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Mediadoras de sanación: Encuentros entre Jesús y las mujeres: una nueva mirada

Teología Comillas

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Christianity is sometimes (not wrongly) called a “therapeutic religion” (see, e.g., Eugen Biser, *Einweisung ins Christentum* [Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1997]). For interpreters of the New Testament, this designation calls to mind the many healing miracles narrated in the Gospels and Acts. Although the concept of miracles tends to form a considerable challenge to modern minds, scholars working with the New Testament can hardly avoid taking some position and developing some approach to the miracle *stories* in the New Testament. The approach taken by Elisa Estévez López, titular professor at the Universidad Pontificia Comillas in Madrid, is a feminist one.

The introduction (13–27) spells out the rationale of this book: in the Synoptic Gospels, the ministries of healing and proclamation seem to be exercised by males only. Thus, Estévez López tries to find traces of women not only as the beneficiaries of healing miracles but as themselves empowered to heal. This approach is also supported by a strand of medical anthropology that understands healing not just as the professional activity of medical staff but as a complex process that involves the patient, too. Transferring this to New Testament miracle accounts, Estévez López stresses the interaction between Jesus and the women concerned: the latter are not mere objects; they become subjects of healing.

In the first chapter (“Mujeres, memoria e identidad colectiva,” 29–84), Estévez López spells out her methodological presuppositions in detail. Following the work of W. H. Kelber, R. A. Horsley, and others, the Gospels are to be read as literary manifestations of collective memory (often by way of informal and/or uncontrolled transmission), designed to confirm and shape the identity of certain Christian groups. Since, as is to be supposed, this memory has mostly been formed and controlled by males, traces of women practicing the ministry of healing and proclamation (and maybe leadership) have to be looked for. This is where the “hermeneutics of suspicion” enters. These general considerations are followed by brief analyses of the Synoptic Gospels in view of the roles they attribute to women. Mark yields a remarkable number of active women, most prominently the Syrophenician woman (7:24–30), but also other female characters who either actively seek healing or whose active role in proclamation is at least subtly alluded to. Matthew seems not to have privileged traditions of active women (apart from the exceptions discussed in the book), while Luke, in his desire to present Christianity as respectable and compatible with Hellenistic and Roman society, has “silenced” women, depicting them as particularly dependent on the (male) healer and benefactor (this explains, too, why the Syrophenician woman is missing in Luke).

Chapter 2 (“Cuerpos e identidades femeninas en contexto,” 85–161) provides the historical framework for the detailed studies that follow. The first three subchapters (85–104) are a survey of concepts of health, sickness, and healthcare in antiquity and today, particularly the significance of gender for ancient conceptions of health and sickness. The fourth subchapter (104–61) focuses particularly on the (Synoptic) Gospels under the aspect of how they reflect current ancient views on women, health, and sickness. Here one finds a number of important observations on how the Evangelists particularly depict the female beneficiaries of Jesus’ healing miracles—without names, mostly within the house. The Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24–30 par. Matt 15:21–28) and the woman with a hemorrhage (Mark 5:25–34 par. Matt 9:20–26; Luke 8:43–48) thus stand out as notable exceptions.

In the third chapter (“Jesús, un sanador tradicional que actúa con el poder de Dios,” 163–219), Estévez López surveys Jesus’ healing ministry. The healings narrated in the canonical Gospels belong to Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God, but, in themselves, they are ambiguous and can give rise to questions: Did Jesus work his miracles with the power of God or with the power of Satan? It is of particular interest that Jesus’ healings are sometimes at odds with existing norms, especially Sabbath regulations. Estévez López then investigates some aspects of Jesus’ healing activity: he did not wait for patients to come to him but was on the move and close to those in need; his healings involve bodily contact, which is particularly important in the case of “lepers”; dialogue and authoritative words of healing. Generally this chapter argues for an understanding of

Jesus' miracles as acts of liberation—from demonic powers as well as from life-limiting rules. This is by all means a valid and fruitful approach to miracle stories, but the reader may sometimes wonder at what level the argument runs. Is it at the level of historical inquiry, or is it at the level of the Gospel narratives and, if so, of which ones? What this chapter does offer is a general conceptual framework of how to understand miracle stories so that one can now approach the detailed interpretations of four miracle stories that constitute the four chapters that follow.

The first of those, in chapter 4 (“El poder de una mujer creyente [Mc 5,24b–34],” 221–53), is the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage, clearly an example of an active woman who acts in a countercultural way. Estévez López gives a detailed analysis of the text in Mark that is focused on the active role of this woman: it is the suffering woman who takes the initiative and approaches Jesus, hoping to be healed by touching him. Thus, properly spoken, *she* performs the healing act and heals herself. But, as Estévez López very clearly points out, she does not act in isolation. On the contrary, she becomes a witness, telling “the whole truth,” and she is addressed by Jesus as “daughter” (Mark 5:34), thus integrated into a new familial connection.

Chapter 5 (“De sanada a discipula: La suegra de Pedro [Mt 8,14–15],” 255–82) is about Peter’s mother-in-law—according to Matthew. The Matthean version is chosen because it shows some characteristics that particularly lend themselves to an interesting feminist reading. Although it is materially a story about a healing miracle, the language is remarkably similar to a vocation story (cf., e.g., Matt 9,9). This observation sheds new light on the woman’s service (διηκόνει αὐτῷ, Matt 8:15): it is her way of following Jesus (cf. Matt 20:28); what has seemed to be an account about domestic duties becomes a note of discipleship, possibly even leadership in a “house church” (yet in Matthew, different from Mark and Luke, she is said to serve only Jesus). Estévez López strongly asserts that this service is not to be understood as subservience but as a freely chosen commitment out of love—a point that might have deserved some more exegetical support.

The sixth chapter (“El derecho de participar a los frutos de la basileia: La cananea [Mt 15,21–28],” 283–312) deals with the most obvious instance of a woman playing an active part in a miracle story. Again, Estévez López chooses to analyze the Matthean version. There, in contrast to Mark 7:24–30, the woman’s plea is articulated in “liturgical” language strongly reminiscent of the Psalms (15:22: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!”; 15:25: “Lord, help me!”). According to Estévez López, this could be a hint of significant liturgical roles being played by women. Moreover, in Matthew’s version a sharp contrast is built up between the woman and the (male) disciples who want Jesus to silence her (Matt 15:23), and in Matt 15:29 Jesus praises the woman’s great faith. Thus,

and by her argument with Jesus, this woman becomes an example for other women as she, through her wisdom, opens up a space of healing and inclusivity.

Finally, chapter 7 (“De estar encorvada a vivirse erguida [Lc 13,10–17],” 313–39) deals with a miracle story from Luke: the bent woman. At first glance this seems to be an unlikely candidate for a story about an active woman, and Estévez López decidedly reads it with an unconventional focus—not on Jesus nor on the controversy, but on what this woman actually does: being healed, she praises God. Estévez López understands this brief note as referring to genuine proclamation and a confession to Jesus as the one who provides access to God. Much of the chapter appears as a meditation that reads pretty much *into* this brief note.

The results are again summed up in “Una palabra final” (341–44), which is followed by a list of abbreviations (345–46) and the bibliography (347–75).

On the whole, this book offers some very interesting and stimulating insights, although not all of the interpretations are equally convincing. Sometimes it strikes the reader how strongly Estévez López relies on the work of B. Malina, J. Neyrey, and others on the cultural environment of the New Testament, and one may be puzzled about her detached way of referring to “Mediterranean culture.” She might possibly have done without such strong dependence on these concepts. Nevertheless, her book is a very welcome challenge to exegetical habits of perception and an invitation to take “una nueva mirada” at women in miracle stories.