

## THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ΘΕΡΑΠΕΙΑ (HEALING) OF SIMON'S MOTHER-IN-LAW IN LUKE 4:38-39 IN RELATION TO NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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### Abstract

Man's health is a function of his social behaviour, nutritional habits and environmental condition. Good health is imperative to man's achievements in life. He, therefore, needs to be at his optimum level of health, physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and spiritually, in order to excel in his chosen career and endeavour. People go to any extent to seek healing. When orthodox medicine fails, people do not hesitate to go to prayer houses and even herbalists to procure healing. The centrality of healing features prominently in Jesus' earthly ministry, which is in compliance with Jesus' instruction to his followers to preach the gospel and heal the sick. This study, therefore, investigated the healing of Simon's mother-in-law in Luke 4:38-39 in relation to the Nigerian context with a view to ascertaining the degree of compliance to Jesus' command. The study adopted hermeneutical and exegetical methods to analyse the text in order to bring out the essential meaning of healing in the Bible in relation to the practice in Nigerian society, and a descriptive method of a survey type was employed. The results of the interview were qualitatively analysed. The study concluded that healing is a fundamental aspect of the liturgy and practice which helps in bringing people to salvation. The study, therefore, recommended that the authority of the Church should ensure strict compliance with the principles and techniques of healing adopted by Jesus in Luke's Gospel.

**Keywords:** *θεραπεία* (Therapeia), Healing, Healing miracle, Salvation

### Introduction

An adage in the society is "Health is wealth". It implies that only healthy people can contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic growth and development of the society. It is, therefore, an open fact that to be in good health is a matter of vital concern to an intelligent person. Health must involve a descriptive and often culturally normative concept that plays a defining role in a given society. The World Health Organisation defines health as 'State of complete physical, mental and social being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity'. Health can also be understood as a condition of well-being proposed as such by a given culture. The health of the body is important because the body is the instrument and agent of the mind. There has been a growing consciousness that health involves much more than the control of diseases and that illness may be caused by emotional and social factors in the life of the patient. Dodd (2012) opined that the work of Jesus as a healer is very prominent in the synoptic narratives and has a place also in the traditional summary of His ministry in the kerygma, which is feebly represented in the Luke's gospel.

The Bible, generally and particularly Lucan narratives, refer to the healing of Simon's Mother-in-Law in Luke 4:38-39, while the healing miracles of Jesus portray Him as not only proclaiming the good news of release and liberty through which humankind encounters God's reign, it also reflects God's participation in the affairs of the early Church. This is manifested in the raising of Simon Peter's mother-in-law.

### Healing of Simon's Mother-in-Law (Luke 4:38-39).

38 Ἀναστάς δε ἀπό τῆς συναγωγῆς εἰσήλθεν εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν Σίμωνος. πενθερά δὲ τοῦ Σίμωνος ἦν συνεχομένη πυρετώ μεγάλῳ καὶ ἠρώτησαν αὐτὸν περὶ αὐτῆς. 39 καὶ ἐπιστάς ἐπάνω αὐτῆς ἐπέτιμήσεν τῷ πυρετῷ καὶ ἀφήκεν αὐτὴν παραχρῆμα δὲ ἀναστάσα διηκόνει αὐτοῖς.

38. And he arose and left the synagogue, and entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they sought him for her. 39. And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and served them (RSV).

The healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law is paired with the healing of the man with an unclean spirit. Pairing technique is one of the characteristics of Luke's Gospel, and it connotes the fact that Jesus had concern for everybody (both men and women). This healing account is another example of Jesus' Capernaum Ministry.

Oderinde (2007) posited that the first woman who appeared in Jesus public life and ministry was Peter's mother-in-law. She was identified in relation to her son - in-law. She was the second person to be healed as Jesus began his ministry in Galilee. This text, as evidenced in the Greek Manuscripts N, A, C, K, L, has a considerable degree of doubt. There are variant readings of the text; in A, C, L, the text read ἐξελθονιες ἦλθον, while in F, Δ, it was ἐξελθονιες εἰσηλθον and B reads ἐξελθων ἦλθεν. Matthew did not mention the names of those who followed Jesus. Green (1990) posited that Mark and Luke agreed that he was coming from the synagogue when he entered Simon Peter's house, Matthew did not indicate that Luke and Matthew, however, did not mention the fact that Jesus came with some people (disciples) into the house of Peter, unlike Mark who mentioned that he came with some of his disciples.

Matthew 8:14 καὶ ἐλθων ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν πετρῶν εἶδεν τὴν πενθερὰν αὐτοῦ βεβλημένην καὶ πυρεσσοῦσαν. Luke 4:38 Ἀναστάς δε ἀπό τῆς συναγωγῆς εἰσήλθεν εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν Σίμωνος. Though Luke showed that there were some people in the house who told Jesus about the woman (καὶ ἠρώτησαν αὐτὸν περὶ αὐτῆς). Matthew implied that without any intercession, Jesus saw the woman lying down sick, and he touched her, and the fever left. Though the singular εἰσηλθον in F, Δ, is in agreement with its parallels in Matthew and Luke, it is awkward in the literary context of Mark as it would mean – "he went into the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John "without Simon and Andrew (Wieland 2005). It is possible that it was changed to the plural ἦλθον for that reason. Akintunde (2001) explained that Luke might have placed much interest on the healing of a woman, with less emphasis on details to achieve his own theological motive, which was that Jesus showed concern for both men and women. The word κατακειτο is a compound verb, an imperfect indicative middle voice and an inflected form of κατακειμαι.

The preposition and primary participle κατα denotes the intensity of the sickness κειμα literally or figuratively means to lie outstretched. πυρεσσοῦσα. Is also an inflected form of πυρεσσω which shows that the situation of the woman was very serious? She was feverish and inflamed, as denoted by the primary word πυρ (fire) or πυρετος. The woman was helpless lying down and very weak as a result of her inability to eat, as implied by the use of the κατακειμαι. Jesus healed this woman of the fever and the weakness of the body, but the miracle has both historical and theological value. It is necessary to note that the woman did not approach Jesus for healing, as that would have been against the proper social convention. Women could not go out in public or talk to strangers; the males decide what they may or may not do. It was not

surprising that the men had to intercede on her behalf. Abogunrin (2008) posited that contrary to the prevailing convention, however, Jesus took hold of the woman's hand (κρατησας της χειρος) and raised her up (ηγειρεναυτην). The fact that Jesus touched the woman is very significant. The word κρατησας means that he actually laid his hand on the woman. Κρατησας is an inflected form of Κρατω, which itself is derived from Κρατος, which denotes vigour, power, and strength. In essence, Jesus touch was not ordinary. He did not just touch the woman as προσψαω (to touch or to lay a finger on in order to relieve) would have adequately described that, but he laid hand on her, it could also mean to seize, retain or hold fast. Another word from the same root sheds more light on what could have actually happened: Κραταιου equally from Κρατος means to empower or to be strengthened. In other words, Jesus' touch of the woman implied the powerful empowering the weak and inactive woman to minister. The word εγειρω used to describe her cure was also used by Mark to describe Jesus resurrection. It denotes being waken or rose from lying down, death or figuratively from obscurity, inactivity or non-existence. Thus, through the transforming power of Jesus, the woman who was lying down like someone dead rose up and began to serve, διηκονει, them.

Abogunrin (2009) observed that though there were precedents for rabbis taking the hand of another man and miraculously healing him, there were no examples of rabbis doing so for a woman. A man could be suspected of evil desires if he touched any woman other than his wife. Jesus also showed his concern for women by his willingness to violate the common view of the Sabbath (the healing took place on the Sabbath) and the standing rules about the uncleanness of a sick person in order to help them. This showed that Jesus outreach was not exclusive but inclusive, and his presence was not condemning but transformative.

Oderinde (2009) posited that Jesus accepted the service of this woman after she was cured of fever. He demonstrated personal feelings towards the suffering woman rather than viewing the woman as a temptress who could make him fall into sin. He assigned a positive value to the woman and gave her his attention with care and tenderness. In a society saturated with fear of female sexuality, Jesus did not hesitate to lend a helping hand to a sick woman. Through his transforming energy, gentiles were brought into the blessings of the covenant, and women were given the dignity of faith and ministry (Sabin 2002). Peter's mother-in-law rose up from being a nonentity to a new life of fulfillment, rendering a service of love to the Saviour. She was released, αφηκεν, not only from fever but impliedly from the bondage of "hiding under the identity of males," "being unheard," to being fully human. Αφηκεν is the aorist active indicative of the compound verb αφημι (απο and ιημι), which denotes separation, to let go, cessation and reversal. Jesus reversed her situation, and her subjugation ceased. She was empowered to wait on Jesus as the angel did.

Tolbart (1992) argued that the author of Mark, by using the same word for the action of the angels (Mark 1:13) and the action of the healed woman, obviously equated their level of service to Jesus. διακονεω actually could mean to wait upon as a host or hostess, to be an attendant or as denoted by the word used διηκονει from διακω, it could mean to run on errands, to serve or to minister. However, the story would not be preserved only for the purpose of fixing a dinner or demonstrating a village hospitality, her service endangers serenity, joy, comfort, well-being, and communion for them all (Waetjen, 1989). Mark's choice of that word means the service of the woman was necessary, crucial and meaningful, just as the service of the angels immediately after his temptations by the devil (Mark 1:13) and Onesiphorus' service to Paul in Ephesus (2 Timothy 1:18). διακονεω denotes a service of higher value and spiritual significance than

υπηρετω, which also means to serve or to minister but more from a subordinate or seemingly insignificant entity (Acts 20:34).

The woman did what angels did, and her service was accepted and recognised by Jesus. Edersheim (1993) said that it was the first diaconate of woman in the world, the first of a long course of woman's diaconate to Christ in which, for the first time, woman attained her true position. According to Akintunde (2012), Luke records that this miracle occurs on Sabbath, but the setting has shifted from the public arena of the synagogue to the privacy of Simon's house. In Mark, the story is one of the first two miracle stories, which took place on Sabbath day. Here, Luke has not yet identified Simon, though in Mark, the story of Jesus calling of Simon, Andrew, James and John has preceded the healing and exorcism (Mark 1:16-20; 21-34). Also, Peter was already a follower of Jesus, the healing of the mother-in-law, whereas Mark gave the names of those who visited Simon's house, this was not recorded in Luke. He, however, retains the name Simon because it is essential to the story. It could be attributed to the fact that their presence was not important for the story as their names have not yet occurred in Luke's Gospel. The person who was ill was identified as "Simon's mother-in-law" Luke does not give her name or that of her daughter. This phrase also is an illusion of the fact of the marital status of Simon Peter (1 Corinthian 9:5). According to Dairo (1995), the Lukan text suggests that the mother-in-law was actually living in Simon's house or at least was visiting there. This observation is plausible. However, Barclay (2005) noted that some women prefer to live with their sons rather than the son-in-law. In Nigerian society, particularly the Yoruba, who attach great importance to cultural values, regard it as a shameful thing to die in the house of a son-in-law. If this occurs, the corpse will be carried out through the window and not through the door. It is this belief that makes the Yoruba feel uncomfortable living with their sons-in-law. Therefore, a responsible man or woman should not be living with in-laws since this could lead to disrespect.

All the Gospels record that Peter's mother-in-law was suffering from fever, but only Luke describes her as literally being seized or tormented by "συνεχομένη πυρετώ μεγάλω" a great fever. Hobart (2011) compares it with Acts 28:8 and various medical writers who used it for another kind of seizures and concludes that it is customary for physicians to speak of high and low fever. Perhaps Hobart (2013) wants to show from such alleged use of medical language to confirm that the author was Luke, the beloved physician (Colossians 1:14). Galen (2009), however, flaws this opinion as he objects to the presence of medical language in Luke-Acts. However, contemporary scholarship purports that these are not medical terminologies. They argued that most of the examples cited could be paralleled by writers who were not in the medical profession.

The Revised Standard Version expressed that Jesus actually entered the house or home of Simon, Andrew, James and John according to the account of Mark. It is noteworthy that Luke omits all references to them, perhaps because he has not yet told of their call. All the three hypnotists mention the fever, but only Luke says that it was a high fever (apparently a medical term). That Jesus rebuked it does not mean that he saw Satan behind the disease and that when the woman was cured, she got up and served them immediately (thus showing the completeness of the cure)

Simon's mother-in-law is apparently a widow without sons of her own (else why would she be living with Peter). Although her "συνεχομένη πυρετώ μεγάλω" "high fever" may reflect current medical terminology, the severity of her illness, and thus the challenge of her healing, is more likely in view. Barker (2005) opined that Luke paints this scene very much as an exorcism, even if no mention is made of the demon perse. Jesus "bends over" the woman, signifying his authority over the fever, a practice paralleled in the stories of exorcism. As Jesus "rebuked" the demon in the previous story (Luke 4:35-36), so he "rebukes" this fever;

just as the demon “went out” of the man, so the fever “departed” this woman. Clearly, Jesus’ ministry of “release” (4:18-19) has begun to take shape.

Swete (2011) opined that Luke’s record of the outcome of Jesus’ healing activity stresses the immediacy and completeness of the cure, but there is more to the woman’s “service” than this. Jesus ministry dealt with the fever, but it also restored this woman to her house. Her response is not one of “wonder,” as was the case with the synagogue congregation, but is one of hospitality and gratitude. As will become evident as the narrative progresses, Luke regards this as an authentic, positive response to Jesus’ salvific ministry.

As soon as Jesus left the Synagogue, he entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. Simon’s mother-in-law, who was sick with a fever, was healed, and she served them (Luke 4:38 -39). Some critics have attributed this story to different sources. According to Bultman (2013), this miracle-story is close to the testimony of an eyewitness because of the simple nature of the story. Lohmeyer (1998) agreed with Bultmann (2014) by saying that there are no other healing miracles in Luke which can be regarded as a second recollection of a personal memory than this story. These views suggest an apostolic witness of Peter. This Petrine source has almost become a general consensus among scholars. There are good reasons to support this. The narrative is a picture of a true-experience. The story retains its primitive simplicity. She was sick with fever.

On different occasions of his visit to this home, Jesus would have met the mother-in-law of Simon. Perhaps he would have served him at different periods of his lodging in that house. Simon was probably a married man before his call, not at the time of his call as proposed by Taylor. Simon’s mother-in-law “was lying down.” She was lying on a bed because she had a fever. In Mark, the word fever is used as a noun. Luke also preferred the noun. According to Akangbe (2003), fever is rarely used in classical Greek but appeared in Lxx.

The phrase “was ill with a high fever” has been variously translated. Robinson opined that “fall into a fever”. Mark simply wished to show that she was suffering from a fever. Luke added the adjective, high because he wished to distinguish the ordinary fever from the serious fever. This is a medical way of describing such sicknesses as low and high fever.

“Immediately they say to him” is a reporting speech. Jesus was told of her sickness. Turner regards “they say” as impersonal. Taylor (2014) regards this phrase as an “artless request”. The artless request means an informal request so that Jesus can use his healing power on her. The adverb “immediately” used along with “they say to him” indicates familiarity in this verse. But it seems as if Jesus, having finished these daily activities within the synagogue, returned to his usual base in the house of Simon and Andrew. On his arrival, he met her sick of fever, not that he was told. The impression one gets in verse 39 is that Jesus raised her first before holding her hand. It appears that Mark reversed the order of the story. Jesus took her by the hand, and she stood up as the fever left her immediately. This is indicated in Luke’s use of the perfect participle, “having held”. It expresses an action that occurred simultaneously. It is interesting to note that the holding of her hand to raise her up by Jesus is a concurrent action with the healing of her fever. Dallaman (2000) and Dunn (2010) think that the healing of the fever occurred when Jesus had raised her up. The healing of the fever was an action that ran concurrently with the holding of her hand and lifting her up.

The healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is paired with the healing of the man with an unclean spirit. Pairing technique is one of the characteristics of Luke’s Gospel, and it connotes the fact that Jesus had concern for both men and women. Scholars agreed that that is another example of Jesus’ Capernaum ministry. Barker (2011) recorded that miracle occurs on Sabbath, but the setting has shifted from the public

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All the Gospels record that Peter's mother-in-law was suffering from fever, but only Luke describes her as literally being seized or tormented by a high or great fever. Howard (2010), in his analysis of the phrase, compares it with Acts 28:8 and various medical writers who used it for other kinds of seizures and concludes that it is customary for physicians to speak of high and low fever. Perhaps Dodd (2016) wants to show from such alleged use of medical language to confirm that the author was Luke, the beloved physician (Colossians 1:14). Galen (1996), however, flaws this opinion as he objects to the presence of medical language in Luke-Acts. However, contemporary scholarship purports that these are not medical terminologies. They argued that most of the examples cited could be parallel in writers who were not in the medical profession.

The accounts of Luke reveal that some of those in the house spoke to Jesus about her (Luke 4:38). Matthew omits this whole statement and stresses Jesus' initiative as a miracle worker (Matthew 8:14-15). In Mark, Jesus approached the woman and raised her up by hand, but Luke, he stood over her. This presupposes that she was lying on a pallet on the ground. Jesus subsequently rebuked the fever as did with demons (Luke 4:35). The Markan version that He did not merely touch or tap her but took hold of her hand with his hands and raised her up before she was subsequently healed. The encounter shows the physical contact Jesus had with the woman. Arson (2011) says that the use of the word "rebuke" by Jesus personifies the disease; thus, he attacked the power of evil, which expressed itself in human illness. To Marshall, Luke's use of the word regarded the malady as springing from the influence of Satan. Both Marshall and Arson (2011) regard the attack as the manifestation of satanic powers and was thus being treated as if it were a demonic possession. These views are tenable. In Luke's presentation, the power of the king and his victory over Satan is a common occurrence (Luke 4:35).

Fitzmyer (2011) noted that Luke uses the imperfect tense, δῖακονεῖ "to serve," which refers to "serving the table" or to serve in a more general sense. Green (2014) opined that it indicated her ability to serve her family and offer hospitality to her guests. Marshall (1998) also thought that it is used to indicate an appropriate form of Christian service and normal domestic arrangements. Grundmann (2010) shared this view while Kee (2011) submitted that she took care of their needs on a regular basis. These views are convincing as they indicate the traditional roles of women and Simon Peter's mother-in-law's hospitality, which makes it possible to say that she served the evening meal as an expression of her gratitude to Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

Miracles are supernatural acts of God; healing miracles by Jesus Christ, disciples, and contemporary miracle workers are not limited to any group of people or sect but are for all and sundry. In both biblical times and contemporary Nigerian society, miracles led to the conversion, growth and development of the church. While no one is against the miracles as a means of evangelisation and conversion, it should not be the sole aim of organising revivals. What should be paramount is the healing of the soul, which leads to inner peace and being at one with the 'Author of miracles'. The miracles of Christ, like all miracles, are manifestations of divine power and are not attributed to individuals. Situations where people throng an assembly, seeking miracles, will be tantamount to hero worship. Contemporary Christians and religious leaders are therefore enjoined to seek first the kingdom of God.

## Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Healing should be an essential part of the proclamation of the Gospel message, and the Church should place more emphasis on healing ministry following the example of Jesus Christ.
2. More funds should be invested in Mission hospitals to make them viable and functional; the Church must not only be a good example but take the leadership in providing some of these needed facilities as the early missionaries did and make them available to people at affordable prices.
3. Government should rise to give urgent attention to the improvement of the existing health facilities and the creation of new ones where people's yearnings and aspirations for good health can be met.
4. Government should subsidise the cost of health services in order to make health facilities accessible to the poor masses.

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