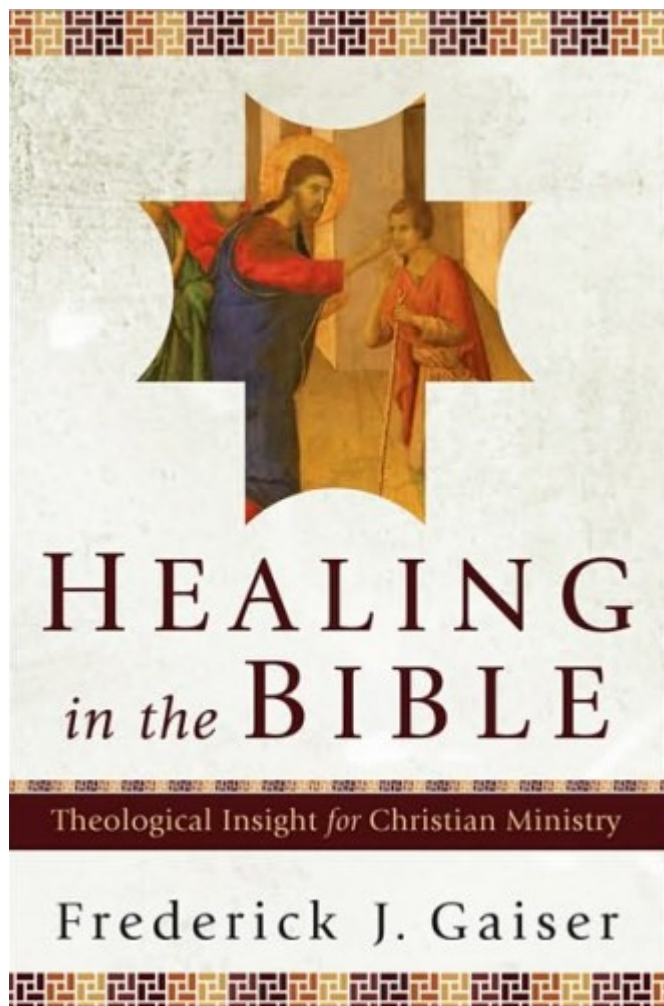


God of wholeness

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [April 18, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Healing in the Bible

By Frederick J. Gaiser
Baker Academic

Healing has almost dropped out of the so-called health-care debate, drowned out by political and economic issues and loud competing ideologies. In the midst of that contestation, Fred Gaiser, a skilled scripture interpreter at Luther Seminary, offers a

sober, accessible review of the biblical materials pertinent to our thinking about healing. He does not aim to resolve our current issues, but he does attempt to reframe our thinking and talking about healing as a counter to positivistic notions rooted in scientism.

The bulk of his book consists of expositions of specific biblical texts, eight from the Old Testament and six from the New; an appreciation of the famous text of Ben Sirach that affirms the importance of doctors; and a compelling conclusion concerning Isaiah 53 and being healed by Christ's bruises.

Gaiser is not a biblicist who wants to replace modern scientific medicine with faith healing. But he does insist that scientific medicine addresses just one dimension of a mystery of healing that invites other perspectives, hosts other dimensions and admits of thick, complex thought that has a theological aspect.

The Old Testament texts that Gaiser considers can be grouped around his second discussion, a reflection on Exodus 15:26: "I am the Lord who heals you." That theological claim is in a text that summons Israel to obey the commandments and thus avoid the "diseases of Egypt."

Gaiser draws the text into the pattern of deeds and consequences that pervades the Old Testament, especially the wisdom materials. By the will of the Creator, there is a reliable coherence between certain choices and corresponding probable consequences. If Egypt is taken as a metaphor for exploitative systems of social power, then the text is a recognition that such systems become instances of predictable pathologies that one can avoid by participating in a covenantal community. This sort of obedience requires discipline and intentionality for relational practices that are often disregarded or contradicted by the practices and assumptions of "Egypt."

Three of Gaiser's texts are lament psalms (Pss. 38, 67 and 77). While tracing the standard rhetorical moves of this genre, notably complaint and petition, Gaiser rightly focuses on the relatedness of the lamenter to the God addressed, who evokes both honesty and hope—two essential ingredients of healing that require such an interaction. He insists that the lament is a genuinely dialogical act in which there is a partner on the other side whose response makes a difference in the status of the petitioner. In this adamant insistence, Gaiser shows the decisive difference between the claims of biblical faith and the one-dimensional reasoning of scientism.

What this investigation makes clear is that one's theology—that is, one's understanding of God—and one's health are interrelated. Good theology contributes to good health; bad theology can lead to death. . . . One's theology can make one resigned or make one expectant.

Happily, Gaiser does not try to argue that claim but simply asserts it as a nonnegotiable assumption of the biblical tradition.

Gaiser sees that "illness and recovery" are a "primal human experience," and Israel's pattern of speech exhibits a community with resources for processing that inescapable human reality. He calls attention to parallels in African health practices that have not been flattened by modernist thinking but are open to the dialogic reality that defies such flatness.

In Psalm 77 Gaiser notices the dramatic turn from "I" speech to "Thou" speech and draws the insight, verified in many of the laments, that "a person cannot be well alone." Such a dramatic move, moreover, is accomplished by the attendant community, for the speech that moves to "thou" is often speech that the person cannot muster for the self; it requires companions to speak it into the crisis. Healing is inescapably in the context of such a tradition that supplies knowing speech.

The more that medical practice devolves into formulaic statistics and computer data, the more there is reason for the claims of biblical evidence to be championed and insisted upon as a truth too important to be eliminated by the persuasiveness of scientism. Gaiser concludes, "The Bible (and the ongoing work of God in cultures of the 'developing world') reminds us that Western medicine and ideology have no absolute monopoly on truth." His other Old Testament studies affirm this concern: healing via the serpent (Num. 21), Hezekiah's bitter weeping, the healing of Naaman from leprosy, a son given to Hannah. In every case, the lament is essential for evoking the healing power of God.

In his study of New Testament texts, Gaiser considers Jesus' casting out of demons, the healing of the blind man in the fourth Gospel, the Samaritan leper in Luke and the forgiveness of sins in Mark. Two matters especially interest me in this exposition. In the events recounted in Mark 5, a woman is healed of hemorrhages after suffering from them for 12 years. The narrative reports that the healing was accomplished by touch. She wanted only to touch Jesus' cloak—and she did! She was healed, and Jesus knew "power had gone out." Gaiser focuses on the mystery of the touch, of

being "in touch with Jesus," of the transfer from power to weakness and eventually of the laying on of hands and the transformative power of such bodily engagement.

Concerning the paralyzed man in Mark 2, we are offered a riff on the interrelatedness of healing and forgiveness, a juxtaposition that Gaiser finds in the familiar cadences of Psalm 103:3: "who forgives all your iniquity, / who heals all your diseases." The modern attempt to heal without attentiveness to forgiveness is a category mistake. As the God of Psalm 103 acts with transformative authority, so Jesus is narrated as one with authority to transform, a claim that immediately evoked the hostility of the managers of "the diseases of Egypt."

A reflection on the healing narrative of Acts 3 leads to a recognition that the healing capacity of Jesus has been entrusted to the church. That healing is "in the name of Jesus." Thus the book of Acts attests to a community close to the power reality of Jesus, an instance of the power reality of the God of the exodus.

Gaiser is no obscurantist. He does not want to wrest healing responsibility away from the medical community. But he does insist that biblical testimony tells us something crucial about healing that is likely to be forgotten in the race to new technologies, fresh experimental treatments, extensions of life expectancy and all the seductions of modern entitlement. This component of human reality consists in a mystery that cannot be reduced to scientific knowledge or control:

We emerge from a world of mystery into a world of rationality . . . recognizing that cold rationality cannot always do justice to the complexity, or perhaps the darkness, of the world in which we live. Perhaps today also . . . we will have to resort to poetry to describe our experience of life and of God. But, like our African and our biblical brothers and sisters, in our illness we confidently turn our lives over to a compassionate and incarnating God, who shares our experience and who remains the source of healing and renewal.

When I read this book, it seemed to me a review of what I already knew. But I had never put what I knew together in the way Gaiser has. Thus the book is a consolidation of awarenesses that are urgent for the future health of our society. In the midst of urgent discussions about entitlement programs, the single-payer option and free-market choice, Gaiser reminds us that healing depends on lively face-to-face communities of candor and hope that specialize not in cure but in healing. The development of networks of neighborliness as the most likely matrix of well-being is

exactly the primary work of faith communities.

I suppose it is an interesting question whether such neighborly engagements are sustainable without a God who is the quintessential neighbor. But clearly the communities that assent to the healing power of God are the most likely venues for networks that sustain and transform.

Gaiser's book is an alert to progressives who may be embarrassed about appeals to a real Other who answers—and to one-dimensional conservatives (not all conservatives) who shun the real confrontation of risky dialogue. We are invited to think again, outside the shrill so-called debate on health issues. Reneging on the dialogic aspects of health amounts to a failure of nerve on the part of faith communities. It is time for a recovery of nerve.