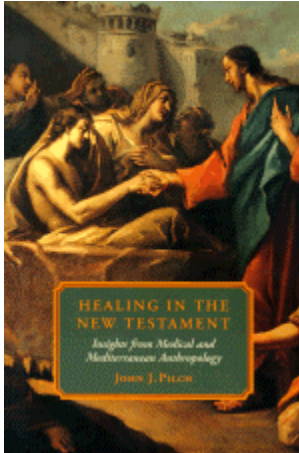


RBL 04/16/2001



Pilch, John J.

Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000. Pp. xiv + 180, Paperback, \$18.00, ISBN 0800631781.

Felix Just

Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles, CA 90045-8400

This book reprints some of Pilch's previous articles and essays on medical anthropology, mostly related to the Synoptic Gospels. New materials include a brief introduction and conclusion, a chapter on "Healing in John," an appendix with discussion questions, a glossary, extensive bibliography, and scripture index (but no subject or author indices). The articles have been revised through the addition of subheadings, an "afterword" for each chapter, some rewritten introductions (pp. 1-2, 57), a new comparative table (p. 43), one longer expansion (pp. 83-84), but only few other changes, mostly grammatical and stylistic. Two other fine additions are some illustrations (mostly Medieval depictions of Jesus healing the sick) and some URLs for related websites, esp. <http://www.stolaf.edu/people/kchanson/healing.html>.

In chapter 1, "Basic Perspectives: Healing and Curing," Pilch introduces the "Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck Model for comparing values across cultures" (p. 4) to show how the main value orientations of the dominant culture in the United States differ strongly from those of the ancient Mediterranean World, as reflected in the Bible. Although intending this model for the entire NT, the biblical examples cited here are mostly from Luke-Acts. Pilch also briefly introduces the important anthropological distinction between "curing disease" (the focus of scientifically-oriented Western cultures) and "healing illness" (the concern of ancient Mediterranean cultures).

This distinction is further explained in chapter 2, "Medical Anthropology: Sickness and Disease." Relying on the writings of physician-anthropologist Arthur Kleinman,

Pilch argues that the “biomedical” approach, based on modern Western cultural assumptions, is inadequate for understanding the health care systems of other cultures. In contrast, an “ethnomedical” approach looks at other health care systems in terms of their “five major functions” (cultural hierarchies of health values; experience of illness; cognitive response; healing activities; potential outcomes) and the “explanatory models” used to understand and deal with illnesses. Pilch also introduces the idea of “symbolic healing” with its four stages (symbolic bridge; mythic world; transactional symbols; confirmation), and defines the concept of “efficacy” in healing (pp. 32-35). This foundational chapter is very enlightening, but highly theoretical. The three “sectors” (professional, popular, and folk) of any health care system are introduced here, but not fully explained until chapter 4.

Chapter 3, “Selecting an Appropriate Model: Leprosy—A Test Case,” also begins by introducing the use of anthropological models for cross-cultural research into human illness, although relying on other medical anthropologists, namely Byron and Mary Jo Delvecchio Good. Their work distinguishes the “Biomedical or Empiricist Model” from the “Cultural or Hermeneutic Model” by considering six aspects (pathological entity; relevant symptoms; elicitation procedures; interpretive goal; interpretive strategy; therapeutic goal; pp. 42-53). To illustrate these distinctions, Pilch explains that the biblical illness translated as “leprosy” is misunderstood in the biomedical/ empiricist model, and can only be understood properly from the cultural/hermeneutic model, which focuses on the social significance of the condition and the transformation of meaning provided in a “healing.” All this is applied concretely to Mark 8:1-4, par., and Luke 17:11-19.

Chapters 4-5 discuss “Healing in Mark” and “Healing in Matthew,” respectively. Pilch first explains the difference between “etic” and “emic” perspectives, and cautions that the “etic” terms so carefully distinguished by medical anthropologists (sickness, disease, etc.) do not correspond exactly to the “emic” terms of the NT. In both chapters he applies Kleinman’s model (from ch. 2) to analyze the health care systems evidenced in these Gospels. Since the NT seldom refers to professional “physicians,” Pilch mainly describes the “popular sector” (the individual; family; social network; community beliefs and practices). As for the “taxonomy” of sickness evident in each Gospel, Mark has a two-fold division (sickness not related to demons vs. afflictions cause by unclean spirits), while Matthew does not distinguish between healings and exorcisms. In discussing the “folk sector” of the health care systems, Pilch argues that Mark presents Jesus as a “teacher-healer,” while Matthew portrays Jesus more broadly as a “folk healer.” These chapters contain many fine insights, but unfortunately do not discuss any Greek terms. Pilch admits in the “afterword” that his discussion is highly “etic” (p. 86), but analyzing the “emic” vocabulary of the Gospels would improve and even strengthen his arguments. For example, although Pilch says that Jesus “heals” a man with an unclean spirit in Mark 1:21, this Gospel never uses any “healing” words (ἰάομαι, θεραπεύω, etc.) in connection

with unclean spirits. Rather, Mark always says that they are “cast out” (ἐκβάλλω), but uses “healing” verbs for illnesses not involving spirits. In contrast, Matthew sometimes does refer to demoniacs being “healed” (Mt 4:24; 12:22; 17:18).

By far the longest is chapter 6, “Healing in Luke-Acts,” which was originally published in *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (ed. J. Neyrey; Hendrickson, 1991). Once again, Pilch begins by explaining the differences between curing disease and healing illness, and then applies Kleinman’s model to analyze the professional, popular, and folk sectors of the healthcare system in Luke-Acts. He then proposes several different “taxonomies of illness”, one based on “spirit involvement,” another on the three “symbolic body zones” (heart-eyes, mouth-ears, hands-feet), and a third on “purity and impurity.” Finally, he looks more closely at the episodes involving blindness and seeing, a dominant symbolic motif in Luke-Acts.

The newly written ch. 7, “Healing in John,” follows a different structure than the previous chapters. Since “there are only three healing stories in the entire Gospel of John (4:46-54; 5:1-20; 9:1-41),” Pilch does not apply Kleinman’s model to the Gospel as a whole, but provides separate exegetical readings of these three pericopes. Particularly interesting here is the explanation that John 5:14, where Jesus seems to accept a causal connection between sin and sickness, must be seen in its social context (“sin is a breach of interpersonal relations”) and thus does not contradict 9:3, where Jesus rejects a sin-sickness causality. Curiously, although it easily fits anthropological definitions of “healing,” the “raising of Lazarus” (John 11) is not treated in this chapter, a lacuna that Pilch recognizes in his afterword (p. 138).

Overall, Pilch is certainly correct to criticize the ethnocentrism (pp. 1-2, 15, 25, *passim*) that has characterized most of Western medicine, medical history, and biblical studies. Yet he sometimes writes as if Western biomedical approaches had absolutely nothing to contribute to our understanding of biblical texts (“such questions are not only irrelevant, but also erroneous,” p. 58; cf. pp. 76, 142). Such over-reaction is understandable for Pilch, a scholar who has pioneered the application of medical anthropology to counter the previous over-emphases of most medical historians and biblical exegetes. However, would not our understanding be enhanced by using *both* approaches? Is it really true that ancient Mediterranean people were concerned with a “state of being” *rather than* an “inability to function” (p. 12)? Or that Western medicine cares *mainly* about the “causes of diseases” while other cultures look to “alleviating symptoms” (pp. 13, 60)? Such distinctions may reflect the *emphases* of different cultures, but should not be drawn too rigidly. Moreover, Pilch repeatedly says that “the healing of illness takes place always, infallibly, since everyone ultimately finds some meaning to given life situations” (p. 60; similarly pp. 93, 141). Such claims are clearly overstated. Is there really *no* case in which someone is *not* “healed”? Do all people *inevitably* find some meaning in their illnesses? Don’t some live and die without ever receiving social

acceptance or finding meaning in their condition? The Bible itself contains some accounts of “failed” healings (Mark 9:28; Acts 19:13-16).

Most controversial, certainly, is Pilch’s application of all this to Jesus: “From this (anthropological) perspective, did Jesus ever cure anybody?” Pilch answers, “‘No’ would be a historically and scientifically correct answer. ‘We have no way of knowing’ would also be an acceptable answer, preferable for many” (p. 142). Pilch is certainly correct to stress that the scriptures do not provide the biomedical details one would expect today. But is it really not possible to say anything more about Jesus’ healing activity? In “healing lepers,” for example, did Jesus merely provide social acceptance and new meaning for these social outcasts, even though their skin condition remained unchanged? Did the woman with the flow of blood continue bleeding, and merely find new meaning and social acceptance for her physical condition? Are not the Gospels claiming that there was also some type of *physical* transformation? It seems too little to explain Jesus’ entire “healing” activity merely in terms of hermeneutical transformation or social acceptance, even if the nature of the biblical texts do not allow precise diagnoses of people’s physical “diseases,” nor provide bio-medical explanations of how Jesus “cured” them.

Fortress Press has provided a great service in making these influential writings of John Pilch easily accessible to a wider audience. Due to their origins as separate articles and essays, the chapters of this book contain some overlap and inconsistencies, so that it does not read very smoothly as a whole. Moreover, contrary to the “Acknowledgments” (p. ix), Pilch’s articles on “Biblical Leprosy and Body Symbolism” (1981) and “Reading Matthew Anthropologically” (1989) are not actually reproduced here, although they are similar in content. But overall, this book is a handy introduction to the use of medical anthropology for NT studies, and provides challenging questions and perspectives for all biblical students and scholars.