

Jesus' Healing Stories: Imperial Critique and Eschatological Anticipations in Matthew's Gospel

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What are we to make of the prominent place that Matthew's Gospel gives to Jesus' miracle-working, particularly his healings and exorcisms?

As Jesus' public activity begins, a summary highlights Jesus' teaching, proclaiming, and healing:

...teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.... (Matt 4:23–24).

After three chapters of teaching (the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5–7), two chapters follow that narrate seven healings (8:1–4, 5–13, 14–15; 9:2–8, 18–26, 27–31), two exorcisms (8:28–34; 9:32–34), and a storm-calming (8:23–27). The summaries in 8:16 and 9:35 generalize the healings and exorcisms to suggest extensive activity. After chapters 8 and 9 follow further healings (12:9–14; 14:34–36; 15:29–31; 20:29–34; 21:14) and exorcisms (12:22; 15:21–28; 17:14–20), as well as feedings (14:13–21; 15:32–39), walking on water (14:22–33), producing

a coin from a fish's mouth (17:24–27), cursing a fig tree (21:18–19), and rising from the dead (chapter 28).

What contributions do Jesus' miracle-working acts make to the Gospel narrative? Some approaches have seen them as "religious" stories concerned with Christology, somehow "proving" that Jesus is the Messiah or that he is "divine." Other approaches "spiritualize" the stories as exhibiting features of discipleship such as understanding, faith, and obedience. Yet other approaches have focused on their social function. They are seen as asserting boundaries vis-à-vis other groups in conflict situations and maintaining the interests and identity of Jesus-followers. And, of course, rationalist approaches have sought to recast the miraculous by domesticating it to a "cause-and effect" worldview. The feeding of the five thousand, for example, results when crowd members are shamed by the boy's example into sharing their food.

These approaches have produced much insight into these rich stories. Yet, despite their diverse perspectives, they share a problematic feature. Attention to Christology and discipleship, and communal conflicts and social identity has, ironically, diverted focus from the miracles themselves. More specifically,

these approaches decenter the material transformations that the healing and exorcism stories narrate.

In this discussion, my concern is to re-center the material transformations. My interest is not an apologetic for miracles but an elaboration of the significance of these accounts of material transformation as part of Matthew's good news. Because of limits of space, we will focus predominantly on the healings and exorcisms.

1. *Matthew 11:2–6 and Isaiah*

Our starting point is the beginning of the Gospel's third narrative section (11:2—16:20).¹

From prison, John, last referred to in 4:12 when he was arrested, sends his disciples to inquire about Jesus:

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." Matt 11:2–6

Commentators conventionally note two contexts for this passage.

The passage selectively reviews Jesus' activity since the beginning of his public ministry in 4:17. Jesus' response to the inquiry from John's disciples about his identity comprises an invitation to discern the significance of his actions for his identity. The sustained sequence of miracle stories in chapters 8 and 9 is particularly in view. There, in Jesus' actions, "the blind receive

their sight" (9:27–31), "the lame walk" (8:5–13; 9:1–8), "the lepers are cleansed" (8:1–4), "the deaf hear" (9:32–34), "the dead are raised" (9:18–19, 23–26), and "the poor have good news brought to them" (4:17, 23–25; 5:3—7:29; 9:35; 11:1; including the sick who are healed [8:15; 9:20–22] and the demon-possessed who are exorcized [8:16, 28–34; 9:32–33]). This is "what the Messiah was doing" (11:2).

Intertextually, the response of Matthew's Jesus evokes language and themes from Isaiah: Isa 26:19 (the dead), 29:18 (the deaf and blind), 35:5–6 (the blind, deaf, and lame), 42:7 (the blind), 61:1 (the poor and blind). These material transformations are part of God's justice that Isaiah envisions coming among humans: "Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you" (Isa 35:4). God's servant "will bring forth justice to the nations... He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;" (Isa 42:1–4). This justice is envisioned as God's intervention through (as well as against) Assyria (Isa 10:5–19) and through Cyrus the Persian (Isa 44:28—45:1) against Babylon (Isa 13; 43:14). God intervenes in a world that is not aligned with God's purposes. God's intervention rectifies this situation, bringing the world into alignment with God's will.

A cluster of events, present and future, accomplishes God's purpose according to Isaiah. God effects judgment "against all the nations" (Isa 34:2), including the defeat of Judah's enemies (chapters 13—33). God also effects the judgment (Isa 10:11, 29) and vindication of Jerusalem and Judah (Isa 24:23; 27:13; 40:9–11; 44:26–28). God also transforms wilderness into abundant fertility (Isa 35:1–2, 6b; 41:17–20; 55:13), restores the sick to wholeness (Isa 35:5–6a; 42:7), ends death and suffering,

1. Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, Revised Edition (Peabody: Hendrikson, 2004), 140–153.

and supplies abundant food for all people (Isa 25 6–10) “It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God, we have waited for him, so that he might save us This is the LORD for whom we have waited, let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (25 9) That is, in evoking Isaiah, Matthew’s Jesus brings into play a multifaceted vision of God’s salvific intervention that materially and physically transforms the world

It is important to recognize the significance of evoking Isaiah’s vision of a transformed world that involves the subjugation of the nations, the gathering of God’s people, the healing of the sick, the

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feeding of those without food, the end of death and suffering, and the inclusion of all people in God’s purposes The Gospel regularly evokes Isaiah to elaborate and interpret Jesus’ God-given commission to manifest God’s saving presence (1 21–23) and reign or empire (4 17)

- In declaring Jesus’ identity and mission as “God with us” (1 23), the Gospel

evokes Isa 7—9² These Isaiah chapters address a situation of imperial threat that King Ahaz of Judah faces from Kings Rezin and Pekah of Syria and Israel and from the super-power Assyria God offers the unreceptive Ahaz a sign, the conception of a child to be named “Emmanuel” (Isa 7 14, 8 8, 10) This child signifies God’s saving presence, the continuation of David’s line, and the people’s future The chapters narrate resistance and refusal to trust God’s word and saving work (7 3–13), the role of imperial power as a means of divine punishment (Isa 7 17–25, 8 8–15), and God’s purposes of saving the people from that power (7 19, 8 1–4, 9 1–7) Evoking Isa 7—9 establishes an analogy with the situation of the Gospel’s audience The latter also live under imperial power, that of Rome, and are also promised God’s salvation (1 21) By analogy, the Isaiah paradigm simultaneously frames Rome as God’s agent in punishing Jerusalem (22 7) and provides assurance that God will overcome Rome to establish God’s purposes (24 27–31) Chapters 7 through 9 of Isaiah elaborate Jesus’ mission to manifest God’s saving presence in a world dominated by Roman power (Matt 1 21–23)

- In Matt 3 3 John is introduced with an Isaiah citation Isa 40 3 addresses the community exiled in Babylon after Jerusalem’s destruction in 587 B C E The text announces God’s intervention

2 Warren Carter, “Evoking Isaiah: Why Summon Isaiah in Matthew 1 23 and 4 15–16?” in Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001) 93–107 For discussion of Matthew’s other Isaiah citations, Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999)

to reverse this situation through Cyrus the Persian and the exiles' return to their land (Isa 44:28—45:1). Its use in Matt 3 in relation to John some six hundred years later involves some obvious differences. The place is Judea, not Babylon. Rome, not Babylon, is in power. Jesus not Cyrus is the anointed one (Matt 1:1, 16–17; Isa 44:28—45:1). But there is a fundamental continuity. God continues to assert God's reign or empire (3:2) in the midst of and to deliver people from oppressive imperial power. Just as Babylon's empire had fallen, so also will Rome's.

- In 4:15–16, Matthew cites Isa 9:1–2, a second evoking of the paradigmatic Isa 7–9. Elaborating this intertext highlights both the reality of imperial power and the promise of God's salvation or transforming power ("light") now manifested in Jesus in the midst of Rome's imperial world ("Galilee under the Gentiles"). In addition to these affirmations, the citation raises the question as to how Jesus will carry out this "light-bringing" mission. It thus points forward to Jesus' public activity that commences in 4:17 with his declaration concerning God's reign or empire and his miraculous actions (4:23–24).
- In 8:17, Jesus' healings and exorcisms are interpreted in terms of Isa 53:4, "he took our infirmities and bore our diseases." The link establishes that Jesus' actions are in accord with and carry out God's purposes. But the connection with Isa 53 is something of a stretch. Whereas the servant (Israel or a group within it) suffers on behalf of the people and bears that suffering in his own body (Isa 53:4–7), Jesus "took away" or heals diseases.
- The fifth explicit citation from Isaiah involves Isa 42:1–4 in Matt 12:17–21. Again healing is prominent in the

context (12:15) though the citation's referent probably includes numerous aspects of chapters 11–13 such as Jesus' God-given authority, the Spirit's activity, and the involvement of Gentiles as recipients of justice. The Isaiah context—deliverance from Babylon's imperial power—also contributes in that it contrasts the difference between God's merciful ways of working for all people with conventional imperial (Roman) ways of asserting control.

With these citations, interpreters conventionally emphasize the "fulfillment" of Isaiah's "messianic" prophecies in Jesus' mission. But this approach focusing on Jesus overplays the messianic role since the material from Isaiah scarcely mentions a messiah (apart from Cyrus). It also seriously underplays the imperial and material dimensions of Isaiah's address and vision of God's salvific intervention. Interpreters frequently and mistakenly spiritualize the Isaiah citations and the Gospel, but imperial power and material transformation should not be so readily dismissed. Both imperial power and material brokenness were integral parts of Isaiah's *and* Matthew's worlds. Both figures envisage their material transformation.

2. A third context: Imperial realities

While narrative and intertextual contexts are significant dimensions of 11:2–6, a third context, that of the world of the Roman Empire, has frequently been neglected. Yet there is no doubt about its relevance even though discussions of Matthew's Gospel, indeed of the New Testament literature generally, often pretend these "religious" texts and their interpretation have no relation to their socio-political worlds.

The Roman Empire constituted the world from which Matthew's Gospel origi-

nated and which it engaged. The empire comprised a hierarchical system of vast societal inequalities, economic exploitation, and political oppression.³ Tacitus has the British chief Calgacus identify the very tangible damage of Roman rule: "our goods and chattels go for tribute, our lands and harvests in requisitions of grain" (*Agricola* 31). This transfer of resources meant a depleted existence for many.

In broad strokes, the empire's socio-economic structure essentially comprised two groups, elites and non-elites. There was no middle class and no "Roman dream" whereby people pulled themselves up by the sandal straps. There were huge discrepancies in wealth, power, and status. The ruling elite comprising both Roman and allied provincials—perhaps 2 percent of the population—controlled political, religious, and legal institutions, the military, and economic activity (resources). Land, predominantly in elite control, was the basic source of wealth and power in this largely agrarian empire. Elites secured wealth through slave labor, taxes and rents (often paid in kind), investments, involvements in commerce and banking, and from peasant farmers defaulting on loans, rents, and/or taxes.

Non-elites, who in all likelihood, comprised most if not all of Matthew's audience, had comparatively little wealth, power, or status. Poverty was pervasive,⁴

though there were varying levels of poverty. Some traders, merchants, and skilled artisans enjoyed a reasonable and somewhat stable level of existence. But the majority lived around subsistence level, periodically cycling above and below it. Unskilled urban workers, rural peasants on small landholdings, day laborers, and slaves who provided cheap labor, struggled to survive while their labor and skills served elite interests. Estimates of pre-industrial cities identify

- four to eight percent as incapable of providing food and housing for themselves, and living as beggars,
- twenty percent in permanent crisis,
- and thirty-forty percent (artisans, shopkeepers, and traders) who temporarily fell below subsistence levels.

Dropping permanently or temporarily below subsistence level depended on work availability, harvest yields, disease, weather, high prices, profiteering, short food supply, low wages, housing costs etc. In such circumstances, involvement in patron-client relations could be a life saver. In return for skills, labor, and displays of public honor, patrons provided non-elites with some material resources.

3. The Mediterranean diet: Empire and health?

Imperial structures are bad for the emotional and physical health of most of their subjects. Predictably the imperial system benefitted the minority elites. They fared well with access to plentiful resources that sustained their lifestyles of conspicuous consumption. By contrast, non-elites, the vast majority living in pervasive poverty, were significantly disadvantaged. For many, living conditions were atrocious, marked by squalor, garbage, human

3 For example, Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Janet Huskinson, ed., *Experiencing Rome: Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2000); Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

4 Chris R. Whittaker, "The Poor." In *Romans*, Andrea Giardina, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993),

excrement, animals, disease, crime, fire risk, overcrowding, natural disasters, and unstable dwellings.

Control of and access to food was an integral part of the imperial system.⁵ Food was power and reflected societal divisions and power inequities. Food was a key aspect of the elite's conspicuous consumption. By some estimates, elites consumed over 50 percent of agrarian production while most of the population lived around subsistence levels.

The lack of adequate food resources signified a lack of power, wealth, and status. While elites ate well, the diets of most non-elites, comprising grains, beans, olives, and vine products, were marked by limited variety, availability, and low nutritional quality. Access to food was negatively impacted by limited purchasing power, market prices, irregular employment (especially in cities), urban overcrowding, poor storage, and irregular supplies resulting from poor soil quality, weather, seasonal fluctuations, and transportation challenges. Recognizing the continuous challenge of procuring nutritionally adequate food, Peter Garnsey argues that, "for most people, life was a perpetual struggle for survival."⁶ He posits that because of strategies employed by both elites and non-elites, famine was reasonably rare and episodic while food shortages were common and endemic.

One of the serious consequences of the inadequate nutrition that resulted from imperial structures was a context conducive for diseases of deficiency and contagion. In relation to diseases of deficiency, malnutrition was a serious problem. The physician Galen "describes a famine during which peasants in the countryside

consumed foods of poor quality (including bulbs, tree shoots, and boiled grass) and developed a huge variety of skin conditions (boils, shingles, erysipelas, carbuncles, putrid abscesses....)"⁷

Noting widespread malnutrition,⁸ Garnsey argues that, at least in theory, the common wheat-based diet, if available in sufficient quantity and quality, could supply adequate protein, calories, and vitamins B and E. But in actuality, the quality and quantity of grains varied greatly, resulting

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in diets deficient for many in numerous minerals and vitamins especially A, C, and D. Vitamin A deficiency contributes particularly to blindness, bone deformation, growth retardation, and lowered immunity. Vitamin C deficiency results in scurvy and retarded development of bones and teeth. Vitamin D contributes to muscle weakness and limited bone growth.

5. Much of the following draws from Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

6. *Ibid.*, ix.

7. Susan Mattern, *Galen and the Rhetoric of Healing* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 153.

8. Garnsey, 51–60.

While wheat was a staple, it was not the only food available. Garnsey estimates that non-cereal sources accounted for perhaps 25 percent of energy requirements, principally dry legumes, wine, olive oil, and perhaps occasionally a few fresh vegetables. But even with this recognition, inadequate nutrition was a widespread

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phenomenon with devastating somatic impact. Garnsey particularly highlights the pervasiveness of bladder-stones, eye diseases, and rickets.

Malnutrition and diseases of deficiency render people more vulnerable to infectious diseases. Diarrhea, dysentery, skin rashes, cholera, typhus, meningitis, measles, scarlet fever, and smallpox affected many. Prime conditions for spreading contagious diseases included water storage, urban overcrowding, ignorance of basic hygiene, disease-carrying animals and insects, and the lack of adequate medical interventions (vaccinations, antibiotics, etc.).

The lethal quality of this imperial existence is evident in short life spans and high mortality rates. Bruce Frier points to the table of the third century C.E. Roman jurist Ulpian, to census returns from Egypt, and to gravestone studies that suggest the

average life expectancy at birth was about 21 to 22 years, and at age 10 about thirty-five further years.⁹ Infant mortality was high. Ann Hanson suggests that "about half the babies born died before reaching their fifth birthday." Of those who reached age 10, nearly half reached age 50. In overall terms, "less than 20 percent" reached the age of 60.

In addition, numerous studies have linked psychosomatic illness and demonic possession with imperial and oppressive contexts.¹⁰ In his study of the impact of imperial power in French-dominated Algeria, Frantz Fanon describes the physical impact of colonial power on frightened locals: "his glance shrivels me up, freezes me, and his voice turns me into stone." Fanon also notes the prevalence of symptoms of pains, menstruation disorders, and muscular rigidity and paralysis in this imperial context. Reporting on Serbian imperialism in Kosovo in 1999, reporter Deborah Amos observed extensive paralysis and muteness in response to the trauma and violence, phenomena commonly attested in research on trauma effects.

These responses of paralysis and muteness suggest people overwhelmed by power. Fanon also suggests these responses are coping mechanisms, even self-protective protests against imperial power.

9 Bruce Frier, "Roman Demography," in David Potter and David Mattingly, eds., *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 85–109, esp. 87–88; Ann E. Hanson, "The Roman Family," in Potter and Mattingly, eds., *Life, Death*, 19–66, esp. 27.

10 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1968), esp. 45, 53, 289–293; Paul W. Hollenbach, "Jesus, Demoniacs, and Public Authorities: A Socio-Historical Study," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49 (1981): 567–588; Deborah Amos, "The Littlest Victims," *ABC News*, April 13, 1999.

through inactivity and non-compliance. In Matthew, the paralyzed (4:24; 8:6; 9:2, 6), shriveled up (12:10), and mute or deaf (9:32–33; 11:5; 12:22; 15:30–31) frequent the Gospel, it seems, both embodying and protesting the traumatic impact of Roman power.

So, too, do the demoniacs (4:24; 8:16, 28, 33; 9:32; 12:22; 15:22). Fanon notes the schizophrenic identity of oppressed people who despise exploitative power, cooperate to survive, and acknowledge its desirability in seeking to be free. Such individuals frequently understand the conflicts and divided self in terms of traditional cosmic myths and evil spirits. So Matthew's Gospel, having asserted the devil's control of the world's empires (4:8) thereby making Rome's power the agent of Satan's control, narrates Jesus casting a demon out of two men into a herd of pigs who destroy themselves in the sea (8:26–34). Significantly, the pig was the mascot of the Roman Tenth *Fretensis* Legion stationed in Syria that had fought against Jerusalem in the 66–70 C.E. war. The scene depicts the demon-possessed nature of the present, and the people's desire for Jesus to be their savior in asserting God's authority by destroying Rome. In the meantime, demoniacs embody and personalize Rome's demonic rule. Jesus' exorcisms are a direct confrontation with the "power behind the throne," a subversion of Roman rule. They assert God's empire (12:28).

4. Matthew, imperial diseases, and healing

It is no wonder that Matthew's Gospel, originating in this late first-century imperial world, is peopled with sick and demon-possessed folks. These folks pervade the narrative just as they pervaded the ancient world. They embody the diseases of deficiency and contagion, the high death

rates, and short life-spans that marked the imperial world. They demonstrate the destructiveness of the system of power that was the empire's food supply which privileged elites and deprived non-elites of access to nutritionally adequate food.

Of what significance, then, are Matthew's narratives of Jesus' miraculous actions of healing and exorcism?

Jesus' healings expose the lie of imperial propaganda. Across the first century, imperial propaganda had claimed that the emperors Augustus and Domitian had initiated a golden age marked by abundant fertility, food, and health (Horace, *Carmen saeculare*; Statius, *Silvae*, 4.1.17–37). But clearly a golden age had not materialized for most of the empire's inhabitants. Jesus' transformative actions resemble imperial aspirations even while they show the empire to be powerless to reverse the social experience it maintained. The healings and exorcisms repair this imperial damage, exposing and reversing its lethal impact. Likewise, Matthew's scenes of feeding the five and four thousands (14:13–21; 15:32–39)—following a healing summary in 15:29–31—demonstrate bountiful supply of food for hungry people. Jesus imitates this imperial agenda but delivers on it, something imperial practices and structures had not effected for most of the population.

Yet Matthew's citation in 11:2–6 of Isaiah's vision of a transformed world in which God's reign heals bodies suggests more is on display. Various Jewish eschatological writings that negotiate the imperial world by envisioning the final establishment of God's salvific purposes feature physical restoration and supplies of abundant food as divine acts of restorative justice. For example, 4 Ezra, written in the same post-70 time period as Matthew, anticipates the "immortal age to come, in which corruption has

passed away, sinful indulgence has come to an end, unbelief has been cut off, and righteousness has increased and truth has appeared" (7:112–115). But Ezra laments that not all will be saved to enjoy these benefits:

What good is it...that safe and healthful habitations have been reserved for us.....Or that a paradise shall be revealed whose fruit remains unspoiled and in which are abundance and healing...(4 Ezra 7:121–124)

The angel assures Ezra that he will participate in the establishment of God's purposes:

...for you Paradise is opened, the tree of life is planted, the age to come is prepared, plenty is provided, a city is built, rest is appointed, goodness is established and wisdom perfected beforehand. The root of evil is sealed up from you, illness is banished from you and death is hidden; hell has fled and corruption has been forgotten; sorrows have passed away, and in the end the treasure of immortality is made manifest. (4 Ezra 8:52–54).

Healing and fertility play important roles in this new world. Material transformation is the name of the eschatological (end) game.

The new world of 2 Baruch, also contemporaneous with Matthew, is likewise marked by abundant fertility and physical wholeness.

The earth will also yield fruits ten thousand fold. And on one vine will be a thousand branches, and one branch will produce a thousand grapes, and one grape will produce a cor of wine.

And those who are hungry will enjoy themselves and they will, moreover, see marvels every day. For winds will go out in front of me every morning...and clouds at the end of the day to distill the dew of health. And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high and they will eat of it...(29:5).

It also ends imperial rule (72:2–6) and establishes peace, joy, and rest (73:1).

Then health will descend in dew, and illness will vanish, and fear and tribulation and lamentation will pass away...(73:2).

That is, the life of the age-to-come under God's sovereignty effects material transformation.

Jesus' healings and exorcisms, like his declaration of the presence and future of God's reign or empire (4:17; 12:28), belong with these eschatological visions. Disease disrupts the divinely-desired social experience. Jesus' actions anticipate what God is yet to establish in full. They participate in and are forerunners of the transformed material existence that contrasts with and overcomes the damaging effects of the present age under Roman rule. These actions manifest the presence of God's reign or empire in the midst of Rome's empire even now. They oppose, even while they also imitate, imperial visions and practices in implementing God's materially transforming reign or empire. That is, they demonstrate that God's salvific purposes are not only matters of the "soul" or "spirit"; they are somatic, material, and societal.

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