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Jesus as healer

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Understanding Jesus Today: Jesus as Healer

Harold Remus

New York et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1997

149 pages, \$16.95 Paperback

This book is part of a thus far seven volume series *Understanding Jesus Today* edited by Howard Clark Kee. The goal of this series is to bring together “in accessible form the conclusions of an international team of distinguished scholars regarding various important aspects of Jesus’ teaching.” In other words: This series is aimed at clergy and theologically interested lay people.

Remus’ book deals with one of the crucial aspects of Jesus’ ministry, namely, healing as an intrinsic part of the gospel message. Protestants tend to focus on an understanding of the Word of God as preached and neglect the fact that for Jesus the coming of the Reign of God inseparably included sharing meals especially with those who were socially and religiously marginalized, and healing of the sick. Those who are in despair do not only need good, consoling words; rather, they are longing for the truth of God’s gracious presence in the experience of healing. The gospel is God’s healing and saving presence through Christ in word and deed. Therefore Remus’ book is indispensable for those who try to answer the question “who Jesus was” — and thus what Christianity has to contribute to the quest for meaning in modern day society.

The book is divided into eight main chapters. Chapter 1, titled simply “Prologue,” is in fact much more than that. It is a well-written introduction into the subject, which lays the foundation for exploration of the topic. Remus’ simple yet superlative writing style engages the reader in an existential yet casual way. He aims to bridge the gap, for the reader, between the ancient past and the present time — and he accomplishes this goal with remarkable success. Remus’ book is informative and yet entertaining. It is fun to read.

The author makes it clear that the question of healing is not only an ancient question; it is our quest for healing and salvation as well. Although Remus sets out to present his findings in a readable way, he nonetheless demonstrates that he is a scholarly specialist in this area, which he has shown in his well-researched monographs and articles, e.g., on miracles (see book list on page 131). The first chapter is filled with information about how illness and healing were viewed in ancient times by Jews and non-Jews in the Mediterranean world. His overview puts Jesus’ healing power into the perspective of how ancient readers and eyewitnesses would have experienced it. What sets Jesus apart from other healers of his time is

twofold. First “most other teachers of the time were not known also as teachers, as Jesus was. But also, none ended their days powerless, hanging on a cross” (11). Thus what makes Jesus unique is that he is a “wounded healer” (a term Remus picks up from Henri Nouwen who used it to designate the modern Christian minister [38]).

Remus does not engage in the difficult and highly disputable questions about the earliest traceable stages of the words and deeds of the “historical Jesus”, rather, he takes on a canonical approach to pursue his analysis of Jesus as healer. He treats “Mark as the first New Testament gospel, and the authors of Matthew and Luke as working from Mark, though not necessarily our version of Mark” (Preface, ix). Thus he starts with an analysis of the Gospel of Mark (Ch. 2), which lays the foundation for his analysis of the other two synoptic Gospels (Ch. 3: Matthew; Ch. 4: Luke). From there he moves on to take a look at the Gospel of John (Ch. 5), some of the Christian apocryphal writings (Ch. 6), and then deals shortly with Paul, the Acts of the Apostles, and the non-canonical Acts of Thomas (Ch. 7). What Remus says in a summary about the Gospel of Mark (Ch. 2) applies also to the other New Testament and non-canonical portraits of Jesus: “The Gospel of Mark’s portrait of Jesus as healer — powerful yet powerless, healing yet himself wounded — is a sobering reminder of human vulnerability to the thousand natural shocks that flesh is still heir to” (39).

Last but not least, Remus takes on the historical question, “Did Jesus really heal?” (Ch. 8), a question that undoubtedly has to be dealt with in a book which programmatically sets out to answer “who Jesus was” (back cover page). Again, this is not a simple matter of yes or no, not a matter about which one can simply chant, “for the Bible tells me so”. Rather, this is a theological question that has to be developed in dialogue with cultural studies in anthropology and medicine. Healing involves a trusting relationship of the healer to the person to be healed, as the New Testament documents about Jesus demonstrate. Healing is a matter of body and soul, of the whole person. Healing — as well as illness — concerns the body as a whole, the individual body as well as the social body of a society. Remus notes: “One of the fundamental elements in the gospel’s portraits of Jesus, most likely based on the historical Jesus, is his concern not only about individual illnesses but social illnesses as well” (115).

The quest for healing of body and soul in life and beyond death is not closed. It is still an inevitable part of our wounded existence. Remus states: “Readers of the gospels are also well aware, however, that Jesus did not heal all the sick people in the world. His healings are presented in the gospels not as panacea — the end of all pain and suffering — but as signs — glimpses — of the reign of God that Jesus proclaims” (117). We can find hope and consolation in the fact that Jesus is a wounded healer.

Remus' book on "Jesus as Healer" is a great "little" book. It is as informative as it is well written. Remus' ability to explain complex issues without reducing the content is a gift to the reader. The appendices, "Questions for further thought and discussion", and "Suggestions for further reading" make this book well suited for personal and group studies. This book is highly recommended.

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Reclaiming the Bible for the Church

Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, Editors

Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995
137 pages, \$13.00 Softcover

An impressive array of theologians contributed to this book, which grew out of a conference with the same name held in Northfield, Minnesota in the summer of 1994. Beginning with Brevard Childs' opening essay which states the theme ("On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology") seven theologians representing various ecclesiastical traditions respond or comment in somewhat related manner.

I was happily impressed with the essay from the Canadian contributor, Alister E. McGrath of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Regent College, Vancouver. Writing on "Reclaiming our Roots and Vision", McGrath places strong emphasis on the role of the community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture, which included welcome comments about public reading of Scripture and good lectionary usage. McGrath perhaps went out of his way to criticize Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. I am always a bit concerned when another's position is attacked without any opportunity for response. Nonetheless, in a way, this essay best captured for me a reasonable understanding of what is always a "chicken and egg" issue — what comes first, the church (the community of faith) or its Scriptures? Thus he suggests the reason for the church to reclaim the Scriptures is its need to secure its own identity. As he concludes: "For Christians, the Bible is our book. It tells our story. It judges us, encourages us, and builds us up. Why should we allow others to hijack it?" (88).

It was interesting that as I was reading this book for this review, the *Christian Century* issue (June 17-24, 1998) arrived in the mail with its notice that Gerd Lüdemann, New Testament professor at the University of