

# The Healing of Simon's Mother-in-Law

## CONTEXT

The healing of Simon's Mother in Law (1:29-31) is part of the set of stories about healing and exorcism in the Gospel (1:21-34). The chapter opens with the phrase 'The beginning of the Good News..' (1) and this 'beginning' has been marked so far by the preaching of John the Baptist (2-8), the baptism and temptation of Jesus (9-13), the proclamation of the Kingdom of God by Jesus (14-15) and the calling of the first four disciples (16-20). Much of what has preceded indicates that the Messianic age has arrived, and these passages fit in with that pattern. That the messianic age is associated with healing is clear in passages such as Isaiah 61 (to which Luke 4:18-19 makes explicit reference).

The story itself follows a fairly standard pattern or 'form': arrival of Jesus, description of illness, healing action, healing, acclamation or (in this case) action that confirms the healing.<sup>1</sup> A further point of interest is the precise word used to describe the healing – Jesus "took her by the hand and lifted her up" (NRSV). The word is actually the same as in 16:6 – "he has been raised".

What has caused some interest however is the last part of this brief narrative. The 'sign' of the completeness of the healing is the fact that not only is Simon's mother-in-law cured of her fever, she is immediately well enough to get on with the task of serving. Or to put it another way she is healed "just in time for supper"<sup>2</sup>

## FEMINIST REACTIONS

Deborah Krause remarks that this phrase often produces a laugh among women's Bible study groups. Is there an ambiguity here? Is Simon's (unnamed) mother-in-law 'liberated' by the healing of Jesus simply to be restored to her 'bondage' in a patriarchal society?

### Diakonia?

In fact many commentators remark that the word Mark chooses to describe this woman's action is not insignificant. It echoes what the angels did for Jesus in verse 13. Curiously the NRSV uses "waited on" in 1:13 and "serve" in 1:31. The term occurs later in the Gospel – it describes the action of the (previously unmentioned) female followers of Jesus in 15:41 (where the NRSV uses the phrase "provide for") and significantly the attitude of a disciple towards others in 9:35 and 10:43 (NRSV has "servant" in these places) and the role of the Son of man – "not to be served but to serve" – in 10:45.

So is Simon's mother-in-law simply the first female disciple? Certainly this is the opinion of some. LaVerdiere remarks that this is

the first mention in Mark's Gospel of pastoral ministry, that is, ministry to the Church itself. After Jesus raised her to life, she ministered to the nucleus of the Church<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Donahue & Harrington, 85

<sup>2</sup> Krause, 39

<sup>3</sup> LaVerdiere, 73

Even so, as LaVerdierie observes immediately, this is a ministry which is different to that of the apostles, which is to “be with him and to be sent out” (3:14), or as Cole remarks in the New Bible Commentary “Not all can preach, but all can love and serve in some way”.<sup>4</sup>

The desire to see this as a misunderstood text which is really about the discipleship of women forms part of a “hermeneutics of recovery” which is one dimension of feminist exegesis – the PBC describes it as the “critical approach” which seeks to rediscover the status and role of women disciples within the life of Jesus... At this period, it maintains, a certain equality prevailed. But this equality has for the most part been concealed in the writings of the New Testament.<sup>5</sup>

Krause herself is somewhat sceptical of such approaches and prefers to stay with the ambiguity, noting that the women in her Bible Study groups were quite able on the one hand of reading the bible as a source of life and on the other of maintaining a certain critical distance from the text.<sup>6</sup>

### **SOME OBSERVATIONS**

Krause finds herself running against the main stream of feminist interpretation here. The quest to see this as an example of women’s discipleship “runs the risk of idealizing Simon’s mother-in-law’s work at the expense of attending to her person”<sup>7</sup>

Is it better to live creatively with apparent ambiguities in the Biblical text, or to seek to explain them away?

### **FURTHER READING**

- Cole, A. “Mark” in Carson et. al. (eds) *The New Bible Commentary* Inter Varsity Press, Leicester, 1994 (Electronic Edition)
- Donnahue, J. R. & Harrington, D.J. *The Gospel of Mark* Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2002, 78-86
- Krause, D. “Simon Peter’s Mother-in-Law” in Levine, A. (ed.) *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, 37-53
- LaVerdiere, E. *The Beginning of the Gospel Vol 1*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1999, 71-73

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<sup>4</sup> Cole, commentary on 1:29-34

<sup>5</sup> *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* I.E.2

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Krause, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Krause, 51