Excerpts from *The Great Physician*  
For study related to the Bible Lesson February 11 - 17, 2019  
“Soul”

Introductory Note – *The Great Physician*, Vols 1 & 2 were written by Vinton Dearing, a Christian Scientist, who was Professor of English at UCLA where he taught the English Bible as Literature for forty years. The book is a composite translation of the four Gospels, organized by event rather than book, and includes a commentary. Because of the composite nature of the translation and commentary, the excerpts below may cover more topics than the citation in the Lesson. These excerpts have been compiled by Doug McCormick. Both volumes are available in paperback for purchase at vintondearing.com.

SECTION V – B19 (Mark 6:34)

FEEDING FIVE THOUSAND


All four Gospels tell of the first event in the year. John says it occurred at Passover time, which comes in March or April, on a hillside where there was much grass. Mark’s statement that the grass was green supports John’s date, for at most other times of the year the grass would have been brown. Matthew says this first event occurred when Jesus heard of the death of John the Baptist, but the other Gospels show that it occurred somewhat later.

Continuing with Mark as usual: “And the apostles are gathered together to Jesus and reported everything to him, whatsoever they did and whatsoever they taught.

“And he says to them, ‘Come to a desert place by yourselves and rest yourselves a little,’ for many were coming and going and they were not finding opportunity to eat.

“And they went off in the ship to a desert place by themselves. And many saw them going and recognized them and ran together there on foot from all the cities and got there before them. And when he got out [of the ship] he saw a great crowd, and had pity on them because they were ‘like sheep not having a shepherd,’ and he began to teach them many [things].”  

2 The other Gospels do not mention the teaching. Matthew and Luke say instead that Jesus healed those who were sick, John says the crowd followed him because they had seen his healings.

“And now when many hours were [past] his students came to him and were saying, ‘The place is a desert and now many hours are [past]. Send them away to go off to the fields and villages round about and buy themselves something to eat [Luke adds, “and find a place to rest”].’

“But he said to them in reply, ‘You give them [something] to eat.’

“And they say to him, ‘Shall we go off and buy two hundred denarii’s worth of bread and give [it to] them to eat?’ [A denarius, as we shall see, was a day’s wage for a worker in a vineyard. The apostles may have been objecting to the expense, or saying they didn’t have enough money.]  

3
“But he says to them, ‘How many loaves have you? Go see.’

“And when they knew they say, ‘Five, and two fish.’”

John gives more details: “He says to Philip, ‘Where shall we buy bread, so that these [people] will eat?’

“He was saying this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

“Philip answered him, ‘Two hundred denarii’s worth of bread is not enough for them to each receive a little something.’

“Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, one of his students, says to him, ‘There’s a little boy here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are these [divided] into so many [portions]?”

Continuing with Mark: “And he ordered them all to recline in parties on the green grass. And they fell to in groups, a hundred [groups of] fifty [each]. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up into heaven and blessed [God] and broke up the loaves and was giving [them] to his students to put [them] beside them. And he divided the two fish for all. And they all ate and were filled. And they picked up twelve wicker-basketfuls of broken pieces [of bread] and of fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.”

In telling the foregoing incident, the four Gospels differ in many small matters, of which the following may be noted. Mark alone says Jesus took the apostles to a desert place to rest. Matthew, although his chronology is wrong, may still be correct in implying that they went where Jesus’ followers could come to him in safety, or where Jesus could seek divine guidance in private: “And when Jesus heard [of John the Baptist’s death] he went away from there to a desert place by himself.” Thus Matthew explicitly opposes a triumph of evil in the case of John the Baptist with a proof of God’s irresistible power and His care for men. Luke says Jesus and the apostles went to Bethsaida, but he anticipates: they went to the desert, or deserted, place first. John alone says that it was Jesus who directed the apostles to pick up the scraps “so that nothing will be lost.” Abundance does not warrant wastefulness.

Mark says, literally translated, that the people grouped themselves “by hundreds and fifties.” Luke says “in groups of fifty.” British scholars, including the translators of the New English Bible, point out that one hundred times fifty is five thousand. We can then see how the apostles were able to calculate the number of men in the crowd. Matthew says women and children were also present; presumably they ate by themselves.

Footnotes
2. A tradition possibly traceable to Egeria (late fourth century) says the place was Tabgha, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee (ABD, VI, 301; Egeria’s Travels, p. 196, a part of Peter the Deacon’s book [1137] that “may come from Egeria,” ibid., p. 180). The quotation is Numbers 27:17 or a similar passage.
4. Although the words I have translated “little boy” and “small fish” are diminutive in form, there is some question whether they are diminutive in meaning; see Newman and Nida, pp. 179-180.
5. “Blessed [God]”: John has “gave thanks,” Luke says Jesus blessed “them,” that is, the bread and the fish, but Luke was not a Jew. The Talmud gives a series of blessings for various kinds of food, all of a later date but all blessing God for the food (Berakoth, 35a [VI, 1]).
6. NEB translates “a hundred rows of fifty each,” because the noun prasia, “party,” also means “garden.” The Jews planted fields in rows, but planted their garden beds in plots arranged along the sides and
in the middle according to the Pharisaic interpretation of the Mosaic law against mixing kinds of seeds (see Kil’ayim, III, 1-2). The fact that $50 \times 100 = 5000$ has not struck everyone as significant (see Bratcher and Nida, p. 207), but those who scoff at the arithmetic should note that the only times we have numbers assigned to the crowds who heard Jesus, 5000 here and 4000 later, he had them sit down and fed them.

SECTION V – B10 (Mark 7:32-35)

A DEAF AND TONGUE-TIED MAN HEALED

Mark 7:32-37.

Continuing with Mark alone: “And they bring a deaf and tongue-tied man to him and call on him to place [his] hand on him.”

“...taking him away from the crowd by himself, he put his fingers into his ears and spitting grasped his tongue and looking up to heaven he sighed and says to him, ‘Ephphatha,’ which is [in translation] ‘Be opened.’

“...and immediately his ears were opened and what was binding his tongue was loosened and he was speaking correctly.

“...he insisted to them that they should speak to no one. But the more he was insisting the more by far they were proclaiming [it]. And they were wondering extremely, saying, ‘He’s done all [things] well, he makes both the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak.’”

I have always liked that description of Jesus, “he’s done all things well.” Even though the words here merely mean that Jesus healed every disability the man had, I think all have had personal experiences that will make them say again and again as they read about him, “he did that well.” I have been a teacher and can certainly say of his class work, “he did that well.” An entrepreneur may well say of Jesus as founder and chief executive officer of Christianity, “he did that well.” A parent may well say of the way Jesus dealt lovingly with his mother and siblings, “he did that well.” Even when we watch him learning, feeling his way, meeting setbacks, praying for guidance, we may say, “he did that well.”

Why did Jesus spit? We shall see two instances in which Jesus spits when healing blind men, but it is not clear in either case why he did so. In the first instance, he is usually understood to have spit “into” the man’s eyes, but the Greek preposition may mean “about, concerning,” so he may have spit on the ground, expressing contempt for the general opinion that God would make or let anyone lose his sight. In the second instance he spit on the ground to make mud that he put on the blind man’s eyes and told him to wash off, which may have been a symbolic cleansing from the opinions of people who said they were made of spit and dust as well as an expression of contempt for such an idea. In both these instances Jesus has usually been understood to have used the medicine of his day, and often, in addition, to have thereby given divine sanction to the medicine of our day. The Talmud speaks of the use of spit on the eyes; on the Sabbath it could only be used to make the eyes more comfortable, not to improve them, in accordance with the usual provision against healing on the Sabbath. But the Talmud also, like the Bible, speaks of spitting in a person’s eyes or face or on his person to express contempt. As we shall see, Jesus predicted correctly that when his enemies had him in their power they would spit on him. Those familiar with spiritual healing feel that Jesus did not need to use medicine and therefore did not use spit as medicine, but spit on the ground as an expression of contempt for the idea that the physical eye controlled sight, the physical ear controlled...
hearing, the physical tongue controlled speech.30

In the healing of the deaf and tongue-tied man we do not know where Jesus spat, and are free therefore to understand his doing so as a vigorous rejection of every thought that the man’s God-given senses could be cut off. The sigh that followed may be understood to reflect a deep feeling of peace that came as he continued to pray silently, and his looking upward to be an acknowledgement of its divine source. We should note, however, that Mark almost immediately tells of Jesus’ sighing in exasperation at the intransigence that had gripped some Pharisees, so that here the sigh and upward look may reflect exasperation at the quality of thought in the place that made it necessary for him to take the man aside, remove him from an inimical atmosphere.

Matthew and Luke do not give the present healing or the healing of the blind man when Jesus spit. (John tells of the occasion when Jesus made mud with the spit.) Matthew’s and Luke’s omissions have been cited as evidence for the priority of Mark, the argument being that Matthew and Luke felt Jesus ought not to be presented as healing in that way. I see nothing in this argument, which depends for any force it may have on the idea that Mark stands between the other two in some way. As I explain in Chapter VII, I believe the three are independent.

Footnotes

28. Being tongue-tied is now correctable by an easy operation clipping excess skin under the tongue that is holding it down, but it is also still correctable by spiritual means alone; for an example of the latter see Christian Science Sentinel, 96:28 (July 11, 1994), 35-36. As it has been said, “Impossibilities never occur.”

29. Whether ephphatha represents a Hebrew or an Aramaic word has been disputed (ABD, II, 551). ABD decides in favor of Aramaic.

30. Other uses of spit: Mark 8:22-26; John 9:6-7. Referring to the healing in Mark 8, Eddy says Jesus’ spitting “expressed contempt for the belief of material eyes as having any power to see,” and interprets his grasping the man as “the putting forth of power” (Miscellaneous Writings, pp.170-171). For the healing in John see also note 60. Howard Clark Kee in ABD, IV, 663-664, rejects the idea that the use of spit and the laying on of hands were medical practices.

Spitting as an expression of contempt was institutionalized in the ceremony of halizah prescribed in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. Most references to spit in the Talmud are to halizah. Nedairim, 66b (IX, 6), however, has a story of interest also in connection with the matter of vows using the word “korban”: “A man once said to his wife, ‘Konam [a substitute for “korban”] that you benefit not from me until you expectorate on R. Simeon b. Gamaliel.’” Apparently he forced his wife to do what he did not dare to do himself. (R. Simeon forgave her.)

Most of the other references to spit or saliva in the Talmud are to circumstances in which it is “unclean.” Spitting was forbidden in the temple, for instance. Spit is mentioned as an eye salve in Shabbath, 108b (XIV, 2). There is also an undated “tradition” recorded by an anonymous commentator to the effect that some spit had medicinal value and some did not (Baba Bathra, 126b [VIII, 5]).

Montefiore (p. 28) notes a story in Jerusalem Talmud, Sotah, 16d (I, 4), about a contemporary of R. Simeon mentioned above. A man whose wife stayed out too late listening to a sermon by R. Meir (second century A.D.) told her he would not forgive her until she spit in the preacher’s eye. R. Meir pretended to be suffering in one of his eyes, asked her to spit in it seven times as would be required to heal the difficulty, and told her to report to her husband that she had spit once as he had demanded. We should note that R. Meir thereby prevented her from feeling that she had somehow
unwillingly expressed contempt for him.

Aulus Cornelius Celsus, who was perhaps twenty years older than Jesus, and is a major source of information about Roman medicine, mentions spit only as a cure for pimples (De Medicina, V.28.18B). He does not mention it in his lengthy discussion of diseases of the eyes and their cures.

Pliny the elder, A.D. 23-79, gives the full Roman pharmacopoeia in his Natural History. In XXVIII.vii.36, as translated in the Loeb edition, he says that it is “the custom in using any remedy (in omnia medicina), of spitting on the ground (despere) three times by way of ritual (precatione), thus increasing its efficacy.” He adds (38) that the daily use of saliva as an eye ointment prevents ophthalmia (lippitudine).

In A.D. 69 Vespasian healed a blind (or partially blind) man by spitting in his eyes, a miracle that was accepted as evidence of divine support for his claim to be emperor. The event comes to us from Tacitus’ Histories, 4.81, Suetonius’ Vespasian, 7, and Dio Cassius’ Roman History, Epitome of Book LXV, 66.8.1, together with another healing caused by the pressure of Vespasian’s foot.

The student of the Gospels finds himself right at home with the problems posed by these historians, no two of which agree together exactly. Tacitus, who gives the most details, says that his information came from eyewitnesses and that, Vespasian’s dynasty having passed away, they had nothing to gain by lying. He says that the first man was partially blind, the other had a dislocated hand, that both said the god Serapis had told them how the healings were to be performed, and that Vespasian first consulted physicians as to whether a man could perform the healings. The physicians said that the disabilities were not extreme, that Vespasian would get the credit if healings resulted, and that the patients would get the blame (for their credulity) if not. After the healings, says Tacitus (5.82), Vespasian visited the temple of Serapis, where he had a vision of a man named Basilides, whose name he thought significant since it means “King’s son.”

Suetonius, who probably relied on written sources alone for his version of the story, says that the vision of Basilides came before the healings, that the first man was blind (luminibus orbatus), the second lame, and that Serapis had appeared to them in dreams. Although he agrees that Vespasian had to be induced to attempt the cures he says nothing about a consultation with physicians.

Dio says nothing about the vision of Basilides or about any hesitation on Vespasian’s part, he says that the first man was blind (tuphlos), the second had an unsound hand, and that they had had dream visions of how to be healed. Dio may be combining and summarizing the narratives of Tacitus and Suetonius, but since this part of his history has survived only in an epitome by Xiphilinus the omissions and differences from the others may not be original.

Articles on spit in Bible dictionaries and books on Jewish magic confidently affirm that spitting was a part of exorcism, but I can find no evidence that this was true in Jesus’ day. The Greek magical papyri contain only one reference to spit, in a manuscript of the fourth century A.D. (see The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press [1986], p. 29). The Talmud has only one statement about spit that might possibly refer to exorcism: R. Johanan b. Nappaha (second-third centuries A.D.) said R. Akiba’s prohibition of the use of God’s name in healing applied only when the healer also spit (for Akiba see Sanhedrin, 90a [XI,1]; for ben Nappaha see Sheb’uoth, 15b [II,1], and Soncino edition p. 75, n. 15, for more information).

The Greek Magical Papyri does not include every known and relevant document. The Coptic Magical Texts Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity in the Claremont Graduate School will publish others, and has begun to do so: see Marvin W. Meyer, Rossi’s “Gnostic” Tractate, Occasional Papers no. 13 of the Institute [1988]. Rossi’s tractate says nothing about spit.

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Blue: Composite Translation  Black: Commentary  Green: Footnotes
Lucian in his *Menippus*, 7, tells of a Babylonian magician who spit in his face three times for twenty-nine days running, but this was to prepare him for a visit to the underworld, not to heal him. Also, the *Menippus* was written after A.D. 150 or so and Lucian was a satirical monologist, not to be trusted in details any more than in his claim to have passed through Hades. Betz thinks more highly of Lucian than I do; see his *Lukian von Samosata und das Neue Testament*, Berlin: Academie-Verlag, 1961.

The usual documentation for spitting to drive out or protect against demons comes from the Middle Ages. It would appear, then, that such spitting was introduced into magic by those who copied the externals of Jesus’ practice. Luke in Acts 8:4-19 tells us that in the very earliest days of the church a magician sought to buy one of the spiritual powers exercised by the Christians.

This footnote is perhaps the place to mention Apollonius of Tyana, who was born approximately when Jesus was but lived for about a century. His life was written by Philostratus about A.D. 217, and there was another biography by Moeragenes written something less than 100 years earlier. About A.D. 300 a certain Hierocles wrote that Apollonius was the equal of Jesus, as we learn from Eusebius in his *Treatise . . . Against The Life of Apollonius . . . by Philostratus* (included in the Loeb edition of Philostratus, trans. F. C. Conybeare, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press [1969], i, 483-605). Apollonius was a Pythagorean philosopher who began to practice medicine in the temple of Aesculapius in the town of Aegae and who traveled as far as India and Egypt to enlarge his knowledge. He observed Brahmans methods of healing, and a few of his own healings are recorded. None of his methods bears any resemblance to Jesus’, where both are described, but there are two parallels of interest.

In the one account we have of Apollonius’ exorcising a demon, he told his audience they would know it had gone out because they would see it knock over a statue by a door as it left (Philostratus, IV, xx). Perhaps the man with the legion asked (for it was really he who asked, not the demons) that the demons might go into the pigs so that he would know that they had left him; they were, after all, not tormenting him at the moment (Matthew 8:28-34 = Mark 5:1-20 = Luke 8:26-39). Josephus tells of an exorcist named Eleazar whose methods of procedure were more like Apollonius’ than Jesus’ were (*Antiq.*, 8.2.5 [VIII, 46-48]).

At another time Apollonius stopped the funeral procession of a young woman in Rome and restored her to life (Philostratus IV, xlv; the fact that Philostratus was undecided as to whether Apollonius might have detected her breath in the cold air at the time is not to the point). Jesus similarly stopped the funeral procession of a young man at Nain (Luke 7:11-17). The accounts are strikingly parallel in details, Apollonius touched the woman and said something secretly (*prosapsamenos autês kai ti aphanês epeipôn*), but neither gives any further indication of how the healings were managed, without which the parallel has no necessary significance.

Morton Smith has devoted a volume, *Jesus the Magician*, San Francisco: Harper & Row [1978], to setting out the foregoing evidence, which, as I have pointed out, is hardly relevant to Jesus. One can go further. Let us suppose for a moment that magicians healed by suggestion, hypnosis or the patients’ faith. Let us also suppose that Jesus healed in the same way. If the parallel makes him a magician, it makes psychiatrists and faith healers magicians also. He himself remarked, “If I throw out demons by Beelzebul, by what [means] do your sons throw [them] out?” (Matthew 12:27 = Luke 11:19). Actually the names do not matter. What does matter is that Jesus did not heal by suggestion, hypnosis, or the faith of his patients. He healed by a full understanding of God’s nature and universe, and if people happened to heal themselves by faith he confirmed their healings by his understanding.
SECTION V – B11 (Mark 8:22-25)

A BLIND MAN HEALED

Mark 8:22-26

Mark continues with a healing not found in the other Gospels. As I noted above, some scholars count it as part of the evidence that Matthew and Luke were written after Mark, that is, they think that the two omitted it because Jesus used spit, and perhaps also because it was not an instantaneous healing. They believe that Matthew and Luke were more interested in glorifying Jesus than in showing him in a real-life situation. Here is Mark’s narrative.

“And they come to Bethsaida. And [people] bring to him a blind [man] and call on him to grasp him.

“And taking the blind [man] by the hand he led him outside the village, and spitting into [or concerning] his eyes he put [his] hands on him, and was asking him, ‘Do you see anything?’

“And he looked up and was saying, ‘I see people, because [it’s] as if I’m seeing trees walking.’ [It has been speculated that he saw women carrying large bundles of twigs on their heads, as may still sometimes be seen in Palestine today.]

“Then he put his hands on his eyes again, and he looked hard, and he restored [his sight], and he was seeing everything clearly.

“And he sent him to his house, saying, ‘But don’t go into the village.’”

In this healing we have another example of Jesus’ practice of protecting his patients from a doubting or inimical atmosphere. In this instance, the intensity of that atmosphere seems to have been extreme, for Jesus withdrew the man from the village where he met him and told him not to go back there, he did not simply heal him on the spot and tell him not to talk about it. We have seen Jesus remarking on the hard-heartedness of the people of Bethsaida, and shall see him doing so again.

It is consistent with what is known today of the effects of the mental atmosphere in sick rooms and support groups to attribute the slowness of the healing, and Jesus’ spitting and grasping the man also, to the atmosphere of thought in the village, the hold of which was not easily loosened from the blind man. Those familiar with spiritual healing feel that both the spitting and grasping are metaphors, not literal accounts of how Jesus healed. Others may feel that if the man thought of, or had used, spit as an eye-salve, perhaps it helped him to feel Jesus’ love, as would his reassuring grasp, without which love there could have been no healing. If he felt the spit was an expression of contempt, perhaps it helped him to feel Jesus’ certainty that it was Spirit which gave life and that the flesh was useless, not having any power to be blind or even to see independently of a Spirit-given sense of sight. In any case, we note that Jesus was neither perturbed at the slowness of the healing nor content with imperfect results. He continued steadfast with the work until it was completed, in perfect accord with and demonstration of his teaching about prayer.

Footnotes

34. “Into [or concerning]”: the Greek preposition eis has a wide range of meanings; for Jesus’ spitting and putting his hands on the man see note 30.

35. The words I have translated “see” and so on are blepô, “see”; anablepô, “look up”; diablepô, “see through,” or “look hard”; and emblepô, “see in” or “see clearly.” It is not clear whether the various
prefixes have their root meanings here, whether they are only intensives, or whether they have no meaning, leaving the words synonyms. “Look up” is in the aorist, anablepsas, which NEB takes as inceptive and translates “sight began to come back.”


Please contact me (dougmcco@gmail.com) if you have any questions or comments.