service.

It appears, so we must conclude, that Jesus, much as he accomplished in this direction, was unable at times to heal the unfortunate among whom he moved. In at least three directions his work was circumscribed. This statement need surprise none save those readers of the gospels who have failed to give them the serious thought which they deserve and demand. Failing here, and taking certain general statements concerning his works of mercy to which he gave but fragments of his time not needed for his more important work as a propagandist of the glad tidings, they have thought of him as one who devoted himself almost wholly to the healing of the sick and the restoration of the maimed. So to conceive of him is to grasp very imperfectly his prophetic evangel and to give scant credit to the intelligence, common sense, and spiritual appreciation of the crowds who thronged him.

It should be evident that unless Jesus could evoke faith on the part of those who came, or those who were brought to him, or those whom he encountered as he got about, he could do nothing for them. Often, if not always, faith on the part of the one in distress was manifested or was evoked. Upon one of his visits to his home town he was able, we are told, to heal but a few sick because of the want of faith on the part of his old neighbors and friends. Their want of faith in him appears to have been shared by most of the sick and the maimed themselves. As Gould in his commentary on *Mark* (*I. C. C.*, p. 105), says in this connection: "Jesus required faith for the performance of his miracles, and that was wanting here; nay, there was positive disbelief, no mere doubt. He found elsewhere a poor wavering faith, but not enough to hinder his work of physical healing, though it kept him out of men's souls. But here the general unbelief of the nation reached its climax and prevented even this one good that his countrymen generally permitted him to do them."

Some came to Jesus so confidently, with such absolute faith in his power to heal and in his grace and willingness, that there was

immediate and glad response on his part. There was no period of probation as there was no effort to increase confidence or to seem to make sure that the one benefited would become in turn a benefactor of others. In the case of a certain blind man who lustily besought Jesus as he was entering Jericho to have mercy upon him and who in answer to the Master's query as to what he wanted replied: "Sir, I want my sight," there was the happy response. "See, your faith has healed you," followed by the immediate restoration of the man's sight.¹ When an individual leper came confidently to him, saying, "If you will, you can cleanse me," Jesus we are told stretched forth his hand and touched him, saying, "I do will it: be cleansed." Here it would seem the faith of the man was sufficient, the stretching forth of the hand and the touching of the unclean leper being in the nature of a mere act of friendliness and compassion. The woman with the hemorrhage, in the plenitude of her faith in Jesus sought only to touch his clothes, for she said, "If I can touch even his clothes, I shall be healed." Having touched and knowing "in her body that she was healed of her affliction," she scarcely needed the assurance of Jesus that by reason of her faith she was made well, "Daughter, your faith has healed you."

References to the diseased as crowding about him and touching him or the fringe of his garment and being made whole must be taken as evidence of unquestioned faith on their part. When, however, the faith was wanting, or lay dormant, Jesus seems, if he found the unfortunate worthy, to have put forth effort to evoke faith. In restoring Peter's mother-in-law Jesus is said to have taken her by the hand and lifted her up, whereupon the fever left her and she ministered unto them. In healing the man with the withered hand in the synagogue there was the command to the unfortunate, "Stand up in the center," which was calculated to create a state of expectancy; then there was the question addressed to the hostile sabbatarians who were watching him, a question which secured no response on the part of the hardened Pharisees, and the further command to stretch forth the hand ere a cure was wrought. Even greater care was exercised to evoke faith on the part of the deaf and stammering man who had been brought to him. Taking him aside from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers in his ears, touched his

¹ Here and elsewhere in this paper the author follows in the main the translations of Dr. W. G. Ballantine's *Revised New Testament* (Houghton-Mifflin Co). He does so not only because of the scholarly character of the volume, despite its modernness of phrase, but also because, being true to the original, it strongly reinforces the conclusions of this study.

tongue with spit; and looked up to heaven and sighed before he cried. *Ephphatha* (be opened), all extremely suggestive and all done apparently with the purpose of evoking faith on the part of the poor unfortunate. Quite as painstaking were his efforts to bring the blind man of Bethsaida to the point where he could heal him. In this instance he led the unfortunate outside the village and after spitting in his eyes and laying his hands on him he asked him, "Do you see anything?" Then after his reply that he saw men as trees walking, he put his hands on his eyes ere he restored him. The ten lepers who appealed to him were told to go to the priests, presumably that if they thought they had been healed they might be examined and certified to as sound of skin. It was not until they in obedience to his charge had started that they discovered they had been freed from their leprosy.

In a number of instances it would seem to have been the faith of those who stood in a paternal attitude toward the unfortunate that moved Jesus to acts of healing, though we cannot be sure that the child or servant for whom healing was sought was not in an attitude of expectancy which was favorable to restoration to soundness. However that may be, it was the faith of the one appealing to Jesus that at times seems to have greatly pleased him, as in the case of the Syrophenician woman who came to him and begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter and in the case of the Roman centurion whose bondservant, dear unto him, was sick. In these and kindred cases it would seem, such is the character of the narratives, so fragmentary are they and so wanting in exact physiological data, that we cannot safely say that the ones restored were themselves without faith in the Master. Even the daughter of Jairus may have known why her father had left home and may have fallen into a sweet, trance-like sleep in the full confidence that the dear Teacher and wonderful Healer would soon stand by her cot.

Again it should be evident that Jesus must have conditions fairly favorable or he could not, or would not, heal such sick and maimed as came, or were brought, to him. In Nazareth upon occasion, as we have seen, he healed but a few. The very atmosphere of his native village was hostile to him. Those whom he did heal may have appealed to him because their faith rose so superior to their environment. His heart was touched. In the home of Jairus he would do nothing until the noisy hired mourners who wailed and beat their breasts were gotten rid of. Here one of the world's greatest exegetes simply notes that Jesus was *irritated* by this clamor and

wailing by those who had got on the job before Jairus cou'd get back; while Farrar notes that this tumult "would be very repulsive to the soul of Jesus." This is true unquestionably; but it is not enough if Jesus' work was conditioned, as we believe it was, by the character of his environment. The blind man of Bethsaida was led out of the village away from its distractions ere he was restored. Jesus is said to have healed many who were in crowds who thronged him; but it is altogether probable that these crowds were largely made up of those most friendly in their attitude toward him and most desirous of seeing these works of mercy wrought. The fact is not to be overlooked that after a day spent largely in the synagogue in worship and instruction, or one spent in teaching in the open air by the sea or among the hills, Jesus had brought to him, as we are told, at evening after the sun had set, those sick and those possessed of demons whom he healed. Thus, it would seem, the Master found in the quiet and peace of the twilight hour, after the restless and hostile ones had gone, a fit time for many of his works of mercy. Fitter time could not have been found for such works. Nature herself must have conspired to assist him in this blessed ministry.

Then, finally, it should be evident that Jesus himself was not always in fit physical condition for such works of mercy. Unquestionably the gospels plainly intimate that the power by which he wrought was from God. Luke in dwelling upon the beginnings of his Galilean ministry prefaces the account of his healing a paralytic by remarking, "The power of the Lord was with him to heal." This power, as Plummer in his *Luke* (*I. C. C.*, p. 152), remarks, was "for Jesus to employ in working miracles." This thought of reliance upon the power of God appears most emphatically in what Jesus had to say in his defense when charged with doing what he did under the inspiration of Beelzebub. "If I am casting out demons by the finger of God," which is in substantial agreement with Matthew's report of what he says, "If I am casting out demons by the Spirit of God." In these passages in which in the English we have the word "power," the Greek has *δύναμις*; but in another and kindred passage in which there is allusion to Jesus' wonderful achievements as a healer, "They were all amazed at the *greatness* of God," we have in the original another and more unusual word *μεγαλειότητι*, which the R. V. renders "majesty"; but a word which nonetheless attributes the power through which Jesus wrought his works of healing to God. Nevertheless these works were regarded very nat-

urally as wrought by Jesus himself. We are told that at a certain time "the whole crowd tried to touch him, because power (*δύναμις*) went out from him and healed them all." When the woman who had a hemorrhage came up behind and touched the tassel of his cloak and was healed, Jesus exclaimed, "Some one touched me, for I know that power has gone forth from me." Hence we are forced to conclude that where there was consciousness of loss there must have been some weakening of the physical energy; and that where there were many such outputs of power there necessarily was such exhaustion as to force the Master to secure reinforcement through retirement and rest.

We are not to forget that in such a study as this we have to do with one who after all that is said of God's reinforcement of him had only a man's resources with which to face the demands which life made upon him. The use which God made of him must have depended almost wholly upon his native resources and the ways in which he conserved and augmented these. We should also keep in mind the fact that nothing which the Master did could have proved more exhausting than the cures which he wrought. Hence it is that we are not surprised to find him not only resting with his disciples at night after the labors of the day but also going to his home in Capernaum after a prolonged Galilean tour or trying to get away from the crowds by passing with his disciples across Galilee's lake into the uninhabited regions beyond, though that the crowds sometimes followed him and denied him the rest which he sought is manifest. Such power as was needed for this work, the impoverishment of which at times he seems to have felt, could not have been wholly physical, what we are wont to designate as "vital force"; and because it was not something more than rest was needed in order that he might in the plenitude of his resources face the sick and the maimed. There was the spiritual element to be taken into account. Hence his need of seasons of prayer, secured in the lonely regions about the cities and villages in which he labored.² Our pictures of the Master as thus engaged in prayer are as truly suggestive just here as those in which we visualize him as sleeping upon a boat's cushion while the disciples are making their way with him across the lake of Galilee.

² It is a significant fact that after the disciples had miserably failed to rid a boy of a deaf and dumb spirit and had appealed to the Master to learn why they had failed, he who had restored him replied, "This kind cannot come out by any means except by prayer."

So imperfect was the understanding of disease on the part of the gospel narrators that it is impossible to say in just what condition many were who are said to have come to Jesus for healing. The terms used are general and vague rather than specific. The term "fever" (*πυρετός*, burning heat) as used in one instance is vague, coming as it does from *πῦρ* (fire). It may have been used of any of several varieties of fever, or presumably of the overheating of the body through fatigue which might easily have been mistaken for a fever. Those mentally unbalanced, whether the type of insanity was mild or severe, were thought to be possessed by a demon; but it is impossible to determine from the different accounts in just what condition any given unfortunate might have been. There are types of mental aberration that are very responsive to the magnetic influence of a strong personality. Such may have come under the influence of Jesus. Some of those alluded to as possessed by demons seem to have been epileptic. Only the milder cases of such are deemed curable; but even in the severer cases the seizure may be so short that its passing may have seemed like the ridding of the sufferer of his demon. If what is needed in curable cases is as Doctor Cabot declares the "simplification of environment with the diminution of every kind of strain and interest and stimulus" then Jesus may have put some such unfortunates in the way of health by engendering a state of mind conducive to a cure.

We read of those palsied who were brought to Jesus and were healed by him; but our N. T. Greek term for palsy, *παραλυτικός*, comes from a verb which conveys the thought of a palsied person as one "loose on one side." Hence we are left in doubt in the gospel narratives as to the extent to which the afflicted of the palsy suffered. Even in the case of him who is said to have been borne of four the condition of the palsied may have been far less severe than the friends who brought him surmised it to have been. It is natural for a simple folk to suppose their afflicted to be in worse state than they actually are. But if we are left in doubt as to the nature and extent to which these and other diseases had progressed, no less are we as to the nature and extent of the misfortunes of those alluded to as the lame, the deaf, the dumb, and the blind. Yes, even in the case of the latter, for where eyes become infected through filth and neglect, as they often do in the East those who pass for blind may not be wholly so.

Another thing which cannot in the interests of honesty be overlooked is the fact that we have no positive assurance that the cures

wrought were in all cases permanent. We know enough of mental therapeutics to be sure that in not a few instances, even where unusual power is manifested by the healer, there is bound to be a relapse, owing either to the nature of the disease, which has been but temporarily checked, or to the character of the afflicted, a period of responsiveness and elation being followed by one of depression and physical lassitude in which all that has been gained is lost. Though Jesus' ministry was confined almost wholly to Galilee and its environs and Perea, east of the Jordan, and continued but a single year, as the synoptic narratives reveal, it would seem that his works of healing were quite extended and that there was little chance of many of the relapses becoming widely known; and this is the more apparent from the fact that in most instances such as did sink back would themselves be blamed, their relapse being supposed to result from a want of faith and consecration rather than from any remissness on the part of Jesus. As another has said after remarking that, "It is also necessary to bear in mind that the cure may often have been only temporary." "If there was a relapse, people did not infer any deficiency in the miraculous efficacy of the healer."

Three things should be admitted even by the most searching critic of the gospel narratives. One is that Jesus never treated disease and physical infirmity as illusions. To him they were most manifestly and painfully real, misfortunes to be deplored and to be wrestled with heroically and persistently. No small part of the work which he delegated to his disciples, as he sent them forth on their evangelistic tours, was that of restoring the sick and the maimed; and the thing which seems to have most elated them upon their return as they rendered their report was that they had given sanity to some possessed of demons. It has become customary for the leaders of one of the Christian cults of our day who deny the existence of disease and infirmity, who declare that they are illusions, to claim that their position here is the same as that of the Nazarene. That such have helped thousands is unquestioned; but it has not been because they teach that sickness and infirmity are illusions that are to be gotten rid of but rather because they create for such unfortunates an atmosphere of good cheer, provoke confidence, despite the falsity of their fundamental concepts, and because, perchance chiefly because, they bring their own personal energy and magnetism to bear upon the unfortunate. They help

and often cure not because of their denial of the existence of disease but in spite of it.

Another thing which must be admitted is that Jesus did have unusual power over certain types of disease and infirmities. After all allowances are made for the distortion of facts and the growth of legends there remains a considerable residuum that in all fairness should be recognized and that indeed seems to be increasingly recognized today as we witness mental therapists doing many of the things the Master himself did.

The third thing which must be admitted is that far more important than any cure wrought by Jesus was the daily revelation of his thought, his love, and his sympathy. His life was lived among a people most of whose teachers were arrogant and selfish. They promulgated their thought and expected men to accept and follow it. Never did it occur to them to win their hearts, to love them, perchance, into a kingdom of love. As leaders they aroused the hostility, if not the contempt, of those whom it was their business to help and encourage. Jesus won men and at the same time provoked to sane thought and to loving service. If the narratives of his work as a mental therapist went beyond fact those who shaped them must have known that they did not exaggerate the love and compassion of their great Teacher.

As man comes to understand himself and to care for and rid his body of disease and infirmity he may think less of the therapeutic side of Christ's ministry and will exalt him more and more in thought as a Teacher and Friend. This it would seem is what the Master himself must desire. Great as was his love and sympathy while he lived and labored he did not fail to endeavor to make men see that his ministry of healing was not his greatest nor most characteristic contribution to the life of the world. Wonderful as are the humanitarian undertakings of the Master's followers in our time they must cease as the need for them ceases; but the memory of the sane thought and sympathetic life of the Master will remain as the norm of the world's thought and life after the last sightless one has come to see, the last deaf one has come to hear, and the last fevered brow has cooled.