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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS' HEALING MIRACLES: A STUDY OF THEIR ROLE IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE TO EARLY CHRISTIANITY

by

JOHN CADENHEAD

Under the Direction of Timothy Renick

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the healing miracles of Jesus as described by the Synoptic Gospels and posits that the appeal of the Synoptics over non-canonical texts can partially be found in the former's focus on these physical healing miracles. The essay argues that the idea that one can be healed of physical pain through faith is a varied theme in the Synoptics and a strong motivator to bring an interest in early Christianity, especially during a time of persecution. Further, this essay considers Gnostic Gospels and their relative lack of healing miracles to expand upon a theory put forth by Elaine Pagels, namely that the early church declared Gnostic texts to be heretical in part because they did not cater to the basic needs of the people as the Synoptics did.

INDEX WORDS: Healing Miracles, Elaine Pagels, Early Christianity, Gnostic Gospels, Synoptic Gospels

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Dedication

To Jack Pinkerton.

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Introduction

In his book *Jesus the Jew*, Geza Vermes states: "According to Luke, Jesus himself defined his essential ministry in terms of exorcism and healing, but even if those words are not Jesus' own but the evangelist's, they reflect the firm and unanimous testimony of the whole Synoptic tradition."[1] The Synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke -- focus prevalently on Jesus' work healing physical and mental sicknesses, listing over thirty separate miracles in the three gospels combined. Yet this familiar theme is not found in all gospels. Why were healing miracles focused on in the Synoptics when they were all but missing in Gnostic and some other "heretical" texts? This is a question that has not been dealt with sufficiently by scholars.

Among the scholars who study the canonical gospels, recently there has been a large shift in thought on miracles. In the past century, scholars have often paid only passing attention to the miracles of the canonical gospels, not knowing how to treat them. Eric Eve writes, "by no means [are] all these writers hostile to the idea that Jesus worked miracles; they merely imply by their near silence on the matter that they consider it to be of little significance."[2] Other scholars, such as Rudolph Bultmann, have "evaded the difficulty [of approaching miracles] by, to all intents and purposes, scrapping miracles altogether."[3] An approach scholars have taken is to translate these miracles into modern terms, removing the miraculous from the miracle. M. A. H. Melinsky, a modern theologian and physician, writes about Jesus' healing of lepers: "if the disease was leprosy, the cure was wholly outside our knowledge. If, however, it was psoriasis or

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[1] Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, (Philadelphia: First Fortress Press, 1973), 58.
[2] Eric Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus' Miracles*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 7. While Eve's views may be seen to be overly exaggerated, scholars have viewed healing miracles as less accessible than Jesus' sayings, and so have often approached them with less focus and detail.
[3] M. A. H. Melinsky, *Healing Miracles*, (London: A. R Mowbray & Co Ltd, 1968), 111.

something like it, then the emotional impact of Jesus' acceptance of the outcast man might very well, within the terms of our experience, have played an important part in his cure."[4]

Currently, scholars such as Gerd Theissen are trying to come to a deeper understanding of the miracles listed in the canon, however, these studies have focused mostly on Jesus' large, extravagant miracles, such as his resurrection, his feeding the five thousand, and so on.[5] Much less has been said about the seemingly daily healing miracles Jesus performed, like the healing of a leper or a man with a withered hand. The healing miracles, however, make up the majority of Jesus' miracles, as well as constituting a significant portion of his ministry, and so are a necessary part to understanding Jesus.

The term "healing miracle," and "miracle" in general, are themselves tricky terms for scholars. The word "miracle," or at least its Greek equivalent, is never used in the Synoptics. The terms "works" or "deeds" are employed. Eve provides a helpful definition for miracles: "a strikingly surprising event, beyond what is regarded as humanly possible, in which God is believed to act, either directly or through an intermediary."[6] Working off this definition, for this essay "healing miracles" will be understood as a miracle where some sort of physical healing is provided to a person. Jesus also performed exorcisms, removing "demons" from people, which can be seen as a type of mental healing, and Jesus' physical healings are often accompanied by spiritual healings as well. This essay, however, will focus only on healings that cause a physical restoration to the ailing or infirm.

I propose to explore the nature and detail of certain healing miracles that are prominent in the Synoptic canonical gospels, as well as the relative absence of healing miracles in Gnostic

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[4] Melinsky, 120.
[5] Theissen spends roughly 10 pages of his 300 page book, *Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, on healing miracles.
[6] Eve, 1.

texts, and present an argument for why healing miracles were so important to both the Synoptic gospel writers and the early orthodox church. Clearly the Synoptic writers who stressed the central role to Jesus' ministry of healing the physically sick did so for a reason. Three particular healing miracles that exist in multiple attestations will be studied, showing the similarities as well as the differences between the Synoptics' treatment as their authors use the episodes to emphasize different points. Then a broader overview of the three Synoptic gospels use of healing miracles, plus healing miracles in some other texts, will be presented. Theories as to why each gospel writer presents the healing miracles in a different fashion will be discussed, and larger conclusions as to why healing miracles became so prevalent in the canonical gospels will be suggested. From there this thesis will consider both theological and socio-political reasons as to why an abundance of healing miracles would be attractive to the early church, using a central thesis and approach that Elaine Pagels utilizes in *Gnostic Gospels* as its starting point. Pagels argues that the early churches chose the Synoptics as canon not only for theological reasons, but also for social and political reasons. By looking at healing miracles in this context, we will be able to see how they were socially attractive to the early church and would be seen as important tools for conversion. The idea that Jesus could heal physical pain and suffering would be appealing to the persecuted Christians of the early church, and the Synoptic gospels, which focused on Jesus as a healer of physical pain, would find an important place in this landscape.

Part I

The Healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman

Jesus performs many different kinds of healing miracles in the Synoptic gospels. However, not every healing is repeated in each gospel. Some are described by one or two of the three Synoptics, and only a handful are discussed by all three. Of those that all three Synoptics cover, three particular healing miracles will be examined in this essay. Each of these present an interesting aspect of how the different gospel authors understood Jesus' healing miracles. The first is the story of the healing of the woman who suffers from hemorrhages. This story is repeated by the authors of the Synoptics – who I will, for convenience's sake refer to as Mark, Matthew and Luke -- and each tells the story in a slightly different fashion.[7] Jesus' role in the Synoptics can be seen on a variety of levels. Often discussions of Jesus focus on his theological position rather than the event itself. However, both of these approaches are important and both will be covered in this study.

All three gospels place this story in the middle of another healing miracle, where Jesus is requested to heal Jairus' daughter, who is said to be "near death."[8] On the way to healing this child, Jesus must wade through a great crowd of people, one of whom, according to Mark, draws power out of Jesus by touching his cloak:

> And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages 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. She had heard of Jesus, and came up behind him in

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[7] The quotations from the Synoptic gospels are all from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), in English. This translation was chosen as it is commonly used in academic settings. The English translation is being used as this author has no formal Greek training. As with all translations, there are things that are altered as a result of the English translation, however, these changes will not affect the this study enough to warrant concern.

[8] Mark 5:20; Mark is viewed by most all scholars as the earliest gospel, written before 70 CE, and shall be viewed that way throughout this paper.

> the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" He looked all around to see who had done it but the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.[9]

Matthew's version is as follows:

> Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well."[10]

Luke writes:

> Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhaging stopped. Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you." But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me." When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."[11]

Each of the Synoptic gospels tells this story differently. Mark, who is usually known for his succinct pericopes, tells the fullest account of this story. Luke's version is very similar to Mark's, and Matthew's is the shortest. One interesting point to mention about this story is that Mark and Matthew give the woman her own voice and motives, whereas Luke's version gives her no voice. Her motivations for touching Jesus' cloak are unknown. Mark and Matthew both

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[9] Mark 5:25-34.
[10] Matthew 9:20-22.
[11] Luke 8:43-48.

desribe the woman as thinking: "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well."[12] But Luke's version gives the woman no such thought. She could be touching Jesus' clothes to get his attention in the crowd or to ask for healing, or she could have accidentally bumped into him. For Mark and Matthew, the woman is shown to believe that just by touching Jesus she will be healed, and Jesus is shown to know the thoughts behind her actions and tells her that it is her "faith that has made you well."[13]

For Mark and Luke, another point is stressed, that Jesus knew someone has touched him and has drawn power from him. Mark states that, after being touched by the woman, Jesus was "immediately aware that power had gone forth from him."[14] Luke states the story in a similar fashion: Jesus announces that someone has touched him, and his disciples look at him puzzled. Luke depicts Peter as very confused by this, as he notes that Jesus is wading through a large crowd of people, and surely people are constantly touching him from all sides. This makes the woman's touch even more important, as she seems to be the only person who "withdraws" power from Jesus by doing so. "Power was the commonest attribute of divinity, and… the Hebrew conception of personality as extending beyond a person to his shadow, footprints, or clothes."[15] This touch then becomes much more meaningful, as it seems that the woman's thoughts and beliefs are what cause the healing. The touch represents even more importance as the woman's "illness had made her ceremonially unclean and untouchable, and Jesus accepts her touch," a ritual boundary he breaks with many types of physically and spiritually unclean people.[16]

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[12] Mark 5:27.
[13] Mark 5:30.
[14] Mark 5:30.
[15] Melinsky, 127.
[16] Melinsky, 126.

The belief in being healed is an important part of the story for Mark and Matthew. Since many people touch Jesus and receive no healing, one might glean from the story that belief and faith in Jesus' healing powers are what made the woman well. Mark and Matthew seem to be stressing the idea that faith is required for healing. In a story where a woman believes that touching Jesus' clothes can heal her, these gospel writers present the idea to their readers that faith in Jesus can still heal people even without this touch. Jesus explicitly states in all three gospel pericopes about the hemorrhaging woman, "Your *faith* has made you well."[17] The message the Synoptic writers are presenting is that faith in Jesus is necessary for a physical healing. Melinsky writes, "Faith was necessary for healing not because a cure was physically impossible without it, but because it would have been spiritually meaningless."[18] But faith in itself does not guarantee a cure.

> 'Faith' by no means implies, in the gospels, a conviction on the part of the sufferer that Jesus can heal him…. Sometimes the faith is more evidently possessed by friends or relatives of the sick person, as the four friends who brought the paralysed man to Capernaum (Mk 2.1-12), or the father of the epileptic boy (Mk 9.24). On every occasion Jesus seems to be confident that conditions are such that the miracle *may* be interpreted by those present as a sign of the presence and the power of the kingdom of God. There was always the risk that it might not be. Ten lepers were healed and went away; only one returned to Jesus to give thanks to God, and only one was saved (Lk 17.11-19). Miracles, then, so far from being an optional extra to the [Synoptic] gospels, are an integral part of them.[19]

Another interesting point to be made is what each gospel writer focuses on and leaves out of their version of the story. Theissen writes: "Here the Marcan version has a somewhat unusual composition which stresses the purpose of the miracle. The healing takes place and is then followed by a dramatic process in which – as usually in the exposition – an obstacle is overcome,

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[17] Matthew 9:22, italics my own.
[18] Melinsky, 23.
[19] Melinsky, 36-37.

giving us two passages with expositional motifs. This departure from the usual structure indicates a skilled narrator."[20] Matthew and Luke, who usually share similar approaches when telling stories that Mark had collected, here tell very different versions of the story. Luke tells a similar story to Mark, that the woman suffered for 12 years and that she touched the "fringe of his clothes."[21] Mark and Luke write that woman fall down in front of Jesus and admits what she did, and indicate that Jesus tells her that her faith has healed her. Luke's version varies just slightly from Mark's as he has the woman only come to Jesus "when she saw that she could not remain hidden."[22] Mark (as well as Luke) focuses on the idea that the woman "had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse."[23] Theissen states, "the woman had suffered much at the hands of many doctors and had come to Jesus – come, as it were, to the true doctor, who would satisfy her longing for a medical cure."[24] The idea that Jesus unknowingly healed a woman who had spent all her life trying to be healed by doctors stresses the powerfulness of the miracle.

Matthew takes a very different approach. Matthew's version is only two verses long, whereas Mark's and Luke's are around five each. Matthew tells of the same woman who suffered for twelve years and touches the cloak. Matthew gives the woman the same motivation to do so as did Mark. But after that Matthew differs. Instead of claiming that Jesus notices that power has been drawn out of him and asks who touched him, Matthew just skips to the part where Jesus turns to the woman and concludes that her faith has healed her. The reason Matthew took this approach cannot be known for sure, but conjectures can be made. Matthew may be

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[20] Gerd Theissen, *Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 176.
[21] Luke 8:45.
[22] Luke 8:47.
[23] Mark 5:27.
[24] Theissen, 92.

ignoring the part about Jesus not knowing who touched him as it may confuse readers or allow for doubters to question Jesus' connection to God if he did not know who took his power. Or Matthew may be ignoring the idea that power could leave Jesus, as this also could cause doubters to question Jesus' power, implying that he was just obtaining and transferring power from somewhere else. According to at least one scholar, this healing miracle is one of the only instances in an important religious text where a holy person in any society loses healing power without their knowing, and without doing it on purpose.[25] Theissen presents one possible interpretation of Matthew's compression of the healing story by suggesting a purely literary motivation.

> Matthew in particular has shortened the miracle stories. It is unnecessary to list these abridgements in detail; we shall concentrate here on one aspect, the importance of previously existing structures of the genre for the Matthaean abridgements. One indication of this is that Matthew frequently has a simpler compositional structure than Mark. The basic compositional structure of the genre 'miracle story' acts as a sort of sieve; the elements and motifs unnecessary to a realization of the basic structure are omitted. This can be seen very clearly in the story of the woman with 'the issue of blood.'… The usual order, expositional motifs followed by healing, has prevailed here and this gives Matthew a basis for his version. He starts from the normal compositional structure, introduces the healing only after the assurance of faith and links this assurance, in normal style, with the woman's expression of confidence. Naturally, the whole dialogue, which presupposes a prior transmission of power, must then disappear. Whatever the theological reasons for this compression, technically it consists in a simplification of the composition which takes the Marcan version as a basis and follows the basic structure specific to the genre. It would be slightly unfair to say that Matthew has 'cut' here; what he has done is to reproduce the story afresh on a simpler basic pattern.[26]

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[25] This point was put forth during an audience discussion in the "Health and Healing in the Biblical World: A Conversation" session with panelists Laura Zucconi and John Pilch and moderator Elizabeth Struthers Malbon at the South-Eastern Conference for the Study Of Religion (SECSOR) conference, March 7th 2008 at the Mariott Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia.
[26] Theissen, 175-6.

This approach does help to explain Matthew's shortened version of the story, but it does not address his rationale for omitting such an important moment.

One central message of the event, however, is present in all three Synoptics, regardless of the length of their pericopes: Jesus can provide physical healing for those who have faith in his power. As we will see, this is a message that would be attractive to the early church which exists amidst physical suffering.

The Resurrection of Jairus' Daughter

The pericope of the healing of the hemorrhaging woman is placed in all three Synoptic gospels right in the middle of the larger story of the resurrection of Jairus' daughter. In all three cases, a man (Mark and Luke identify him as Jairus) comes to Jesus, telling Jesus that his daughter is dying asking for him to heal her. Jesus then leaves with Jairus to go to his house, and, on the way, the crowd that just witnessed Jesus' exorcism gathers around him. The hemorrhaging woman at this point touches Jesus' clothes, and the story that was explored above unfolds. Jesus then continues on to Jairus' house and finds that a crowd has gathered. Jesus dismisses the crowd, saying that the girl is just asleep. The crowd, which has seen her dead, laughs at him, and Jesus, along with a group of disciples (a different group in each gospel), enters the house and Jesus "wakes" her up. Mark writes:

> When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of they synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with them… . [Here is the sub-story of the hemorrhaging woman is told]. While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James and John, the brother of James. When they came

> to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was 12 years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.[27]

As with the previous story, Matthew presents a much shorter version of the story than do Mark and Luke, however the story does not differ between gospels as much as does the story of the healing of the hemorrhaging woman. Matthew tells basically the same story in fewer verses than Mark. Mark, with the shortest gospel of the three, again tells the longest version of this particular story. Luke's version adheres closely to Mark's, as many of his healing pericopes do. In Matthew and Mark once again, the person who is asking for healing, in this case the father, is given a voice, whereas in Luke he is not. However, Luke does recount that the man "fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house, for he had an only daughter, about 12 years old, who was dying."[28] So the man is given more of a motivation than the hemorrhaging woman was, but he still does not get to have his own voice presented for the readers. Matthew, with his compression of compositional structures, apparently removes that which he considers to be extra to the story: "the dialogue between the messengers, the father and Jesus, leading to the assurance of faith, has all been dropped."[29] Theissen writes that Matthew's "character field is much more thinly populated than in Mark or Luke. While there is a general tendency to fill out a tripartite

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[27] Mark 5:21-24, 35-43.
[28] Luke 8:41.
[29] Theissen, 178.

field of principle characters, subsidiary characters and miracle-worker, in Matthew the field of subsidiary characters is occasionally empty."[30]

Another important fact to mention about the pericope is that Mark and Luke include a quotation from Jesus saying: "Do not fear, only believe," and "Only believe, and she will be saved."[31] This statement by Jesus stresses one important point that Mark and Luke are trying to present to their readers. It is faith that brings healing. In a world after Jesus, Mark and Luke stress that healing could still be present for the believers. Matthew attributes no such comment to Jesus.

The Man with the Withered Hand

The third healing miracle that I will discuss can be referred to as the healing of the man with the withered hand. This healing miracle is the only specified healing of a withered hand that Jesus performs in the canonical gospels. It is discussed in all three Synoptic gospels, and each story works very similarly. These pericopes can be found in the appendix section in full; here I will summarize them. In Mark Jesus enters a synagogue on the Sabbath with some Pharisees.[32] Mark writes:

> Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees

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[30] Theissen, 177.
[31] Mark 5:28 and Luke 8:50 respectively.
[32] Mark 3:1-6. I will use Mark's version to summarize the stories, and follow that by contrasting the differences Luke and Matthew present.

> went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, and how to destroy him.[33]

In the synagogue the Pharisees have placed a physically handicapped man, the man with the withered hand, to try to trick Jesus into healing him on the Sabbath. Mark then records Jesus as saying to the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" The Pharisees give no reply. One does not really know if they were indeed contemplating the message Jesus just told them, or keeping silent to see what he did so they could accuse him of working on the Sabbath. Mark then records Jesus as saying to the man, "Stretch out your hand" which the man does, and his hand is restored. The pericope ends with the Pharisees leaving and conspiring on how to destroy Jesus.

The other two Synoptic gospel writers also discuss this miracle, however there are certain changes that appear in their versions. Luke's account in particular only differs from Mark's by mentioning that Jesus "knew what they were thinking," i.e., he knew that the Pharisees were trying to trick him so they could accuse him.[34] Matthew changes the story slightly here, having the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?" versus Mark's "doing good on the Sabbath."[35] Matthew and Luke omit Mark's statement that Jesus "looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart." Luke uses more expressive language, describing the Pharisees as "filled with fury." Other than these changes, Matthew's and Luke's accounts follow Mark's.

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[33] Mark 3:1-6.
[34] Luke 6:6-11.
[35] Matthew 12:9-14 and Mark 3:4, respectively.

One interesting thing about this healing miracle is that it is also present in the Gospel of the Nazareans.[36] The Gospel of the Nazareans is a "heretical" gospel of which most of the text, including this pericope, has been lost.[37] However, there are surviving manuscripts of how Jerome understood it in his *Commentary on Matthew*. Jerome states that during his time (347-420 CE) "most people consider [the Gospel of the Nazareans] to be the authentic version of Matthew." This position is debatable; Bart Ehrman argues that either the Nazareans "produced their own version of Matthew, translated into Aramaic," or "it may have been an original composition, in Aramaic, based on oral traditions about Jesus," however one can argue that one text did probably influence the other.[38] The interesting thing about the version of this healing miracle in the Gospel of the Narareans is that the man with the withered hand, who Jerome describes as a mason, actually is given a voice and is depicted in Jerome's report of this gospel not as a tool to trick Jesus, but as a person who sincerely asks for healing from Jesus, a person who actually believes that Jesus had the ability to heal him. He is not just placed before Jesus as a test. The man, who still is not given a name, is described as seeking "help in words like these: 'I was a mason who made a living with my hands; I beseech you, Jesus, restore my health so I do not have to beg for food shamefully.'"[39]

In the Synoptic gospels, the story of the man with the withered hand is interesting as it presents the action of Jesus healing the hand primarily because Jesus seems to want to argue

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[36] The Gospel of the Nazareans is not a Gnostic text, and is thought to be almost identical to the Gospel of Matthew, but written for the Nazareans, who were very Jewish Christians, focusing on continuing to follow Jewish Law.
[37] For this essay, "heretical" gospels are gospels that were not accepted as canon, so gospels other than Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Gnostic gospels are a group of heretical gospels, but not all heretical gospels are classified as "Gnostic."
[38] Bart Erhman, *Lost Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9.
[39] Jerome, Commentary on Matthew, 12, 13, from Erhman's *Lost Scriptures*, 10. While it is not known whether Jerome's Commentary is a direct quotation of the Gospel of the Nazareans or not, Jerome directly states that the man was given a voice.

against the Pharisees about the role of the Sabbath and to assert the relative importance of helping those in need versus following the law exactly. Melinsky writes, "it is generally assumed by those present in the synagogue that Jesus *can* heal; the question is, *will* he?"[40] The Synoptics may be using this story to stress that, while observing the Sabbath and obeying rules is important, treating those in pain is more important, and one can go against one rule to obey a higher rule. In this way the actual healing miracle may get lost behind the message the gospel writers are trying to convey. The man himself can be seen as a tool for the Pharisees to trick Jesus, who enters into their trap but excuses his actions by explaining how the good outweighs the bad. In the Synoptics the man is passive; he just sits there and obeys Jesus when Jesus tells him to stretch out his hand. So Jesus' healing in this case can be seen as the healing of an injured man who needs a physical healing. Jesus shows that one should save life, even on the Sabbath. The actual healing can be seen to take a backseat to the message the gospel writers are presenting.

According to Jerome's understanding of the Gospel of the Nazareans, however, the man is given a voice, and while we do not know how the rest of the pericope played out, Jerome (and others) argue that this gospel is very similar to the Gospel of Matthew. If it is, then we can possibly assume that the two pericopes play out in a similar manner, with the Pharisees testing Jesus with the man with a withered hand. In the Nazarean gospel the man is shown to be a mason, a person whose hand is very important to his trade. In the text, one can see that the actual healing is much more important to the story, or at least to the man, who knows that Jesus is there to heal him, even if he does not know about the underlying trap the Pharisees have set for Jesus. While not all readers of the Gospel of the Nazareans were in the same predicament as the

[40] Melinsky, 122.

man, they would understand the necessity of being healthy to do work, as well as the shame of having to beg for food. So by personalizing the man, the writer of the Gospel of the Nazareans can be seen to be creating a stronger connection between his audience and the miracle, making the healing more prominent to the point of the story.

The story of the man with the withered hand is interesting *because* of the different emphases in the various versions. In most canonical pericopes, the main focus is on healing that comes with faith, and in most heretical texts, as we will see, healing is not nearly as important to the message of Jesus. This periscope seems to be the exception to the rule. Here the Synoptics can be seen to focus more on the message that Jesus is presenting and less on the actual healing of the man.

Other Healing Miracles in the Synoptic Gospels

Three particular healing miracles from the Synoptic gospels have now been analyzed; however, there are over thirty healing miracles mentioned in the Synoptic gospels. To study each one in depth would be beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this section will look at overall themes that each gospel writer presents by means of their healing miracle pericopes.

Matthew

While each gospel has its share of healing miracles that other gospels do not discuss, when it comes to healing miracles that are mentioned in multiple gospel accounts, Matthew tends to spend the fewest number of verses on these miracles. While a definite conclusion cannot be made as to why this is the case, based on material that he excludes that Mark and Luke include, one can posit that Matthew focuses on healing miracles for a different purpose than do the other

Synoptics. Matthew tends to focus on aspects of Jesus' story that stress his Messianic qualities, so miracles that did not focus on these qualities perhaps are judged to be less central to his story. One theory holds that the main purpose of Matthew's gospel was to "demonstrate Jesus' credentials as Israel's true Messiah," and since Matthew understood the Messiah to be the "supreme teacher and interpreter of the Mosaic Torah," healing miracles were not as important of an accomplishment.[41] It is interesting that healing miracles take up significantly less space in the longest gospel than they do in Mark, the shortest gospel. Matthew often presents healing miracle stories in a different light than do Mark and Luke. On certain occasions, Matthew presents new aspects to Jesus' healing miracles. In one particular story that only Matthew presents, two blind men are brought to him for healing and Matthew records that Jesus touched their eyes to heal them.[42] Matthew's reason for presenting healing by Jesus' touch is not certain, but one possible interpretation is that it brings a more personal connection between Jesus and the person asking for healing. Matthew tells of Jesus healing two blind men twice in his gospel, and the story unfolds in the same way each time.[43] The reasoning for this is not known, though Matthew does use the second healing event as an introduction to a parable and message. Matthew uses this rhetorical approach a number of times, such as when he has Jesus tell the parable about saving sheep in the story of the man with the withered hand.[44]

Mark

Mark tends to place emphasis on miracles to a much greater extent than does Matthew. Mark's gospel is the shortest of the three, but Mark and Matthew have included the same number

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[41] Harris, p. 161.
[42] Matthew 9:27.
[43] In Matthew 9:27 and 20:29.
[44] Matthew 12:9.

of healing miracles (even though some of the miracles are different), and Luke only discusses two more miracles than Mark. According to Melinsky, "in St. Mark's gospel 31 per cent of the whole, 209 out of 666 verses, is taken up with miracle stories: in his first ten chapters the proportion is as high as 47 per cent."[45] Where the miracles are repeated, Mark and Luke tend to provide equally long accounts, and Matthew usually tells the same miracles with less detail and emphasis. Relative to Matthew, Mark's descriptions tend to place more emphasis on the actual wishes and reasons of the person seeking the healing. Mark gives them voice much more often than does Luke and shows how through their faith Jesus can heal them. Mark's main emphasis in healing miracles is on the connection of the recipient to Jesus, and the mystery of Jesus' actions and reasons. Jesus often asks what the recipient wants, and, after the recipient says that they believe in the power Jesus has for healing, they are healed.

Mark also tends to stress one controversial theme in his healing miracles. Besides the issue with "power leaving Jesus" that was discussed above, he includes one particular healing miracle that is absent from the other gospels. This miracle involves Jesus healing a blind man and failing to heal him fully the first time.[46] In the story, Jesus is brought to a blind man, and Jesus puts his saliva on his hands and his hands on the man's eyes. Jesus asks if the man can see, whereas the man replies, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking."[47] Jesus then lays his hands on the man's eyes again, and the man's sight is then fully restored. One can see right away how this story could have caused controversy by posing questions about Jesus' power, and that may be one reason it was not included by Matthew and Luke. There are other issues with the story. Jesus is presented as not knowing if the healing would work, as he questions the man

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[45] Melinsky, *Healing Miracles*, p. 15.
[46] Mark 8:22.
[47] Mark 8:24.

if he can see, whereas normally Jesus just declares the subject is healed and he or she is. Also, Jesus is shown to use his saliva and hands to cure the man, whereas in most other healing stories of a similar nature, even in Mark, Jesus only has to declare that they are healed for them to be so. One possible explanation for the differences in this story is the request of the healing. Whereas in most other stories the actual recipients ask Jesus for healing, showing their particular faith in Jesus to perform such a miracle, here the people who brought the blind man to Jesus ask for the healing. One does not know if the blind man believes he can be healed, or even if he is aware of what is to transpire. The subject's lack of participation might be read as a central point of the story, showing how it affects the healing, but this claim is still not provable, as Mark does not state his reasoning for presenting the story in such a fashion, and this reasoning does not hold up with Mark's version of the healing of Jairus' daughter. One of Mark's main ideas in his gospel, however, is the mysteriousness of Jesus, how his disciples are constantly misunderstanding his actions and messages. Mark's version of Jesus is a tragic figure, and all his actions build up to his crucifixion and death. Jesus is able to heal and save others, but he cannot save himself from his fate. This idea, while present in the other Synoptics, is central to Mark, and so likely influences on the healing miracles Mark reports.

Luke

Luke also has his own unique style in presenting healing miracles. Luke's healing pericopes tend to be very similar to Mark's; however Luke tends to focus less than Mark on the particular person being healed. Thus the voice of the recipient is often ignored by Luke. Since Luke's versions of the pericopes share so much in common with Mark's, but ignore the voices of the recipients, one can understandably feel that Luke's are "lesser" versions. However, Luke in

more than one instance does bring something unique to these accounts. Luke is known as "the physician" and tends to write about physical ailments and the healing of these ailments.

Luke focuses more on lepers than the other Synoptic authors do. There is only one leper story that all three gospels share, and while the story unfolds very similarly between all three, Luke focuses more on the fact that the man was completely "*covered* in leprosy" and that Jesus touched this man to heal him.[48] Since leprosy was held to be highly transmittable through skin-to-skin contact, Luke seems to stress that Jesus is willing to heal even the sickest most disease-ridden and socially marginalized of people, and that those who are in search of healing need only put their faith in Jesus. Melinsky explains:

> Leprosy was the most dreaded of all diseases, and is the only one for which the Old Testament gives a detailed description and regulations (see Lev 13-14). It was the task of the priest to identify the disease, excommunicate the sufferer, and certify a cure. This was not on hygienic but on ritual grounds, because leprosy was regarded as direct punishment from God for serious sins, and a solemn summons to repentance for the whole community. Of seven cases in the Old Testament four are caused by the direct intervention of God, and three are healed by him.[49]

Luke, the physician, was aware of both the physical and religious dangers Jesus faced with leprosy, but he still depicts Jesus touching the lepers to heal them. "In doing so Jesus violated the law" and showed his commitment to heal even the most vile of diseases.[50]

Luke stresses this idea further with the inclusion of a healing pericope that no other gospel includes. In this pericope Jesus runs across ten lepers who ask for healing, and Jesus heals all of them, sending them to the priest to be checked.[51] One comes back to Jesus to show that he is healed and to thank Jesus, and Jesus asks where the others went. Jesus then tells the

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[48] Luke 5:12.
[49] Melinsky, 119.
[50] Melinsky, 119.
[51] Luke 17:11.

one that his “faith has made him well,” showing again that faith can heal even the vilest of diseases.

John

This essay will not discuss healing miracles in the Johnanine tradition. John’s gospel is very different from the Synoptic tradition. The stories of Jesus’ life follow a very similar pattern in the three Synoptics, yet are cast in a dramatically different fashion by John. This includes his miracle stories. John describes few healing stories and shares no healing miracles with any of the Synoptics. For John, healing miracles seem to have a completely different message. For the Synoptic tradition the faith of the recipient affected the miracle, as Jesus primarily performed miracles for those who believed in him. John takes the opposite approach. Jesus performs miracles to convince people that he is the “light” and to instill faith in them. Since John’s gospel is so different from the Synoptics, attempting to come to an understanding on John’s gospel in regards to healing miracles is an essay in and of itself, and so covering the Gospel of John is outside the scope of this essay.

Gnostic Gospels

So far in this essay, we have explored the three Synoptic gospels and their varying treatments of healing miracles. However, there were many other gospel accounts of Jesus’ life that circulated in the first centuries of Christianity, some of which have survived to this day, at least in fragments. While it is impossible to know how Jesus’ miracles were represented by those gospels which are lost, we do have access at least to parts of other gospels, and can draw tentative conclusions about them. Among these are the so-called Gnostic gospels. There are

dozens of Gnostic texts that have been found since World War II, most in a cave in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Studying all of them is too large a task for this essay. Additionally, a large number of the Gnostic texts that have survived only did so in fragments or in references from other works. In considering why Gnostic texts deemphasized healing miracles, this thesis will bypass those texts that are too fragmentary to allow one to draw reasonable conclusions. Further, we will focus only on the gospels within Gnostic writings, and not the myriad other Gnostic texts from wisdom literature to apocalyptic texts to histories.[52] This narrows down the playing field significantly.

Gnostics were a group of Christians who tended to focus on spiritual and intellectual truths. *Gnosis*, the Greek term that "Gnostic" derives from, is usually translated as "knowledge." As Pagels explains, "Gnosis involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. And to know oneself, they claimed, is to know human nature and human destiny… yet to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God; this is the secret of Gnosis."[53] While the search for knowledge is not a feature that concerned only the Gnostics, Gnostic "knowledge" takes a different shape than the knowledge of what was to become orthodox Christianity. Pagels states how "the Greek language distinguishes between scientific or reflective knowledge ('He knows mathematics') and knowing through observation or experience ('He knows me'), which is *gnosis*. As the Gnostics use the term, we could translate it as "insight," for *gnosis* involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself."[54] Gnostics focused their lives on experiencing and knowing this ultimate reality. So the teachings of Jesus, more than his actions -- the message on

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[52] The three main sources used for English translations of these texts are *Lost Scriptures*, edited by Bart Ehrman, *The Other Bible*, edited by Willis Barnstone, and *The Nag Hammadi Library*, edited by James Robinson.
[53] Elaine Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Random House, 1979), xix.
[54] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, xix.

how one can become a spiritually enlightened person and so therefore get closer to God -- appealed much more strongly to the Gnostics than to many other early Christians.

One important fact about the Gnostic gospels is that, as Pagels argues, they focused to a larger extent on Jesus as a supernatural teacher, on the spiritual connection between Jesus and the reader, and on ultimate reality as non-physical in nature.[55] They focused on the sayings and ideas of Jesus and not his actions. As such, the physical act of healing was much less important in Gnostic texts, and healing miracles are all but non-existent in Gnostic gospels. However, this does not mean that the Gnostic gospels are of no help to us. While there are no particular healing miracles to look at, one can still look at places where healing miracles are absent, and question why the writers of these gospels chose to write their accounts in the way they did, perhaps intentionally omitting healing miracles.

The first gospel fragment large enough to mention is the Secret Book of James, also known as the Apocryphon of James.[56] This book, a Coptic translation of what was once a Greek document, is filled with the sayings, prophecies, parables and rules that Jesus told his disciples, and it makes no attempt at a historically narrative structure. The author focuses on the message and teachings of Jesus, including his thoughts, but leaves his life and actions absent. Willis Barnstone claims, "Only some of the sayings that are in the Apocryphon of James are also found in the New Testament. Analysis of each of these sayings provides no evidence that the Apocryphon of James either knew or is literarily dependent upon any of the writings of the New Testament."[57] Perhaps the author was not familiar enough with Jesus' life to present an historical narrative along with his message, or perhaps the author felt the words and thoughts of

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[55] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*.
[56] Willis Barnstone, editor, *The Other Bible*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 343-349.
[57] Barnstone, 344.

Jesus were the important part of his message, and his deeds less so. By leaving out Jesus' actions, of which healing miracles are a significant part in the Synoptic gospels, the author of the Secret Book of James appeals to a certain segment of early Christians. Robinson writes: "It is clear that the persons for whom this tractate was written made a distinction between themselves and the larger Christian church…. They certainly ignored the second coming of Christ and the general resurrection, and hoped to ascend, in soul or spirit, to the kingdom of heaven, which they meanwhile felt to be inside themselves."[58] This inner ascension is an important Gnostic view.

The Gospel of Thomas, studied in depth by Pagels in her book *Beyond Belief*, follows a very similar pattern in that it too ignores narrative and stories of any kind, instead containing sayings of Jesus that were claimed to be collected by Jesus' twin brother, Thomas. The interesting thing in both of these books, as well as in most Gnostic texts, is that "what ultimately mattered for the author of Thomas was not Jesus' death and resurrection, which he does not narrate or discuss, but the mysterious teachings that he delivered. Indeed, the gospel begins by stating that anyone who learns the interpretation of these words will have eternal life."[59]

Other Gnostic authors take a similar approach to presenting Jesus in their gospels. Gnostic texts tend to focus more on the message than the actions of Jesus. Perhaps because the Gnostics were focused on a message of personal intellectual insight, the physical suffering and persecution other Christians were facing did not resonate with the Gnostics. Justin (d: c.165 CE) writes in his second *Apology* that "'we do know' of [the Gnostic's] crimes: unlike the orthodox, they are neither persecuted nor put to death as martyrs."[60] While Gnostic views on martyrdom

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[58] James Robinson, editor, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1988), 29.
[59] Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 19.
[60] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 84.

are complex, according to Pagels, martyrdom did occur very rarely among the Gnostics.[61] If true, this fact is significant. With physical suffering and martyrdom less of an experience for the Gnostic Christians, the physical healings Jesus performs can be seen to be less important to them than is the message of Jesus. Knowledge alone brings one closer to God.

Part II

The Early Orthodox Church's Reasons for an Interest in Healing Miracles

As this essay has shown, a number of the healing miracles attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic gospels are described differently by the various authors, and each gospel writer also includes certain miracles that others do not. If we are to posit the (admittedly unprovable) view that these gospel writers intentionally changed and edited the healing miracles, as presented in earliest accounts, this leads to an important question of why they would do so. While this question is impossible to answer definitely, as we cannot fully ascribe motivations to the gospel writers when we don't even know who they were, I would like to suggest that there are some provocative tentative theories that can be posited about the gospel authors' treatment of miracles. To do this, first we need to understand Elaine Pagels' explanation for why the Synoptics were favored by Eusebius (d: c. 339 C.E.), who helped develop one orthodox early church with specific gospels as canon.

In her book *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels presents theories as to why the Gnostic gospels were deemed heretical by the early church and why the Synoptics became canonized. She posits reasons for why Eusebius called for a unified church by means of Matthew, Mark, Luke and

[61] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 90.

John as canon and why he declared the Gnostic writings to be heretical. Each of Pagels' chapters presents a separate reason as to why Eusebius and the early church would take issue with the Gnostic writers, not only on theological and philosophical grounds, but on social and political grounds as well. Pagels writes: "Traditionally, historians have told us that the orthodox objected to Gnostic views for religious and philosophical reasons. Certainly they did; yet investigation of the newly discovered Gnostic sources suggests another dimension of the controversy. It suggests that these religious debates – questions of the nature of God, or of Christ – simultaneously bear social and political implications that are crucial to the development of Christianity as an institutional religion."[62] Pagels' presentation of these political implications suggests a reason why healing miracles may have been embraced by the early orthodox church.

One argument Pagels presents is that many early Christians gravitated towards the idea of Jesus as fully human and his suffering on the cross as fully realized, as depicted in the Synoptics, because these Christians were themselves being persecuted and suffering. This human Jesus would experience the same difficulties in life and so was the easier to relate to, connect with, and believe in than the common Gnostic view of Jesus as ethereal – a purely spiritual presence. Pagels states that orthodox Christians "insist that Jesus was a human being, and that all 'straight-thinking' Christians must take the crucifixion as a historical and literal event."[63] This literal event appealed more to the suffering and persecuted early Christians than did Gnostic versions of Jesus' death, a story of an otherworldly Jesus who does not really die on the cross. The *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, a Gnostic text found at Nag Hammadi, presents Jesus' passion as such: "it was another… who drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. It was another upon whom

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[62] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, xxxvi.
[63] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 75.

they placed the crown of thorns. But I was rejoicing in the height over… their error.… And I was laughing at their ignorance."[64] Pagels argues that for a suffering church, a suffering Christ is more appealing and easier to relate to than a Christ which laughs at others' ignorance. "No wonder," Pagels writes, "that far more people identified with the orthodox portrait than with the 'bodiless spirit' of Gnostic tradition."[65]

Ignatius (d: c. 117 C.E.) "vehemently opposes Gnostic Christians, whom he calls 'atheists' for suggesting that since Christ was a spiritual being, he only *appeared* to suffer and die."[66] By showing that Christ suffered as deeply and to the same extent as did many early followers, the early church focused on the idea that "the same being who was seized and experienced suffering, and shed his blood for us, was both Christ and the Son of God… and he became the Savior of those who would be delivered over to death for their confession of him, and lose their lives."[67] The early church feared that any argument to "avoid martyrdom undermines the solidarity of the whole Christian community. Rather than identifying with those held in prison, facing torture or execution," as the early church felt would help unite the disparate factions of Christianity, the "Gnostic Christians might withdraw support from those they consider overzealous and unenlightened fanatics. Such actions serve to 'cut in pieces the great and glorious body of Christ [the church] and … destroy it.'"[68] It was this idea of martyrdom as linking the believer to Christ that Pagels argues helped to unite the early church in the second century. The orthodox stressed the idea that Christ was, like the rest of humanity, born, "lived with a family, became hungry and tired, ate and drank wine, suffered and died," and stressed that

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[64] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 73.
[65] As quoted in Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 101.
[66] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 83.
[67] As quoted in Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 87.
[68] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 98.

he rose "bodily from the dead."[69] These bodily experiences, to the early orthodox church, were vital elements to their religious beliefs, whereas the Gnostics, "who regarded the essential part of every person as the 'inner spirit' dismissed such physical experience, pleasurable or painful, as a distraction from spiritual reality."[70]

In this same way I will suggest in the next section that the early Christians may have found more appealing the idea of a Christ who performs physical healing and less attractive that of a Jesus who focuses on the spirit and not on the ailments of the flesh. Politically, a healing Jesus may have served as the more potent depiction for the early orthodox church.

Healing Miracles in Light of Pagels

It is my contention that Pagels' theory can offer insights into why the canonical gospels focus much more heavily on Jesus' miracles of physical healing than do the Gnostic texts – or at least into why the Synoptics became canon. The Synoptic writers focus on physical healing and stress the idea that Jesus can heal the physical wounds of a person via faith. Time and again the Synoptic writers show Jesus healing physical sicknesses and even death through his words and acts. Jesus states to the recipients that it was their *faith* that healed them -- their faith in Jesus and in his new covenant. For believers, the promise is clear: the healing is not just something that happened merely while Jesus was alive, but is something that, with one's faith, one can still receive. In a time when many Christians were being persecuted for their beliefs, not only would Jesus' personal, very physical persecution be something the Christians who read these texts could have related to, as Pagels argues; the idea that Jesus can restore the physical body and do away with pain and suffering would be similarly attractive. For the sick and victimized, this

[69] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 101.
[70] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 101.

depiction, and the promise it offered, would be very appealing. It would help to strengthen their beliefs and to connect them to a religion that understood their pain.

Pagels' theory as to why the Gnostic texts were deemed heretical by the early church can also be applied to the context of Jesus' healing miracles. For while the Gnostics tended to preach the esoteric and abstract, the early church's wider audience was often focused much more heavily on issues of the physical world. Gospels that focused on a physical healing, as we have seen the Synoptics do, would resonate. The physical pain and hurt of the world was something that everyone, whether rich or poor, dealt with on a regular basis. Theissen writes:

> Illness is of course universal, but even without recourse to modern social criticism we can find a connection between socio-economic status and belief in miracles in an unprejudiced consideration of the story of the woman with the issue of blood. As long as the woman had money she tried doctors. Only when her money was spent did she come to Jesus, with the most irrational kind of belief in miracles. Many poorer people must have seen themselves in that story. For a person without any resources illness meant exposure to immediate economic distress… the economic threat… of disease to the lower and middle class was grave, graver perhaps than at any other time.[71]

So gospels that focused on physical healing can be seen to have made Christianity more appealing to the general public. The Synoptic gospels, with their strong focus on physical healing miracles as well as their emphasis on theological points that Eusebius and company felt were essential to the early church's message of Christianity, found a strong message to share. In the Gnostic texts, on the other hand, many early Christians saw a distant and foreign figure. They saw "heresy."

By taking Pagels' arguments and applying them to Jesus' healing miracles, then, one can possibly see another reason why figures such as Eusebius would be interested in making the

[71] Theissen, 251.

Synoptic gospels canon. Yet to what extent do Jesus' healing miracles fully support Pagels' theory? The three Synoptic healing stories will now be discussed with Pagels' theory in mind.

The Healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman

The first healing miracle discussed was the healing of the hemorrhaging woman. All three Synoptic writers discuss this story, and the main focus of the story can be seen as the idea that faith in Jesus can bring about a physical healing. Jesus is shown to heal the woman's physical ailment even without meaning to do so. The faith that he *can* do these things is enough for it to happen. Yet while the Synoptic gospel writers do present Jesus as a healer many times over in their stories, we have seen that these stories' main purpose may not be to show that Jesus can heal. In the majority of the stories in which Jesus performs a physical healing or exorcism, the author then uses that event to showcase a message from Jesus. Since the healing tends to be less the focus than the message, can the healing still be understood as important to the early church, and if so, can the Synoptic gospels still be viewed to be included as canon in part for the reasons suggested above? I claim that yes, we can still hold to that theory -- an expansion of Pagels' theory -- even if we are to argue that the healing miracles took a back-seat to other messages in the Synoptics. For while the Synoptics, and Matthew especially, do tend to focus on the message that is attached to the healing, they still do present the healing miracle, and they do so many times over. The Synoptic gospels are among the gospels with the most prevalent accounts of healing miracles. Of the approximately thirty healing miracles in the canonical gospels, all but three are found in the Synoptics, and most are recounted in multiple gospels. Outside of the canon, the majority of healing miracles are found in non-Gnostic gospels like the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the stories of which were accounts of Jesus' childhood, and the

Gospel of the Nazareans, which, as we have seen, is viewed by many scholars as an altered version of Matthew, so its inclusion of miracles is understandable.[72] So while one can read the Synoptics as focusing primarily on the message Jesus presents, the fact that healing miracles are mentioned, and especially to the degree that they are, still says something important about them. Many Gnostic texts, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Apocryphon of James, focus completely on Jesus' message, also believing that it is the most important part of Jesus' life. Yet they completely ignore healing miracles. There is significance in this difference.

The story of the hemorrhaging woman presents the idea that faith in Jesus' healing powers will bring about actual physical healing. The Synoptic writers stress that one can be healed even without this physical touch when they all present Jesus saying, "Your *faith* has made you well."[73] The idea that one can be physically healed via faith alone is a powerful concept. The message is that one should have faith in Jesus, but the outcome of this faith is a physical healing. For anyone, no matter their rank or place in the world, physical hurt is always present, and for the Synoptics to tell believers that Jesus can remove their hurt as long as they have faith in him, and then to present multiple miracles where this removal of physical pain happens due to faith, is a potent combination. It would become a central message to a catholic church with a canonized set of gospels.

The Resurrection of Jairus' Daughter

The resurrection of Jairus' daughter adds even greater appeal to converts to Christianity as it shows that Jesus can even bring people back from the dead, as well as foreshadowing Jesus' own resurrection. Death has always been a prevalent force in the world and takes many people

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[72] This idea was discussed on page 14 of this essay.
[73] Matthew 9:22 NRSV, italicizes my own.

before their time. To have a story reiterated in three different gospels of Jesus bringing a child back from the dead because her father had faith that Jesus could do so is powerful. For families with lost loved ones, the belief that if I have enough faith in Jesus, he could bring back my loved ones too, must have been compelling. And again, Mark and Luke stress the idea that all one needs for a miracle like this to happen is to believe. "Do not fear, only believe," Jesus says to Jairus.[74]

The Man with the Withered Hand

The man with the withered hand miracle story also tells of a healing by Jesus. However, in the Synoptic versions this man is not given a voice. Due to this, the Synoptics show an episode where Jesus heals a physical ailment not because the person has faith in him, but more so to present a message. Here the healing most clearly is a tool used to teach a point. However, as stated before, this does not mean that the healing is unimportant.

While the Synoptics do not give a voice to the man, there are other gospels, such as the Gospel of the Nazareans, as discussed above, that do present the man with a voice, showing how the man believes Jesus can heal his hand when he says, "I beseech you, Jesus, restore my health so I do not have to beg for food shamefully."[75] Illnesses were not only an issue for the person but also for their families. Theissen writes, "illness meant inability to work."[76] As with the mason who is given voice in the Gospel of the Nazareans, illness is "not just a physical and economic problem, but a social one. The sick fear isolation, being abandoned by others, and becoming a burden. Here the miracle stories assured even the sick person whose case was

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[74] Mark 5:28.
[75] Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* 12, 13, from Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, p 10.
[76] Theissen, 251.

hopeless that he or she will not be abandoned…. The healings must be seen against the background of the community which recounted them, as collective symbolic actions by which distress was remedied and in which the members found strength to combat it in their ordinary lives by actions which were not merely 'symbolic.'"[77] So while the Synoptics do not explicitly turn this healing miracle into another message for faith, other gospel writers using this story have. In either form, the story would resonate with the physically disabled, and with those who feared such disability.

Concluding Thoughts on the Gospels

Particular healing miracles have now been theorized to be more attractive to the early church as these physical healings would draw people to Christianity. Yet, as each gospel portrayed healings in a different light, it is still necessary to look at them as a whole. The Gospel of Matthew feels that healing is important, as he attributes physical healings to the requirements for being the Messiah.[78] While there were many views on what the Messiah should be able to do, Matthew's contention is that the Messiah should be able to heal physical ailments and exorcise demons. As Vermes has argued, however, Jesus was not the only healer of his time. "The representation of Jesus in the gospels as a man whose supernatural abilities derived, not from secret powers, but from immediate contact with God, proves him to be a genuine charismatic, the true heir of an age-old prophetic religious line. But can other contemporary figures be defined in the same way? The answer is yes."[79] So in order to stress Jesus'

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[77] Theissen, 251.
[78] Harris, 161.
[79] Vermes, 69.

qualifications over others, Matthew's approach to the healing miracles of Jesus is to separate Jesus' healings from all the other healers of the time, and connect him to the Hebrew Prophets.

In the canonical gospels, the healing power of Jesus in most cases only requires a verbal command, but this is not always the case. Throughout the many healing scenes, the words and actions used by Jesus to heal certain people and afflictions change. Most often the healing was done with a command, but sometimes it required touch, and one particular miracle required saliva.[80] In his book *Jesus the Jew*, Vermes presents a detailed study of the different ways Jesus healed people according to the gospel writers, and compares this healing to other Jewish healers during the same time period. Vermes' thesis is that Jesus' healing powers are different from his contemporaries, who focused more on certain rituals that had to be performed to make the healing work.

> Was Jesus a professional exorcist of this sort? He is said to have cast out many devils, but no rite is mentioned in connection with these achievements. In fact, compared with the esotericism of other methods, his own, as depicted in the gospels, is simplicity itself. Even in regard to healing, the closest he came to the Noachic, Solomonic and Essene type of cure was when he touched the sick with his own saliva, a substance generally thought to be medicinal.[81]

However, while Jesus' healings were much simpler, Vermes argues there was precedent with the prophets of the past for these simpler healings. "The pattern set by the miracle-working prophets Elijah and Elisha was first of all applied by post-biblical tradition to other saints of the scriptural past; they, too, were credited with powers of healing and exorcism deriving not from incantations and drugs or the observance of elaborate rubrics, but solely from speech and touch."[82] By linking Jesus to the prophets, whose simple healing practices most Jews would recognize, the

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[80] Mark 8:22.
[81] Vermes, 65.
[82] Vermes, 65.

gospel writers, and Matthew in particular, with his interest in connecting Jesus to the past prophets, could show how Jesus would perform miracles in the same vein as the prophets of the past. If, as is often claimed, Matthew wrote his gospel for the Jewish people, and if the earliest members of the church were mainly Jewish converts, this connection would make sense.[83]

As discussed above, Mark, while producing the briefest of the three Synoptic gospels, devotes the most space of all the gospels to healing miracles. Mark's is also the gospel that gives voice to the recipients of the healing more than do the other two Synoptics. Why Matthew and Luke, who some scholars hold referenced Mark in their work, may have taken the healing stories Mark presented and removed the recipient's voice is not known.[84] Mark's gospel, as we discussed above, usually gave the recipients a voice, asking Jesus to heal them, and allowing them to tell Jesus that they believed in his power to heal. This allows Mark to stress multiple times Jesus' power to heal physical ailments as long as the recipient has faith, as in the story with the hemorrhaging woman when Jesus tells her: "daughter, your faith has made you well."[85] This focus on the physical healings of believers would be an important idea to early Christianity, and so presents another strong reason why Mark's gospel would be included in the canon.

Luke's gospel, as we have seen, is very similar to Matthew's with regard to healing miracles. Both Matthew and Luke share healing miracles that are not found in Mark, and both contain similar healing miracles that Mark does contain. However Luke does not give voice to the recipients nearly as much as Mark does. This feature does not allow for Luke to develop the idea that belief in Jesus can lead to physical healing the way Mark does in his gospel. Yet, as discussed above, Luke does have one extra addition to his gospel. Luke, with his attention to the

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[83] Harris, 157.
[84] Harris, 157.
[85] Mark 5:34.

detail of physical ailments, helps to fully develop and show the suffering of which Jesus rids the believers. With his story of the healing of the ten lepers, Luke stresses Jesus' ability to heal a disease that was thought to be incurable and caused the victims to be exiled from their communities and former lives. Jesus was able to cure not just one person afflicted with this terrible disease, but many at once. This powerful healing would surely be influential for suffering people to have faith in Jesus.

The Gnostic texts and their lack of focus on physical healing suggest the idea that the early church was attracted to the Synoptics in part because of their focus on the idea that belief in Jesus can lead to the healing of physical ailments. Since the Gnostic texts were devoid of these healing miracles, they may have proven less appealing to the masses, which would be interested in the idea of physical healing through faith. If so, Eusebius would have been less likely to acknowledge the Synoptic gospels as among those texts widely recognized as embraced by orthodox. Combining the work of this essay with Pagels' work in *The Gnostic Gospels* helps to strengthen her argument as to why the Gnostic texts were deemed heretical by the "orthodox," adding another strong, independent argument to her theory about the shaping of the canon.

The Synoptic gospels continually stress that Jesus performed healing miracles throughout his career. This fact, which seems mundane at first, is important as Jesus' healing miracles are less of a focus in John, ignored completely in many non-canonical texts, and completely disregarded in Gnostic gospels. Healing miracles, while important in their own right, can be seen to be even more important when placed in this larger context, and when examined amid the interpretive approach offered by Elaine Pagels in *Gnostic Gospels*. The suffering Christians in the second century found comfort in a Christ who can heal physical wounds -- an idea which the

orthodox leaders used, along with other theological and political reasons, to create a united church body. The Gnostic gospels, on the other hand, which focus more on the spiritual and less on the physical, do not have the same resonance and appeal for those who are suffering physically, and provide another reason for the early church to present these texts as heretical. While it is impossible to know for sure why the Synoptic authors chose to focus on healing while other gospel writers did not, there are both theological and social reasons for why Eusebius and other early orthodox figures presented Mark, Matthew and Luke as part of a canon for a unified church.

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Appendix

This appendix contains a list of healing miracles referenced in the thesis. All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from: The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version Third Edition.

1: The Man with the Withered Hand

-Matthew 12:9-14

> He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, "Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. He said to them, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

-Mark 3:1-6

> Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, and how to destroy him.

-Luke 6:6-11

> On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and

stand here." He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and is hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

-Gospel of the Nazareans – 5

In the gospel that the Nazareans and Ebionites use, which I have recently translated from Hebrew into Greek, and which most people consider the authentic version of Matthew, the man with a withered hand is described as a mason, who sought for help in words like these: "I was a mason who made a living with my hands; I beseech you, Jesus, restore my health so I do not have to beg for food shamefully." (Jerome, Commentary on Matthew, 12, 13).[86]

2: The Resurrection of Jairus' Daughter & The Healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman

-Matthew 9:18-26

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd has been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout the district.

-Mark 5:21

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of they synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well,

[86] Bart Erhman, *Lost Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

and live." So he went with them. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard of Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" He looked all around to see who had done it but the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease. While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was 12 years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to giver her something to eat.

-Luke 8:40-56

Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him. Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house, for he had an only daughter, and 12 years old, who was dying. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhaging stopped. Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you." But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me." When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and

how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace. While he was speaking, someone came from the leader’s house to say, “Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer. When Jesus heard this, he replied, “Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved.” When he came to the house, he did not allow anyone to enter with him, except Peter, John and James, and the child’s father and mother. They were all weeping and wailing for her; but he said, “Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. But he took her by the hand and called out, “Child, get up!” Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. Then he directed them to give her something to eat. Her parents were astounded; but he ordered them to tell no one what had happened.