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Many Healings of the Woman with the Flow of Blood

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Abstract: With the emergence of the modern quest for the historical Jesus, theologians began increasingly questioning traditional views of Jesus as a healer of human bodies. While a growing suspicion of Jesus's role as a literal healer of the body is commonly traced to the influence of the Enlightenment, in this essay, I will suggest that the roots of this theological marginalization run deeper, in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformations, when supernatural did not yet equal superstitious. The essay will examine two representative exegeses of the healing of the woman with the flow of blood in Mark 5:25–34, offered by Martin Luther and John Calvin. My analysis will reveal a shift of hermeneutical emphases from the bleeding woman's restoration to the dynamics of her faith, and consequently, a new Protestant vision of Jesus's role in the story, which I will argue occurred due to the new theological importance placed on faith by Protestant reformers.

Keywords: healing; Protestant Reformation; woman with the flow of blood; Mark 5:25–34; faith; Jesus Christ; Martin Luther; John Calvin

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1. Introduction

With the emergence of the modern quest for the historical Jesus, theologians began increasingly questioning traditional views of Jesus as a healer of human bodies. For example, influential nineteenth- and twentieth-century interpretations of Jesus's healing miracles included manifestations of his moral will (Schweitzer), existential and symbolic expressions of the relationship with the Absolute (Bultmann), the acts of magic (Smith), and examples of healing informed by the healer's own suffering (Remus).[1] While a growing suspicion of Jesus's role as a literal healer of the body is commonly traced to the influence of the Enlightenment, in this essay, I will suggest that the roots of this theological marginalization run deeper, in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformations, when the supernatural did not yet equal the superstitious. This essay will examine two representative exegeses of the healing of the woman with the flow of blood in Mark 5:25–34, offered by the main initiator of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, and a leading systematic thinker of early Protestantism, John Calvin. My analysis will reveal a shift of hermeneutical emphases from the bleeding woman's restoration to the dynamics of her faith, and consequently, a new Protestant vision of Jesus's role in the story, which I will argue occurred due to the new theological importance placed on faith by Protestant reformers.

2. Jesus as the Healer of the Soul and Body in Premodern Christian Thought

The tradition of construing Jesus as the divine physician stretches back to the late first century. Patristic writers viewed Jesus as the healer of sin and evil in the human soul and the restorer of human immortality through the spiritual medicine of the Lord's supper, baptism, repentance, and even martyrdom.[2] The "Letter to the Ephesians" attributed to the martyred Bishop Ignatius of Antioch (d. c. 108) contained the first known characterization of Christ as a physician and the Lord's supper as his antidote to death.[3] In the second half of the second century, Theophilus of Antioch (d. c. 185) spoke of Christ as healing the blindness of the human soul and hardness of heart, and, in his treatise *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–202) portrayed him as the physician offering the eucharistic bread

of immortality.[4] Origen (c. 184–253) similarly described Christ as the divine Word, able to cure all evil in the human soul.[5]

At the same time, although early Christian writers viewed the importance of Jesus's ministry as a healer of the body as secondary to what they perceived as his spiritual healings of sin, these thinkers nevertheless affirmed the significance of the former. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) spoke of Jesus as the only physician providing all-sufficient cures for both the soul and the body.[6] In the West, Tertullian (c. 155–220) described the true health restored by Jesus in terms of restoration of the knowledge of God. Yet, at the same time, he also stressed the importance of Jesus's physical healings as literally fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah 53:4 ("surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases").[7] Frequently, early Christian writers evoked Jesus's bodily healings in their disputes against the worship of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine. For example, in the fourth century, in his treatise *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius (c. 296–373) used the scope of Jesus's healings to assert his superiority over Asclepius. According to Athanasius, Asclepius was wrongly considered a god for skillfully curing human bodies with herbs, which were already present in nature. In contrast, Christ healed by restoring what had originally been lacking in nature (for example, giving the sight to the blind man).[8] Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313–386) spoke of Jesus as a minister to both the soul and the body, and exhorted the sufferers from both sin and bodily sickness to call on his help.[9]

In the West, the tradition of viewing Jesus as the divine physician was ultimately solidified in the writings of Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Augustine further developed and popularized the image of *Christus medicus* that since became firmly established in Western Christian thought.[10] For Augustine, humanity was plagued by the tumor of pride, which Christ cured by applying a medicine of humility. Furthermore, in his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine introduced the subsequently influential trope of Christ being simultaneously the physician (*medicus*) and the applied medicine (*medicamentum*) for the human soul.[11] Finally, Augustine stressed that, as the divine creator of bodies as well as souls, Jesus was also the perfect healer of the body, who would never err in his treatments, nor himself contract the disease.

3. The Woman with the Flow of Blood in the Synoptic Gospels

The story of the healing of the woman with the flow of blood (or Haimorrhoousa, from the Greek αἱμορῥοοῦσα, "the bleeding woman") in Mark 5:25–34 has a long history of capturing Christian theological imaginations.[12] The narrative of the Haimorrhoousa is intercalated within another narrative about Jesus's resurrection of the daughter of a synagogue leader, identified by Mark and Luke as Jairus. A woman who suffered from bleeding for twelve years came behind Jesus on his way to Jairus's house. The hemorrhaging woman touched his cloak (or its fringe, in Matthew and Luke). The Markan and Lukan accounts further record that, having approached Jesus in the crowd, the Haimorrhoousa touched Jesus's clothes without his knowledge. In addition, Mark indicates that the woman had previously spent all her money on numerous painful treatments from physicians, but her condition only deteriorated. In the Markan and Lukan versions of the story, Jesus sensed the release of his power and asked the crowd who had touched him, after which the trembling woman fearfully confessed her healing, which had already taken place. In Matthews's more concise version of the story, the Haimorrhoousa experienced healing, following Jesus's assurance. All three accounts share the same ending: Jesus told the woman, "Your faith has made you well", before dismissing her. The story's premodern and early modern interpreters further discussed in this essay approached these accounts as one unified narrative centered on Jesus's proclamation to the Haimorrhoousa: "Your faith has made you well." At the same time, they understood in different ways the meaning of the woman's newly found wellness and the role of her own agency and faith.

4. The Healing of the Haimorrhoousa in Early Christianity

The story of the Haimorrhoousa played an important role in early Christian devotion, as testified to by a rich apocryphal tradition established by the fourth century, as well as material and artistic production.[13] The walls of the catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter in Rome bore early third-century murals of the scene of the Haimorrhoousa's healing. In his fourth-century *History of the Church*, Eusebius described a statue of Jesus healing the woman with the flow of blood erected in the city of Caesarea Philippi, allegedly by the (former) Haimorrhoousa herself in gratitude for her recovery.[14] Eusebius noted that a plant growing around the sculpture was known for its power to heal every kind of disease. The depictions of the Haimorrhoousa's healing were also found on early Byzantine amulets, which were hypothesized to have been used for healing purposes and, specifically, to ward off hysteria. In sum, the material evidence suggests that, in early Christianity, the story of the Haimorrhoousa was viewed primarily as a story of a miraculous physical recovery and invoked in popular devotional healing practices.

In late antiquity, the interpretation of the Haimorrhoousa began to shift. The narrative was increasingly explicated primarily as allegorizing the cleansing of human sin by Christ. Such was the interpretation maintained by Gregory of Nazianzus, and, later in the West, by Augustine.[15] This was in accord with Augustine's recasting the theological trope of *Christus medicus* in predominantly spiritual terms. Augustine's subsequent primarily allegorical reading of the Haimorrhoousa's narrative as an account of the cleansing of sin and an exhortation to moral restoration became the main mode of its interpretation continuing into the middle ages. However, it was not until the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation that the Haimorrhoousa's story had acquired a significantly reimagined spiritual meaning in light of novel Protestant soteriological concerns with justification by faith, which left Christians simultaneously both sinful and justified.

5. Reformation of Salvation in Early Modernity

The entrance of Christianity into the early modern era was marked by the sixteenth-century splitting of the medieval Catholic church and the emergence of the Protestant movement as the third global Christian tradition over a dispute over the doctrine of justification (or salvation). It may sound incredible to contemporary readers that a major historic event that marked the end of medieval Christendom, redefined the map of Europe, and eventually led to the formation of modern European states, as well as to other multiple social, economic, and cultural changes, was ignited by a controversy over religious dogma. Yet, while a number of other political, social, and ecclesial factors certainly contributed to the rise of Protestant reform, it was a perceived need to align the church's teachings on justification with what early reformers saw in Scripture that sparked the Protestant Reformations.

Although the medieval Catholic church did not have an official doctrine of how Christians are spiritually justified, a general consensus was that both faith and good works were necessary to eventually merit salvation. In the medieval Catholic tradition, salvation was a lifelong process, which required faith formed by love, through growing in literal holiness by participating in the church's sacramental system and performing virtuous works. It was only on the Judgment Day when the sinner would ultimately be judged by Christ as meriting salvation or eternal condemnation. In the early sixteenth century, an observant Augustinian monk and University of Wittenberg Bible professor, Martin Luther (1483–1546), struggled with an overwhelming awareness of his sin and uncertainty about his salvation. Between 1514 and 1518, through a series of interpretive insights, the main one being his new understanding of the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17, Luther arrived at a theology centered on salvation attained by grace through faith alone. Consequently, Luther became convinced that his contemporary Catholic Church's teachings on salvation, requiring virtuous deeds in addition to faith, were erroneous and had to be reformed. Luther was eventually excommunicated in 1521, after which the Protestant movement irreversibly took off.

Medieval Catholicism developed an elaborate typology of different types of faith. In contrast, Luther taught that Christian faith was trust in God's promises as recorded in Scripture, the chief of which was God's promise to justify Christians on account of their faith alone, without expecting any merits or human contributions in return.[16] Luther's theology of justification by faith collapsed salvation from a process to a moment that brings sinners despairing of their sins from self-reliance to faith in God's promises to forgive and save them. Such authentic salvific faith no longer saw Christ as a judge but rather as a merciful savior.[17] Salvation was simply rendering sinners righteous before God on account of their faith in Christ, not of their actual righteousness. For this reason, Luther described Christians as simultaneously both sinful and righteous (*simul iustus et peccator*): sinful with their own sin and righteous with the righteousness of Christ imputed (or credited) to them. This is not to say that Luther denied the need for moral transformation for Christians. Rather, for him, moral transformation would occur post-justification, which would allow a Christian to serve God and the neighbor in gratitude and out of Christ-like love, free of the self-interest to perform sufficient good deeds in order to earn salvation.

Luther admired and was significantly influenced by the thought of Augustine (whom he believed to be in agreement with him on matters of justification), including Augustine's *Christus medicus* theology. Luther's writings contained frequent references to Christ that used medical imagery. Luther retained Augustine's original dual representation of Christ as both the physician and the medicine, although in light of his *simul* theological anthropology, he described Christians as still sick while also being fully healed.[18] This led to the demotion of the soteriological importance of the traditional trope of Jesus as the physician of sin, as literal holiness was no longer required for salvation.

For Luther, the teachings about justification by faith became a hermeneutical key to the entire Bible. Luther was supremely concerned with demonstrating that belief in solely justifying faith is indeed supported by the Bible, as well as with explaining what such soteriologically efficacious faith must entail. These hermeneutical commitments influenced Luther's and, subsequently, Calvin's readings of gospel healing narratives, as illustrated by their exegeses of the story of the miraculous healing of the woman with the flow of blood.

6. The Healing of the Haimorrhoousa in the Protestant Reformations

Luther, Calvin, and other early Protestant reformers demonstrated a high level of suspicion regarding claims of miraculous healing that purportedly continued to occur in their own era.[19] As Philip Soergel has shown, there were several reasons for Luther's cautious and critical approach to this issue.[20] First, in Luther's late medieval context, healing miracles were strongly associated with devotion to saints, whom Luther came to see as unwarranted religious mediators of direct and unhindered access to Christ through faith. Luther criticized contemporary practices of saintly veneration, including pilgrimages and votive gifts, as being used for economic gain by the medieval church, which allegedly would occasionally not hesitate to forge such miracles for financial profit.

Second, while Luther did not dismiss all healing miracles as fraudulent, he believed that at least some seemingly genuine healing miracles were demonically staged to deceive people and lead them away from true faith. Luther was challenged by the Catholic claim that, for centuries, the church had manifested miracles, while Protestants had not been able to produce miracles of their own to testify to the validity of their religious teachings. In response to this charge, Luther stressed the secondary, weaker role of miracles in confirming the truth of one's religion. For Luther, authentic Christian faith should rest on the Word of God and did not require confirmation by external signs, such as healing miracles. Once the role of external signs was elevated, the role of the Word of God was consequently diminished, corrupting the primacy of faith, which, according to Luther, had happened in medieval Catholicism.

Similar to Luther, Calvin also criticized the desire for visible miracles to confirm one's faith, rather than trusting God's "bare" Word. While the reformers' emphasis on faith over

miracles primarily arose from their contemporary concerns, this emphasis also affected their interpretation of gospel narratives of miraculous healing.

Against this background, Luther read the story of the Haimorrhoousa pedagogically, as an instruction to both its initial and his own contemporary audiences in the proper experience, manifestation, and power of soteriologically efficacious faith, as exhibited by the bleeding woman.[21] In particular, according to Luther, the commendable strength of the woman's faith had two distinct dimensions. First, Luther emphasized that the woman approached Jesus with supreme faith in his exceeding power. She did not think it was necessary to look Jesus in the eyes, to convince him with many words to help her out, or to enlist others to advocate for her condition. On the contrary, she was certain of Jesus's ability to rescue her, should she merely reach him.

Second, Luther stressed that the woman's faith successfully overcame her struggles and fears regarding Jesus's kindness and goodness specifically towards her. The woman with a flow of blood was considered unclean and was prohibited from associating with others. With his characteristically lively imagination applied to scriptural exposition, Luther dramatically elaborated on the woman's internalization of her perceived low status.[22] Luther's bleeding woman genuinely felt polluted, rightfully excluded from her community, and even punished by God in a special way. She must have feared the sheer brazenness of her desire to touch Jesus. Nevertheless, the woman's exceptionally strong faith drove her straight to Christ, despite her own anxieties and fears.

Luther resisted a reading that, when feeling the release of his power and inquiring of the crowd who had touched him, Jesus actually meant what he asked. The intention of Luther's Jesus was, via the woman's testimony, to proclaim the strength and free reward of her faith to the surrounding crowd. In Luther's sermon on the hemorrhaging woman's healing, he described the power of her faith in the following way:

> Behold, that is an excellent faith! It realizes its unworthiness, and yet does not let this hinder it from trusting in Christ. Her faith does not doubt His grace and help, but breaks through the Law and everything that would frighten it away from Him. Even if all the world would restrain and hinder it, it [the faith] would still not think of leaving this man until it has taken hold of Him. Therefore, it [the faith] forces its way in and obtains what it seeks from Christ and immediately experiences the strength and work, even before Christ begins to speak with her. This faith cannot miss its mark in this man, as even Christ Himself must testify of her, saying, "Your faith has helped you" [Matt. 9:22].[23]

It is notable that, in this passage, the Haimorrhoousa's agency was hermeneutically subsumed under the agency of her faith. For Luther, Jesus's concluding words, "your faith has helped you (or made you well)", were the key to the narrative. It was crucial for the reformer's interpretation of this story that the woman did not earn her healing or offer Christ anything in exchange for it. This served as an obvious parallel for Luther's insistence on justification by faith alone, without any contributions of human works. One must note that this pedagogical culmination of Luther's exegesis never elaborated on or even directly mentioned the healing of the woman's body as the consequence of her faith. The Haimorrhoousa exhibited an exemplary faith in the power and benevolence of Christ, the chief benefit of which was her presumed spiritual salvation.

Like Luther, John Calvin (1509–1564), an intellectual founder of the Reformed tradition and a leading systematic thinker of early Protestantism, had a major impact on the subsequent development of Protestant thought. While Calvin's exegesis of the Haimorrhoousa's narrative was more concise than Luther's, his hermeneutical emphases were remarkably similar.[24] Calvin, too, read this story as a pedagogical exposition of the hemorrhaging woman's faith. However, unlike Luther, who exuberantly praised it, Calvin viewed the experiences and manifestations of the woman's faith as providing both positive and negative examples.

While the agency of Luther's Haimorrhoousa in attaining her salvation was ultimately subsumed under the agency of her faith, Calvin exaggerated the Haimorrhoousa's passivity and receptivity to an extreme. Calvin insisted that even the bleeding woman's faith in being healed by a mere touch of Jesus's clothes was not of her own but had been secretly granted to her by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Haimorrhoousa approached Christ guided by this externally supplied faith. This obedience made her behavior praiseworthy and pious. However, when the woman began fearing and trembling after being called forth by Christ, for Calvin, her faith started expressing a likely "mixture of sin and error."[25] This episode revealed that the Haimorrhoousa's externally supplied faith was still plagued by her own uncertainty.[26] In addition, Calvin suspected that, rather than stopping at Christ's garments and then sneaking back, the Haimorrhoousa should have perhaps openly gone straight to Jesus. According to Calvin, Jesus's exhortation to the woman to take courage was his correction of her inappropriate doubts adverse to true faith.

At the same time, Calvin acknowledged that the manifestation of the Haimorrhoousa's faith was ultimately praised by Jesus, who both forgave its deficiencies and strengthened it. For Calvin, this exemplified the general mode of the divine reception of human faith. Like Luther, Calvin stressed that, contrary to what the story seemed to suggest, Jesus healed the woman with full knowledge and intentionality. Jesus's inquiry was intended to make the woman's own testimony of her healing more credible for the surrounding crowd. For Calvin, the Haimorrhoousa's story illustrated that just as the woman's healing was the consequence of her faith, so too was salvation received solely on account of one's faith, as confirmed by Jesus's final assurance to the woman. The purpose of the story was to teach its audience the nature and proper manifestation of such soteriologically efficacious faith.

7. Conclusions

Early Christian writings revealed the importance placed on Jesus's role as a healer of the soul and the body. They emphasized Jesus's role as a spiritual healer of human sin, although they also attributed a (lesser) significance to his role as a healer of the body. In the Western Christian tradition, starting with Augustine's development of the earlier trope *Christus medicus*, the interpretations of Jesus's medical activity mainly shifted from his healing of physical to his healing of spiritual diseases. However, it was in the early modern era when traditional interpretations of Jesus's healings in the gospels faded in light of new theological concerns of early Protestant reformers, as exemplified by the exegeses of the story of the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5:25–34. In particular, in Martin Luther's and John Calvin's interpretations of this narrative, the hermeneutical emphasis radically shifted from the bleeding woman's physical or even moral restorations to the dynamics of her faith. Luther and Calvin read this story pedagogically, as teaching the proper experiences, manifestations, and power of a soteriologically efficacious faith, confirmed by Jesus's parting words to the Haimorrhoousa: "your faith has made you well."

The new, central hermeneutical role of faith was due to its unique soteriological importance for the Protestant reform movement. Subsequently, rather than healing the bleeding woman's hemorrhage, or even her sin, Jesus's role in the story became strengthening, accepting, and making public the Haimorrhoousa's faith. While the modern theological departure from Jesus's role as a literal healer of the body crystalized following the Enlightenment, this essay has shown that its theological roots run deeper in the new polemics about faith in the Protestant Reformations.

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Notes

[1] See (Schweitzer 2001), (Bultmann 1958), (Smith 1981), and (Remus 1997). For more recent engagments, see (Kubiś 2020) and (Dźwigała 2020). For the survey of the changing interpretation of Jesus, see (Porterfield 2005), especially Chapter 1, "Jesus: Exorcist and Healer".

2 The following discussion consulted (Grundmann 2018). See also (Schipperges 1965) and (Fichtner 1982).

3 Ignatius, "Letter to the Ephesians", in (Ignatius 1946, pp. 63, 68).

4 Theophilus, *Theophilus to Autolycus*, in (Theophilus 2004, p. 91). For Irenaeus, see *Against Heresies*, Book III, Chapter V, in (Irenaeus 2001, p. 418).

5 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VIII, 72, in (Origen 1953).

6 The English translation is found in (Clement of Alexandria 2015, p. 4).

7 For the reference to health, see Tertullian, *On Modesty*, IX.12–13. For bodily healing, see *Against Marcion*, IV.VIII.4. All scriptural quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

8 This English translation is found in (Athanasius 2011, p. 102).

9 Cyril, *Lecture X* in (Cyril of Jerusalem, p. 355).

10 For an overview of Augustine's use of *Christus medicus*, see (Arbesmann 1954).

11 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.14.13 in (Augustine 1995).

12 An alternative transliteration is *haemorrhoissa*. The parallel accounts of this narrative are in Matthew 9:20–22 and Luke 8:43–48.

13 The following discussion of the healing of the Haimorrhoousa in early Christianity and late antiquity depends on (Baert 2014), (Baert et al. 2012, pp. 663–81), (de Wet 2019, pp. 1–28), and (Spier 1993, p. 44).

14 Eusebius, *the History of the Church* 7.18.1–4 in (Eusebius 1989).

15 In the East, John Chrysostom offered a more literal reading of the Haimorrhoousa's healing, which nevertheless emphasized its spiritual implications over an actual bodily recovery. See (de Wet 2019).

16 On the comparison between the medieval Catholic and Luther's understanding of faith, see (Hamm 2004), especially Chapter 5, "Why did "Faith" become for Luther the Central Concept of the Christian Life?". See also (Steinmetz 2002), Chapter 4, "Abraham and the Reformation", esp. pp. 33 and 40–41.

17 For the classic study, see (Oberman 1966). Also see (McGrath 2001).

18 For a detailed discussion of Luther's use of the *Christus medicus* trope, see (Steiger 2005).

19 On early Protestant attitudes towards miracles, see (Walker 1988), (Soergel 2012), and (Soergel 1999). The following discussion relies on (Porterfield 2005) and (Soergel 2012), 38–46.

20 On the medieval cult of saints, see (Vauchez 1997), especially Chapter 14, "'*Virtus*:' The Language of the Body," pp. 427–43, and Chapter 15, "The Structures and Expansion of the Field of the Miraculous," pp. 444–77, as well as (Klaniczay 2014), Chapter 13, "Using Saints: Intercession, Healing, Sanctity."

21 Luther's works are cited from (*Luthers Werke*, Luther 1883–2009), hereinafter WA, and (*Luther's Works*, Luther 1955–) hereinafter LW. Luther's exegesis of the Haimorrhoousa is primarily based on Matt. 9:20–22 and included in his sermon on Matt. 9:18–26 in Caspar Cruciger's 1544 *Summer Postil* in WA 22:390–405; LW 79:309–22. Luther preached the sermon between 1521 and 1537, but the exact year remains unknown. In addition, in 1534–35, Luther composed annotations on Matt. 9:20–22 to assist Johann Bugenhagen's preaching. These annotations are found in WA 10/1.2:428–41; LW 67:75–78.

22 For more on Luther's "composition of theological fiction" in interpreting the Bible, see Chapter 9, "Luther and the Drunkenness of Noah", in (Steinmetz 2002), especially pp. 110–11.

23 WA 22.397:13–22; LW 79: 314–15.

24 Calvin's works are cited from (*Ioannis Calvini opera*, Calvin 1863–1900), hereinafter CO. Calvin's exegesis of the story of the bleeding woman is found in CO 45:254–60. The English translation is found in (Calvin [1845] 2010, pp. 408–13) as part of his *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*.

25 *vitii et erroris fuerit admixtum*, CO 45:256 (Calvin [1845] 2010, p. 411).

26 On the crucial importance of theological certainty for early Reformers, see (Schreiner 2011), especially Chapter 2. For Calvin, see (ibid., pp. 66–72).

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