

The Healing at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9a)

Bible Study for WDP 2020, Zimbabwe

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1. Some Introductory Words on the Theology of the Gospel of John – The Background

The story of the healing at the pool at Bethesda is told twice in the New Testament. The two versions of the Gospel of John (John 5:1-9a) and Mark (Mk 2:1-12) tell the stories that are similar in some parts but differ in various ways. Both have a different setting within the narrative itself namely their position within the gospel. Common to both is the healing of a paralyzed man and this order: Get up, take up your bed/mat, and walk.” The differences are due to the different theologies of both gospels. Therefore, in order to understand John, it is necessary to take a closer look at some points of John’s theology.

1.1. The Gospel of John: Poetry About Jesus

The gospel of John was not written in one piece, but we name the person or group “John”, that is responsible for the gospel as we read it now. The context of the gospel is a split within the community – and “John” belongs to the group that insists to be the true followers of Jesus. Unlike the other gospels Jesus proclaims Himself as the only Son of God, Light of God etc. right from the beginning. He is not the hidden Messiah like in the gospel of Mark; *the basileia tou theou*, the kingdom of God is not in the center of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus is Christos, the anointed, the Messiah. John’s gospel is a kind of religious meditation about Jesus, it reflects the experiences of the believers with Jesus as Savior. This is the core perspective of the gospel of John.

The gospel takes up some narratives about Jesus and his miracles, the tradition of the passion, chapter 21 and other older texts (like John 1:1-8). These texts are incorporated into the concept of John’s gospel and are shaped in a certain way in order to highlight the special theology of John. This theology relies on the salvation that still is to come, the waiting for the last judgement and the need of love which is expressed in participating in the eucharistic meal.

If one reads the Gospel of John as religious poetry (for instance in the sense of a novel) then the statements of John’s Christ are first of all statements about Jesus – they are the words of believers telling about their experiences with Jesus as Redeemer and Savior. But it is precisely in this way that they also gain religious persuasiveness.

Until now it is not clear where and when the gospel was written. It was known about 150 A.C., it is written on a Papyrus dating back to this age. The community was speaking Greek. And the Jewish origins were long gone, as the gospel has to explain now and then expressions in Hebrew or Aramaic or Jewish customs.

1.2. The Belief in Jesus Christ as the Only Way to Salvation

John proclaims Jesus as the only way to God and the Son of God. The important goal is the eternal life, which only can be achieved by the belief or by believing in Jesus Christ.

Whoever accepts the Son will be filled with life from God. Jesus is the image of the Father. Like father like son. This unity of Jesus with God is the core of John's theology. Jesus is the *logos* (Greek: Wisdom, logic) of God (John 1:1) that became a human being, the Wisdom of God on earth. *Logos* combines different theological traditions: The Word of God (Gen 1) that is the creative might of God; Woman Wisdom (Hebrew: *chokmah*), which is part of creation (Prov 8; Sir 24); in Greek philosophy *logos* is part of creation. In John's theology, Jesus Christ as the *logos* of God is the mediator between believers and God. Whoever believes in Jesus will be a "child of God". To express this John uses metaphors and language images: Jesus is the Son, Jesus is living water, bread of life, a good shepherd, the way, the truth, life, king, vine. In Jesus we see the universal concept of God that is inscribed into creation. Whoever sees Jesus sees God. But this is only true for believers who are able to see God in Jesus and believe that God is here. To believe in Jesus the Son means to recognize God and to gain salvation.

(We who participate in the bible study have already been given this meaning — so in this study we are coming to this meaning again, hopefully with new eyes/ears. To learn again differently is hard work. We have been carrying around meaning that we have been told -can we let go and make room for a fresh encounter with the story and thus with Jesus? I think so — let's begin by looking at John's Gospel).

1.3. The Healing as Sign in John's Gospel

In this concept the signs of Jesus have a specific meaning. Jesus' healings are called signs (Greek: *semeia*). "Sign" is an important theological term in the Gospel of John. Yet, the meaning of the healings as a sign in John differs from the healings and their meaning in the other gospels. In Mark, Matthew, and Luke they are signs for the kingdom of God (Greek: *basileia thou theou*) that Jesus proclaims. Jesus' healings are prophetic signs of God's rule. God's royal power really prevails, even if only in mustard seed mode for the time being, i.e. selectively and situational. They not only point to the royal rule of God, but also carry it out. This program of Jesus is most clearly formulated in Lk 11:20: "*If I cast out demons with the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has arrived with you*". It does not only apply to the exorcisms, but also reveals the meaning of its other sign actions within the framework of the *basileia* message. Although the king's final assertion of power has yet to take place and *basileia* is therefore not yet a universal greatness, the experience of healing in healing, exorcism and feast is nevertheless the real presence of the royal rule, is final salvation in provisional particularity.

Signs in the Gospel of John

The signs of John's Christ are, without exaggeration, directly the opposite of the *basileia* happenings of the historical Jesus. This is due to the fact that in John Jesus' message about the kingdom of God with its unique experience (fullness of salvation in the fragment) and hope for the future (universal perfection) does not play a major role. The Johannine are - to take up an ingenious formulation by a former NT professor Ernst Haenchen - rather something like the turn signal on the car: The blinking light indicates a change of direction, but does not carry it out.

That is, signs point to something that is not realized in them. They point to something which is something fundamentally different. What the signs indicate lies on a fundamentally different level of reality. Who only sees this earthly reality of bodily life, healing, and death does not see the real meaning of the sign at all. Only those who recognize in the earthly

process the reference to a completely different, divine reality can understand the healing. Healings and other wonders as signs represent an alternative reality, accessible through faith. This term is connected with the typically Johannian understanding of miracles.

1.4. Jesus according to John: “You watch the paraclete at work”

In the first three gospels it is hidden that Jesus is the expected Messiah, only certain signs point to it. In John, Jesus is the Logos of God, the source of all life, and you know that from the very first verse of the gospel. Logos has many meanings, like wisdom word, logic, here Jesus as the Logos made flesh, is something like the personified wisdom of God. John combines biblical and Greek-Roman traditions:

1. God created the universe through His creative word (“and God spoke)
2. According to biblical wisdom theology, creative wisdom is to be seen as the divine person through whom God accomplished his work of creation. The Logos would thus be something like the male variant of the woman's wisdom (cf. Prov 8 and Sir 24).
3. In Greek-Roman philosophy the Logos concept understands the Logos as a kind of “subgod” which serves as blueprint and idea of creation, but also as material and tool.

Jesus is the paraclete (John 14:16; 1 John 2,1), the Greek word means advocate or helper, in Christianity the term "paraclete" most commonly refers to the Holy Spirit. The *logos* Jesus is all of that, wisdom of God, presenter and representer of God, Jesus is: like the father, like the son. When Jesus heals it is a sign for a different reality: *“You watch the paraclete at work”*

In contrast to the blinker, however, the statement of the Johannine sign lies on a completely different level than the visible sign itself. John's gospel presents a radical spiritualization of salvation: Divine life is always more than health, physical integrity and “non-disability”. The miracle of wine (John 2) and the miracle of bread (John 6), the healing of the son of an imperial official (John 4), a fragile man (John 5) and a blind (John 9), and also the spectacular resurrection of Lazarus is by no means approximated to the conception of Jesus. There were more signs (John 20:30), that are not told. Some are enough to explain their meaning.

The signs remain “bodiless”, point away from themselves to the “completely different”, which takes place neither in physical satiety, nor in the joy of drinking, nor in bodily health, nor in the (temporary) overcoming of bodily death. These earthly sensitivities are only an indication of greater and more important things. Therefore in John 5 there is no thank you, no joy or a feast.

Whoever opens up believing Jesus as the presenter of the living God pushes out of the death darkness of unbelief into a new spiritual reality and finds there an eternal divine life, which no earthly death can threaten anymore. Who really sees, recognizes a new, completely different reality, a truth about the things of the world. This belief in knowledge grants a share in the divine reality, here and now. But who does not believe this, will not see the life advantage of the believers.

So for the lame man his healing cannot be an experience of salvation, but only a wake-up call that makes it clear to him who Jesus really is. If he accepts this message, then in faith Jesus as resurrection and life exactly communicates this divine supernatural life to him. Those who remain attached to the earthly spectacle recognize no sign at all.

2. Exegesis of John 5:1-9a

2.1. Beginning and End of the Story of the Healing at Bethesda

Talking about the story of the healing at the pool of Bethesda one first has to deal with the text. What exactly is the text of the story? It seems to be easy but looking closer reveals the problem. The beginning of the story is clear: Something new begins with John 5:1:

- a) Jesus sets off – leaving the place indicates that a different story begins;
- b) There is a new place - Jerusalem is reached;
- c) There is a change of time - the feast of the Jews; the whole first verse of ch. 5 indicates that a new scene starts.

But the problem is to define the end of the text. The women from Zimbabwe wrote: *We'll finish the text here* (“v.9a: He took his mat, carried it around and was healthy.”), *but we are aware that it goes on*. The women are aware that their ending the story is a conscious decision. This is important, because the end of the text determines the interpretation.

The whole chapter five offers many other verses where you could end the biblical story of the healing at Bethesda. On the handwritten old manuscripts of the gospels there is no chapter division. The text just runs through, all the verses and chapters we have today are done by later redactions. So, one has to determine where a text has its beginning and its end. If you place different editions of the Bible next to each other, then you will see that in chapter John 5 different passages of the text are separated, causing different headings. Just some examples:

1 - 9a: End: And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked *Headline:* The healing of a paralytic or: The healing at the pond Bethesda

1 - 9: End: But it was the Sabbath.

Headline in some Bibles: The Healing on the Sabbath

1 - 11: Confirmation of Jesus by the sick

Headline: Jesus Power Saves the Paralyzed

1 - 13: Jesus heals, but remains unrecognized

Headline: Jesus, the Unknown Savior

1 - 14: Connection between sickness and sin, healing and salvation

Headline: Jesus saves

1 - 16: The problem of healing on the Sabbath triggers persecution.

Headline: Jesus persecuted by the Jews

Clearly the decision where the text ends influences the interpretation! It is necessary to be sensitive to this problem in interpreting the text. The differences of interpretations might lie here.

2.2. Excursus: Bethesda and Archaeology

Whoever visited Jerusalem might have seen the compound of Bethesda. Today it is at the beginning of the Via Dolorosa, on the compound of the order of the White Fathers. A huge arch of stones stands there, further many remains of walls, some deep down. Mostly the tour-guides tell that this is the place of Bethesda, the arch is the rest of the five halls John is talking about and that here Jesus healed the paralyzed man. In fact, it is not as obvious as it seems. First of all: The manuscripts know various names – Bethesda, Bethsaida – so that is

not clear at all. The huge arch is the rest of a basilica, it can't be one of the halls John is talking about. What is known is that from the north side there were some structures to lead water up to the temple. And maybe there has been a bit further a place with water, caves and the notion of a healing place.

Healing Places / Holy Places with water or other ways of healing are widespread in former times in the Middle East. They normally are connected with Gods or Goddesses, to whom healing powers are attributed. John doesn't name a God or Goddess for the pool of Bethesda. Bethesda is situated in Jerusalem, not far from – even beneath - the Temple Mount. It is not unusual to find a healing spring near a temple, even if the place developed into a healing place *after* the destruction of the Temple.

But only later this place was identified with the story of John 5 and the notion of a place for people seeking healing was transferred to John. But again: John is not talking about history and reconstructing history. John's setting is told to make obvious the *signs* of Christ and to unfold the increasing conflict with the Jews because of these signs, the deeds that show that Christ is the logos, the Son of God.

2.3 John 5.1-9c – Step by Step

Let us have a closer look at the healing story – and accept for now the break that the women of Zimbabwe made within the text. The text ends at V.9a, so the problem with the Sabbath and the Jews is not present for the moment (cf. introduction).

- 1 After this there was a feast of the Jews,
and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
- 2 Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool,
in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades.
- 3 In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, and paralyzed persons
[3b] *[waiting for the moving of the water;*
[4] *for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool,*
And stirred the water:
whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever
disease he had]
- 5 There was a person (or: human being; Greek: *anthropos*)
who was carrying his/her fragility for 38 years.
- 6a Jesus seeing him lying there
- 6b and knowing that what he had already carried a long time,
- 6c he said to him,
- 6d “Do you want to be healed?”
- 7a The sick person answered him,
- 7b “Lord (*kyrie*), I have no person to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, 7c
and while I am going (*or: until I am coming*)
- 7d another steps down before me.”
- 8 Jesus said to him,
“Get up,
carry your bed/mat,
and walk.”
- 9 And at once the person was healed,
and he carried his bed/mat
and walked.

(The words which are also repeated in the Greek text, are marked with the same color. It indicates the inner connection of the text.)

The important message results from how the persons are characterized. The evangelist mainly contours the persons through their speeches, through their actions and through the attribution of others in their speeches. Through this complex literary strategy, the characters gain contour. One has to be aware that leaving out information is as important as the given information. We have two main figures, Jesus and the sick person. Both are characterized by what they are doing or speaking. No description of the person, no inner life is told, everything that is not directly relevant for the message is left out.

As in any good story the tempo determines what is important. Sometimes you can sum up many years in one sentence (fast tempo) or you tell in detail what the persons have done or what they say (slow tempo). The slower the narration, the more important the information is. A narrated dialogue is running so to speak in “real time”. It slows down the pace and gives insight into the person and weight through their speech. The narrative lasts as long as one would actually speak. This directs the interest and puts a focus on the persons and the goal of the conversation.

2.4. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades (V.2)

The first readers of the gospel did not have Jerusalem before their eyes. Maybe even John didn't know exactly what had been in Jerusalem before it was destroyed 70 A.D. But the archaeological background is not decisive. It is enough to know that there was a remembrance that Jerusalem had a place of healing water. More important is the function of this information within the story. As short as the story is, so many words are used to describe the pond. This indicates the emphasis that is put on the pool. This healing place is finally replaced by the healing of Jesus. Interestingly this place is initially described positive, for “Bethesda” means: “The House of Grace”. There is the grace of being healed and on this promise a large crowd is there.

The pond of Bethesda appears again, this time very detailed in the answer of the sick person, when Jesus had asked him: Do you want to be healed? Interestingly the patient does not simply answer Yes or No, but explains in a complicated way why he is not cured after 38 years.

2.5. In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, and paralyzed persons ... (V.3)

Many sick people are lying in the halls of Bethesda. What exactly are the words in Greek? V.3 describes the fragility of the people in different ways. The Greek words for the whole crowd are: *astheneion* (fragility/illness) – *typhlon* (blind) – *choion* (lame) – *xeron* (dried up; withered).

There are the blind and the lame people. They are often put together when it comes to identifying a group of disabled persons, not only individuals. The other two words are much less concrete. *Astheneia* – the Greek term in V.5 is not “illness” but “fragility”. Such fragility and weakness is expressed by the man whom Jesus recognizes as such (v.6). To identify him as “lame” limits his illness to a certain characteristic and does not really capture the situation of the fragile person. The other characteristic is *xeron*, it means withered or weakened. This may not only be physical, but include also social conditions that make people feel weak,

emaciated, exhausted or without strength. *Anthropos*, human being, person, opens up for everybody the possibility to identify.

2.6. Dissatisfied with the Story: Inserting V. 3b-4

3a In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, and paralyzed.

[3b] *waiting for the moving of the water;*

[4] *for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water: whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had*

Depending on the translation of the Bible you may stumble upon the fact that Vv.3b-4 is missing. For the comparison of manuscripts shows that V.3b and V.4 are not yet known in the oldest manuscripts. Only later manuscripts suddenly know these verses here.

Someone, who wrote the Gospel of John on an early manuscript was obviously dissatisfied. He lacked the necessary information to understand the history of the patient's healing. Without Vv. 3b-4 there are many sick people in the halls of Bethesda. But what about the healing water?

(See more at V.7)

2.7. A person/a human being (V.5a)

5a There was a person (or: human being; Greek: *anthropos*)

5b who was carrying his/her fragility for 38 years.

Different to the other gospels the crowd here plays no role on its own, like being witness of the wonders of Jesus or other roles. Here the crowd is only mentioned to illustrate the situation in Bethesda. Jesus and the sick person, both are drawn in two ways. The evangelist first narrates how both act and what both say. In direct speeches, the narrator lets the persons describe themselves or others attribute characteristics to them. Through this literary strategy, the characters each gain their own contour.

“One human being” (in Greek: *anthropos*) frames the healing scene (v.5/v.9). That leaves open who the person is who gets cured. It could be anyone and everyone, a man or a woman, so anyone can identify with it. Even when the story is talking of a man in the course of the story, it is important to note the openness for the person. At the beginning as at the end it is “a human being”.

This person is in the midst of a crowd of fragile people. Many sorts of illnesses are present. He is part of the crowd of fragile people at the halls of Bethesda who want to be healed. That the person Jesus talks to is paralyzed, might be taken from Mk 2:11 because of the same command: “Get up, take up your stretcher/mat, and go away”. But many ways of fragility may make the sick person unable to move quickly enough. However: Not being able to move on its own, he needs no person to throw him into the pond in time.

2.8. The weakening, depressing “carrying” fragility (V.5-6)

... who was carrying his/her fragility for 38 years (V.5b)

The sick person has two formative characteristics. a) The person is fragile (Greek: *astheneia*). b) But what's central in the Greek text: The main activity of the person is that he is *carrying* (Greek: *echei*). This term occurs four times in total (V.5.6.8.9). This signals that this is very important issue. And his “carrying” is transformed. The first description is in V.5-6. Before the healing he carries “time” (38 years) and he carries “fragility.”

He carried time (38 years)

he lies down in midst of other ill people at the pool at Bethesda

He carried his weakness / fragility / illness

It is very clear that this “carrying” is depressing. It is even literally expressed through the way the sentences are composed. The Greek term for “carrying” encloses and frames the condition of the person. Like being held in a vise, a carpenter’s tool to keep something fixed and not able to move, *carrying* brings the person down to earth, he lies down, he is not able to move on his own, it holds the person on the floor and constricts him.

The first characterization is not that he is paralyzed. What is told is: He is fragile and therefore he is not able to move. He is held down and seemingly a life time.

See the transformation of Carrying the mat after the healing in V.9:

2.9. Jesus: Knowing and Seeing (V.6)

Jesus is knowing and seeing. Up to now the narrator had described the fragile person. Now the narrator lets Jesus confirm this description. Jesus sees and knows that this ill person is in deep need of healing without asking.

Only three actions describe Jesus: Jesus sees, Jesus knows, and Jesus speaks powerfully. The Greek form reinforces seeing and recognizing as something that happens constantly with Jesus. Seeing and knowing is always at the beginning of a liberating act by God. When God knew and saw the need of his people in Egypt (Ex 2:23) or other situations of need. Jesus proves divine knowledge.

Since in John’s gospel Jesus is like the Father, it is not surprising that these divine characteristics are also found in Jesus. Jesus acts like God – and in the further course of the story this becomes the offence for the Jews and the reason for persecution. Whoever recognizes this already expects Jesus to act by healing. All the acts of Jesus make clear: Here is God’s messenger at work. Someone wrote: In John you see the paraclete at work. Again God-Like: In Genesis 1 God created the world at his word Jesus heals the sick man at his word.

2.10. Do you want to be healed? (V.6)

Even seeing and knowing Jesus asks the ill person: “Do you want to be healed?”

Now the interaction and communication between Jesus and the ill man begins. Even seeing and knowing and being the *logos* of God Jesus is asking the important question: Do you want to be healed? It can also mean: “Do you want to be made whole?” What a question! The focus is just about the infinite time of the fragility. He is not assuming that this is the main concern of the man – although it seems to be obvious.

Jesus is careful not to put the disease under a general heading right away. It is important to listen carefully to what someone has, why someone cannot do something, in what situation the person is individually. Therefore Jesus – even seeing and knowing – asks him: “Do you want to be healed?”

Finally, he is in the hall of the pool of Bethesda to get to the water in time to be healed. Nevertheless, Jesus is asking him. He respects the fragile person by not simply healing him. He doesn’t even force what is obvious at the patient. He respects the personal view on his situation, he does not **assume!**

This is an important point, to take the dignity of fragile and weakened people seriously. They actually know best what they need and it does not always have to be what the supposedly obvious is. A superior position is always hurtful. Which does not have to correspond with the self-perception.

2.11. I have no person ... (V.7)

- 7a The sick person answered him,
- 7b “Lord (*kyrie*), I have no person to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up,
- 7c and while I am going
- 7d another person steps down before me.”

Kyrie: Even saying “kyrie”, John plays with a double meaning. In Greek, it can mean both: Just the normal addressing of someone, like Sir, or the meaningful and powerful “kyrie” that is used in the gospel for Jesus. “Kyrios” is a title that indicates the messianic power of Jesus. His answer is in a way also a misunderstanding, but this is common in John’s Gospel. The persons who interact with Jesus (see John 4) don’t see the Son of God but the Jesus as human being.

The healing pool: The man answers Jesus with a long speech, he indicates indirectly that he wants to be healed. He could have said, Yes, of course, what do you think why I’m here? Or: No, thank you. But instead he tells his situation, but in a complicated way. He explains the healing system to Jesus. And now one understands why V.3b.4 was inserted. For all who are not familiar with Jerusalem and Bethesda this is a riddle: Why does he have to be thrown into the pond, and why does it matter that someone else enters before him? The copyist’s intention was to put the hearers and readers in the picture better. His community was no longer familiar with Jerusalem and its places. Without the explanation of V.3b-4 one must know what happens in Bethesda in order to understand at all what the man is talking about. It is no wonder that later copyists tried to explain the situation at the pool. But even with this explanation: The information puts more question marks. Who stirs up the water, when is it stirred up, why? And what does it matter if someone else is before him there? And also the gospel does not really explain how someone can spend 38 years there and not become healthy.

This answer throws a different light on Bethesda. The name of the place means: House of Grace. The inserted verses talk about the angel of the Lord. This remark (inserted later) with the angel, who comes by from time to time and stirs up the water, does not make the understanding any better: Which angel? Why so seldom? Is it a lazy angel? Why the competition of the sick people? The text ignores all the implications. But in a way the situation and more so the insertion that explains the idea seems to describe a cruel place. Somebody wrote: “The winner takes it all”. A place where healing, grace, relief and comfort

are promised proves to be a place of competition for these values, of merciless and of elbow mentality. The pool – healing into the old system. It is a system, where healing functions at the cost of others. John doesn't let Jesus argue about the place, nor is there any comment. He just heals by his word – and offers an alternative.

Loneliness/social isolation: His main problem seems to be that he has no one! *Nobody* throws him in the pond in time. Of course, if only the first person will be healed, everybody will run for his own sake. But the man trusts in the healing power of the pool; otherwise having nobody would not be his main problem.

Once again, the word *anthropos* is found: This man has no *human being, nobody* (v. 7) who could do to him what he thought would heal him, namely to throw him into the pond in time and first when the water moves.

Nothing except his 38 years of illness and loneliness are at the center of the story. He even does not know who Jesus is, as we will know later. The gospel is not interested in a detailed narrative where the healed person plays an individual role. It is someone who is ill an unbelievably long time, his whole life, it seems. These 38 years of illness that he spends without someone carrying him to the water raise more questions than are answered. Who is taking care of him? How did he get there if he cannot get into the water? Can he walk, just not fast enough? What does he do for a living, begging? Is there no family in the background? None of this is of interest in the story. The only interest is to emphasize the severity and length of the disease so that the sign of the miracle of healing is all the greater. And that the knowing and seeing of Jesus – like God's knowing and seeing the need of the people of Israel – is all the more important.

He is alone. This loneliness hinders him to be healed. He is carrying time (38 years) and *astheneia*, fragility. Now starts the interaction of Jesus and the man: *dynamis* vs. *astheneia* / healing power vs. fragility

2.12. The fragile person is healed (V.8-9)

8 Jesus **said** to him,

“Get up,
carry your **bed/mat**,
and **walk**.”

9 And at once the person was **healed**,
and he **carried** his **bed/mat**
and **walked**.

(The words with the same implication or wording are marked by the same color.)
Carrying the mat is also told twice after the healing in V.9:

Jesus is speaking the healing word. The following sentences are structured in a parallel way. The main characterization of the person is the contrast of lying and being ill, now walking and being healed. The parallel construction of get up – carry – walk and being healed - stand up – walk indicates that walking is the sign for the healing.

Still carrying: After the healing the fragile but healed person carries his mat as Jesus had told him. This characteristic stays with him. Again, like in V.5, the *carrying* determines the sick person. One wonders why he should actually carry its mat. It doesn't seem to make sense. But there is an important difference to the first time in V.5.

But there is one characteristic that stays. After the healing he is still carrying something, this time his “bed” or mat instead of his illness. The difference to V.5 is indicated in the construction of the three short sentences the carrying of the mat/stretcher/bed is framed by activity! *He is healed – he carries – he walks.* And again: *He stood up – he carries – he walks.*

| | |
|---|---|
| He is healed - he <i>carries</i> his mat he walks | He stands up - he <i>carries</i> his mat He walks |
|---|---|

However, that he has to carry something remains and is not gone away. The difference is decisive. During his sickness he carries fragility and time, not able to walk; fragility determines his existence. The fragility is total, carrying encloses the whole person, reducing the whole life to *carrying* for 38 years. Waiting in vain for healing through the water because he is not able to get there quickly enough. The healing word of Jesus made him walk again. The time of fragility leaves its traces. It is part of his life. The mat/bed stands for this experience that is inscribed in his body. Nevertheless, he can endure it *with* the ability to walk and while being healed. Even if he is able to get up and walk – he carries his story with him.

Healing stories and body language

Where is healing? This question lies at the core of the narrative. And there is no doubt about it: Jesus is healing even in a hopeless situation.

In feminist theology, healing stories aren't read according to the ancient concept as the deed of a magician. They are understood as stories where the focus is on the relation between Jesus and the ill person. The strength of the healing develops within the mutual relation or encounter between Jesus and the human being in need. God and the *dynamis* of God (in John it is Jesus) is seen as power in in relationships (Carter Heyward). The healing is embedded into this divine-human relation.

Healing is empowerment – and empowerment does not only mean to heal up to the “normality” of bodily wholeness. Opening our eyes and looking around we can easily see how many different ways of fragility people carry in their life. Healing stories talk about authorizing fragile and ill persons, powerless ones, poor people enabling them to live their life with new strength. Even if John wants to glorify Jesus the story puts the *egeire* the standing up / getting up of the man in the center.

But: It is not the simple getting up – carrying his mat/bed with him marks the man as one who has not lost totally his fragility, he is marked by it. But he is able to get up and to walk – to live his life with new strength. For John the healing is one of the *semeia*, the signs that let us see the different world, the might of God. The miracles are part of the visible world. But in them the mysterious way of God's extending power that touches the fragile human beings tenderly. God's tender touch was the theme of Venezuela 1998.

To stand up / Get up / Rise

The word “to rise”, in Greek *egeire*, is prominent in the narrative (V.8). Jesus is telling the man: Get up. *Egeire* stands for the rising of a person, for getting up, but it also has the meaning for rising after death. Here the man literally stands up, he walks – the sign for the fulfilling and realizing of the order. But within the whole gospel this “rising” of a fragile man is a sign for the “rising” of Jesus from death– and in the end of the Christians. If we take the story for itself it talks about Jesus as the *logos* of God, whose word is healing and creating a new life as God had created the earth. If we put it in the context of the course of the gospel it stands for the deeper message of a God/Jesus who will wake up the dead like Jesus rose from death to eternal life.

3. Dis/ability Studies and Biblical Healing Stories

Interpreting healing stories are tricky. How are we able to understand these stories today? One problem is to refer to the power of Jesus – but what is that meaning today? If people who are ill are not able to stand up and walk – what can the stories mean for them?

A new way of interpreting these stories are challenging even these questions. They are called the “Dis/ability studies”. They question the interpretation that healing, going back to “normal” is the aim of the story and therefore the “normal” is identified with the kingdom of God. This is a distorted way of looking at these healing stories. It is a „*disturbed reading*“, if *the healings of Jesus aims* “to heal up” into “normality” and this is seen as the Kingdom of God. Some of the authors are theologians with a handicap.

The temporarily able-bodied, or TABs: That’s what disability activists call those who are not physically or mentally impaired. And they like to remind them that disability is a porous state; anyone can enter or leave at any time. Disability studies teaches that it is an unaccepting society that needs normalizing, not the minority group. “Disablement comes from a confluence of social factors that shape one’s identity,” says Tammy Berberi, President of the Society for Disability Studies. “It is not a distinct physical condition or a private struggle.” Live long enough and you will almost certainly enter it. **Disability is a fact of the human experience, not the exception.** Disability Studies centers the experiences of disabled people and emphasizes the role of the disability community in defining problems and evaluating solutions. “Disability studies starts with accepting the disability. Then it asks the question: ‘How do we equalize the playing field?’”

Disability Studies scholarship and teaching enhance the understanding of disability by incorporating social, cultural, historical, legal, and political perspectives, including the connections between disability and other identities. The overarching project is to reconceptualize dis/ability and in doing so to create a new conceptual tool for disability studies in a social and political context where many disabled people are seeing rights eroded under neoliberal regimes. Like other oppressed groups throughout history, disabled people have been marginalized; this has led to minimal attention to the historical, cultural, and political/legal dimensions of disability. Through neglect, ignorance, prejudice, and false assumptions, as well as through exclusion, distinction, or separation, society prevents persons with disabilities from exercising their economic, social, or cultural rights on an equal basis with persons without disabilities. The effects of disability-based discrimination have been particularly severe in the fields of education, employment, housing, transport, cultural life, and access to public places and services.

Dis/ability Studies open the eyes for a different interpretation of biblical stories

“Only if we understand the healing stories in such a way that our interpretation does not offend handicapped people, do we understand them correctly for ourselves” (Ulrich Bach). The disability studies name dangers in the interpretation of healing stories.

3.1. Some keypoints to avoid.

- *Contrast*: Often the contrast between the healthy and the disabled people is stressed in order to highlight the significance of the miracle. But this reinforces that disabled people are not considered “normal” and thus excluded.

- *Assumptions and Generalization*: The lack of differentiation of disabilities levels out problems. John 5 names four groups of handicapped people staying at the pool of Bethesda. As the man is not among the lame people, but among those with fragility, the gospel itself differentiates. It is the interpretation, not the text, that identifies him as a lame or paralyzed person, probably taken from Mk 2. But the interpretation is an assumption that reduces “being fragile” to being paralyzed. There may be many reasons why the man could not walk and has worn his illness for 38 years. The gospel does not generalize: The man is fragile (*astheneia*). It is important to listen carefully to the need, letting the person speak for him- or herself, like Jesus did it.

- *Infantilization and anonymization*: Very often society is denying all abilities of disabled persons. Talking about disabled persons in an anonymous way is one danger, infantilization the other. Having one disability does not erase all other abilities. People should be treated as adults who can speak for themselves.

- *Metaphorizing and functionalizing*: If being healed is a sign for the Kingdom of God, then becoming “normal” is the aim of the kingdom of God. This kind of interpretation is bitter for disabled people. Dis/ability studies claim: *On the contrary!* As Dorothee Wilhelm puts it: „Our bodies serve the ‘normal’; as signs for something we are not, they use our body experience, which they do not understand and which does not belong to them, for their own purposes.” Dis/ability studies claim that everybody has a disability and everybody has abilities.

- *Stigmatization and Aestheticization*:

With the focus on disability, people are easily stigmatized. It reduces life to few characteristics and evaluates them in the light being “normal”. Characters are presented as deviating from the social corporeal norms and in need of repair. But often that delegates and projects our own fears and shortcomings. Especially in John the disabled bodies are used not as a story about an individual who is healed but as signs of negating the imperial power and to demonstrate the alternative of God’s power that can be experienced in Jesus.

- *Shifting hope to eschaton*

Sometimes the healing is shifted: It is a hope to Eschaton that disability will disappear. There are numerous articles which tackle this assumption. This interpretation holds the “normal” as the norm and transfers it to eschaton as the goal for eternity. The identity of dis/abled people are not worthwhile to stay! But the great diversity that exists among people is not destroyed in eternity.

3.2. Alternative Approach: Dis/ability-Studies:

“An image of persons that does not focus on the perfect, but on the dependability and fragility of people, without losing sight of the ability of the individual” (Markus Schiefer Ferrari, S. 67)

1. Rethinking disability

The dis/ability studies enable a new thinking about disability. What is “normal”? Where is this “normality” unconsciously assumed to be the central norm? What abilities and disabilities are part of every life? And where is social change necessary to achieve an improvement?

2. Critically reflecting metaphors

Dis/ability studies sharpen the awareness of how to use metaphors. Metaphors like “ill” or “disabled” are used in derogatory ways. But language is important. Language does not only reproduce reality, but it produces reality.

3. Perceiving the body attentively - anthropology of fragility

Dis/ability studies help to perceive the body attentively. It is an encouragement to discuss the image of body. How do we judge the body today? Fragility is part of life – how is it possible to integrate this insight lead to a changed attitude?

4. Testing other readings - a dis/ability critical reading

Dis/ability studies allow conventional interpretations to be viewed with different eyes. They cast a critical light on the interpretations and enforce a critical reading. Do these interpretations include the different aspects or are they discriminatory?

5. Fragility of the community:

The fragile is the new normal. With this attitude not (only) a special meaning of people with limitations is needed, but a new understanding of community in general. Being un/broken people is a natural expression of being human, a community in the diversity of human life possibilities is necessary – and normal!

6. Allow polyphony in the interpretation of the plural voices of the Bible.

Dis/ability studies are not the only way of interpreting the Bible. There may be other human, social, political situations and fragilities that shed a different light on the biblical text. They have their own method or their own focus. It is important not to play them off against each other. Hear different voices and talk about them.

7. Beware of empathy exercises (replay).

The bodily experience of disability is exceptional. Pretending that this experience is known by others may hurt people. Dorothee Wilhelm puts it: „ Our bodies serve the ‘normal’; as signs for something we are not, they use our body experience, which they do not understand and which does not belong to them, for their own purposes.” This has to be respected.

8. Not to exclude a complaint, also against God, about the lack of possibility of life

Seeing disability anew is not minimizing the problems, the violence, the pain or maybe the wish to live a different life. Biblical texts provide the important prayer of lamentation. Whatever fragility people endure – it is their right to lament. 40% of the psalms are prayers of lament, if not more. The Book of Job is a whole book of fighting with God. There is the right to accuse God. It would be fatal if the lament and complaint were to be interpreted as a lack of faith. On the contrary: The complaint does not release God from his responsibility. It holds the relation to God.

9. And: Nourish hope for better opportunities in life

But it also is true: The dis/ability studies and the consequences in interpretation hopefully nourish hope for better opportunities in life. Some scholars use a cultural model of disability, a postmodern approach that explores the ways we shape the world around us by reference to physical and cognitive differences. Those who employ this model are not primarily interested in a medical diagnosis or in social discrimination related to impairments, but in the interpretive categories by which we narrate and organize the world in which we live. As society becomes more aware, the opportunities for people with disabilities will improve.

10. World-changing dynamis of God

John’s theological message is the world-changing *dynamis* (Greek *dynamis*: might, power) of God. Jesus brings this *dynamis* to the world and whoever beliefs in Jesus will experience

this *dynamis*. This is not the power of the mighty in the world. God's power is different and John opens the eyes for the second level behind the world and its powers. He talks about Jesus as the Son of God who opens up for a new life.

A short example:

The people with physical challenges are sources of creativity –they have a lot to offer us. “I met Harold Wilke in the early 80's—and he did everything with his feet—he ate, drove a car, he was married and raised 2 or 3 boys. His parents let him figure out how he was going to do things and he trained his toes/feet to be his hands. He was very flexible and had trained his legs to rise up to a table on which there was a cup of coffee (he needed a cup or mug with a handle to allow his toes to grip the cup. Being with him one discovered how normal this adaptation is. He told a story of driving into New York city and when he came to one of the toll plazas, a white man was the toll taker and he was so shaken by Harold using his foot, the toll taker dropped the coin. When he came to another toll taker, he was an African American. When he reached for the coin held by Harold's foot he smiled and said—way to go man! It was Harold's experience that people who encountered difficulties could be open to how others coped with their challenges.”

Harold H. Wilke (1914–2003) – United Church of Christ minister and founding member of the National Organization on Disability. He delivered the invocation at the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Born without arms, Wilke signed with his foot the ADA Americans with Disability Act . This is United States law that ensures the right of every individual to participate fully in American society.

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