

# Jesus: Healer and Exorcist

by Ian Wallis

## LECTURE 1 – SETTING THE SCENE

### The Challenges of Interpretation and Reconstruction

Let me begin with an observation made by Professor John Meier at the end of a 500-page analysis of the material relating to Jesus as a wonder-worker:

The curious upshot of our investigation is that, viewed globally, the tradition of Jesus' miracles is more firmly supported by the criteria of historicity [eg multiple attestation of sources and forms, coherence with sayings, etc] than are a number of other well-known and often readily accepted traditions about his life and ministry ... Put dramatically but with not too much exaggeration: if the miracle tradition from Jesus' public ministry were to be rejected *in toto* as unhistorical, so should every other gospel tradition about him. (John P Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol II, p 630)

Meier's striking assessment is borne out by the evidence. There is reference to Jesus' wonder-working activity in all Gospel sources - Mark, Q (hypothetical source used by Matthew and Luke), Special Matthew, Special Luke, Johannine Signs source – in addition to one of our earliest New Testament manuscripts, Papyrus Egerton 2 (2<sup>nd</sup> cent; healing the leper, Mark 1.40-44) as well as in the Gospel of Thomas ('a physician does not heal those who know him,' 31; 'No one can enter the house of the strong and take it by force unless he binds his hands,' 35), other so-called apocryphal Gospels (Infancy Gospel of Thomas, Judas, Nicodemus) and early Christian literature (Clement, Eusebius).

There is good reason to conclude that the apostle Paul was aware of Jesus' wonder-working activity and integrated it within his ministry ('For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God', Romans 15.18-19; 'For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power,' 1 Corinthians 4.20; also 1 Corinthians 2.4-5; 2 Corinthians 12.12; Galatians 3.5; 1 Thessalonians 1.5; spiritual gifts within the ecclesial body of Christ, include 'healing, *iamatōn*' and 'working of miracles, *energēmata dýnameōn*,' 1 Corinthians 12.9-10; '... and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love,' 1 Corinthians 13.2; cf Mark 11.23/Matthew 21.21 [fig tree]; Matthew 17.20 [epileptic boy]).

Significantly, Josephus, a first century Jewish historian with no sympathy towards Christianity, in a brief description of Jesus, describes him as 'a doer of startling deeds (*paradoxōn ergon*)' ('Testimonium Flavianum', *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63-64), whilst, in the second century, the Neo-Platonist philosopher, Celsus, accuses him of being a magician (Origen, *Contra Celsus* 1.28) – a charge repeated in later rabbinic literature where he is

accused of being a magician who misled Israel (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 104b; Sanhedrin 43a, 107b).

References to Jesus' wonder-working can be found in the Gospels across multiple literary forms – narratives (eg Mark 1.40-45/Matthew 8.1-4/Luke 5.12-16; Mark 5.21-43/Matthew 9.18-26/Luke 8.40-56; Mark 10.46-52/Matthew 20.29-34/Luke 18.35-43), controversies (eg Mark 2.1-12/Matthew 9.1-8/Luke 5.17-26; Mark 3.1-6/Matthew 12.9-14/Luke 6.6-11; Mark 3.22-25; Matthew 11.22-28/Luke 11.14-20 [Q]), sayings (eg Mark 2.17/Matthew 9.12/Luke 5.31; Matthew 11.2-6/Luke 7.18-23; Luke 4.23; 13.32) and editorial summaries (eg Mark 1.32-34/Matthew 8.16-17/Luke 4.40-41; Mark 3.7-12/Luke 6.17-19; Mark 6.53-56/ Matthew 14.34-36; Luke 7.21; 8.2).

What is more, whilst the provenance of individual traditions can be called into question, the sheer quantity of material militates against wholesale dismissal of these memories as mistaken or a product of the early church (cf John Wilkinson, *Health and Healing*, 1980. Percentage of total verses: Mark: 20%; Matthew: 9%; Luke: 12%; John: 13%. Percentage of narrative verses: Mark: 40%; Matthew: 40%; Luke: 35%; John: 33%)

And yet, acknowledging all this, we still find ourselves sympathetic towards an assessment of one of the leading New Testament scholars of the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann, when he writes:

It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles. We may think we can manage it in our own lives, but to expect others to do so is to make the Christian faith unintelligible and unacceptable to the modern world. ('New Testament and Mythology,' in *Kerygma and Myth*, 1953).

Few aspects of Jesus' ministry are better attested than his reputation for being a wonder-worker and yet few details cause more difficulty for the modern mind, presenting us with a dilemma: Is a wonder-working Jesus credible within a world shaped by rational thinking and scientific inquiry? And, if not, can we be confident that our earliest sources contain any accurate information about him?

The roots of this dilemma can be traced back at least to the seventeenth century and the legacy of René Descartes' (1583-1648), the putative father of Western philosophy, who can perhaps be accredited with inventing the category of 'nature' as a closed system of cause and effect, entirely discrete from the super-natural dimension of the mental, spiritual and sacred – as it happens, none of whose existence he denied.

It was only a matter of time before the spotlight of rational inquiry would be trained upon the Bible and, especially, the miraculous elements within it. In 1670, a Portuguese Jew, Benedict de Spinoza (1632-77) published anonymously, for fear of reprisals, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, in which he demonstrates the logical impossibility of miracles before spelling out the implications for the alleged miracles in the Bible. To quote:

Now, as nothing is necessarily true save only by Divine decree, it is plain that the universal laws of science are decrees of God following from the necessity and perfection of the Divine nature. Hence, any event happening in nature which contravened nature's universal laws, would necessarily also contravene the divine decree, nature, and understanding; or if anyone asserted that God acts in contravention to the laws of nature, he, *ipso facto*, would be compelled to assert that God acted against his own nature – an evident absurdity.

Spinoza continues ...

Thus in order to interpret these Scriptural miracles and understand from the narration of them how they really happened, it is necessary to know the opinions of those who first related, and have recorded them for us in writing, and to distinguish such opinions from the actual impression made upon their senses ... For many things are narrated in Scripture as real, and were believed to be real, which were in fact only symbolical and imaginary.

Such was the uproar caused by *Tractatus* that Spinoza didn't publish again during his lifetime. His influential book on *Ethics* was published posthumously under the ascription BDS, his initials.

But it was a brief essay of barely 20 pages, entitled 'Of Miracles', published in 1748 by the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-76) that was to frame the debate well into twentieth century, in which he wrote:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. (Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 1748)

And so miracles became defined out of existence by what some have claimed to be a philosophical slight of hand based on questionable assumptions: a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; the laws of nature govern the material universe; hence, miracles are logically impossible. Either way, Hume's definition was widely adopted with far-reaching ramifications for biblical studies.

In their textbook, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (1998), Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz identify six phases in the interpretation of Jesus' wonder-working traditions in the ensuing centuries. Briefly ...

#### Rationalist Interpretations

Inventing rational explanations for supernatural components with a view to making the stories more credible to the enlightened mind (eg H E G Paulus, 1761-1851). This worked in some cases, notably, the feeding of the 5000 which becomes a massive 'bring and share' picnic, following the boy's example of pooling his packed

lunch [cf John 6.9]; but, in others, the rational alternative was equally, if not more, incredible than its supernatural alternative as with the walking on water being facilitated by a chance deposit of floating logs which serendipitously formed themselves into a causeway over which the deftly footed Jesus was able to tip-toe cross the lake.

### Mythical Interpretations

Reconceiving the miracles as mythical compositions serving kerygmatic ends. The foremost exponent here was David Strauss (1808-74), in his magnum opus *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, in which he maintained that the miracle traditions drew on stories and hopes from the Hebrew Scriptures to re-enforce Jesus' messianic status (as Elijah the prophet healed the sick and fed multitudes, so greater miracles become attributed to Jesus to demonstrate his superiority).

### Comparative Interpretations

Influenced by the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, history of religions school, originating in the University of Göttingen, Germany, at the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars such as Ludwig Bieler, Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Dibelius and Richard Reitzenstein compared the Gospel miracle stories with those found in other ancient literature to identify common themes, archetypes and interconnections – with obvious implications for claims over Jesus' uniqueness and Christianity's superiority to other religions.

### Relativizing Interpretations

In the 1950s, the gospel Evangelists came into their own as creative authors who didn't simply record inherited traditions about Jesus, but redacted or edited them to serve their own theological agendas. Within this climate, a number of studies appeared which focused on the evangelists' re-working of the miracles – for example, Theodore Weeden (1971) maintained that by placing these traditions within a narrative stressing the costliness of discipleship, Mark corrects false interpretations of Jesus as a wonder-worker who inaugurated a kingdom of cheap grace (Mark: K Kertelege; L Schenke, D-A Koch; Matthew: H J Held; Luke: U Busse; John: R Bultmann).

### Contextual Interpretations

One of the landmark studies of Jesus to appear in the twentieth century was *Jesus the Jew* by Geza Vermes in 1973. Strange as it may seem to us now, Vermes was one of the first scholars to stress the Jewishness of Jesus, as the title suggests. In this volume, he sets Jesus within a first century Palestinian context alongside other celebrated Jewish wonder-workers such as Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the rain-maker, thereby proposing a 'charismatic holy man' archetype as the most suitable interpretative category for Jesus (cf Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* [1978]: Jesus trained in Egypt as a magician).

### Sociological Interpretations

In *Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, published in 1974 (trans 1983), Gerd Theissen draws on insights from sociology and related disciplines to analyse the function of these stories within the communities which preserved, embellished or sometimes created them. He concludes that they served to highlight charisma as a source of legitimation for protest or renewal movements within oppressive political regimes.

Other scholars have similarly drawn on sociological models as an interpretative method with insightful results. John Pilch, for example (who Dominic Crossan draws upon heavily), maintains that sickness, possession and healing are social constructs emerging from and belonging to a particular set of circumstances and, as such, are not universal categories, but rather are tied to time and place.

Yet for all the difficulties and embarrassment caused by the category of miracle in general and Jesus' wonder-working activities in particular, academic interest across a number of disciplines (especially, anthropology, biblical studies, philosophy, sociology and theology) has heightened over the past two or three decades, yielding some interesting developments. Let me offer you one or two tasters:

### 1. Revision

Philosophers and theologians are much less willing these days to draw on Hume's definition of a miracle as an event that 'violates the laws of nature' out of recognition that these laws are essentially descriptive rather than prescriptive – they purport to describe the natural world not to determine it – and, as a consequence, are in principle open to revision.

Some scientists go much further and claim that the whole notion of universal laws is fundamentally flawed, preferring to speak of habits that evolve through time. So it is conceivable that alleged miracles bear witness to naturally-occurring phenomena not yet understood (David Basinger, 'What is a Miracle?' in Graham Twelftree [ed], *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, 2011).

### 2. Circumspection

Anthropological studies of the miraculous across many different cultures have called into question the adequacy of Western scientific rationalism to account for the breadth of human experience encountered, thereby recognising the contribution of other belief systems to provide a more comprehensive overview. Some go as far as to interpret the refusal of the Western scientific mind-set to acknowledge the so-called 'enchanted world' as an expression of unwarranted intellectual arrogance and imperialism.

Commenting on rationalist explanations of the almost ubiquitous phenomenon of clairvoyance, the anthropologist Robert Hutton objects ... 'ultimately the psychologizing of [Siberian] spirits is itself a statement of faith, resting upon no ultimate truth [ie the relativity of our own essentializing discourses] ... It makes sense to modern westerners of otherwise uncanny or repugnant phenomena; but in its

different way the native explanation made equal sense, and with as much claim to objective demonstration of evidence.’ (Robert Hutton, *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination*, 2001).

### 3. Acknowledgement

In a two volume work running to over 1200 pages, New Testament scholar Craig Keener has compiled a vast collection of reports and testimonies to alleged miracles across cultures and social groupings, in the present time and through the centuries (*Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2012). Whilst readily admitting that not all his reports have been, or could be, subject to careful scrutiny, their collective force shows not only that non-Westerners consider miracles happen, but also that vast numbers of people dwelling in the West consider it is possible (contrary to Bultmann) to live in a post-Enlightenment age and experience them.

### 4. Resurgence

Whilst not new in itself, relational ontology has come to the fore across a number of disciplines, yielding some exciting work at the interface between science and theology. *Relational ontology* maintains that relations between entities, whether at a micro sub-atomic or macro whole organism level, are ontologically more fundamental than the entities themselves, in contrast to *substantivist ontologies* which give priority to the entities and sees relations as derivative.

Within this perspective, for example, our relations and interactions play a major role in defining human being and personal identity as well as in shaping the future – thereby, amongst other things, providing us with a conceptual framework for understanding the transformative nature of encounters between Jesus and those around him. But more of that later.

### 5. Recognition

In a sense this is an extension to what has been said already under Circumspection, but the inability of scientific inquiry to explain satisfactorily fundamental experiences such as consciousness and memory, together with an increasing body of empirical research within the fields of mind-body interactions (placebo effect, psycho-social genomics, faith-healing) and psychic studies (eg ESP, telepathy OBEs, NDEs, precognition, clairvoyance) is leading some academics to question whether a materialist understanding of cause and effect is sufficient to account for all these phenomena.

By definition, current scientific methodologies are unlikely to be able to demonstrate this, but, as precedes every major paradigm shift (cf Thomas Kuhn), the body of evidence that cannot be accommodated within the reigning orthodoxy is mounting.

Those wishing to pursue this further are directed to the following publications:

*The Science Delusion*, by Rupert Sheldrake (London: Coronet, 2012).

*Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, by Edward Kelly, Emily Williams Kelly, Adam Crabtree, Alan Gauld and Michael Grosso (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

*Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality*, by Edward F Kelly, Adam Crabtree and Paul Marshall (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

## **Illness and healing in Israelite Faith**

Now that we've gained a little insight into some of the intellectual challenges raised by the miraculous and, by implication, Jesus' reputation for wonder-working, let us turn our attention to the milieu that gave rise to that reputation. And, perhaps, the place to start is with the following question: How was illness experienced and understood in first century Palestine and what sources of healing, if any, were available?

Before attempting an answer, let me offer another quotation, this time from the acclaimed medical anthropologist, Arthur Kleinman. In his classic study, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*, he writes:

In the same sense in which we speak of religion or language or kinship as cultural systems, we can view medicine as a cultural system, a system of symbolic meanings anchored in particular arrangements of social institutions and patterns of interpersonal interactions. In every culture, illness, the responses to it, individuals experiencing it and treating it, and the social institutions relating to it are all systematically interconnected. The totality of these interrelationships is the health care system. Put somewhat differently, the health care system, like other cultural systems, integrates the health-related components of society. These include patterns of belief about the causes of illness; norms governing choice and evaluation of treatment; socially-legitimated statuses, roles, power relationships, interaction settings, and institutions. (p 24)

It goes without saying that the 'health care system' operating when Jesus was alive is very different from the one we experience today. We need to acknowledge that difference and then try to reconstruct the former, critically and imaginatively, before attempting to interpret Jesus' wonder-working within it and then finally to see if we can open up a conversation between the first century ministry of Jesus and the twenty-first century ministry of his followers today.

As a way in, I would like us to focus on what is probably the single most important ancient text we possess for our task. Scholarly consensus places Ecclesiasticus, to be distinguished from Ecclesiastes, also known as Sirach, in Judea, around Jerusalem, in the second century BCE. It belongs to the sapiential tradition of wisdom writings within Israelite religion that draws on experience, observation and reflection to discern God's presence in life and to shape a faith accordingly. As you would expect, the compass of

such works is expansive, embracing much of human existence, and in chapter 38 the author turns attention to our area of investigation.

Honour physicians for their services, for the Lord created them; <sup>2</sup> for their gift of healing comes from the Most High, and they are rewarded by the king. <sup>3</sup> The skill of physicians makes them distinguished, and in the presence of the great they are admired.

<sup>4</sup> The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not despise them. <sup>5</sup> Was not water made sweet with a tree in order that its power might be known? <sup>6</sup> And he gave skill to human beings that he might be glorified in his marvellous works. <sup>7</sup> By them the physician heals and takes away pain; <sup>8</sup> the pharmacist makes a mixture from them.

God's works will never be finished; and from him health spreads over all the earth. <sup>9</sup> My child, when you are ill, do not delay, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you. <sup>10</sup> Give up your faults and direct your hands rightly, and cleanse your heart from all sin. <sup>11</sup> Offer a sweet-smelling sacrifice, and a memorial portion of choice flour, and pour oil on your offering, as much as you can afford.

<sup>12</sup> Then give the physician his place, for the Lord created him; do not let him leave you, for you need him. <sup>13</sup> There may come a time when recovery lies in the hands of physicians, <sup>14</sup> for they too pray to the Lord that he grant them success in diagnosis and in healing, for the sake of preserving life. <sup>15</sup> He who sins against his Maker, will be defiant toward the physician. (Sirach 38.1-15)

The first thing to note here is the conviction that Yahweh, Israel's God, is the ultimate or final source of all healing – a conviction that is rooted in the perceived privileged relationship between Yahweh and Israel enshrined in the covenant ('I am the LORD who heals you', Exodus 15.26). One consequence of this was that sickness, impairment and healing were interpreted theologically in the sense that a breakdown in health within the physical body was thought to reflect a breakdown in health within the covenantal body – between an Israelite and Yahweh or between Israelite and Israelite.

What is more, a breakdown in health within the covenantal body was thought to result from disobedience or some other form of dis-ordering behaviour – all of which came under the umbrella of sin or transgression. Now whilst this causal relationship between sin, on the one hand, and sickness or impairment, on the other (whether as a consequence or punishment), was not universally accepted – think of Job's riposte – it was, from what we can gather, the dominant view as reflected in the passage from Ecclesiasticus (38.9-12) and indeed in many other texts, for example, Psalm 107:

Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction; they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress; he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction. (Psalm

107.17-21; cf 'No one gets up from his sick-bed until all his sins are forgiven' (Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 41a; sickness as a consequence of wrong-doing: Psalm 107.17-21; Sirach 28.9-15; 4Q242; James 5.13-16; sickness as punishment for wrong-doing: Exodus 12.12; 1 Samuel 5.6; 2 Samuel 12.15-16; 2 Chronicles 21.12-19; 26.16-21; 2 Kings 5.21-27; Habakkuk 3.2-5; Tobit 11.13-15; Luke 1.18-20, 59-64; Acts 5.1-11; 9.8-18; 1 Corinthians 5.1-5; 10.1-11; 11.27-32.)

Interestingly, it also appears to have been the view of the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 5.1-5; 10.1-11; 11.27-32), the author of the epistle of James (James 5.13-16) and, quite probably, the evangelist Luke (Luke 1.18-20, 59-64; Acts 5.1-11; 9.8-18).

One consequence of this link between sickness and sin is that restoration within the physical body was believed to be dependent upon restoration within the covenantal body – hence the need for repentance and forgiveness as a means of re-ordering right-relating between sufferers and Yahweh.

What is more, sickness and impairment disordered human relationships as well. They could disrupt how you were able to participate in community life. In some cases, such as various skin conditions, you would be rendered ritually unclean, quarantined from home and village, and excluded from corporate worship. If your condition was debilitating, then you would be left unable to earn a living and quite possibly forced into destitution, thrown upon the mercy of others – a source of great shame in the ancient world. Whilst, all of the time, feeling under the judgement of God and, in many cases, condemned by fellow Israelites who would interpret your illness or impairment as the outcome of or punishment for wrong-doing.

We should also note that within a worldview where God is the source of everything, then ultimately sickness, as much as healing, is a divine prerogative. And there are many references in the Hebrew Scriptures to Yahweh striking people down, usually as a form of punishment, although sometimes as a means of proving faithfulness and fortitude. However, what we find following the Babylonian deportation of sixth century BCE when exiled Israelites were exposed to Zoroastrianism, a dualist religion with two equally powerful yet opposing celestial forces, is a growing recognition that disorder, whether within or beyond the physical body, may not always be caused by God, but by a discrete unclean or malevolent spirit.

So whilst, according to First Samuel, Saul is tormented by an evil spirit sent by God (1 Samuel 16.14-16, 23), in the book of Tobit, dating from second or third century BCE, the demon Asmodeus serves malevolent ends outside of Yahweh's behest (Tobit 3.7-8; also 6.8, 17-18; 8.3).

Furthermore, it is significant how the language of sickness is used within the Hebrew Scriptures to describe dis-ease and dis-order within the covenantal body of Israel – a breakdown in relationships, if you will. And, equally, how the language of healing is employed to express hope of restoration and right-relating with Israel's God. Here is a sample gleaned from the prophetic literature:

Come, let us return to the LORD; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him (Hosea 6.1-2; also 5.13; 11.1-4) ... Return, O faithless children, I will heal your faithlessness. (Jeremiah 3.22; also 14.19; 30.17-20) ... See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. (Malachi 4.1-2)

Back, then, to the passage from Ecclesiasticus and notice how the author, whilst acknowledging God as the ultimate source of all healing, recognises that Yahweh employs intermediaries to bring healing about, notably physicians and pharmacists as well as natural remedies.

This is a hugely important development in that self-styled physicians tended to be judged inept and exploitative in Israelite traditions, as indeed in other ancient cultures. Recall that detail, easily missed in Mark's rendering of Jesus' encounter of a woman suffering from chronic blood loss: 'Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.' (Mark 5.25-26)

Although there aren't many references to physicians in the Hebrew Scriptures, most are negative. For instance, King Asa of Judah (913-873 BCE) dies as a consequence of seeking their help rather than turning to Yahweh (2 Chronicles 16.12), whilst Job, in his suffering, can think of no worse aspersion to cast upon his hapless comforters than to call them *rophay eleeel* – 'worthless physicians' (Job 13.4; cf Genesis 50.2)!

And lest we think it was only in Israel that the nascent medical profession was viewed with suspicion, how about this from the first century Roman satirist, Martial (38/41-103 CE): 'Lately Diaulus was a doctor, now he is an undertaker. What the undertaker now does, the doctor did before.' (Martial, 38/41-103 CE, Roman satirist, *Epigrams* 1.47; also 5.9; 8.74; 9.96). Or the following curt injunction from the acclaimed Roman commander, naturalist and philosopher known to us as Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE): 'interdixi tibi de medicis - I forbid you to have anything to do with physicians!' (*The Natural History*, 29.7; cf Cato)

Those described, usually by others and somewhat pejoratively, as 'magicians' or 'sorcerers' fare even worse for whilst their existence is acknowledged, their practices are roundly condemned within the Torah: 'No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the LORD your God is driving them out before you' (Deuteronomy 18.10-12; also Genesis 41.1-41; Exodus 8.7, 18-19; 9.11; 7.8-12, 22; Leviticus 19.26-28; Numbers 23.22-23; Isaiah 2.6; 3.1-3; Jeremiah 14.14; 27.9; Ezekiel 13.17-18, 22-23; Malachi 3.1-5; cf 2 Kings 13.20-21).

Yet, for all that, we shouldn't think that the practice of medicine was denigrated or even rejected outright by everyone in the ancient world. Far from it. As those verses from Ecclesiasticus affirm, at least some of Israelite faith from second century BCE onwards not only recognized the value of medical practitioners, but also believed them to be servants of God.

This positive attitude probably reflects the influence of Greek medicine which from the fifth century BCE, through observation, dissection and surgery, had been seeking rationally and systematically to understand anatomy and organ function as well as key bodily processes such as intelligence, respiration and circulation. Of the various schools of thought that emerged prior to the Common Era (dogmatists, empiricists), the Hippocratic tradition (cf Hippocrates, 460-370 BCE) with its theory of the 'four humours' became preeminent for many centuries with a centre on the Greek island of Cos which may well have taken the form of an Asclepeion (founded 4<sup>th</sup> cent BCE), a healing centre dedicated to Asclepius, where medical physicians practised their art in service of the Greco-Roman deity dedicated to health – reflecting, as with Ecclesiasticus, the conviction that whilst all healing is ultimately a divine gift, it is administered through human means.

It is worth noting at this juncture that the veneration of Asclepius, in a similar way to the Egyptian cult of Isis, was enormously popular and spread broadly throughout the Mediterranean and beyond. The reason was clear enough: for once, divine beings were concerning themselves with the frailties of mortals and coming to their aid by meeting one of the most basic of human needs – the need for soundness of body, mind and spirit. And there is good reason to think not only that Greek advances in medicine spread to Palestine during the reign of Alexander the Great (336-323 BCE) as well as during the Hasmonean dynasty (2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE), but also that shrines to the healing deity Asclepius had been established there by the first century CE, raising the intriguing possibility that Jesus himself may have visited one.

For instance, an inscription to Asclepius has been found at a temple dedicated to the Phoenician deity, Eshmun, at Sidon, where according to Mark Jesus visited (Mark 7.3; cf 3.8), which dates back at least to the second century BCE (cf Strabo [1<sup>st</sup> cent], *Geography* 16.2.22; Pausanias [1<sup>st</sup> cent], *Description of Greece*, 7.23.7-8). In addition, we know of healing springs associated with Asclepius at least from the end of the first century CE near Tiberias on the west shore of Lake Galilee (coins 99, 108 CE; Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.614; *Antiquities* 18.36; Pliny, *Natural History* 5.15) and at the pool called Beth-zatha in Jerusalem with the five porticos where the evangelist John informs us a healing shrine existed which Jesus visited, attending to a paralyzed man (John 5.1-9; inscriptions and votive offerings).

And we have at least one piece of evidence suggestive of Jesus being viewed as a rival to Asclepius which although in its current form dates from the fourth century contains traditions considerably earlier (cf Justin Martyr [ca 160 CE] 'the Acts drawn up under Pontius Pilate,' *First Apology* 35.9; also 48.3). In the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, we find the following dialogue between Pontius Pilate and Jesus' accusers:

The Jews replied, 'We have a law that no one may be healed on the Sabbath. But this one has performed evil deeds by healing the lame and crippled, the withered and the blind, the paralysed, mute, and demon possessed on the Sabbath.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what are his evil deeds?' They replied, 'He is a magician, and by Beelzeboul, the ruler of the demons, he casts out Demons, and they all are subject to him.' Pilate responded to them, 'No one can cast out demons by an unclean spirit, but only by the god Asclepius.' (1.1; see also Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.24-25)

Ecclesiasticus also celebrates Yahweh's provision of naturally occurring substances and their application as medicines. Here again, the author reflects a seemingly widespread practice as evidenced by the Roman naturalist, Pliny, who maintained that it is 'quite impossible to come to a full understanding as to the true characteristics of each individual plant, without a knowledge of its medicinal effects, a sublime and truly mysterious manifestation of the wisdom of the Deity' (*Natural History*, 19.62).

Although there is some concern about the occult origins of such knowledge within Israelite faith (cf Genesis 6.1-6; 1 Enoch 7.1; Jubilees 10.7-14), the Jewish historian Josephus singles out the Essenes, one of the movements in existence in the first century, as acknowledged practitioners of natural medicine. He writes: 'They display an extraordinary interest in the writings of the ancients, singling out in particular those which make for the welfare of soul and body; with the help of these, and with a view to the treatment of diseases, they make investigations into medicinal roots and the properties of stones' (*Jewish Wars*, 2.134-136).

We should also point out that Essenes were credited with a commitment to well-being more generally. Whilst most scholars maintain that the community based at Qumran and responsible for the *Dead Sea Scrolls* was Essene, little research has been conducted into the movement more broadly. Both Josephus and the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, Philo (25 BCE-50 CE), offer lengthy descriptions, estimating that there were approximately 4000 living in lay communities, largely within villages throughout Palestine (*Antiquities* 18.20; *Every Good Man in Free* 1.75).

From what we can gather, these Essenes practised a form of communalism – pooling their resources, partaking in shared meals and pursuing a practical piety. Philo and Josephus extol their virtues, celebrating amongst other qualities their simplicity of lifestyle, care for one another and compassion for those in need. It is difficult to know whether such generosity and kindness was reserved for their own, although given they lived in villages among non-members this seems unlikely. Of particular interest for us is the way in which both Philo and Josephus highlight their care of the sick, the former implying that they ran rudimentary hospitals for the infirmed and elderly. Philo writes:

As for the sick, they are not neglected on the pretext that they can produce nothing, for, thanks to the common purse, they have whatever is needed to treat them, so there is no fear of great expense on their behalf. The aged, for their part, are surrounded with respect and care: they are like parents whose children lend them a

helping hand in their old age with perfect generosity and surround them with a thousand attentions. (Philo, *Every Good Man is Free* 87; also *Apology for the Jews* [preserved in Eusebius', *Proclamation of the Gospel*], 11.13; Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.136)

Assuming Josephus and Philo can be trusted, albeit allowing for a more than a little exaggeration, we need to colour into our portrait of first century Palestinian life, the existence of lay communities of Essenes, based in villages and towns, perhaps running rudimentary sanatoria, where those unable to fend for themselves could be cared for and treated with dignity.

To complete our picture, we need to mention the presence of exorcists and 'faith-healers'. We learn of the former, of course, from the Gospels themselves where Jesus challenges a delegation of Pharisees by what authority their exorcists cast out demons (Q; Luke 11.19/Matthew 12.27). And then, again, Mark records the disciples reporting back to Jesus how they had attempted to stop someone who had been exorcising in his name (Mark 9.38-40; cf Matthew 7.22-23; Acts 19.13).

The practice of exorcism within Israelite tradition, however, can be traced back at least as far as David whose lyre-playing caused the evil spirit – sent, as it happens, by Yahweh – to depart from Saul (1 Samuel 16.14-23; Pseudo-Philo 60). That said, according to the *Genesis Apocryphon* found at Qumran, the patriarch Abram conducted an exorcism upon the king of Egypt who had been struck down after making advances on Sarai, his wife who had been masquerading as his sister (1QapGen 22.12-30).

Solomon is also celebrated as someone whose wisdom could be applied to the healing art and, in particular, to the vanquishing of evil spirits (eg Wisdom 7.17-21; *Testament of Solomon*). Once again, Josephus illustrates the point before drawing attention to a first century Israeli exorcist by the name of Eleazar whom he claims to have seen at work:

And God granted him [Solomon] knowledge of the art used against demons for the benefit and healing of human beings. He also composed incantations by which illnesses are relieved, and left behind forms of exorcisms with which those possessed by demons drive them out, never to return. And this kind of cure is of very great power among us to this day, for I have seen a certain Eleazar, a countryman of mine, in the presence of Vespasian, his sons, tribunes and a number of other soldiers, free men possessed by demons, and this was the manner of the cure: he put to the nose of the possessed man a ring which had under its seal one of the roots prescribed by Solomon, and then, as the man smelled it, drew out the demon through his nostrils, and, when the man at once fell down, adjured the demon never to come back into him, speaking of Solomon's name and reciting the incantations which he had composed ... And when this was done, the understanding and wisdom of Solomon were clearly revealed. (Josephus, *Antiquities* 8.45-49)

Further evidence of exorcism can be found in the book of Tobit (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> cent BCE), previously mentioned, where an evil demon is expelled by the odour of burning fish entrails

(Tobit 8.1-3) and, again, in a poorly preserved *Dead Sea Scroll* which relates the prayer of a Babylonian king by the name of Nabonidus who had suffered from an ulcer for seven years before a Judean exorcist pardoned his sins which presumably, although this portion of the text is damaged, led to his recovery (4Q242).

Interestingly, one theory for the origin of the Jewish custom of wearing phylacteries, small boxes strapped to the forehead and inner left arm, is that they served as prophylactic amulets, affording protection from evil spirits – a superstition that was re-interpreted during the rabbinic era to serve a liturgical function as aids to prayer (Ruth Satinover Fagen; *Anchor Bible Dictionary* V.370).

We find in the Mishnah, a compilation of rabbinic oral tradition compiled towards the end of the second century of the Common Era, yet containing much earlier material, the following saying: 'When Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa died, the men of (great) deeds ceased.' (Mishnah, Sota 9.15) The nature of those deeds is not spelled out in that context, but elsewhere in the Mishnah and, more so, in later rabbinic literature, healings and wonders are attributed to him, becoming more and more incredible, in a comparable way to what happens to Jesus' miracles in some of the apocryphal Gospels. In addition to his loyal donkey who goes on a hunger-strike when rustled, bear-catching goats and collapsing table, Hanina is able to control the rain and stretch timber joists, before he conjures up bread and, of all things, golden table legs (Babylonian Talmud, Taanith 24b-25a; Jerusalem Talmud, Demai 22a; Aboth de Rabbi Nathan A8).

But the earliest traditions are much more modest, depicting him as a compassionate man of prayer whose inspired, extemporary petitions often seemed to amplify Yahweh's will. Consider this one from the Mishnah:

It is told concerning Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa that when he prayed for the sick he used to say, 'This one will live and this one will die.' They said to him, 'How do you know?' He replied, 'If my prayer is fluent in my mouth, I know that he (the sick person) is favoured; if not, I know that (his disease) is fatal.' (Mishnah, Berakoth 5.5; cf Babylonian Talmud, Berakoth 34b / Jerusalem Talmud, Berakoth 9d)

On the grounds that there has to be some basis for the later wonder-stories about him, it seems likely that Hanina was revered as a holy man of discerning prayerfulness with a gift for intuiting the seriousness of patients' medical conditions. A reputation which was subsequently embellished to underline the intimacy of his relationship with God and capacity for serving as Yahweh's intercessor. This is significant in that he may well have been a contemporary of Jesus, residing in the proximity of Sepphoris (Arav), no more than ten miles north of Nazareth.

So there we have it, a brief overview of the health care system in first century Palestine. It is a worldview where Yahweh is sovereign. Health and disease are the scale on a barometer recording the weather within the covenantal community, reflecting the state of relationships between God and its members. Restoration within the physical body is dependent upon restoration within the covenantal body, which can be compromised by

dis-ordering 'sinful' behaviour.

There is rudimentary medical knowledge and, with it, recognition that God can heal through intermediaries – human beings, naturally-occurring medicines and sacred places. That said, disease and impairment often went untreated, in many cases severely affecting the quality of life and prospects of sufferers who frequently found themselves ostracized, sometimes excluded from community life, deemed accursed of God, with little prospect of their circumstances improving. It must have felt like a living hell.

Yet within this climate, a hope was still harboured by some that Yahweh would act decisively to heal Israel's wounds by freeing her from oppression and fulfilling her vocation to be a people of blessing of which the restoration of physical well-being would be, unsurprisingly, both a sign and an embodiment. No one expressed this hope more clearly than the prophet known as Deutero-Isaiah, composed during the Babylonian captivity of the sixth century BCE.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.' 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. (Isaiah 35.1-6; also 19.19-25; 26.19; 29.18; 61.1-2)

If you recall, this was the passage Jesus quoted when the disciples of John inquired whether he was the awaited messiah:

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me. (Luke 7.22-23/Matthew 11.4-6)

Notice, though, the reference to raising the dead and preaching to the poor, neither of which is mentioned in the Isaiah passage, but interestingly both are included along with healing as tell-tale signs of the messianic era of blessing in one of the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, dated to the beginning of first century.

He [ie the Lord] shall release the captives, make the blind see, raise up the do[wntrodden.] . . . then He will heal the sick, resurrect the dead, and to the meek announce glad tidings.' (4Q521; trans. *DSSU* 23)

And this may well have been the climate of hope shaping Jesus' faith and informing his ministry. Certainly, a lengthy Israeli prayer known as the *Eighteen Benedictions* (also the *Tefillah* or *Shemoneh Esreh*) which was recited daily and may well have been current in

some form in the first century reflects a similar outlook ('A man should pray the Eighteen [Benedictions] every day,' Mishnah Berakoth 4.3; attributed to Rabbi Gamaliel, a contemporary of Jesus [cf Acts 5.34; 22.3]). Let me close with one or two of its petitions:

- VI Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned against You.  
Blot out and remove our transgressions from before Your sight,  
for Your mercies are manifold.  
You are praised, O Lord, who abundantly pardons.
  
- VII Look at our affliction, and champion our cause,  
and redeem us for the sake of Your Name.  
You are praised, O Lord, Redeemer of Israel.
  
- VIII Heal us, O Lord our God, of the pain of our hearts.  
Remove from us grief and sighing,  
and bring healing for our wounds.  
You are praised, O Lord, who heals the sick of His people Israel.

It is quite a thought that these may have been words Jesus recited and made his own.