

Did Jesus Heal Simon's Mother-in-law of a Fever?

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Mark 1:29/They left the synagogue right away and entered the house of Simon and Andrew along with James and John. 30/Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her right away. 31/He went up to her, took hold of her hand, raised her up, and the fever disappeared. Then she started looking after them.

Matthew 8:14/ And when Jesus came to Peter's house, he noticed his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. 15/He touched her hand and the fever disappeared. Then she got up and started looking after him.

Luke 4:38/He got up from the synagogue and entered the house of Simon. Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they made an appeal to him on her behalf. 39/He stood over her, rebuked the fever, and it disappeared. She immediately got up and started looking after them.¹

FORTY YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE APPEARANCE in English of Oscar Cullmann's historical assessment of the life and career of a Simon called Peter.² Twenty years have passed since the publication of the historical conclusions of the Catholic-Lutheran task force, chaired by Raymond E. Brown and John Reumann, relative to the life and career of this Simon called Peter.³ Both Cullmann and the members of the task force approached this story with an interest specifically in Peter, not Jesus. But neither Cullmann nor the task force explicitly affirmed the historicity of the event presupposed by this synoptic story narrated initially in Mark,

1. The English translation of these gospel texts is that translation known as the Scholars Version (SV). See Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1992).

2. Oscar Cullman, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953).

3. Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, and John Reumann, eds., *Peter in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973).

and subsequently adapted from Mark by the authors of Matthew and Luke.

Based on the “gist” of the Marcan version of the report, the historical question can be narrowly couched in these terms: *Did Jesus heal Simon's mother-in-law of a fever?* Based on the details of the Marcan report, at least three related historical questions can be raised: *Did Simon actually have a mother-in-law? Did the healing occur in Simon's house in Capernaum? Did the healing occur on the sabbath?*

Early church tradition about the origin of the gospel of Mark (Papias of Hierapolis, Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria) identifies the author as that Mark who, as a follower and interpreter of Peter, wrote down information about Jesus received directly from Peter. If the author of the gospel was this Mark, then one can speak with some confidence about a “Petrine reminiscence” underlying this story, as scholars occasionally still do.⁴ If I followed this lead, my recommendation for a vote on the narrowly formulated question would be RED, that Jesus really did heal Simon's mother-in-law of a fever.

More recent critical tradition—with the advent of form-critical and redactional-critical analysis—has seen in Mark evidence of oral transmission of tradition and has emphasized the theological and ecclesiological issues which led to, and are reflected in, the written gospel narrative.⁵ Therefore, this story about Simon's mother-in-law, along with the other miracle stories in Mark 1:21-3:6, can be characterized as “Mark's own fictions.”⁶ Following this lead, my recommendation for a vote on the narrowly formulated question would be BLACK, that Jesus did *not* really heal Simon's mother-in-law of a fever.

However, my voting recommendations will both embrace and fall between the extremes: RED; PINK; GRAY; and BLACK. This essay anticipates these recommendations by proceeding in three steps: first, I briefly review the possible transmission history of the gospel of Mark; second, I examine the Marcan version of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law in its written Marcan context; and, third, I consider the Marcan story and its adaptation by Matthew and Luke within the literary and social setting of the ancient world.

4. See, for example, C. E. B. Cranfield, *St. Mark* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 81-86; Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to Mark* (New York: St. Martin's, 1966), 178-80; and C. S. Mann, *Mark* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), 214-16.

5. See, for example, Howard Clark Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977); Theodore J. Weeden, *Mark—Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971); Werner H. Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

6. Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 239.

THE TRANSMISSION HISTORY OF MARK

In recent years historical interrogation of the canonical gospel of Mark has been complicated by the possibility that the transmission history of Mark itself is much more complicated than once thought. Since the discovery and initial advocacy of “secret Mark” by Morton Smith,⁷ several scholars have adopted the view that canonical Mark represents a later version of the gospel from which passages in the earlier “secret Mark” have been excised.⁸ Therefore, the version of Mark in the New Testament—canonical Mark—can be dated as late as the middle of the second century.

It has even been suggested that the transmission history of Mark involves five distinct stages⁹:

Stage 1: a version without Mark 6:45-8:26 used by Luke but not Matthew, since—as has long been recognized—Luke does not contain material from Mark 6:45-8:26;

Stage 2: a version amplified with material now in Mark 6:45-8:26 which was used by Matthew;

Stage 3: a still later revision, characterized by redactional material not paralleled in Matthew and Luke, which approximated “secret Mark”;

Stage 4: an abbreviated edition of “secret Mark” which became canonical Mark; and

Stage 5: an expansion with the addition of endings, such as Mark 16:9-20, now preserved in the manuscript tradition.

7. Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). What has become known as “secret Mark” is a version of the gospel of Mark used in Alexandria in the second century. Apparently this version of Mark contained certain passages intended only for those who had attained a level of “knowledge” beyond that of common church folk. The existence of “secret Mark” was unknown to the modern world until its discovery by American scholar Morton Smith. In 1958, while working in the manuscript collection of the Mar Saba monastery near Jerusalem, Smith found a portion of a previously unknown letter by Clement of Alexandria which mentioned different versions of the gospel of Mark and preserved two brief passages from “secret Mark.” To see these two excerpts, consult Helmut Koester and Stephen J. Patterson, “Secret Mark,” *The Fourth R* (May 1991): 14-16; or Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, 402-405.

8. John Dominic Crossan, *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of Canon* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1991), 59-83; and Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), 293-303.

9. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 285-86.

There is nothing in these reconstructions of the transmission history of Mark, however, to suggest that the brief story of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law would not have been integral to the text of Mark at stage 1. Therefore, this written story of Simon's mother-in-law dates literarily from ca. 70 C.E.—a generation after the event it reports, and less than a decade after the death of Peter.¹⁰

THE NARRATIVE CONTEXT AND LITERARY FORM OF THE MARCAN STORY

The Marcan story of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law represents an integral part of that opening portion of Mark's gospel in which Jesus begins his public activity in the territory of Galilee, specifically in the village of Capernaum. The eight literary units which comprise this section of the gospel can be arranged as follows with the three units marked + identifying the passages related to Jesus' activity in Capernaum:

- baptism in the Jordan River by John (Mark 1:9-11)
- testing in the wilderness by Satan (vv. 12-13)
- return to Galilee and summary of preaching (vv. 14-15)
- call of Simon and Andrew, James and John, at Sea of Galilee (vv. 16-20)
- +exorcism of man with unclean spirit in Capernaum synagogue (vv. 21-28)
- +healing of Simon's mother-in-law in his Capernaum house (vv. 29-31)
- +summary of exorcisms and healings (vv. 32-34)
- withdrawal for prayer and expanded ministry through Galilee (vv. 35-39)

Redaction-critically,¹¹ the author—whatever his motives—has arranged the three passages marked + to represent the first day in the public ministry of Jesus. Set by the author in Capernaum on the sabbath, the story of *exorcism* in the synagogue (Mark 1:21-28) and the story of *healing* in the house (vv. 29-31) complement each other and give concrete expression to the subsequent summary statement about Jesus' ministry of *exorcism* and *healing* (vv. 32-34). The summary statement concludes with the characteristically Marcan motif of the "messianic secret" (v. 34b).

10. In scholarly biblical publications, the temporal abbreviations B.C. and A.D. have increasingly been replaced by B.C.E. and C.E., "before the common era" and "the common era," as a way of recognizing the commonality between Judaism and Christianity.

11. Redaction-criticism—or editorial criticism—studies the ways in which the individual gospel writer has edited the tradition, whether oral sayings and stories or written sources, in order to identify the theology peculiar to each writer.

The reference to Simon in the story of the healing of his mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31) presupposes his call beside the sea to follow Jesus (vv. 16-20) and anticipates his first rebuke by Jesus when he seemingly asks Jesus to return home to Capernaum because the crowds are seeking some benefit (vv. 35-39).

Form-critically,¹² the Marcan story of Simon's mother-in-law has been classified as a *healing story*.¹³ But in style and vocabulary, the story as written appears to be thoroughly Marcan; and in length and detail, it seems to be hardly a story at all. It has the appearance of a simple report with little literary and theological elaboration.

The brief narrative twice contains the characteristically Marcan expression "right away" (twenty-five or more times in Mark) and concludes with a reference to "looking after," or "serving" (as does the earlier story of Jesus' testing in the wilderness [Mark 1:12-13]). The brief account of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law also lacks the formal features of many other gospel miracle stories: *no* comment on the duration of the malady, *no* word spoken by Jesus, *no* emphasis on the faith of the recipient, *no* response of amazement by those present.

Also this story of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law is *not* included in those collections of miracle stories which some scholars claim were used by Mark in the composition of his gospel.¹⁴ Therefore, any tradition underlying the story *must* be represented by the "gist" of the account: *a report that Simon's mother-in-law had once been healed of a fever by Jesus*. There is evidence in Mark that the author knows certain biographical details of interest to him and his original readers but apparently of little interest to Matthew or Luke. Only Mark mentions the "naked boy" present in Gethsemane at the arrest of Jesus (14:51-52). Only Mark identifies Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross for Jesus, as "the father of Alexander and Rufus" (15:21).

Historically, it is possible that Jesus healed the mother-in-law of Simon since there is reliable independent evidence—by Paul—that Simon had a mother-in-law because he was married (1 Cor. 9:5). Later tradition also refers to the wife of Simon, including her martyrdom, and even claims that she and Simon had children (Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, the Pseudo-Clementines). It is also possible that this healing oc-

12. Form-criticism studies the literary forms characteristic of the sayings and stories of Jesus in order to identify the ways the gospel tradition was passed down, first orally, and then in writing.

13. Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963, German original, 1921), 212; Reginald H. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 34, 126.

14. Paul J. Achtemeier, "Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 265-91; and "Origin and Function of the Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 198-221.

curred in the house of Simon in Capernaum, although elsewhere Simon called Peter and Andrew his brother are said to be from Bethsaida (John 1:44). The divergent claims about the residence of Peter have often been reconciled by viewing Bethsaida as the hometown of the brothers and Capernaum as the place where Peter later dwelt. Franciscans excavating at Capernaum have even claimed to have uncovered the actual house of Peter. Although these claims have been treated sympathetically by some,¹⁵ they have been rejected by others.¹⁶ Furthermore, the very existence of Capernaum as a first-century village in Galilee has been called into question.¹⁷ However, that Capernaum was both a village in the first century and constituted a locale for Jesus' activity can hardly be doubted. Also in recent years excavations have been undertaken at the site of ancient Bethsaida.¹⁸

THE ADAPTATIONS AND ANALOGS OF THE MARCAN STORY

This Marcan story of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31) represents one of the *few* gospel miracle stories in which the recipient of the miracle is associated with a personal name (also Jairus' daughter, Bartimaeus, and Lazarus) and the *only* story in which the historical existence of the recipient receives support from literary evidence independent of the miracle story itself. This Marcan story, however, is adapted by Matthew and Luke and has analogs in other ancient healing stories.

Matthew appropriates the Marcan story and places it (Matt. 8:14-15) among the ten miracle stories arranged by him between his first (chaps. 5-7) and second (chap. 10) discourses. Although Matthew refers to Simon by his nickname "Peter," he does not alter the "gist" of the story: *Jesus heals his disciple's mother-in-law of a fever*. And her healed status is again publicly demonstrated by her serving. But whereas in Mark Jesus raises her up by taking her hand, in Matthew he simply touches her hand. Also whereas in Mark disciples are present in the house, inform Jesus of her illness, and are served by her, in Matthew only Jesus is present and served. Although within the broader Matthean narrative setting the healing is presented as occurring in Capernaum, there is no mention of its

15. Edward J. McMahon, "The Healing of the Lame Man [Mark 2:1-12 and John 5:1-14]," Mar. 1993, paper prepared for the Jesus Seminar, Sonoma, California.

16. James F. Strange and Hershel Shanks, "Has the House Where Jesus Stayed in Capernaum Been Found?" *Biblical Archaeological Review* 8 (1982): 26-37.

17. Frank R. Zindler, "Capernaum—A Literary Invention," Mar. 1993, paper prepared for the Jesus Seminar, Sonoma, California.

18. Rami Arav and John J. Rousseau, "Elusive Bethsaida Recovered," *The Fourth R* 4 (Jan. 1991): 1-4.

happening on the sabbath.

Luke appropriates the Marcan story of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law and places it before that story reported only by him of Simon's call by Jesus through the the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11). Consequently, in Luke the Marcan story thereby functions as an introduction of Simon to the reader (4:38-39). But Luke retains the "gist" of the story: *Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of a fever*, although the condition is now described as a "high fever." Furthermore, Luke omits any reference to touch and substitutes Jesus' verbal "rebuke" of the fever in language reminiscent of an exorcism. Elsewhere in Luke, Satan is explicitly identified as the source of a physical infirmity (13:10-17). As in Mark so in Luke, Simon's mother-in-law demonstrates her healed status by waiting on those said to be present. Also as in Mark so in Luke, the broader narrative setting places the healing in Capernaum on a sabbath.

As evident from the preceding analyses, there is no evidence that Matthew and Luke possessed independent tradition about the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. Therefore, the event itself is *singly* attested. There are preserved in the canonical writings, however, other miracle stories in which the physical ailment is described as a "fever," one in the gospel of John, and the other in the book of Acts. Therefore, healings of a fever are *multiply* attested in early Christian literature.

The gospel of John preserves the story of Jesus' healing an official's son of a fever (4:46-54). Herein Jesus performs the healing from a distance when the official "believed" Jesus' declaration, ". . . your son is alive and well." The story has apparently been adapted from the so-called Signs Gospel, which some scholars believe was a written document used by the author of John. Indeed, the gospel of John itself describes the healing in the story of the official's son as the "second sign" or "second miracle" which Jesus did when he had come from Judea into Galilee. Interestingly, the specific locale for this healing of a fever is none other than the village of Capernaum. The claim has sometimes been made that the Johannine story presupposes the same event narrated in the Q miracle story of the Centurion's servant, which also has Capernaum as its setting, although the latter makes no reference to "fever" (Matt 8:5-13/Luke 7:1-10).¹⁹

The book of Acts tells the story of how Paul, after his shipwreck on Malta, healed the father of a man named Publius of "fever and dysentery" (28:7-10). Herein Paul performs the healing through touch and prayer.

At least since the writings of David Friedrich Strauss in the last cen-

19. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970), 1:193.

tury,²⁰ Hebrew scripture—the Old Testament—has rightly been perceived to exert a creative influence on the gospel tradition of Jesus' miracles. The stories about Moses, Elijah, and Elisha, and the prophetic catalogs of eschatological healings (such as Isa. 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 42:18) provide models for depicting Jesus and his "mighty works" or "signs." But within Hebrew scripture prominence is given—for various reasons—to such dramatic healings as the cure of blindness, deafness, dumbness, and leprosy. "Fever" does *not* appear among these stories and lists of physical ailments. Therefore, early Christian miracle stories of *fever* healing, including the Marcan story of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, do not appear to have been shaped by passages of Hebrew scripture.

However, "fever" as a malady to be cured does appear in at least one ancient miracle story of Jewish provenance that has obvious similarities to the early Christian accounts reviewed above. One of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa's (first century C.E.) often cited miracles involves the healing of Rabbi Gamaliel's son (bBerakoth 34b). Herein Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa cures the lad of a fever. The cure is effected at a distance through prayer. The cure is publicly attested by the boy's request for a drink of water.²¹

At least since the writings of W. K. Hobart in the last century,²² similarities have been noted between the vocabulary of Greek physicians from Hippocrates (fifth century B.C.E.) to Galen (second century C.E.) and the author of Luke-Acts. Among the terms claimed to be technical jargon were the phrase "high fever" or "great fever" (in contradistinction to "small fever") in the Lucan version of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38) and the expression "fever and dysentery" in the story of Paul (Acts 28:8).

However, the attempt to use this kind of evidence in support of the authorship of Luke-Acts by the physician Luke has generally been found wanting.²³ Such language was commonplace in the ancient Greek world and well attested in general literature as well as in medical writings. Therefore, although the early Christian miracle stories of *fever* healing, including the story of Jesus' healing of Simon's mother-in-law, may not have been created out of the ancient recognition of "fever" as a physical ailment they would have been intelligible in their claim that this kind of healing had occurred.

20. *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and trans. George Eliot (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972; German original, 1835-36).

21. Cited by Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: William Collins Sons, 1973), 72-78.

22. *The Medical Language of St. Luke* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1882).

23. Henry J. Cadbury, "Lexical Notes on Luke-Acts: II. Recent Arguments for Medical Language," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 45 (1926): 190-209.

CONCLUSION WITH VOTING RECOMMENDATIONS

That Jesus historically was a healer and exorcist has been affirmed by the Jesus Seminar in votes on various propositions at the fall 1992 and spring 1993 meetings. In his paper on sabbath healing Daryl D. Schmidt reported on some of these votes.²⁴

Based on the preceding analysis of the story of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, I conclude that the story—or report—probably preserves the memory of a specific occasion when Jesus actually healed his disciple's mother-in-law of a fever. It is even possible that the healing occurred in Capernaum in Simon's house. It is less likely that the healing occurred on a sabbath. Therefore, I have formulated the following statements, recommended votes relative to the statements, and offered brief rationales for the recommendations.

Statement: Simon called Peter had a mother-in-law.

Recommended vote: RED

At least *two independent written sources* attest to the existence of Simon's mother-in-law: Paul's letter known as 1 Corinthians and the gospel of Mark.

Statement: Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law of a fever.

Recommended vote: PINK

This story appears in the earliest version of Mark, stage 1, written circa 70 C.E. It is one of the *few* gospel miracle stories in which the recipient of a healing is identified by a personal name and the *only* such story in which the historical existence of the recipient is supported by independent evidence. The story has more of the character of a *report* than a story and has not been shaped by its transmission in the early church, or amplified by the gospel writer, under the influence of Jewish tradition and Hebrew scripture.

Statement: This healing occurred in Capernaum in Simon's house.

Recommended vote: GRAY

The story, or report, itself does not refer to Capernaum as the locale

24. "The Sabbath Day: To Heal or Not to Heal," Mar. 1993, paper prepared for the Jesus Seminar, Sonoma, California. For recent monographs by members of the seminar who acknowledge the importance of Jesus' activity as healer, see Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 60-67; and John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 303-53.

of the house where Jesus performed the healing. But the village of Capernaum was apparently a *center* for Jesus' activity in Galilee; and there are also archaeological claims that the remains of the very house of Simon have been found in Capernaum—although these claims have been disputed.

Statement: This healing occurred on the sabbath.
Recommended vote: BLACK

Neither does the the report of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law refer to the sabbath. The gospel writer himself has joined this account of a healing in a house to the preceding account of an exorcism in the synagogue in order to depict the first day in Jesus' ministry as a characteristic day in his ministry. At the outset as well as later in Mark, Jesus exorcises and heals specifically on the sabbath. The reference to the sabbath within the broader narrative setting is *redactional* and not historical.

* * *

[Editor's note: In the discussion that followed, Tatum elaborated his position. He stated that there is general agreement that the historical Jesus was a healer and exorcist. Yet there is disagreement among scholars about which details of which healing stories reflect the historical Jesus. Multiple attestation of an event is one way of corroborating the historical authenticity of any event. The story of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law only has a single source in Mark, which is the source for the accounts in Matthew and Luke. Since there is only one source, we are initially skeptical about the story. Yet the story has none of the contrived and formal literary elements of other healing stories in the New Testament. Nor does it follow Old Testament models as other healing stories do. The story, Tatum argues, is borderline between gray and pink. He favors pink because it seems to serve no theological purpose in Mark nor does it contain a contrived literary pattern. The simplicity of the story seems to argue in favor of authenticity.

To these remarks, Bruce Chilton added that the story ends with the mother-in-law serving a meal, which increases its likelihood of authenticity—Jesus was known to share a table of fellowship in his ministry and a Jewish woman would have been particularly attentive about serving a sabbath meal. Other participants argued against this being primarily a healing story; they saw it as a story of calling to serve or calling into fellowship. Tatum responded that the call or inclusion was important, but so was the healing element. Voting was taken on several issues relating to

the passage. The voting by participants on the main proposition was as follows:

Did Jesus cure Simon's mother-in-law?

| | Scholars | Associates |
|-------|----------|------------|
| Red | 3 | 3 |
| Pink | 20 | 10 |
| Gray | 1 | 8 |
| Black | 0 | 2] |