

# Jesus and the Paralytics. Memorializing Miracles in the Greco-Roman World of the Gospels

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**Abstract:** This study explores the Greco-Roman memorialization of healings through material culture as a point of comparison for the Gospels' miracle traditions. Special attention is given to the ex-votos left at healing shrines and especially the *Iamata* inscriptions connected with the Asclepius cult. This corpus of evidence brings into focus a series of dynamics that help illuminate the stories of Jesus' two healings of a paralytic (John 5:1-15; Mark 2:1-10). The comparisons help clarify both the common memorializing supports that informed and sustained the memory of Jesus transmitted in the Gospels, as well as the distinctive relationship of the Christian cult to certain specific places where memories of Jesus were preserved.

**Keywords:** ex-votos, Asclepius, miracles, healing shrines, *Iamata*, paralytics, Bethesda, Peter's house

The recent turn to memory in historical Jesus research is a major and healthy paradigm shift. It has rebooted the methodology in foundational ways and revised the broad agenda of askable questions. In the eager mood that this new *Traditionsgeschichte* perspective has awakened, interest has been redirected very frequently (and fruitfully) towards the old chestnut of oral traditions, rethinking those critical and complex dynamics. Interdisciplinary dabbling in cognitive neuroscience is also to be seen. By contrast, an energetic rapprochement between memory and material culture is, on my inspection, largely missing.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> While Birger Gerhardsson long advocated a certain variation on the memory approach to Gospel studies, a significant new wave of research has been energetically exploring new avenues for approximately the last twenty years and the bibliography is by now too substantial to be easily cited. See e.g., S. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT 123; Tübingen; Mohr Siebeck 2000); J.D.G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making. I. Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2003); R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2006); A. Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco, TX; Baylor University Press 2009); D. Alison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2010); R. Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory* (JSNTSup 407; London: Clark 2010); S. Byrskog – R. Hakola – J.M. Jokiranta (eds.), *Social Memory and Social*

This is curious, for the bridge is not difficult to build. The ancient world, as known to us both through texts and archeological discovery, abounded in physical memorials. Memory was not purely an abstract mental operation, but conventionally invested in concrete things and places. In the Greco-Roman context, one might reasonably speak of a near obsession with memorial statuary, monuments, and inscriptions.<sup>2</sup> The cultivation of these carefully engineered acts of remembering is particularly rich, for these crafted *aide-mémoires* both preserved in a kind of frozen form and worked actively to mold the living shape of public recollection. If much of this memorial lavishness derives from the honor-based ethos and considerable capital (both social and economic) of Rome's *honestiores*, memorialization through artifacts was not exclusively elite behavior. An excellent example is ex-voto culture.

## 1. The Ex-voto Habit

Ex-votos might range from entire temples to the simplest, most homely objects. The *Templum Lares Permarini* in the southern Campus Martius in Rome, for instance, was built to fulfill a vow made by Lucius Emilius Regillus during a naval battle in 190 BCE.<sup>3</sup> A grateful boy at a shrine in Asia Minor, by contrast, dedicated his ten dice to the god.<sup>4</sup> At the sacred wood of Persaro stones were offered as votives and simply inscribed with the deity's name: IVNO LOVCINA, MAT[ER]-MATVTA, SALVTE, archaic Latin goddesses of childbirth and health.<sup>5</sup> Figurines, cups, bowls and amphorae, plaques, tripods, swords, shields, and stelae: anything one vowed to the gods in return for a favor might be accepted into the treasuries of a sanctuary. All these gifts served to augment the shrine's prestige—if not through monetary worth, at least through testamentary value to the efficacy of the local god's power. The practice accordingly cuts across class lines, as the sheer multitude of the excavated ex-votos also attests. At Ponte di Nona, a small sanctuary 9 roman miles east of the *Urbs*, 8,000 votive items were

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*Identity in the Study of Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (NTOA 116; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2016); A. Kirk, *Memory and the Jesus Tradition* (London: Clark 2018).

- 2 See Ramsay MacMullen's classic essay, "The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire," *AJP* 103 (1982) 233–246.
  - 3 See E. Orlin, "Augustan Reconstruction and Roman Memory," *Memory in Ancient Rome and Early Christianity* (ed. K. Galinsky) (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016) 119.
  - 4 See L.R. LiDonnici, *The Epidaurian Miracle Inscriptions: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Texts and Translations Greco-Roman Religion Series 11; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1995) inscription {A8}. Henceforth, alphanumeric citations in curly brackets refer to the inscriptions from this collection.
  - 5 See E.-J. Graham, "Mobility Impairment in the Sanctuaries of Early Roman Italy," *Disability in Antiquity* (ed. C. Laes) (London: Routledge 2017) 248–266.
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recovered.<sup>6</sup> So common was the offering of these devotional memorials that votive items were mass produced and the ritual Latin formula was simply abbreviated VSLM: *votum solvit libens merito*, “freely discharges the vow, as deserved.” The habit of such thank offerings was, naturally, by no means confined to the Greco-Roman context. The same phenomenon has exceptionally deep roots in the ancient near east, from Ayssria to Uratu to Phoenicia, Egypt, and beyond.<sup>7</sup> The temple-based act of recording a divine favor with some inscribed object, celebrating the god’s gracious intervention, was all but ubiquitous in the eastern provinces of the empire.

Although the relevant epigraphical haul in Southern Syria and Judea during the early Roman period is far from overwhelming, these regions should not be exempted from this wider culture. Ex-voto inscriptions naturally intensify dramatically with the arrival of legionary soldiers after 70 CE.<sup>8</sup> One may presume, nevertheless, a basic continuity of praxis in pagan centers like Caesarea, where temples to Roman gods were known from the very start. No less than soldiers, exposed to all manner of danger, sailors are high performers when it comes to offering ex-votos and it is right to imagine many paying vows for their safe arrival in the harbor at Sebastos. The Decapolis predictably carried this culture inland. In first century Gerasa, Demetrius, son Apollonius, a priest of the imperial cult, dedicated a statue at the temple; while a certain Artemidora offered a small limestone altar, likely to her patron, Artemis, one of the city’s two main divinities.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Healing Shrines

Within this obviously robust ex-voto culture, healing shrines deserve to be specially singled out. It has often been observed (normally with poorly hidden value judgments) that an unbroken line can easily be drawn between pagan popular religion and the Catholic cult of the saints.<sup>10</sup> Anyone who has visited Fatima and

<sup>6</sup> See Graham, “Sanctuaries of Early Roman Italy,” 248–66.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g., G. del Olmo Lete, “Les inscriptions puniques votives: suggestions d’interprétation,” in *Studies in Ugaritic Linguistics: Selected Papers* (Münster: Ugarit 2017) 451–456.

<sup>8</sup> See CIIP 1128–1138.

<sup>9</sup> See P.-L. Gatier, “Inscriptions du 1er siècle à Gerasa,” *Syria* 79 (2002) 277–281; and P.-L. Gatier *et al.*, “Greek Inscriptions in the Jordan Museum,” *ADAJ* 58 (2017) 343–344.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g., the highly erudite and equally meandering “classical Sebastianism” of Maurizio Bettini, “Looking at Ourselves Backwards: Modern Recourses to the Ancient World,” *HR* 41 (2002) 197–212. Bettini reflects on the link between a statue of St. Giuseppe Moscati in Naples and the ancient cult of Asclepius. More sober and succinct, see the commonplace observation of Alessandra Colazilli, “Reproducing Human Limbs: Prosthesis, Amulets, and Votive Objects in Ancient Egypt,” *ReAnt* 3 (2012) 163.

observed the piles of crutches and wax effigies of body parts will, in fact, immediately recognize the perennial type of the healing shrine. Huge numbers of ancient terra cotta votives fill museum collections—heads, faces, eyes, ears, teeth, tongues, hands, fingers, feet, toes, arms, legs, genitals, breasts, babies, bladders and other diverse manner of innards—each one the memorial of a healing. Some of these commemorations in clay of answered prayer reach back as far as four-thousand years, like the Minoan members held in the British Museum (BM 1907.1–19).<sup>11</sup>

Regional healing shrines were dotted across the empire and, based on the preponderance of one or another body part among the votives, it is often possible to surmise what sort of healings this or that shrine especially promised. At the monumental Etrurian site of Ara della Regina at Tarquinia, for instance, 26 legs, 225 feet, and 233 wombs were found in a deposit of 759 votives, suggesting a concentration on mobility impairments and infertility.<sup>12</sup> The occasional presence of medical professionals among the priests tending such shrines helps explain this sort of specialization.

This alliance with ancient medicine brings one healing cult into view, which rises far above all the others: the cult of Asclepius, son of Apollo and patron of the Greek medical arts. Without being a franchise, the ancient world knew a massive number of centers dedicated to this demi-god. Archeologists have identified more than 300 separate shrines, from Corinth to Carthage, Rhodes, and Rome—all radiating out, beginning in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, from the greatest and most celebrated Asclepion in Epidaurus, his traditional birthplace.<sup>13</sup> Regional variation contoured these various sites, which had their own specializations and protocols, as well as their unique votive traditions. In Corinth terra cotta body parts abound; in Athens and Piraeus it was stone reliefs. Still, the basic character of the Asclepius cult was clear.

The open cultivation of temple medicine under Asclepius' patronage is an interesting phenomenon in itself, for it evinces a very different view of divine healing than our own. Vitruvius, for instance, in describing the proper site for

11 The specific practice is again widespread. The Temple of Hathor in Deir el Bahari, for instance, abounds in phalli seems to have specialized in cures for impotence. See Colazilli, "Human Limbs," 160.

12 See A. Comella, *Il deposito votivo presso l'Ara della Regina* (Materiali del Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Tarquinia 4: Rome: Bretschneider 1982).

13 For this number, see C. Fant – M. Reddish, *Lost Treasures of the Bible: Understanding the Bible through Archeological Artifacts in World Museums* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2008) 363. On Asclepius, see above all see E.J. Edelstein – L. Edelstein, *Asclepius: Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1998). For a close study of one such sanctuary, see M. Lang, *Cure and Cult in Ancient Corinth: A Guide to the Asclepieion* (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens 1977).

building a healing shrine, hints at the uncomplicated cooperation between the god's intervention and what we might today consider entirely natural factors.

For all temples there should be chosen the most healthy sites (*saluberrimae*) with suitable springs in those places where shrines are to be set up, and especially for Asclepius and Salus, and generally for those gods by whose medical power sick persons are manifestly healed. For when sick persons are moved from a pestilent to a healthy place, and the water supply is from wholesome fountains, they will more quickly recover. So it will happen that the divinity, from the nature of the site (*ex natura loci*) will gain a greater and higher reputation and authority (*On Architecture* 1.2.7).

Healing sanctuaries were thus sanatoria in the ancient mode; worshippers might stay for weeks or months; and as at Lourdes or Baden-Baden and the other 19<sup>th</sup> century *Kurorte*, the importance of the springs must not be neglected. Aristides, the orator, invalid, and zealous devotee of the doctor god, offered several full orations on the waters of Asclepius.

The god uses this well as a kind of co-worker (συνεργῶν)... for just as the servants of physicians (ιατρῶν) and miracle workers (θαυματοποιῶν) are trained to ministrations, and, working with their superiors, astonish those who behold them and ask their advice, so is this well the discovery of the great miracle worker (τοῦ μεγάλου θαυματοποιοῦ) who does everything for the salvation of men (*Oratio* XXXIX, 14).<sup>14</sup>

The surgeons who staffed an Asclepion were, of course, along with the waters, also *synergoi* of “the great miracle worker.” The astonishment that the advice and ministrations of these co-workers occasioned refers, it would seem, to the wide range of flamboyantly absurd prescriptions connected with the cult: eating partridge stuffed with frankincense, for instance. Coupled with the prescribed rituals, above all the incubation and reception of a dream-message from the god,<sup>15</sup> the intervention of the ancient physicians—in their better moments through ointments, compounds, and *pharmaka*, induced vomiting, freezing baths, fasting, incisions and the like [317; 432]—lends the whole process a note of odd credibility, which has led the Edelsteins to suspect real healings at work in this enormously (and otherwise inexplicably) successful cult.

<sup>14</sup> For Greek text and English translation, see Edelstein – Edelstein, *Asclepius*, text #804. Henceforth, numbered citations in square brackets refer to texts from this collection.

<sup>15</sup> In the Latin West, the practice of incubation may not have been observed. See G.H. Renberg, “Public and Private Places of Worship in the Cult of Asclepius at Rome,” *MAAR* 51–52 (2006–2007) 134.

### 3. *Iamata* – Remembering Healings

However we chose to handle the data and the Edelsteins' suspicion, healings in huge numbers are recorded. Asclepius' shrines were famously full of ex-votos memorializing cures: σφόδρα ἐνδοξον καὶ πολλῶν ἀναθημάτων μεστὸν ἱερόν, Strabo says of the temple at Cos: it was "exceedingly famous and full of numerous votive offerings" (*Geo.* XIV, 2.19 [794]). In fact, the offering of an ex-voto was clearly expected (τὰ νομιζόμενα), even on pain of reversing a healing or having your fish stand struck by lightning, if the debt went unpaid {B2 (22); C4 (47)}. With the cock he owed, Socrates, Asclepius' most famous and philosophical patient, was but one of a multitude of beneficiaries and benefactors of the god.

As part of this hieratic system of payment, the narrative memory of specific healings was proactively promoted at certain Asclepian shrines by the centralized inscribing of special commemorative stelae. These so-called *Iamata* ("Healings") contained succinct but lively accounts of medical cases and cures, the stories behind various ex-votos. They are known to have been mounted not only at the mother shrine in Epidaurus, from which 66 inscriptions, from four of the original six stelae erected around the grounds in the fourth century, still survive in whole or in part. Similar installments were present in other locales like Cos and Tricca [735]. At Lebena private cure inscriptions were displayed,<sup>16</sup> while Aelianus mentions a catalogue of votive offerings in the Asclepion of Athens [731]. Though this may be an inventory of the temple treasures, it is not unlikely that the circumstances of donation—namely brief memos of healing—were also there recorded. It is clear enough, in any case, that the cult was linked to an important operation of collecting, recording, and broadcasting personal tales of healing, all meant for public consumption.

The following example, chosen nearly at random, helps expose the character, both of the cult and of the surviving corpus of Epidaurian inscriptions.

{A4} Ambrosia from Athens, blind in one eye. She came as a suppliant to the god. Walking about in the sanctuary, she ridiculed some of the cures as being unlikely and impossible, the lame and blind becoming well from only seeing a dream. Sleeping here, she saw a vision. It seemed to her the god came to her and said he would make her well, but she would have to pay a fee by dedicating a silver pig in the sanctuary as a memorial of her ignorance. When he had said these things, he cut her sick eye and poured a medicine over it. When day came she left well.

16 See Edelstein – Edelstein, *Asclepius*, 239–240, 252–254.

The “didactic nature” of these inscriptions has rightly been observed, though the expression is perhaps a little weak.<sup>17</sup> Here one detects not only the financial *enjeux* at stake in ancient health care, in the form of a coerced ex-voto silver pig, along with the supportive role played by publicly posted testimonials of healing, but also the anxiety that might also surround such advertising. Certain examples, like the parturition of a grown child by a certain Kleo who endured a five-year-long pregnancy {A1}, do indeed strain credulity; and multiple inscriptions make a rather blunt reply to the hemorrhaging problem of disbelief.

## 4. Healing Sites in the Gospels

The corpus of these healing inscriptions is obviously of immense interest. New Testament scholars have not failed to engage the texts, though not always with the most compelling results. The structural (*formgeschichtliche*) parallels between the Epidaurian narratives and Gospel miracle accounts are not greatly illuminating in all frankness. Essentially, both recount healings and have a beginning, a middle, and an end—like aspirin commercials, as my professor in the seminary once quipped. The transfer over time of *Wunderberichte* from this medical cult onto the heroes of historical and biographical texts obviously marks an important development in preparing the literary context of the Gospels.<sup>18</sup> Still, more interesting, I propose, is pondering these *Iamata* texts specifically in their integral linkage to concrete *Gnadenorte* functioning as sacred *lieux de memoire*. For the cultivation of memory in conjunction with concrete, sacred locales opens up quite an interesting window upon a number of Gospel miracle traditions. Indeed, Gospel miracles in a narrative nowhere are remarkably rare.

### 4.1. Jesus and the Paralytic in John 5

The topographically rich Fourth Gospel is a very good place to begin. It happens, famously, that a shrine of Asclepius-Serapis is known to have existed in Jerusalem, in a section of the city just north of the Temple and Antonia fortress, beside two very large, adjacent pools sharing a common wall, today by the church of St. Anne. Serapis is a conglomerate deity of Ptolemaic Egyptian provenance, who assumed many attributes of Asclepius and was often fused with him in the

<sup>17</sup> See M.P.J. Dillon, “The Didactic Nature of the Epidaurian *Iamata*,” *ZPE* 101 (1994) 239–260.

<sup>18</sup> See D. Dormeyer, “Wundergeschichten in der hellenistischen Medizin und Geschichtsschreibung: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Annäherung,” *Hermeneutik der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen* (eds. B. Kollmann – R. Zimmermann) (WUNT 339; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2014) 127–151.

Greek context. More than 20 such Asclepius-Serapis cultic sites have been located throughout Syria-Palestine and several votive finds point quite clearly to this identification in Jerusalem, including a marble foot with the inscription: “Pompeia Lucilia dedicated this,” a miniature temple with a serpent (joint emblem of Asclepius and Serapis), and two small boats, hinting at Serapis’ additional role as a patron of safe sea travel.<sup>19</sup> Despite some grounds for hesitation—notably the missing remains of any columns from the supposed five-sided portico—the site of this Asclepion-Serapeum is today quite confidently identified as the same Pool of Bethesda where John very intentionally places his account of Jesus’ healing of the paralyzed man (John 5:1–15).<sup>20</sup>

The coincidence is not likely accidental. The question is what this collocation exactly suggests. The ex-voto finds date essentially from the second century CE, though several scholars have argued that the healing shrine existed already in Jesus’ own day. As an openly pagan cult (serving the soldiers of the Antonia, for instance), this is very difficult to concede.<sup>21</sup> First century Jewish monotheism indulged more latitude than modern monistic reconstructions often allow, however, and a properly Jewish variant of the wider Mediterranean culture of cultic springs is not hard to imagine. In any case, John clearly indicates that the spot was associated with healing powers prior to Jesus’ encounter with the paralytic. The presence of “many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed” all hoping to enter the water makes this plain (John 5:3,7). An intriguing and difficult textual variant further preserves a tradition that an angel was the agent stirring up the waters. As popular piety, the tradition sounds plausibly compelling. Text critically it is hard to decide. Archeologically Shimon Gibson thinks that the effect was produced by opening a sluice gate that separated the northern and the southern basins.<sup>22</sup> As for the invalid crowds waiting to enter the pools, Gibson further surmises that “those precluded from admission to the Temple, owing to disabilities and bodily defects,

19 Asclepius was also associated with rescue at sea. See Aristides, *Oratio* XLII, 1-15; and Edelstein – Edelstein, *Asclepius*, 162.

20 See the discussion of Robin Thompson, “Healing at the Pool of Bethesda: A Challenge to Asclepius?” *BBR* 27 (2017) 66–68. Confusion surrounds the precise name of the site, with variants appearing in the manuscripts of John 5:2 (Βηθζαθα, Βηθεσδα, Βηθσαιδα, Βελζαεθα) Josephus (Βεζεθα, *B.J.* 5.149–151), and the Copper Scroll from Qumran (*bbyt* ‘*sdyn*, 3Q15).

21 André Duprez (*Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs a propos de Jean* [CRB 12; Paris: Gabalda 1970] V, 98–127) for instance, argues that the origins of the cult should be sought in old Semitic traditions of healing activated by the Jewish encounter with Hellenism. In such extreme and flagrant proximity to the Jerusalem Temple, however, this scenario remains rather difficult to accept. Additionally, it now seems clear that the pools were transformed from reservoirs into *miqvoth* under the Maccabees—so that tracing the origins of a cult back to the period of Ptolemaic influence will no longer accord with the archeological evidence.

22 S. Gibson, “The Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem and Jewish Purification Practices of the Second Temple Period,” *POC* 55 (2005) 270–293, here 287.

would have sought miraculous healing at the pools.”<sup>23</sup> We have no way to confirm or reject this speculation; still Jesus does subsequently find the man precisely in the Temple (John 5:14), so his healing does appear ordered to his entrance into that cultic space, where we might perhaps imagine some thank offering. Whatever the precise reconstruction, the minute accuracy of John’s description (not paralleled in any ancient miracle accounts that I know) makes a very strong impression. One is transported by sheer literary force into some Jewish variant of just the sort of healing shrine simply presumed by the Epidaurian inscriptions. In understanding John’s text, we must accordingly reckon with both a very strong rhetoric of place—specifically sacred place—and a formidable verisimilitude coloring the whole picture.

Verisimilitude can mislead, of course, as the skeptics are quick to answer. Against this view of some pre-existing site of healing, Jodi Magness thus thinks that John’s entire depiction simply presupposes the transformation of the site into a pagan cult sometime after 70 CE.<sup>24</sup> In this case, the Gospel’s retrofitted memory is of a very different Jerusalem long after Jesus’ time, into which the miracle story has been inserted. Yet, if not a pure narrative fabrication, a concocted event meant to profit from a real and suggestive setting, then it would seem that Jesus did indeed work some wonder at what was then simply a large *miqveh* near the Temple. Memory of this healing, moreover, would itself have helped fuel that site’s subsequent transformation into a Roman shrine. For the question must inevitably be asked: If there was no preexisting cult, as Magness suggests, why the Roman shrine precisely here? A memory of Jesus’ own healing would be the obvious answer. The phenomenon in this case would then be parallel to the attempted *damnatio memoriae* that Hadrian, in recreating Jerusalem as the pagan Aelia Capitolina, worked on the site where Jesus’ resurrection was revered, strategically planting there a temple of Venus. Ironically, by this very act, he preserved an underground memory of the precise spot among believers. On the other hand, this supercessionist choice of location might just be an illustration of the less sinister and widely attested rule of continuity of sacred locales. Either way, one might easily argue that, even on Magness’ account, the anachronism testifies precisely to an accurate local memory preserved in the traditions informing John’s Gospel.

<sup>23</sup> Gibson, “Pool of Bethesda,” 271. It is true that the northern pool was indeed oriented to participation in the Temple cult, being repurposed, it seems, around 150 BCE from a reservoir into a ritual bath (*miqveh*).

<sup>24</sup> See J. Magness, “Sweet Memory: Archeological Evidence of Jesus in Jerusalem,” *Memory in Ancient Rome and Early Christianity* (ed. K. Galinsky) (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016) 324-343. Against the assumption that the cult arrived with Hadrian and the founding of Aelia Capitolina, Duprez (*Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs*, 106–107) points to a Latin inscription found near Zion’s gate, dating from the end of Trajan’s reign, between 115 and 117, erected by the Third Legion and addressed to *Jovi Op[timo] Max[imo] Sarapido*.

The origin of the Asclepion and question of just who is transforming whose healing shrine leads us back to the text itself. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is constantly presenting himself in various ways (and among other things) as the source of living water. His ostentatious neglect of the health-bringing waters at Bethesda, Asclepius' celebrated "coworker," curing the man with a bare word of command, accordingly allows Jesus' own healing power to function in the waters' place, making him appear (once again) as the true life-giving spring. From the perspective of *constructing a memory*, the evocative, water-rich, shrine-like setting of the scene as described in John's text is thus a great success. Robin Thompson helpfully observes that, "Regardless of where John's readers were from, surely this sort of description would bring to mind the sanctuaries of Asclepius found everywhere in the Roman empire: sanctuaries that were marked by porticoes where the sick came to be healed."<sup>25</sup> Taken as a story set in a place immediately reminiscent of readers' own native memories of "*salubrious places* with suitable springs," the story thus comes with its own key for interpretation. Not only was Jesus "able to provide more than the great Greco-Roman god of healing" (cf. Justin, *Apology* 22.6; 69.3).<sup>26</sup> He also replaces the specifically Jewish form of hope for cures. For readers, Jewish and pagan alike, the miracle story as John recounts it thus, in the first place, *triggers* memories, antecedent associations (drawn both from their "cultural encyclopedia" and earlier passages in the Gospel) through which Jesus, this truest μέγας θαυματουργός, may be properly perceived and understood.

As John's story develops, it quickly becomes a sabbath controversy, not a discourse on living water, however. This prompt displacement of sacred place by sacred time seemingly short-circuits any ongoing function for the local memory of the site at Bethesda. At this point, the healing scene would by all accounts be more fittingly placed in a synagogue, where, as in the story of the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1–6), the Jews routinely gathered on the seventh day. In contrast to this synoptic report, however, in John it is not *Jesus' deed* that is condemned as sabbath breaking. It is rather the healed man himself who is caught carrying about his mat (John 5:8–12). The *krabattos* thereby emerges as the vital link between the story's time and its place.<sup>27</sup>

In the Epidaurian *Iamata* there are multiple cases where the cause or emblem of a person's malady becomes a souvenir of their healing. "Euhippos bore a spearhead in his jaw for three years," we are told; and upon being healed by the god, "he walked out well having the spear head in his hands" {A12}. Another man had a stone, which he ejected during his incubation at the shrine. "Picking

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, "Challenge to Asclepius," 81.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, "Challenge to Asclepius," 81.

<sup>27</sup> Pace E. Lohse, "Jesu Worte über den Sabbat," *Judentum, Urchristentum, Kirche* (ed. W. Eltester) (BZNW 26; Berlin: Töpelmann 1960) 79–89, esp. 79–80.

it up,” the inscription says, “he departed with it in his hands” {A14}. Gorgias of Herekleia was healed of a barb in his lung. He too left carrying the barb in his hand {B10}. This terminal formula ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν ἔχων (or φέρων) which closes these inscriptions so effectively with such dramatic, graphic force hints at the way narrative art and enacted ritual were fused and bound to the cultivation of a patient’s private memory, publicly memorialized. One might well imagine items like Gorgias’ barb being treasured like scars—and like scars serving as the occasion for recounting fabulous stories. On the other hand, not all walked out with a medical miracle memorial in their hands. The cure of one Damosthenes, who was paralyzed in the legs and carried into the sanctuary upon a couch (ἐπὶ κλίνᾳς), is celebrated in the following lapidary phrase: “He went into the Abaton with two crutches (μετὰ δύο βακτηριῶν), he went out healthy (ὕγις ἐξῆλθε)” {C21}. The crutches evidently stayed behind.

The similarity of Damosthenes’ situation to the Gospel paralytic is fascinating. On the one hand, Jesus’ calculated decision not to let the liberated man leave his mat behind, as Damosthenes left behind his canes, ensures that credit for the wonder (or blame, as it happens) is ultimately directed to Jesus himself. For were an empty mat simply to lay there where the paralyzed man used to be—an ex-voto trophy in a known site of healing—the abandoned mat would have redounded to the waters’ glory. At the same time, the ostentatious portage of the *krabattos* resembles the showy healing of Gorgias and Euhippos. That the man’s mattress relic successfully occasioned the recounting of his incredible story is the very premise of John’s continued narrative as it develops. In this way, John’s account accomplishes for Jesus something similar to what the *Iamata* accomplish for their own institutional interests, forging a memory that magnifies the *doxa* of the divine source of healing (John 5:23; cf. 2:11). Jesus himself has in this way rhetorically displaced the epoch’s wonderworking shrines and personally become the locus of healing: beneficiary of the beneficiary’s ex-voto souvenir.

## 4.2. Jesus and the Paralytic in Mark 2

In Mark 2:1–10, another story of a paralytic is recounted, again with strong links to Damosthenes and John 5, but where the relation to place takes a very different turn. The setting in Mark has shifted to Galilee and the village of Capharnaum, where Jesus is said to be ἐν οἴκῳ (Mark 2:1). The “house” in question, to follow from the context, must be the house of Simon Peter, located somewhere near the synagogue of the village (Mark 1:29). What is especially remarkable about these two opening chapters in Mark is the way so many healings all transpire at this selfsame locale. First Peter’s mother-in-law is healed (Mark 1:29–31); next, at evening, huge crowds are brought to the house where they are healed

(Mark 1:32–34). Finally, with Jesus again back in the house, a paralyzed man is carried in on a mat and let down through the roof. To judge from the similar case of a certain Diatos of Kyrna and in contrast to the man in John 5, Mark’s paralyzed man may have been well to-do, for the paralyzed Diatos was carried around on his mat by his servants (ὑπηρέτας) {B18 (38)}. Whatever the case, after forgiving the man sin’s, Jesus tells him to pick up his mat and go home (Mark 2:11). The words ἔγειρε ἄρον τὸν κράββατὸν are exactly the same as in John.

More likely than two massively garbled versions of the same healing, we likely confront here the principle “same sickness, same formula.”<sup>28</sup> However we explain the recurrence of the miracle-working logion—as Jesus’ habitual speech or something shaped or duplicated in later transmission—the saying is more integral to the narrative in John 5. For although the Markan tale is, as in John, also the mixture of a miracle and controversy story; in Mark carrying away the mat is pure dramatic effect, with no relation to the dispute about forgiveness. If the mat does play an integral role in Mark’s memorable scene of opening up the roof, it is the house itself that becomes the critical prop in the Markan story. The cognitive support for *schema* and *script* represented by Peter’s *oikos* is recognizable by modern memory theory. When John Meier in reference to Mark 2 thus pronounces himself “inclined to think that some event in the public ministry stuck in the corporate memory precisely because of the strange circumstance,” the strange circumstances have everything to do with this healing’s location inside a crowded home.<sup>29</sup>

It is interesting in precisely this regard that, similar to John 5, Mark’s localization of the miracle had a cultic afterlife—and possibly a cultic prior life as well. In this case, it is not an Asclepion but a first century house shrine, later a *Domus Ecclesia* (still later an eight-sided Byzantine church), planted on the presumed site of Peter’s house. There was accordingly in Capharnaum an *aide-mémoire* built in black basalt, which was certainly the occasion to preserve and promote the bundle of miracle stories recorded in Mark 1–2. Whether veneration of this site predates Mark’s Gospel or is instead the Gospel’s fruit no one can say. Both scenarios are easily imagined—nor are they entirely exclusive options. In any case, the extremely early date of the sanctuary’s first stratum should not be underestimated. We are well informed, moreover, that (as still today) locals in the Greco-Roman world guarded and gladly told tales about hometown celebrities. It may well be that, just as the house of Augustus’ grandfather in Velitrae, where the future emperor was born, quickly became a draw for ancient tourists—with no help from any circulating texts—so Peter’s house was promptly valorized,

28 So J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*. II. *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday 1994) 680.

29 Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 680.

even without the intervention of a written Gospel. The extraordinarily early pilgrim traffic through Bethlehem, which Justin already knows, elicited traditions about the localization of Jesus' birth never recorded in the Gospels, namely its occurrence in a cave. The evidence of a primitive Galilean pendant to this Judean life of Jesus tourism, with its own store of local lore about his miracles, may thus represent a sort of archeological "multiple attestation" in favor of Mark's story. It is with good reason that we speak of the Holy Land as the "Fifth Gospel." Under whenever conditions it began, pilgrims came to Peter's house searching for help from the personal power who once passed that way and healed the paralytic. This is born out in the Christograms and prayers left in four languages of ancient graffiti.

In evoking the cultic context of Jesus traditions circulating in ancient Capernaum—a much thicker description than appeals to pre-Gospel *Sitz-im-Leben* normally provide—one major fact must not be lost from sight. In Mark 1–2 we are dealing specifically with the home of one of the most well-known and authoritative individuals in the first Christian generation. The lack of any comparable "House of the Centurion" shrine in the same village is an interesting index of the Petrine orientation of the local tradition. Such linkage to the named person of Peter reconfigures the calculations around what students of oral transmission call a "controlled tradition." Peter, indeed, is the earliest identified source behind the writing of Mark's Gospel, as Papias' Presbyter already recounts; and we have more here than simply the memorably "strange circumstances" evoked by Meier. We have an unforgettable event that purportedly took place in the Gospel's *author's* living room (he who had later to repair his torn-up roof).

The form of control in Mark is thus quite distinct from the institutional and hieratic supervision at work behind the redaction of the *Iamata*, where huge economic implications have manifestly produced and shaped the whole collection. This is personal memory to the highest degree, at least as Mark's Petrine Gospel itself was remembered. Thus, while the accounts of the miracles associated with Peter's own home are composed in the third person like the third person stories of named individuals at Epidauros, the Gospel's rhetorical purpose is actually much nearer to Aristides' first-person act of witness: his exuberant rhetorical celebration of Διός τε Εὐαγγέλιος καὶ Ἀσκληπιὸς Σωτῆρ, "Zeus the Gospel bringer and Asclepius the Savior" [806.3]. Aristides' witness is an evangelical testimony driven by honest zeal, zeal born of personal experience and his desire to erect a fitting oratorical monument for his multiple healings (a sign, one might think, that the healings had not taken). He was determined to expend himself expressing his thanks "as long as we shall have any memory (μνήμης) and thought left" [317]. Even so, his effusive highly personal oratory cannot escape cooption by the self-serving culture of publicity cultivated by Asclepius' cult. *Nolens volens* Aristides' orations still ultimately function like the first-person ex-voto of one

Marcus Julius Apellas, who recounts his story because, as he says, ἐκέλευσεν ἀναγράψαι ταῦτα, the god commanded him to write it [432]. The cult of Asclepius was immensely jealous for good press and glory.

## 6. Conclusion

The Christ cult was not less jealous for glory than that of Asclepius the healer. Yet the publicity generated around the person of Jesus and the sort of memory associated with the healings at Peter's house and at Bethesda reveal something rather striking about the Gospel tradition. It is a form of historical memory that at once results in the creation of shrines and also actively undermines them, paradoxically enough. It takes shape in concrete places and leaves behind its trace, yet overthrows the universalizing Asclepion branch model (where healings presuppose the shrine, rather than vice versa). John promotes a memory of Jesus as the sole true and personalized sacred locus: "The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... but in spirit and in truth" (John 4:21). Peter grounds a tangible memory in the personal framework of Jesus' *bios*. There cannot be two Peter's houses as there can be an Asclepion in every town. Together, the universal and particular dimensions bound up in this fruitful Johannine and synoptic-Petrine tension confer on the cultic memorialization of Jesus' wonder working power a grounded-yet-transcendent, incarnational, divine-human grammar.

One more difference might finally be mentioned regarding Jesus' healing power. Damosthenes' cure took four whole months, the longest convalescence recounted in the Epidaurian inscriptions. Aristides, when he was "helplessly bedridden" (κατακλίσσεις ἀπόρους), was healed, he says, by a vigorous regime of long, forced marches [317.8]. Kleimenes of Argos, paralyzed in body, was healed by having a large snake wrapped around him as he drank {B17 (37)}. The wealthy Diatos, for his part, was yoked to a team of horses, circled the sanctuary three times, then ritually trampled under their hooves, which all somehow made him well {B18 (38)}—a miracle cure indeed. Jesus' healing of the paralytic in Peter's home, like his healing of another at Bethesda, was remembered, by contrast, for the astonishment caused by the simplest and most sovereign word of command: "Rise, pick up your mat and go."

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