

Deification of Materials and Methods in Supernatural Healing: An Exegetical Study of John 5:3-4 and Its Implications for Gospel Ministers

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INTRODUCTION

Humanity has long grappled with various health disorders and employed diverse curative approaches to address these challenges. The methods used to resolve these issues are often influenced by factors such as education, economic capacity, and belief systems. Beyond conventional medical treatments and traditional herbal remedies, one alternative that has garnered attention is supernatural healing. This method entails restoring mental, emotional, or spiritual well-being without conventional or medical procedures. It involves the intervention of an external agent or force, transcending the physical realm to exert influence over human maladies, thereby facilitating healing. This form of healing is prevalent in various religious traditions and cultural contexts, reflecting a deep-seated belief in the power of the supernatural to bring about cures where conventional methods may fall short.

The Bible records various narratives of Jesus' supernatural healing endeavours in the four gospels. The Gospel of John recounts a pivotal healing record at the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (John 5:1-15), which has raised scholarly debate about the originality of verses 3b-4 of the chapter and

numerous theological analyses of the entire narrative.¹ In examining the theological and practical implications of supernatural healing, particularly in the immediate context of John 5, it is crucial to consider how such practices align with or diverge from biblical teachings.

This paper investigates the practice of deifying materials in supernatural healing, arguing that such practices divert focus from Christ's central role in healing and could mislead gospel ministers into venerating items used as channels in the healing process. By examining the passage's contextual, textual, and linguistic analysis and drawing significant inferences, this study aims to highlight the necessity of a Christ-centered approach to healing, affirming Jesus' sovereignty over any material intermediaries. The research further explores how contemporary gospel ministers can avoid the pitfalls of syncretism and maintain doctrinal purity in their healing ministries.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF JOHN 5

The authorship of the gospel account has been traditionally attributed to John, the son of Zebedee. Even though the author does not reveal his identity throughout the account, the gospel record refers to an eyewitness (John 19:35) whose testimony is true. Internal evidence narrows it to the 'beloved disciple' suggested to be John. The date of the fourth gospel has been speculated to be around the first century and early second century. Most scholarly documents and Church traditions hold the date as around 90 AD.²

Early Church tradition agreed that the gospel was written in Ephesus, one of the most significant cities in the Roman

¹ Gordon D. Fee, "On the Inauthenticity of John 5:3b-4", *The Evangelical Quarterly* 54.4 (1982), 207

² Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament* 2014 (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 245-246.

Empire, along with Rome, Corinth, Antioch, and Alexandria. It was situated at the meeting point of important trade routes.³ Evaluating various scholarly contributions about the background of the gospel and the language of dualism employed in the writing further provides evidence about the context of the fourth gospel to be written within a Greek-dominated culture dated to be around the close of the first century.

The fourth gospel recipients are likely Gentile believers and non-believers who lived in a Hellenistic culture but under the Roman empire. The book's purpose is expressed in verses 30-31 in the twentieth chapter, thus: "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing, you may have life in his name (John 20:30-31 NIV)."⁴ The evangelist intended his writer to believe Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah and that they should have eternal life through faith in Him. In doing this, John carefully chooses events in the public ministry of Jesus that lend credence to his claim about Jesus.

There are diverse opinions about the motive of the evangelist. Some posit that John's gospel was a theological response aimed to refute advertent and inadvertent heresies among the saints who queried Christ's humanity or denied His divinity. There are diverse thoughts in these heretic teachings, and the evangelist wrote to establish a plumbline using Hellenistic languages and terminologies that these heretics have abused. Prominent among these heretics are the Gnostics, founded by Simon Magnus, who led a movement that holds that the Christ-Spirit came upon Jesus at baptism and departed at the crucifixion.

³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary, Vol.2 John and Acts*, (Eds.) Clinton E. Arnolds (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 36.

⁴ All Scripture Quotations are from New International Version 1984 (US)

Another is Cerinthus, who asserts that Jesus was not of virgin birth but a child from Joseph and Mary. Scholarly arguments have countered all these suggestions. Meanwhile, the internal evidence of the gospel account suggests that the author has a broader aim than refuting heresies, which could be to construct the perception of Jesus before his audience as the Messiah who is Sovereign and above all human challenges.⁵

John presented a Christ-centered theological gospel, emphasizing Jesus' divinity and humanity. Jesus' mission is portrayed as the source of eternal life, affirming his pre-existence as the *logos*, a Greek word that means the Word (John 1:1-14). The evangelist explores key theological concepts, including the dichotomy of light and darkness, the significance of witness and the Word, and the contrast between life and death. The gospel also highlights the person and role of the Holy Spirit, emphasizing the Spirit's agency in the believer's life.⁶

Historical Context

The settings of John 5:1-9 suggest three possible contexts. One could be an *Asclepion*, the sanctuary of the healing deity in Greek mythology, whose influence is dominant in most cities in the Mediterranean region.⁷ Another possibility is a Greco-Roman therapeutic bath, considering the time of this event in Palestine under the Roman Empire. The third perspective points to a *mikveh*, a Hebrew word that means ritual bath or immersion pool. It is a water body used for Jewish ritual baths

⁵ Clarke Adam, *Commentary of the Bible: John Introduction* (Parsons Technology, accessed through mobile application 06.11.24), 1831

⁶ Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John. Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 113

⁷ Clyde E. Fant and Mitchel G. Reddish, *Lost Treasures of the Bible: Understanding the Bible Through Archaeological Artifacts in World Museums* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008), 363.

in Judaism since the pool is in Jerusalem during a Jewish festival.⁸

The actual name of the pool further complicates the discourse, as it has variants: Bethzatha, Bethsaida, Bethesda, etc. Modern scholarship reveals 12 variants of the pool's name, which could be linked to scribal errors during dictation and other non-biblical materials that referenced this pool but with a variant name. Bethesda variant has gained more acceptance among translators because there are non-biblical texts dated before AD 68 and a discovery of Copper Scroll (3Q15) in 1952 testifying to it.⁹ Masterman noted in his work that the actual name of the pool remains uncertain due to varying scholarly opinions and arguments within Biblical text and historical writing.¹⁰ Scholarly opinions hold that "Bethesda" might not be a proper name but a descriptive label employed by the evangelist. Nevertheless, "Bethesda," an Aramaic term meaning "House of Mercy," has become the widely accepted designation for the pool.

Another issue with the pool is identifying the actual pool the evangelist refers to among the pools in Jerusalem. Wahlde expressed that the pool of Bethesda has been wrongly placed and identified. The pool has been mistaken for other water bodies in Jerusalem.¹¹ Scholars have proposed two water bodies in Jerusalem, Gihon Spring and Pool of Siloam, as the Bethesda healing pool because of the activities in these pools

⁸ Craig R. Koester, 2019. *The Healing Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-18): A Study in Light of Archaeological Evidence from Bethmajusculesesda, Jewish and Greco-Roman Practice, and the Johannine Narrative* in R. Culpepper and Jorg Frey (eds) *Expressions of the Johannine Kerygma in John 2:23-5:18*, Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary

⁹ Robin Thompson, "Healing at the Pool of Bethesda: A Challenge to Asklepious," *Dallas Theological Seminary Bulletin for Biblical Research* 27.1 (2017) 65-84.

¹⁰ E.W.G Masterman, "The Pool of Bethesda", *The University of Chicago Press Journals, The Biblical World* Vol.25, No.2 (1905): 88-102

¹¹ Urban C von Wahlde, "The Puzzling Pool of Bethesda: Where Jesus Cured the Crippled Man," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 37/5 (2011): 42

that are synonymous with “the stirring of water”, and since these two pools are south of the temple, they fell short of the description in John 5.¹² The Pool that will be judged as the pool described by John should be close to the sheep gate, north of the temple, possess five colonnades and be a spot that can accommodate a multitude of sick persons. However, of all the pools discovered by archaeological efforts in modern Palestine, no pool entirely complies with the description of John 5. What archaeologists have as the closest to the description in John 5 is a twin pool by the north of the temple with four porches adjacent to a Greek Catholic Church named St. Annes, and this pool lies under erected structures and rubbish.¹³

The passage suggests a healing tradition at the time of Jesus that necessitates gathering multitudes around the pool. The fourth verse of John 5 reveals a supernatural enhancement of the water body performed by an angel, making it a potent healing source for any human disorder. This belief must have formed the tradition of healing prevailing at the time, which required the smartness and speed of sick individuals before healing. Although claims of actual healing might be challenging to refute, considering the large numbers of sick people gathered at the pool, objective criticism of the healing against the character of healing in the Old Testament and other gospel accounts suggests a conflict of principles.

Compassion and sovereignty are the underlying attitudes of Jesus in all His healing endeavors that often require faith and no human advantage to restore the sick. The healing accounts of Jesus are primarily by His words. When He employs physical items, they are never repeated or administered to other sick individuals as an object of healing virtue. After the healing of Naaman at River Jordan (2 Kings 5:1-14), there was no further testimony of healing at the river, and neither was there a repeat

¹² Thompson, “Healing at the Pool of Bethesda: A Challenge to Asklepius” 65-84

¹³ E.W.G Masterman, “The Pool of Bethesda”, *The University of Chicago Press Journals, The Biblical World* Vol.25, No.2 (1905) pp88-102

of the supernatural experience at Pool of Siloam after the John 9 experience.

Koester's submission shed more light on this issue and provided much-needed clarification in his work. He expressed that these healing practices at the Bethesda pool did not have witnesses from other Jewish historical documents that contain the healing activities of the God of Israel.¹⁴ Archaeological discoveries at the site, suggested to be the location of the Bethesda pool, also reveal the presence of votive offerings, tokens of thanksgiving offered by the beneficiaries of the healing powers of Asclepius, the generous Greek deity known for healing in the Mediterranean region which includes Palestine where Jerusalem is located.¹⁵ A critical analysis of healing tradition around the pool against the backdrop of the God of Israel's character and His historical pattern of miraculous healing interventions, as documented in both the Old and New Testaments, suggests that the agent responsible for the healings at Bethesda is unlikely to be the God of Israel.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF JOHN 5:3b-4

John 5:3b-4 have been a focus of scholarly debate for centuries, and the subject of discussion has been the authenticity of these verses in the Johannine gospel. Are they original to the fourth gospel or due to scribal activities? The issue at hand, when critically considered, reveals a degree of intentionality. It is either a purposeful insertion or a deliberate omission. It is far from being an unintentional error by the copyist.¹⁶

¹⁴ Craig R Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 53

¹⁵ Steven M Bryan, "Power in the Pool," 12; Andrew T Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John, BNTC 4* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 193; Mackowski, *Jerusalem*, 81; André Duprez, "Probatique (Piscine)," in DBSup, ed Louis Pirot (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1928), 617

¹⁶ Fee, "On the Inauthenticity of John 5:3b-4", 208

It has been popularly accepted among modern New Testament scholars that the verse was an interpretative addition, i.e. explanatory notes or comments added to a text. This position is based on the argument that these verses were absent from the oldest and most reliable manuscripts (P66 P75 x B C* syrc Cyril-Jerusalem) and contained Greek vocabularies alien to the Johannine gospel. The verses were also rendered differently in various ancient manuscripts, raising questions about their originality. Some Manuscripts (such as D Wsupp 0141 33 itd, f, 1 vgwwgeo) contain the latter part of verse 3 without verse four while others (such as A* L Diatessaron1, i, n) contain verse four without 3b. Manuscripts like S Λ Π 047 1079 2174 pc syh included 3b-4 with asterisks and A2 C3 K Xcomm Δ Θ Ψ Ω 063 078 Bzy.¹⁷

The variations in rendering these verses, with some manuscripts omitting the entire v4 but including v3b and vice-versa, and others including the verse with asterisks, indicate doubts and uncertainty about such verses. These arguments suggest that there are intentional scribal activities probably aimed at explaining the seventh verse. It is almost impossible for a scribe to expunge about two verses from a manuscript since the texts are considered sacred. What is more probable is the scribal activities that sought to clarify the response of the sick man to Jesus's question.

Furthermore, the principle of textual criticism holds that shorter readings are closer in originality to the autography owing to the attitude of copyists who revere the texts as God's Word and will not alter them.¹⁸ However, explanatory notes could be added to aid the reader's understanding when there are texts that could raise queries, such as those contained in verse 7. Although there are counter-scholarly opinions that

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Paul D. Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 247.

support the originality of the longer reading, the arguments are weak compared to the strong evidence that suggests the inauthenticity of the verses.¹⁹

Although the shorter reading of John 5:1-5 is generally considered closer to the autograph, adhering to the principle that earlier and shorter readings are often more authentic, the longer reading, which includes John 5:3b-4, may reflect the cultural reality of the Ancient Near East, particularly the belief in angelic intervention at healing waters. This addition likely served to contextualize the narrative for early readers familiar with such traditions. From a content analysis perspective, John 5:3b-4 can still be regarded as inspired, even if it was not part of the original autograph. Likely introduced as a scribal gloss, a marginal note, or an explanatory addition, this passage eventually became part of the text, intended to clarify verse 7, where the paralytic references the stirring of the water. Without these verses, readers might struggle to understand the man's expectations of healing from the pool. Consequently, while the longer reading may not have originated with the evangelist, its inclusion in certain manuscript traditions reflects scribes' efforts to preserve and communicate theological and cultural insights relevant to the interpretation of the passage.

LEXICO-SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF JOHN 5:3-4

After conducting a textual criticism of the passage, analysing its syntax will further help uncover the evangelist's authorial intent of the evangelist. A few keywords in John 5:3-4 will be analysed, and their syntactical function will be discussed.

- *ekdechomenon*: This Greek word is a present middle/passive participle, deponent genitive masculine plural from the root word *ekdechomai* (I wait); thus, *ekdechomenon* translates to "waiting." This word functions adjectivally, providing more information about

¹⁹ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* 4th Edition (New York: Broadway, 2001), 80

the sick (Greek *asthenounton*) and waiting. The noun case genitive deponent implies a middle/passive ending in which case it could have been translated as “waiting by themselves” but is active in form, thus implying that the sick are perpetually in the waiting (expectation) state all by themselves.

- *angelos*: A noun nominative masculine singular, which means messenger that could be human or divine, holy or satanic. This is expressed in its various uses in the New Testament. In Luke 7:24, it was used to describe the messengers of John the Baptist. In Matt.1:20, it was used to consider the angel of the Lord; in Matt.25:41, it was used to describe the angels of Satan; and in Acts 12:15, it was used to describe the angel of Peter. The likely error of a contemporary reader is to assume it means an angel of the Lord. The rendition in verse 4 shows that a definite article did not precede the noun. Hence, an indefinite article is ascribed to the noun. This means the messenger could take either of the meanings, either human, divine or satanic. Considering the supernatural nature of the activity at the pool, the messenger has to be divine or otherwise. Previous arguments from the textual criticism of the verses suggest the absence of v3b-4 from the oldest and most reliable manuscripts and the consequential inference that suggests that the nature of healings at the pool negates the principles of healings recorded in the Old and New Testament.
- *katebainen*: An imperfect, active indicative verb, third person singular, from the root word *katabaino* (to descend); hence, *katebainen* means He/she/it was descending. It functions as an imperfect verb, which means that the messenger's action started at an unknown time in the past over a period of unknown time. It is significant to note that the stirring (*etarassen*) is accordingly also an imperfect active indicative Greek

verb. It means whoever (of the invalid) missed the timing of the angelic descend and stirring must wait for another unknown time of descending and stirring. Meanwhile, from the words of the invalid, it will be a safe deduction that the action occurs periodically. It could be understood that the sick man Jesus attended to have been witnessing the stirring of the water but missing it, yet the deteriorating condition of the invalid did not attract the supernatural messenger for 38 years. This makes one wonder who the master of this messenger is in comparison with Jesus who was described in Acts 10:38 as a travelling philanthropist. Most presumably, John presented Jesus in contrast to that messenger as the ultimate One sent by God by His compassionate response to the situation of the sick man in restoring him to health.

INFERENCES FROM JOHN 5:3-4

Reflecting on the meaning and syntactical functions of the Greek words analyzed, the following inferences could be drawn:

1. The Nature of the Supernatural Healing: The belief in an angel stirring the waters likely reflects popular Jewish myth or syncretistic practices rather than divine revelation or intervention from the God of heaven. The healing associated with the pool seems to rely on superstition and ritual, focusing on timing, effort, and chance, which contrasts with the requirement of faith and grace-based healing endeavors of Jesus.
2. Supremacy of Jesus: Jesus entirely bypasses the pool, revealing His divine authority and negating the efficacy of ritualistic or material-based methods. The invalid man's healing demonstrates that true healing is not dependent on human advantages, competition, or magical rituals but solely on the compassion of Jesus.

3. **Critical View of Human Dependency on Methods:** The account reflects humanity's tendency to worship materials, which is the pool and methods, angelic stirring, and first-entry requirements as conduits of healing rather than trusting in God. There is a tendency to stick with what has worked and ignore the principle. Faith in Jesus is the principle, and His practice or method can vary according to His Sovereignty.
4. **Questionable Source of Healing:** This interpretation raises doubts about the legitimacy and source of the healing power attributed to the stirring of the water. It implies that not all healing is directed by God. Other supernatural agents that differ from the nature of the holiness of God are exploiting the weak and those desperate for healing. The passage highlights the need to discern between genuine divine miracles and those attributed to other sources or superstitions but popularly believed to be from God.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PAPER

- a) **Revealing Wrong Beliefs and Misplaced Faith:** The paper reevaluated misplaced faith in intermediaries or physical objects for healing. This is significant for understanding how such beliefs persist in contemporary believers. The text demonstrates the danger of elevating secondary elements, like materials or methods, above the sovereignty of God.
- b) **Theological Clarification:** The contrast between Jesus and the ancient healing traditions surrounding the pool affirms His role as the ultimate revelation of God's will and power. This enriches Christological studies and pastoral theology by clarifying where divine authority lies. Jesus is revealed as the ultimate messenger sent from the Father to remove the impacts of sin, which includes sickness and human disorders.

- c) **Emphasis on Grace and Accessibility:** This research undermines human advantages such as influence, wealth and riches, merit, or competition for divine favor, emphasizing that healing and restoration are acts of God's grace and are available to all. God has never made human effort a prerequisite for accessing His blessing. His blessings are released as a result of His compassion and goodness.
- d) **Correct Exegetical Analysis:** The paper interpreted a text and employed exegetical tools to establish an authorial intention about the text. If the angel is not from God, it suggests that not all supernatural events in the Bible have a divine origin. Gospel ministers should adopt this interpretive approach to arrive at the text's intended meaning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GOSPEL MINISTERS

Central to the Johannine gospel is the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah, which necessitates the choice of seven miracles that point to Jesus as the Sovereign One. In his narration, John deliberately presented a systematic order of historical events that established his claim about Jesus's divinity (John 1:1-14) and the One who saves the world from sin and its impact on humanity (John 1:29). The theme of John's gospel and the narration of John 5 reveals a model that should be inculcated into healing practices among contemporary gospel ministers.

- I. **Principle of Faith and Grace in Healing Must be Upheld:** Jesus' healing activities were built around faith in the sick and gracious response to their weakness. Ministers should avoid placing requirements around human strength, such as economic price, which negates the nature of Jesus' healing. Practices such as selling enchanted materials as objects of supernatural healing negate the principle of healing that Jesus exemplified. In His Words, freely you have received, give freely

(Matt. 10:8). This compels all who have received the grace to administer supernatural healing to the sick freely and willingly.

- II. Revelation and Authority of Jesus in Supernatural Healing Must be Accentuated: Practitioners of faith healing should foster the revelation of Jesus as the source of healing virtues and sovereignty over the outcomes of any procedures adopted in administering supernatural healing. The practice of faith healing should not exalt the healer above the One from whom all healing virtues are domiciled.
- III. Deifying Materials Must be Avoided: Items such as oil, water, handkerchiefs, aprons, etc, could often be employed in the healing process. However, there is a subtle line between appropriating materials as channels of supernatural healing and esteeming materials as the source of healing through instances of recorded success. Faith healers must avoid deifying materials and men as the source of healing rather than a simple channel employed for the time. When healing is performed through an object, over the years, such material gradually metamorphosed from a simple channel of divine activity to a source of miraculous powers, subtly leading to syncretic dispositions that deify objects as carriers of supernatural abilities. Jesus, in all the accounts of healing in the Synoptic gospel and John, did not deposit healing virtues in any object or materials used as reference materials. Instead, He stimulated faith in God as the obligation of health seekers and not in healing tradition.
- IV. Subtle Syncretism Must be Watched: In religion, syncretism involves importing practices, philosophies and procedures from a foreign religion into another, creating a new belief system. Numerous cultures of Africa have strong traditional techniques, which include

the practice of magic, diabolic procedures and the deification of objects as tools of magical arts. Hence, the process of divine healing in the African context must be engaged with caution and sound biblical doctrine to avoid importation of practices that are not congruent with scriptural examples, leading to syncretism.

CONCLUSION

The will of God is fundamentally the well-being of humanity, which is evident in His provision of the medical approach as a blessing for addressing disease and illness. However, divine sovereignty permits God to intervene supernaturally, achieving healing outside conventional medical methods. Whether through supernatural, traditional, or scientific means, healing represents a restoration of wholeness from disorder. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that supernatural interventions can involve agents that do not reflect the character of God. As a result, believers are urged to exercise discernment and avoid syncretism, particularly when engaging with unholy or questionable channels of healing practices.

This study undertakes an analysis of the background of the Fourth Gospel, with a particular focus on John 5:3–4, addressing textual variations, embarking on lexico-syntactical analysis of the passage, and highlighting its contextual and theological implications. Through careful content analysis, the researcher argues that John 5:3b-4 particularly lacks originality and was likely a later scribal gloss introduced to clarify the paralytic's reference in verse 7. Archaeological discussions around the Pool of Bethesda, presumed to be the healing location, challenge traditional opinions about the nature of the purported healings at the site. Furthermore, the exegetical analysis shows that it is biblically inconsistent to associate the healing at the pool with the God of Israel. Historical evidence and theological critique suggest that a deity distinct from Yahweh was likely associated with the supernatural phenomena at the pool prior to Jesus'

intervention. The study also evaluates faith healing practices and draws out their implications for contemporary gospel ministry.

Supernatural healing, within the framework of the Christian faith, is founded on biblical principles that offer guidance for its practice, and its efficacy is not derived from material or methodological routines but from the blessing of the LORD. Gospel ministers and health seekers are called to prioritize faith in God's sovereignty, compassion, and divine authority rather than placing undue reliance on human agents, methodologies, or material instruments as mediators of divine realities. Practitioners of divine healing in the Church are called to guide their congregation in ensuring that all forms of healing give glory to God alone. By rejecting the temptation to idolize methods or materials and focusing solely on God's power, the church avoids the danger of replacing God's truth with falsehood, keeping the Creator as the center of faith and worship. The deification of creation over the Creator undermines the integrity of faith and promotes syncretic practices that must be vigorously rejected in the community of faith. Ministers are thus encouraged to uphold the biblical standard, ensuring that the God of Israel remains the central object of worship and trust rather than the tools or intermediaries employed in the healing process.

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