

HEALING *in the* BIBLE

Theological Insight *for* Christian Ministry

Frederick J. Gaiser


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Preface

I was interested in healing before I became a pastor or a biblical theologian. The first reason, of course, is that I am a human being, one for whom, like all human beings, healing is a matter of life and death, a part of the perpetual pursuit of happiness and self-preservation. A second reason is that, before attending seminary, I worked for a time as a pharmaceutical chemist, part of a group of committed scientists striving to alleviate human misery. As a former scientist, I have no doubt about the integrity and motivation of most of my fellow workers or about the efficacy of many of the medications they developed. As a present biblical theologian, I have no doubt that the Lord of creation was at work in their efforts and that the Bible affirms that work in its teaching on healing. The same Lord, however, can and will surprise us through healings that derive from systems other than Western medicine and those that, for now at least, surprise even the scientific world. Because I believe that the Bible bears faithful witness to the character and work of God, I am profoundly interested in what the Bible says about healing.

This book has taken shape over many years. In different form, parts of three chapters have appeared elsewhere: chapters 13 and 14 in *Word & World: Theology for Christian Ministry*, and chapter 15 in *Ex Auditu*. Material from those earlier articles is used here with the kind permission of the publishers.

I owe special thanks to many people and institutions:

- Luther Seminary for its support of this work, not only by granting sabbatical leave but also through its backing of the Luther Seminary in Zimbabwe program that provided me opportunity to teach and study in Africa (that program, sadly, now having fallen on hard times because of

the collapse of networks, infrastructure, and institutions in that deeply troubled country); I benefited also from the encouragement of more than one academic dean, the indispensable conversation with colleagues, and the support of an invariably helpful and friendly library staff;

- schools that invited me to speak on healing at public lectures and convocations, providing occasion for the development of some of the material that appears here: the University of Zimbabwe in Harare; Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe; Makumira University College of Tumaini University in Usa River, Tanzania; North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago (the Nils Lund Lectures); and Luther Seminary (Mid-Winter Convocation Lectures);
- Thrivent Financial for Lutherans for financial assistance during sabbatical leave;
- the many congregations and church organizations where I have spoken about healing in the Bible, the conversations there always productive of insight;
- medical professionals, including parish nurses and physicians, who have attended lectures, forums, and lay-school classes and provided valuable feedback;
- friends and colleagues in Africa, among whom I experienced an introduction to ways of thinking about health and healing that are no doubt closer to those of the Bible than those of modern Western culture, and with whom, particularly those in Zimbabwe, I pray for their personal, communal, economic, and political healing;
- the students in my “Healing in the Bible” course and in advanced degree programs whose interest, questions, and comments have, over the years, stimulated my thinking on this topic;
- Jim Kinney and Baker Academic for their support of this project from the beginning and for their patience and encouragement as it developed;
- my immediate and extended family, always interested in and supportive of my work, including most especially the partnership and encouragement of my wife, Barbara.

Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota
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1

Introduction and Method



Because parts of this book began to take shape in Africa, I start with two stories from one of my tours of teaching in Zimbabwe.

For southern Africans, the winter of 1996 was uncommonly cold. Snow brought hardship and death to South Africa, and, according to the news, parts of Zimbabwe experienced the coldest temperatures in eighty years. Although, as a Minnesotan, I was sometimes amused at what counted as cold, the suffering of people unprepared for freezing weather was real. On one of the coldest nights of that cold season, I was invited by a friend, an African pastor (of a tradition quite different from my own), to participate in a crusade that he and his congregation were holding in Hatcliffe, one of the bleakest of the “high-density suburbs” of Harare (these were the black ghetto areas under Rhodesian apartheid). At the end of the service, the pastor asked any who desired prayers for healing to come forward—healing of body or mind or spirit. At first they came in a trickle, but then in droves. Despite the cold night and the late hour, I thought that they might never stop. My friend asked me to assist him in laying hands on the sick and praying for them or with them, which I did. The scene—standing in an open field blessing the multitudes in the name of Jesus—resembled some biblical pageant. It was a rich and moving experience. Were people “healed”? No statistics were gathered, no follow-up studies were conducted; but surely people were helped. Their willingness to brave the elements spoke highly of their expectations and their past experience. Surely, the Spirit of God moved over their troubled minds and bodies and souls.

During that same season, my brother and his family visited me from the United States. One night at a *braai* (barbecue), eating in the dark, my brother put a piece of meat in his mouth that turned out to be too large for his esophagus. It lodged partway down and refused to be moved. Although he could breathe, he could not swallow. Neither time nor various suggested home remedies helped. Eventually, we all went to the emergency room, but efforts there failed as well. He was admitted to the hospital, and the next day the blockage was surgically removed. Among the efforts that “failed” was the fervent and public prayer of a devout Christian, convinced that God could and would respond to the crisis with no need for surgical intervention.

Some skeptics may have muttered that what took place in that field in Hatcliffe was mere superstition. Since it happened in Africa, they may have called it “mumbo jumbo.” On the other hand, some pious Christians may have been disappointed that my brother elected to undergo surgical treatment without waiting for the results of prayer. They may have been critical of his “little faith.” It is my conviction that God was fully active in each of these scenarios: reaching out with healing through prayer and laying on of hands on the field in Hatcliffe, and employing the best tools of creation and human vocation in the operating theater of the Avenues Clinic in Harare. That conviction informs this book.

Those who would reject physicians in their zeal for healing through prayer alone would do well to consider the words of the ancient Hebrew wisdom teacher Ben Sira (himself a faithful believer in the biblical God):

Honor physicians for their services, for the Lord created them;
 for their gift of healing comes from the Most High, and they are re-
 warded by the king. . . .
 The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not
 despise them. . . .
 And he gave skill to human beings that he might be glorified in their
 marvelous works. . . .
 Give the physician his place, for the Lord created him;
 do not let him leave you, for you need him.
 There may come a time when recovery lies in the hands of physicians,
 for they too pray to the Lord that he grant them success in diagnosis
 and in healing, for the sake of preserving life. (Sir. 38:1–14)

Those who find no relevance for the Bible or for faith in the modern world might be challenged by the words of a twentieth-century biblical scholar, Gerhard von Rad (himself a student and product of the Enlightenment), in a sermon on the story of Balaam:

We today don’t regard ourselves in any way bound to the ancient biblical notions. We today view the world differently. But, oh, this “We today!” In its place

it certainly has a good and proper use. But, just as certainly, it can in a flash become unbearably arrogant. Unsuspecting, it can set aside a knowledge of the world, of humanity, and even of God that is lamentably unavailable to us. Is it the case that the reality in which we live has only been properly understood in our own age? Let us just pose the naive question: Which side has the better realists? Is it those who always have this sophisticated “we today” on their lips? Are they the better realists? Or is our narrator out in front of them when he regards the blessing of God as a real power under which we live unconsciously day and night, so that we would be lost if we could not take refuge in it. Here is where we must make up our minds about the actual reality in which we live.¹

God accomplishes healing in all kinds of venues and in all kinds of ways. God heals through the work of creation, through the presence of Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and through the prayers and support of the people of God. The biblical healing stories are as rich and varied as present experience. I attempt, in this book, to listen to them in all their variety.

A word about the methodology employed here is in order. Those who care at all what the Bible says about healing might use a variety of responsible ways to pay attention to its voice. Among them would be an exhaustive critical exegesis of relevant texts or a constructive and thematic compilation of biblical theological topics related to healing. The present investigation is neither of those, though it partakes of elements of each. I assume here that individual biblical accounts convey a message worthy of consideration by the modern reader, and I seek to pay attention to them in all their peculiarity. The readings of the biblical texts are my own, of necessity at the outset because the initial work was done in Africa where I had no access to library or Internet. The methods are eclectic, involving tradition history, form criticism, literary structures, and regard for different historical periods and biblical theologies—and eventually I do engage other biblical scholars, albeit selectively—but finally I assume that, despite distance and difference, biblical texts, appreciatively heard in their final form, will provide the reader with significant insights, indeed, even moments of wonder. The interpreter’s task is to retell the stories to that end.

My reference to starting this work in Africa and the two stories from Africa that begin this chapter are neither incidental nor included merely to provide exotic color. The reader will find similar references scattered throughout the book. The opportunity to live and work in Africa brought an introduction to living cultures, especially in the rural areas, which, though certainly changed now by contact with the wider world, still think about health and healing in ways much closer to the world of the Bible than are the assumptions and perspectives of the modern West. Without rejecting that latter world, which is, of course, fundamentally my own, I treasure African perspectives as a gift

1. Gerhard von Rad, *Predigten* (Munich: Kaiser, 1972), 165 (my translation).

that brought new insight into my reading of the Bible, especially the Bible on healing.

One might call my reading a hermeneutic of appreciation versus the hermeneutic of suspicion sometimes employed by critical readers.² For me, to be sure, such an “appreciative inquiry” of biblical texts will never jettison critical inquiry, as that is called for. Still, it is important for the reader to know that here I make no claim to provide full commentary on the passages in question.

This inquiry assumes that the biblical witness is properly brought into conversation with other ancient and modern insights into the healing process (including those within the Bible itself), and that such conversation will be mutually beneficial. While the method attempts to allow particular texts their own say, it assumes that the conversation with other points of view or with a broader biblical perspective can come at any and every stage of the investigation. In other words, the conversation is open.

This conversational inquiry into the biblical texts does several things:

- it recognizes that, for the time being, center stage is given to a particular biblical voice, which is listened to for its own story and its own claims;
- it suggests that such a particular voice has its own legitimacy, even if it stands somewhat off the beaten path of a broader biblical view or even over against other biblical witnesses;
- it is open to any or all critical understandings of a given text, but it recognizes that a fruitful conversation with the text might be initiated on one day by one insight, on another day by another.

Practitioners of such a conversational approach to developing biblical theology will, I believe,

- listen intently and with historical, grammatical, and literary care to the particular biblical voice as a partner in conversation that has the potential of speaking a meaningful word;
- be willing to be shaped by the conversation, ascribing to the texts the proper respect and authority discovered over generations and centuries of use by the people of God;
- recognize that this particular biblical voice is not the whole; even as it contributes to a broader “biblical view of healing,” it must also be examined and tested in light of that broader biblical witness;

2. This mode of reading is my own, but it might be compared to the “appreciative inquiry” used now as a positive tool in management and group dynamics; see, for example, *Appreciative Inquiry: An Emerging Direction for Organization Development*, ed. David L. Cooperider et al. (Champaign, IL: Stipes, 2001); Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J. Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001).

- read and hear texts theologically, asking: What is God doing here? What has this to do with God's revelation in Christ? How will interpreters develop present theological reflection on a text that is faithful to its original witness?
- confront the broader biblical witness and the subsequent theological tradition with their need to take account of the specificity of the claims and observations of a particular text;
- let the conversation with the word be real; the interpreter will both listen and speak, both argue and defer, as one with something to say and something to learn, claiming a legitimate voice while observing an appropriate humility in this encounter with the messages of Scripture;
- work in community; the interpreter will read texts in conversation with the voices of the church (locally and ecumenically), the voices of the Christian tradition, "prophetic" voices over against the tradition, the voices of biblical scholarship, responsible voices of human vocation, and voices from science, literature, and the arts, both inside and outside the church, attempting to give each of these its appropriate place in determining the meaning of a text.

This book uses this method in examining a variety of biblical texts in something of a case-study approach. What can we learn from *this* text as we consider healing in the Bible and broader issues related to healing? The reader will quickly note that not all biblical healing stories are included here. I have chosen texts that seem representative and that deal with or suggest matters of ongoing theological interest. No doubt, other stories could offer other insights. Having studied the individual texts, I seek to make some general comments on healing in biblical perspective, culminating in a set of theses that draw together the insights gained through the several chapters and occasionally from material not directly included there. The summary theses have been formulated and reformulated to draw the broader, overarching ideas out of the particular stories.

The goal of this book is to explore the ways in which the Bible amplifies the claims and the promises of both Testaments—"I am the LORD, your healer" (Exod. 15:26); "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people" (Matt. 4:23)—and then to think about all of this in our own cultural perspective.

2

“O LORD, Heal Me”



The Primal Witness of Psalm 6

Behind the artistically structured poems and liturgies of the biblical psalms lie the joys and terrors of primal human experience. In the middle of the night, when the telephone rings with the news of grave illness or tragic death, no one has to be taught to cry out in the typical outbursts of the biblical laments: *Why? How long? If only! Help me!* Similarly, when the call is from the doctor, saying that the tests show the tumor to be benign, no one has to be told that “Praise the Lord!” is an appropriate response or that it is okay to break into a dance step or two (Ps. 30:11). These are the cries and actions of primary human experience, found among people everywhere. The psalms have molded this experience into the ordered form of poetry and prayer. They bear the marks of the artist and the liturgist and the theologian. But without the background of primal experience, the psalmists would have had no working material, and unless they rendered that experience truthfully, their poems would have had neither merit nor longevity.

In the psalms of lament and thanksgiving, the Bible presents us with its most fundamental witness to the experience of illness and healing. Both illness and healing are basic to human life, and both are given voice in the Bible beneath and behind any attempt to explain or tame or order them in theology and story. Any study of biblical healing must begin with these simple but basic observations: The people of the Bible fell ill—good people and bad people, ordinary people and kings, young people and old. But also, the people of the

Bible experienced healing—through prayer, through early forms of medicine, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes through a lengthy process. In other words, the people of the Bible were like us. They had no more immediate answers to the terrible existential questions brought on by suffering than we do. Still, even without access to the miracles of modern medicine, they experienced healing and release and celebrated life.

Candor requires admitting that the people of the Bible were like us in another way as well: eventually, they died. Such an obvious statement is essential to a book on biblical healing because it has not always been so obvious. A danger in a study of the healing texts of the Bible is that, in them, people regularly are healed. This sometimes leads to the assumption that God’s healing happened more often or was more available to people of faith then, or was more miraculous then, or is now to be expected in every case where there is faithful prayer. Of course, people are healed in the healing stories. Those are the stories we have chosen to read. If we were reading the death and dying texts of the Bible, everyone would die. In fact, everyone in the Bible did die,¹ and, as any history of medicine will make clear, they died more quickly than modern people do. In the world of the Bible, to contract serious disease or to fall victim to serious accident generally led to death—more often then than now, because the skills and possibilities of modern medicine were unavailable to them. True, biblical people prayed and experienced healing and ascribed their healing to God. We do well to celebrate that, to investigate it and learn from it, to appropriate it for our own lives; but we also do well to do so in a realistic context. Life and death, illness and healing, are universal human phenomena. The Bible bears particular witness to God’s healing, thus providing us with an important resource in our present quest for meaningful and abundant life. But we enter that quest aware of the finitude and mortality of the people in the Bible, and of our own. Healing is not the guaranteed right of certain people of faith; it is God’s surprising gift to all people everywhere. That is the broader context in which we must understand biblical healing.

In his masterful study of evil, Paul Ricoeur argued that the confessional outbursts in the psalms and elsewhere—where people cry that this life of suffering and terror is not the full life that ought to be, and, more, that they too are not what they ought to be and have thus contributed to the world’s terror and suffering—are the Bible’s fundamental “symbols” of evil.² These undeniable primal phenomena bear witness to the reality of sin and evil, a reality that later stories and doctrines will attempt to explain and define. Similarly, we can suggest that the primal outbursts of release by people who were ill but now are well are the Bible’s fundamental symbols of goodness and grace. People have

1. The oft-cited exceptions are Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), who apparently were taken by God directly into heaven. This is not, however, due to their inherent immortality. Had they not been taken by God in this way, they too would have died eventually.

2. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1969).

experienced unexpected healing and, in their outbursts of joy, have ascribed this to the grace of God. Later stories and doctrines will attempt to explain and define grace as well. But human beings experience first the phenomenon itself. We begin our study of Psalm 6 from this perspective.

The Shape of Lament

Psalm 6 is the prayer of one “shaking with terror,” a person in great distress who turns to God for healing. The psalmist appeals to God’s “steadfast love” to counter both internal personal suffering and external attack by certain “enemies.”³ Typical of many psalms, the prayer goes beyond the terror of the present and rejoices in the healing release found when God hears and responds. It bears witness both to the universal reality of pain and illness and the wonder of healing and renewal. Both, of course, are of interest to a biblical study of healing.

As in most psalms, we never learn the precise nature of the pray-er’s distress. There are probably at least two reasons for this. The first is liturgical. The psalms have been gathered now for communal use, so that everyone can use them as tools for prayer. The more explicit the references to the nature of illness, the less usable the psalm would be for those whose illnesses are different. The generality of the psalms promotes their availability; their poetic imagery, precisely in its imprecision, promotes their universality. Second, the psalms function in a world of connectedness. The problem may be multiple sclerosis, but the experience and the effects of the disease are much more than physical. All illness—at least, serious illness—has an effect on the whole person. It is not that “I” have an illness but that the illness has me. It is no longer an inconvenience, a dog nipping at the heels; it is the wolf at the door. The experience of trauma itself, the awareness of mortality, is at least as great a distress as the particular symptoms of the trauma. Thus, not only the psalmist’s “bones” shake with terror, but also his “soul.” The fact that his “eyes” waste away in grief does not imply that he has an eye disease. In another psalm the writer says, “My eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also” (Ps. 31:9). In other words, whatever the physical symptoms, they have broader significance that produces emotional and spiritual consequences (and vice versa). Indeed, the psalmist lives in that holistic world; and so do we, of course, so the psalms become usable for all of us, whatever our distress.

Careful readers and professional form critics have long recognized that the laments or complaints of the Psalter point in three directions: toward God,

3. Despite the present attribution of Ps. 6 to David (in the text note), the assumption here is that it was available also to describe the experience of the ordinary Israelite. See Frederick J. Gaiser, “The Emergence of the Self in the Old Testament: A Study in Biblical Wellness,” *HBT* 14, no. 1 (1992): 1–29; James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, IBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 22–24.

the self, and the other.⁴ Each direction will give rise to stories and explanations of the meaning and origin of suffering, but we hear them first as cries typical of human experience: I am in trouble, and it is God’s fault, or mine, or yours. We must quickly add here that although there seem to be psalms with an actual court or trial setting, one dare not interpret “fault” here (or elsewhere in this chapter) merely in a forensic sense. Perhaps it would be better to say that in the experience of the psalms, my illness derives from distortion of my relationships with God, with myself, and with others. Somehow, the experience of distress is personal. Somehow, God is *in* my illness, as am I, and as are others around me, for good or ill.

The existence of this threefold cry ushers us quickly into the complexity of the experience and causality of illness. No eventual answer to the haunting question of the meaning of sickness and suffering will be adequate if it does not do justice to all three directions of the psalmist’s complaint. Does God bring illness, or is God involved in it in some way? Well, yes, says the psalmist—sometimes, at least. Has my suffering resulted from my own actions? Again, yes, sometimes. Have other forces or other people brought me down? Once more, the biblical response, sometimes, is positive.

God’s Role in Illness

In Psalm 6:1–3 the psalmist wrestles with what God might be doing in this distress. Is this illness an example of God’s wrath or anger? Might it be a way for God to discipline the one praying, to teach something? Appeal can be made to God’s grace, but, although the psalmist senses that God is doing something here, it is uncertain what that may be, as is even God’s present mood or inclination. The structure of these verses is instructive:

- A God’s anger and wrath (v. 1)
- B Be gracious to me (v. 2a)
- B’ Heal me (v. 2b)
- A’ Uncertainty about God (v. 3)

The pray-er knows of God’s grace and healing (B, B’), but for now, those positive images seem surrounded by God’s wrath and the psalmist’s uncertainty about divine intervention (A, A’).

In the ancient world, it was generally impossible not to consider God’s place in what happened. Israel’s was a thoroughly theistic world, with no doubt that

4. There are many introductions to the forms of the various psalms. See, for example, Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message*, trans. Ralph D. Gehrke (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980); more recently, C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

God was an actor in the events of life, including its dark side.⁵ As we see in Psalm 6, that did not necessarily mean that God's action was clear or that it excluded the actions of others, but the God question was always present. Today, we have more sophisticated ways to think about cause and effect. Although sometimes we too will spontaneously cry out to God, wondering what God is doing or why, most people of Western culture are full-blown children of the Enlightenment (and most other world cultures have been heavily influenced by it). As such, we will naturally look to the actions of human beings or the course of an impersonal "nature" to explain what is happening, either around us or within us. People of faith are not exempt from this worldview, nor should they be. In fact, it explains a lot. The psalms, however, keep reminding us that we too can and should ask the "God question." Both illness and healing are occasions to ask what God might be doing in my life. The answer may be complex or may not immediately be found at all, but the question is in place. It is a form of prayer.

It is not only the psalms that provide us with this cross-cultural reminder of a different way of looking at the world—one that assumes an active role of God in everyday affairs—it is also our contact with people from non-Western cultures. Like native peoples everywhere, traditional Africans regularly seek a "theological" rationale for the diseases and disorders of their life; they do not regard these as "neutral" phenomena. In the modern world, of course, Africans too face the questions raised by the Enlightenment; they become haunted by what Cécé Kolié calls "the sorcery of the whites."⁶ The church lives in the world of the Enlightenment as well, but it dare not dismiss questions of meaning and point to a merely mechanical cause-and-effect system of medicine. We must bring present questions of meaning (from Africa and elsewhere) into conversation with the biblical world and the modern scientific world and derive a theology that can make sense in a variety of cultures of the claim that God heals.

Failure to take seriously the God question in relation to illness and suffering will not only capitulate too quickly to an essentially atheistic or, at best, agnostic modern worldview, but also it will be unable to respond adequately to people who still ask that question. Although Harold Kushner is correct in his assertion that the awful questions of "why" are fundamentally cries for help, he is incorrect in assuming that they are not also real questions worthy of serious theological response.⁷ There are different kinds of cries for help.

5. While perhaps underestimating other agencies in the psalms, James Luther Mays's comments on the significance of Israel's monotheism are instructive here. For the psalmists, seeking God's role in suffering is "a choice against other options offered in the culture: another god, demonic powers, magical spells of enemies, sheer fate beyond the sphere of God's sovereignty. It is not a choice as such to believe in an angry God; rather, it is a choice to understand experiences through belief in one God and to encompass all experience within the relation to that God" (*Psalms*, 61–62).

6. Cécé Kolié, "Jesus as Healer?" in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreier (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 146.

7. Kushner writes, "The question we should be asking is not, 'Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?' That is really an unanswerable, pointless question. A better ques-

“Help!” is one, but the cry of “Why?” is more. It is a question to which people seek an answer, not only because their understanding of God is at stake (no small matter) but also because, even at this most primal level, human beings are creatures who seek meaning. Since “Why?” is surely a cry for help, the first response to that cry will be care and comfort rather than rational discourse. But it is also a question, and somewhere along the line theological discourse is necessary. Depending upon its competence and faithfulness, such discourse will be either healing (true and useful) or harmful (simplistic and destructive).

Is It My Fault?

Although Psalm 6 contains no specific confession of sin, implicit behind its references to God’s anger, wrath, and discipline is the assumption that present suffering is brought on, in part at least, by human fault or human agency. The God of the Bible is not capricious. God does not torment people just for the fun of it. God’s anger is triggered by human rebellion and failure. Most of us know this feeling well. We must have done something wrong to deserve our present fate. The late American cartoonist Walt Kelly said it well in the oft-quoted observation of Pogo Possum: “We have met the enemy, and he is us!”⁸ Indeed, this perspective is a major emphasis in the realm of public health medicine: How do we contribute to our own illness? How can this be avoided? In speaking of the dangers of smoking or unprotected sex, public health officials generally do not invoke the wrath of God. Their vocation is not to speak as theologians. But an important element of their message is the same: dangerous acts have dangerous consequences; folly brings suffering; or, in another language, the wages of sin is death. Just to be clear: the psalms never claim that every illness is deserved, that all get their just deserts, that all suffering is the result of personal fault. They do remind us, though, that this might be true, or at least partly true: dis-ease, by its very nature, stems from and produces estrangement. And the psalms encourage us, in the midst of suffering, to engage in a healthy measure of self-examination. To blame others or God or fate too quickly may obscure the road toward health that is brought by considering one’s own responsibility.⁹

On the other hand, and certainly even more dangerous for some (perhaps especially the pious), always to blame the self, to assume that nothing happens to me that I do not have coming, is a perspective that is too simple for the psalmists.

tion would be ‘Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?’” (*When Bad Things Happen to Good People* [New York: Schocken Books, 1981], 136). More recently, on a television talk show, Kushner said that our cries of “why” were “not a question” but a “cry for help.” Thus, we should not try to answer the question, but instead provide the needed comfort.

8. The line first referred to human effects on the environment. Among other places, it appeared in the comic strip published on Earth Day, 1971.

9. On the relation between sickness and sin, see chapter 15.

The author of Psalm 6 also speaks of suffering and illness as something that has simply happened: “I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears” (v. 6). Here there is no mention of fault, indeed, no consideration of causality at all. There is only the terrible experience.¹⁰ Few of us have not awakened with a wet pillow, due either to physical pain or emotional distress. We need not find the cause in order to share the experience. Sometimes cause is not the issue, but simply the real presence of suffering and tears.

The Other as Enemy

The psalms recognize that my suffering can be either aided or exacerbated by the actions of others. Like the poet John Donne, they know that “no man is an island, entire unto himself”;¹¹ nor is any woman. My sense of self and well-being probably ought not be overly dependent on the words and actions of others, but those words and actions are not irrelevant.

Here in Psalm 6 the one in distress cries out against his “foes”; they are “workers of evil” and “enemies.” Much has been written about the enemies of the lament psalms.¹² At least in the psalms of illness, they seem to be domestic enemies not foreign ones. They might, in fact, be very close: “Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me” (Ps. 41:9). In some cultures, such enemies who cause or contribute to my illness might be sorcerers or demons.¹³ In the Old Testament, with its insistence that Yahweh alone has divine power, these forces have been relativized or demythologized, but human evildoers may be enough.¹⁴ If they exercise political or criminal oppression, they might be the direct cause of the distress of others (Ps. 10:8–11); more often, however, the enemies seem to take on the role of Job’s “friends”—people who, though they are not the source of suffering, make it worse by blaming and ridiculing the victim. Part of the reason for the Psalter’s fierce opposition to these enemies is that, if they are correct, the one who suffers is separated from God and community (and thus from the sources of healing): according to the enemies, those who are ill suffer the just

10. In the early Christian church, Ps. 6 was the first of seven “penitential psalms” (along with Pss. 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143). While such a designation for Ps. 6 rightly understands the pray-er’s contrition in the light of God’s “anger” and “wrath,” it does not adequately name the psalmist’s experience of “raw” (unexplained) terror and pain.

11. John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), no. 17.

12. See, for example, Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

13. Some commentators suspect that demons may once have lurked behind the now unnamed “terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday” in Ps. 91:5–6.

14. Eventually, of course, the psalms’ notion of *many* evil others will be augmented in biblical theology by the danger of *one* Evil Other (Satan). The psalms, however, invite us to think about suffering and sickness in relation to God, self, and others before turning to Satan as the cause of all ills.

punishment of God; they have no place in the community of “good” people; the “righteous” have no responsibility for them, because the righteous “know” how these others got into their present predicament.

Little has changed from the ancient world to now. The suffering and the poor, the ill and the distressed, are often castigated by the “good” members of society, even by their own families. Victims are often blamed. People are too quick to see symptoms and assume that they can identify the actions that produced them. Those who suffer are further victimized by gawkers and irresponsible journalists. Now, as then, when people need friends, they often find enemies, and their distress is amplified.

The Meaning of Petition

In the psalms, illness is a fact of human experience. The pray-er knows distress and may even play a role in producing it, but so may God and so may other people. However, the psalmist is not left with nowhere to turn: there is petition to God.

The petition is a stereotypical feature of the lament psalm, but that does not diminish its striking theological significance. That a person who is ill should cry out for help is hardly remarkable, but the form of that prayer in the biblical lament psalms is noteworthy. It regularly consists of two parts: a plea that God look favorably upon the petitioner and a particular request for healing. The request for healing is straightforward, as it is in Psalm 6:2: “O LORD, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.” We expect a person in pain to cry out for alleviation. That comes quite naturally. However, that such a request is accompanied by (indeed, in the psalms is regularly secondary to) a prayer for God to turn and regard the petitioner favorably marks a particular theological worldview. Once more, health is not merely a physical or bodily issue; it has something to do with the pray-er’s relation with God. This may or may not suggest that God has sent the illness. More importantly, it means that well-being has a spiritual dimension. Wellness involves not only my body, but also my soul and spirit.

The petition in the lament psalms makes sense only in a world that believes in God, indeed in a God who responds to the cries of human distress.¹⁵ The pray-er, though feeling isolated, under attack from others and maybe even from God, does believe in God. The pray-er is not alone. In distinguishing between the ancient and the modern worldviews, Walter Brueggemann states that “modernity cannot anticipate a ‘breakthrough’”—that is, an intervention from outside the imme-

15. David Robertson is profoundly wrong when he suggests that the ancient world shared the same view as that of nineteenth-century liberalism, knowing that “no petition from them is going to lead God to make human life basically any different” (*The Old Testament and the Literary Critic*, GBS [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977], 67).

diately visible world of cause and effect.¹⁶ Israel could and did anticipate such a breakthrough because it believed in God. More than that, it believed in a God of “steadfast love” (Ps. 6:4). Yahweh is more than just a supreme being. To invoke the name of Yahweh on behalf of one who is ill is more than wishing “The force be with you.” Yahweh is a very particular God, one whose intentions for people are clear. The author of Psalm 6 will have been familiar with Israel’s catechism in which Yahweh is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6). It is hard to overestimate such a view of God as a factor in human healing. It provides an expectant attitude, a faith that life is possible because it is willed by a good and compassionate deity. Some worldviews contribute to resignation and death, others to renewal and life. If God is as impassible or untouchable as some traditions have argued, prayer makes little sense, and my future is essentially my fate. I am caught in a tragic drama where the best I can do is live heroically in the face of impossible odds. Nothing will change; I can just live better or worse in a predetermined world. Israel’s theological world was different. “Turn, O LORD, save my life,” prays our psalmist (v. 4). A request that Yahweh “turn” assumes that Yahweh genuinely hears and responds to prayer, that God enters into real dialogue with human beings, that the future is not fixed. A pronouncement that one’s fate is sealed, whether it comes from a preacher, a palm reader, or a physician, does not contribute to an attitude of healing. The best that one can achieve then is resignation. Our psalmist, however, is not resigned to fate. The psalmist is convinced that God hears and responds to prayer, means well, is in favor of life, and can act on the psalmist’s behalf. Such an attitude is itself healing—the more so, of course, if the God in which the psalmist believes is real.

What this investigation makes clear is that one’s theology—that is, one’s understanding of God—and one’s health are interrelated. Good theology contributes to good health; bad theology can lead to death. This is true not only in the extreme instances, like religion-inspired terrorism such as Jim Jones’s cyanide pot or David Koresh’s fiery furnace, but also in the everyday experience of sickness and health. One’s theology can make one resigned or make one expectant. For the author of Psalm 6, it was the latter.

Life and Death

An interest in healing assumes that this life matters. A misreading of Paul’s “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (Phil. 1:21), even though this verse in no way dismisses the value of life, may provide little interest in healing.

16. Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 94. Obviously, some moderns can and do anticipate the work of God in their lives and in their world; Brueggemann speaks of the agnostic or atheistic worldview that characterizes much of modern consciousness.

A cartoonist portrays a new arrival in heaven, enjoying all the rewards of eternal bliss, saying, “If it hadn’t been for all that damn health food, I could have been up here years ago.”¹⁷ When this world does not matter but the next world does, physical health may not be high on the agenda. But this is not the world of the Old Testament. “In Sheol who can give you praise?” asks our psalmist (Ps. 6:5). The point, common to the psalms, is that death is final, cutting us off even from the possibility of praising God. Unlike the view of the book of Revelation, where the life to come means perpetual praise (Rev. 4:8), death, for the psalmist, brings only death. And death does not praise God.¹⁸ Other psalms and prayers, indeed the whole Old Testament, basically share this perspective (see, e.g., Pss. 30:9; 88:10–11; Isa. 38:18–19; cf. Job 10:20–22). The living praise God; the dead do not. In other words, life matters not only to us, but to God as well. God is at least as interested in our life as we are. Such a God will care about being our “healer” (Exod. 15:26). To be sure, the New Testament envisions an eternal life where “neither death nor life” can “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39; in anticipation of this, see Ps. 139:8), but such an eschatological perspective never negates God’s interest (and ours!) in an “abundant life” in this age (John 10:10). The Old Testament (including Ps. 6), with its concern for life and meaning and justice in the present age, remains Christian Scripture and reminds us that arguments dismissing the value of life in the world have no biblical warrant.

The Bible recognizes that mortality marks the human condition. The Genesis creation story does not teach that death would have been unknown to human beings without sin. Humans are finite; only God is infinite. If immortality were the human condition, there would be no reason for the tree of life in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9; 3:22). The curse of sin is not mortality, but rather the terrible refusal of death to stay where it belongs, out there at the end of a rich, long life. Were it true that all people knew from the beginning that they would die peacefully in their sleep at the age of one hundred, death would not be the feared enemy that it is in the Bible and in human literature more broadly—indeed, much, if not most, of human literature would disappear! But death will not stay out there. It invades the present, with no interest in justice or meaning, taking babies and causing incalculable pain and misery. Only in eschatological faith or perhaps in moments of overwhelming pain or at the end of a meaningful life can death be termed “friend.” Most often, in the instant, its terrors are real. The Old Testament reminds us that God is first and forever pro-life. Healing is, therefore, God’s business. Because of finitude

17. Kenneth Mahood, *Punch*, July 1980.

18. The author of Ps. 6 could not have understood Francis of Assisi’s poetic view that, in William Draper’s translation, “kind and gentle death” also praises God. See his hymn “All Creatures of Our God and King,” in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), hymn 527, stanza 6.

and sin, human beings cannot take healing for granted, but there can be no doubt that it corresponds to God's will.

The Experience of Healing

Something happens to the one praying Psalm 6. The pray-er experiences not only the shaking terrors of illness but also the acceptance and release of healing: "The LORD has heard the sound of my weeping" (v. 8). The stereotypical turn of many psalms from lament to confidence and praise is not merely a liturgical or literary formula; it bears witness to the real experience of healing. People who were ill are now well (or assured of their coming recovery).¹⁹ This happens in every culture and every age. Healing happens. Unique to the biblical psalms is their ascription of this healing to Yahweh, the God of Israel: "The LORD has heard my supplication" (Ps. 6:9).²⁰

Healing changes everything. The pray-er in Psalm 6, once cowed by the scorn and ridicule of others, now is able to dismiss them: "Depart from me, all you workers of evil" (v. 8). This does not mean that community no longer matters, that the pray-er assumes the role of the rugged individualist with no need of others. The "acceptance" of the psalmist's prayer is, no doubt, made known by the voice of a priest, speaking for the community of the faithful.²¹ The "shaming" of the enemies makes no sense if there is no communal definition of morality and meaning. The psalm itself is recorded for others in order that its witness might inform future generations (cf. Ps. 22:30–31). Still, the pray-er of Psalm 6, recognizing the deliverance and healing from Yahweh, is able to put relationships in perspective. The voice of others, though important, is no longer determinative of well-being. Now made well, the pray-er can stand before God in strength and joy.

The healing of Psalm 6 occurs offstage, as it were, between verses 7 and 8.²² We have no idea whether this occurred instantly and unexpectedly, solely

19. The tenses of the Hebrew verbs in vv. 8–10 are ambiguous. While it is clear that "the LORD has heard my supplication," it is not certain whether the enemies *are* ashamed (having seen God's healing intervention) or *will be* ashamed (because God will surely act on the psalmist's behalf). The determination is not crucial. Healing is certain because Yahweh has announced it. The announcement is itself healing, and it promises to usher in fuller healing either now or in the days to come.

20. This is not to suggest that elsewhere than among people of faith, healing happens apart from the God of the Bible. Monotheistic faith in God, who is both "one" and "healer," will claim that all healing everywhere—that is, healing that is genuine, producing a renewed and more fully whole human being—is of God, whether directly or indirectly. The difference is not that God is active in healing only people who know God's name, but that people who know the name name it in their healing. They bear witness to God's healing and, in naming it, enter into it more fully and experience it more richly.

21. So, among others, Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper, 1962), 1:247. See also Ps. 66:20.

22. Even if the physical healing is yet to come (see n. 19), the argument is similar. The mode or duration of the healing process is not the issue, whether it has already occurred or is yet to come.

as the answer to prayer, or over a period of days or months, as the result of medical and “natural” processes. Moreover, we know nothing of its nature or extent. Is the pray-er now symptom free, or has this person rather been given a new and remarkable ability to live fully in an imperfect body in an imperfect world? One of the characteristics of both poetry and liturgy is their ability to compress broad and extended human experience into the compact and available medium of literature. The process of healing is captured in an instant of language. The point, of course, is that the duration, process, and even the extent of the healing are not the key elements in this discussion. Whether the psalm describes a healing that is immediate and inexplicable or one that comes as the result of time and human agency, the healing is of God. The essence of the psalm is this: “I was sick and now I am well. Praise the Lord!” In the Bible, healing, no matter how it occurs, is God’s business. It restores the pray-er to meaningful life: “On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul” (Ps. 138:3).

Artistic and Theological Balance

While Psalm 6 is based in the primal experiences of life—the terror of illness and the joy of recovery—its present form has taken this experience and expressed it in aesthetic and poetic beauty and order. One of the results is a theological and artistic balance that may be more ideal than real.²³

The concentric structure of the psalm is evident, carefully balancing an expression of God’s mystery and of human anxiety in part one with one of God’s justice and of human joy in part two:

- A The psalmist is “struck with terror”; Yahweh is inscrutable (vv. 1–3)
- B “Turn, O LORD, and save” for the sake of “your steadfast love” (v. 4)
- C Weeping in distress (v. 6)
- D “My eyes waste away” due to “grief” and “foes” (v. 7)²⁴
- D’ The foes, “workers of evil,” depart (v. 8a)
- C’ The Lord hears “the sound of my weeping” (v. 8b)
- B’ Yahweh hears and accepts because of “my prayer” (v. 9)
- A’ The enemies are “struck with terror” (v. 10)

23. Comparing the structure of the lament psalms with that of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s “stages of grief,” Walter Brueggemann (*Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 86) describes the language of the psalms as “regularized speech.”

24. A better translation than “my grief” might be “my vexation”—that is, the harassment and provocation that one experiences at the hand of others (the same term is used to describe Peninnah’s provocation of Hannah in 1 Sam. 1:6, 16). Psalm 10:14 seems to be a response to Ps. 6: “But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief [same Hebrew term], that you may take

The characters in part one are God and the pray-er; they are joined in part two by the enemies. The balance is complete: Where once the psalmist was in terror, now it is the enemies. Where once God was asked to “turn,” now God has done so to hear the psalmist’s prayer. And now that God has turned toward the pray-er, the enemies must “turn back” and be put to shame.

This precise correlation between the pain of the faithful and the judgment of the enemies expresses what we might now call an eschatological hope—part of the great reversal described so often in the Bible (see, e.g., Mary’s song in Luke 1:46–55). Finally, God’s justice will be complete. Where there was illness, now there is health; where there was persecution, now there is punishment. Certainly, this view of things was not always evident in the life of the people of the Old Testament, nor is it always true in life as we now experience it. It may still be a future event also for the author of Psalm 6. Still, the artist makes a valid theological point: God is finally a God of justice and healing. At last, healing will be full, and evil will be overcome. This is the hope of the psalmist, and it continues to inform the people of God.

It is important to recognize that punishment of the enemies is not the psalmist’s responsibility. It is accomplished by God in response to the pray-er’s petition. Healing does not require that we take charge of maintaining the balance of good and evil in the world; it is, however, enhanced by a vision that good and evil matter and that God stands with the good.

The parallelism between parts B and B’ balances yet two more things that stand in dialogical relationship: God’s steadfast love (v. 4) and the psalmist’s prayer (v. 9). Healing is not finally dependent on human prayer; the initial appeal is to Yahweh’s steadfast love. Human prayer, however, is not without meaning. It calls upon God’s love and invites it into the present. Prayer, in league with Yahweh’s covenant faithfulness, can open the world to the surprise of divine healing.

Psalm and Story

Psalm 6 speaks to the primal human experience of illness and recovery. It reports this faithfully and sets it in an artistic construction that proclaims a theological worldview in which healing and wholeness make sense. In its appeal to experience, it invites our empathy; with its theological perspective, it elicits faith and hope. It becomes not only a report of healing, once upon a time, but also a vehicle for healing in the present world.

Although all humans suffer and fall ill, and thus share a more or less common cry of distress and confession of need, not all human cultures or religions interpret their common cry in the same way. Human beings inevitably draw

it into your hands.” In the first part of Ps. 6, the pray-er lays the vexation before God; in the second part, God takes it into God’s own hands.

their primal experience into stories and explanations, and the closer these remain to true experience, the more helpful they will be. As Gerhard von Rad said about Jacob’s naming of the place where he had wrestled with God in Genesis 32, which von Rad saw as a form of doing theology,

Right here in the morning twilight is where theology has its place. In the midst of the terrifying tribulation one cannot do theology; there one can only be saved or be lost. But thereafter one *must* do theology, and woe to the one who does it somewhere else but in the immediate proximity—under the spell, as it were—of the fading shadows of such nights and their terrors.²⁵

Psalm 6 does its poetic and theological naming precisely under the spell of the terrors of the night, which explains its availability to nearly all readers. Yet, as Ricoeur observes, different cultures build from this common cry different stories (which he calls “myths”) about it and finally sometimes quite different detailed explanations of its meaning.²⁶ The results will be mixed. Positively, the story of someone else’s illness might invite me more fully into that experience, producing a deeper empathy than might otherwise be possible—a gift, for example, of great literature in general and of the growing genre of stories of illness and healing in particular. Negatively, however, if your story of illness (especially, your cultural story or your political story or your religious story) does not match my own, I might fail to respond even to your elemental distress, becoming thereby, in the language of the psalm, an enemy, one who blocks the possibility of healing. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, though anything but a sympathetic character, rightly appeals to a shared common humanity to overcome the discrimination and the hatred that arise from viewing the other only through the lens of religious story and doctrine:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?²⁷

But story need not divide. Believers will hear the elemental cry of Psalm 6 in the context of a biblical story that, at its best, calls hearers to respond to the need of even the stranger who does not share the same story, to put behind us forever the designation of the other as enemy. The story will call

25. Gerhard von Rad, *Predigten* (Munich: Kaiser, 1972), 97 (my translation).

26. For a brief introduction to Ricoeur’s paradigms, see Frederick J. Gaiser, “Paul Ricoeur’s Myths of Evil in Biblical Perspective,” *WW* 19, no. 4 (1999): 389–400.

27. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 3, scene 1.

its adherents back to the common humanity that we share in creation with all who bear the image of God and move them forward to participation in the promise that God holds out to all: on God's mountain "the shroud that is cast over all peoples" will be destroyed, and there God, in an ultimate act of healing, will "swallow up death forever" (Isa. 25:7-8). Now, happily, the common cry of distress is matched by a story that finds a place for all. Here, healing can happen.