



## ***Healing in the Gospel of Matthew: Reflections on Method and Ministry* by Walter T. Wilson, Fortress Press, December 2014**

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Walter Wilson, a professor of New Testament at Candler School of Theology (Emory University in Atlanta, GA) wrote this book to help us gain new insights on the topic of healing by looking at familiar stories in Scripture. Health and healing are important priorities in the broader culture around us today. The topic also has implications for the Christian faith and touches on such disciplines as “Christology, soteriology, discipleship, mission, and eschatology” (page xiii). Wilson challenges us to think more broadly and in new categories in our reading of Scripture, especially the healing narratives in the Gospel of Matthew.

His approach is an interdisciplinary one built around both traditional and newer approaches to biblical criticism. He describes these approaches in Chapter 1 entitled “Methodology,” where he begins unpacking some of the more traditional types of gospel criticism:

- Historical criticism: locating the Gospel narratives historically in the first-century world using insights not only from typical historical studies but also from both sociology and the study of redemptive history
  - Form criticism: exploring typical motifs and conventional literary forms of narrative storytelling
  - Source and redaction criticisms: building on comparisons of the synoptic Gospels to locate both the original sources of Matthew’s healing stories (following the standard assumption of Markan priority and the hypothetical Q document), and how Matthew uniquely edited and shaped his material in these healing stories.
- To these more traditional approaches of gospel criticism, Wilson has added a number of newer disciplines:
- Narrative criticism: ascertaining how the individual healing stories are woven together into the larger unit of Matthew 8-9 and then how this unit fits within the broader structure of Matthew’s Gospel
  - Reader-response criticism: exploring how these healing stories invite the reader to enter into the narrative world of Matthew’s Gospel
  - Feminist criticism: searching for insights into possible gender-related perspectives on this topic of healing
  - Disability studies: demonstrating a sensitivity to how such social constructs as disease and disability as well as health and healing are described in the New Testament world
  - Medical anthropology: exploring the distinction between disease as a bio-medical disorder and illness as a socially recognized construct imputed to disease

by a given culture both in the ancient world and, by implication, today

Put simply, his interdisciplinary approach challenges us to use these different approaches to biblical criticism to help us see new connections between diverse areas of knowledge. (By the way, if you bogged down reading the descriptions of the different approaches listed above, you will also bog down reading the rest of his book.)

Wilson spends the vast bulk of the book, chapters 2-13 (pages 37-288), illustrating his eclectic methodology in the twelve sections of biblical text he has isolated in Matthew 8-9. He outlines how these different sections were apparently organized by Matthew into three sets of parallel triads: Matthew 8:1-17; 8:23-9:8, and 9:18-34. The first triad consists entirely of healing stories; the second, a nature miracle, an exorcism, and a healing; and the third, a series of progressively shorter episodes. Wilson also discusses how the intervening connecting narrative material located between these triads gives purpose and direction to the structure of this two-chapter narrative in Matthew. (He summarizes this structure and its significance in the final "Conclusion" chapter.)

It is important to see that Wilson's book is more methodologically driven than it is theory or theologically driven. Matthew 8-9 is the longest and most concentrated section of material to be found anywhere in the Gospels dealing with Jesus' healing miracles. Matthew's distinctive editorial style also makes this passage an obvious choice for Wilson to illustrate his multifaceted approach. Thus, Wilson time and again finds himself wrestling with the question of why Matthew brought these stories together and edited them as he did. At the same time, it should also be noted that Wilson's focus on Matthew's healing narratives sheds light on more than simply Matthew: they open the door to the

broader topic of illness and disease elsewhere in the ancient world.

Wilson adopts a fairly typical approach to the standard critical approaches of historical criticism, form criticism, and source and redaction criticism. He is more creative (and probably more controversial) in his approach to some of the newer disciplines of narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, feminist criticism, disability studies, and medical anthropology. Certainly, since he surveys such a wide swath of different approaches, not everyone is going to agree with all of his conclusions. Some of us might weigh these different methodologies of biblical criticism differently and potentially come to some different conclusions in some of the details of his exegesis. Still, he comes at things from a broadly evangelical stance with few real surprises in his treatment of these passages from Matthew's Gospel.

There are several clear strengths in his treatment. First, he reminds us of the importance of what we could call theological reflection. There is always a benefit in pausing to stop and explore some of the implications and broader meanings in these otherwise familiar passages of Scripture. There is no substitute for meditating on Scripture and looking for connections between the biblical text and contemporary life situations.

The second benefit is that Wilson reminds us that the Bible is relevant to life today. This relevancy is a basic presupposition of his entire text-based approach. There are always benefits in being pointed to God and His Word. There is something meaningful and significant in God's Word for understanding contemporary issues in health and healing. Sometimes learning to think in biblical categories can help us better analyze the events of everyday life.

A third benefit is that Wilson has challenged us to think about the intersection of medical practice and Christian faith. A chart on page 29 contrasts four different sectors of health care: supernatural ones such as cultic (organized and official — the Temple priests, for example) and charismatic (unofficial and spontaneous — like Jesus himself) versus natural ones such as professional medical doctors as well as more informal folk medicine practitioners. Yet in Matthew's healing stories, we find a blurring of these categories where Jesus healed supernaturally to be sure, but also in ways that were meaningful in his culture.

A fourth benefit is that Wilson has provided us with a detailed commentary on this two-chapter portion of Matthew. His work is on par in quality and depth of analysis with standard commentaries on Matthew. No one commentary does everything. But this book seriously wrestles with unpacking the text of these two chapters. All in all, this book is definitely a well-researched work. The author has marshaled insights from a whole host of different disciplines, including many that are not normally included in most commentaries.

Another strength is that the author has done his homework well in terms of familiarizing himself with medical terminology and perspectives, both ancient and modern. It does not appear that the author has any explicit training in the medical world, but he is able to pair his biblical studies approach with an ability to think medically. The author writes like a biblical scholar addressing others with similar backgrounds. Still, he writes clearly enough and simply

enough to be meaningful to informed lay people.

In terms of potential weaknesses, there are only a few areas where the present reviewer had hoped for something more or different. One of these was a desire for a more conservative approach to biblical criticism where the Bible is more clearly viewed as the self-revelation of a Holy God. Yet in fairness to the author, it should be noted that he has positioned himself within the broad mainstream of contemporary biblical scholarship.

Another area that could have had a clearer focus was the supernatural power of God to heal and how healing fits into His broader kingdom purposes. Perhaps one could say that these lessons were at least implicit in the present volume even though they were not as explicit as they might have been. But then we often learn the most from others who come from different positions from our own.

If Wilson's goal is to challenge us all to think more broadly and in new ways about both the topic of healing and the text of Scripture, it is fair to say that he has achieved his goal.

This book is not a magic answer. Any of us can take the time to get out our Bibles and try to do the very thing that the author here is suggesting. We too can pause, reflect, and meditate on what we read in Scripture. Still, there are benefits in looking at the author's analysis of these different passages of Scripture. It is always good to be challenged to think more broadly than we otherwise might, and Wilson has helped fulfill that service for us.

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**Competing Interests:** None declared.

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