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Gary S. Shogren

Will God Heal Us— A Re-Examination of James 5:14–16a

Dr. Shogren was a research student in the University of Aberdeen before becoming pastor of the Penacook Bible Church in New Hampshire; he is also Adjunct Professor of New Testament at the Conservative Baptist Sminary of the East in Worcester, Mass.

James 5:14–16a (author's rendering):

Is any among you ill? Let him summon the presbyters of the Church and let them pray over him after anointing him in the name of the Lord with olive oil. And the prayer offered in faith will deliver the sick, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he is in the state of having committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore confess (your) sins to each another and pray for each other so that you might be healed.

Jas. 5:14–16 is intriguing on several counts: (1) because it seems to give an unqualified promise of answered prayer, as in Jn. 14:13–14; (2) because it involves physical healing; (3) because Roman Catholicism bases two of its sacraments on it; (4) and more excitingly, because anointing with oil seems exotic to many evangelical Protestants. The need for a careful study of Jas. 5 is all the more valid in an age when medical technology has taken on religious connotations of its own, when religion and science are neatly divided into Cartesian categories, with healing generally falling into the realm of science. The issue is further heightened with the latter-day spread of holistic treatment, 'inner healing,' and the 'Health and Wealth Gospel' with its sporadic rejection of medical technology,[1] movements which soften the distinction between supernatural healing and natural law.

The very strangeness of James' instructions may trigger an emotional bias which will force us to conclude that 'James cannot

[1] Cf. esp. Barron, *The Health and Wealth Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill., 1987) for an excellent critique of the latter idea.

mean that' to the violation of our own interpretive principles. This is a plea, therefore, not for a renewal of the healing *charisma*, but for an approach to Jas. 5:14–16 which sees the passage as the battleground for a sound hermeneutic.

In 5:14 we have the third piece of advice James gives to people in different situations in the Church (*en humin*, 'among you,' is used five other times in Jas. 3–5 to speak of the 'congregation'). James' third question and his instructions for the ill continue throught 5:16a. James uses a common word for sickness (*astheneō*, to be weak, sick') which here denotes physical ailment, not spiritual distress (cf. 13a); its meaning is confirmed by the participle of *kamnō* ('the one who is ill, sick') in 15.[2]

His prescription is to 'summon' (*proskaleō*) the elders of the Church. The fact that it is the body of presbyters that is called, [3] and not a charismatic healer, is highly suggestive for two reasons. First, James was almost certainly written within the first century, and probably before the controversy over Gentile admission to the Church.[4] Since the gift of healing was known in the Church throughout the first century, James is signalling a course of action which circumvents the charismatic healer in favor of Church officers.[5] Second, he has the patient call for his own presbyters, the very people who would be best equipped to enquire about hidden sins (15b).[6]

The elders are called upon to anoint the subject with 'olive oil' (*elaion*); the aorist participle *aleipsantes*, 'having anointed,'

[2] See J. Cantinat, *Les Epîtres de Saint Jacques et de Saint Jude*, SB (Paris, 1973), 247. Cf. the attempt to read this in terms of spiritual weakness by Carl Armerding, '"Is Any Among You Afflicted?" A study of James 5:13–20,' *BSac* 95, 1938, 195–201.

[3] Contra Cantinat, 248–49.

[4] Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (3rd. rev. edn.; Downers Grove, Ill., 1970), 761–64.

[5] Although note K. Seybold and U. B. Müller, *Krankheit und Heilung* (Stuttgart, 1978), 161, who assign a late date to James and conclude that the gifts of healings and miracles in 1 Cor. 12:28 had become institutionalized in the presbyters. Calvin assumes that the charismatic gift is in view here; so do A. B. Simpson in *The Gospel of Healing* (London, 1915) and A. J. Gordon in *The Ministry of Healing* (2nd. edn.; Harrisburg, 1961), although they argue that the gift of healing is still available to the Church today.

[6] Note the frequent references to visiting the sick in the Babylonian Talmud (ed. I. Epstein): *b. B. Mes.* 30b; *b. Sabb.* 127a—'There are six things, the fruit of which man eats in this world, while the principal remains for him in the world to come, viz.: hospitality to wayfarers, visiting the sick,' etc.; in *b. Ned.* 39b—40a, R. Akiba compares neglect of visiting the sick to the shedding of blood, since the visitor's prayers might have healed a dying man; there are guidelines for whether one should stand or sit with the sick (*b. Ned.* 39a) or when not to visit the sick (if the ailment is embarrassing—such as bowel trouble—or if it would be exacerbated by talking, *b. Ned.* 41a); note the concern about healing on the Sabbath, which seems to have been restricted to

probably denotes an action antecedent to prayer. They are then to invoke the name of the Lord. The name of the Lord Jesus is surely meant here (see Mk. 16:17 [longer ending]; Acts 3:6, 16; 16:18);[7] the invocation of his name stamps the use of oil as a Christian religious act, 'an opening to the power of God for him to intervene.'[8]

Let us examine four possible interpretations of the function of the anointing with oil: 1. the oil is purely medicinal; 2. the oil is sacramental (Extreme Unction); 3. the oil is a psychological reinforcement; 4. the oil is a symbol of divine favor.

1. The Oil is Purely Medicinal

Olive oil was widely used both for hygienic and medicinal purposes. It was popular as a sort of body rub or lotion for use after bathing or between baths (cf. 2 Sa. 12:20). It was also used in the treatment of flesh wounds, skin afflictions, sciatic pain, and violent headaches. In such cases the oil would be applied to the part of the body where it would do good. In the Roman world, some healers anointed to drive out the spirit that was thought to have caused the illness.[9] The Jews too seem to have used oil as a part of exorcism; according to the Midrash on Ecclesiastes, Hanina is put under a spell (by a Galilean Jewish Christian) and rides an ass on the Sabbath; his uncle Joshua anoints him, whereupon he recovers from the spell (cf. *Midr. Qoh.* I, 8).[10]

The proponents of the 'medicine' view imply that in the first century olive oil was used as a cure-all.[11] The point that is made

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life-threatening ailments such as open wounds (*b. 'Abod. Zar.* 27b–28b); there are warnings against 'crying out' in prayer for the sick on the Sabbath, lest the rabbi be guilty of the work of healing (*b. Šabb.* 127a); note too that Polycarp thinks that good presbyters should 'care for all who are sick' (Pol. *Phil.* 6.1).

[7] Cf. Sophie Laws, *Epistle of James* (San Francisco, 1980) 227–29; C. L. Mitton, *Epistle of James* (London, 1966), 199; Peter Davids, *Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, 1982), 193–94.

[8] Davids, 194.

[9] Schlier, '*aleiphō*,' *TDNT* I: 231.

[10] Cf. the *Midrash Rabba on Ecclesiastes,* trans. by A. Cohen (London, 1939). Dibelius and Greeven, *James* (Philadelphia, 1976), 252, assert without evidence that 'the whole procedure [in James 5] is an exorcism.' John Wilkinson, *Health and Healing* (Edinburgh, 1980), 148, shows that physical, not demonic, affliction is intended by '*astheneō*.'

[11] It seems clear that many modern writers plunder Ropes' (304–07) and Mayor's (170–73) commentaries on James for their selective references to anointing. Thus counseling authority Jay Adams can boldly claim that 'in fact, in biblical terms oil was used as the universal medicine . . . James did not write about ceremonial anointing at all.' Cf. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids, 1970), 107.

is that James is promoting the best of both worlds: good medicine in conjunction with prayer. Therefore, the arguments runs, a modern Christian should seek the best medical attention (certainly not olive oil!) while praying for healing.[12] This interpretation coincides well with our Western regard for the medical profession.

The 'best medicine' approach, however, has several important flaws. First, oil was by no means regarded as a panacea in the first century; we need not suppose that the medical profession of those days was that primitive. While oil was helpful in some cases (as in giving immediate roadside treatment for wounds, Lk. 10:34), it would have been next to worthless for broken bones, heart trouble, or infectious diseases such as leprosy. Why too would James invite the charge of quackery by having Church elders give whatever medicine they thought best? This is especially pertinent in a society where a variety of other more suitable cures was recommended. Anointing is not the best medicine, and in most cases it is not even good medicine.

The modern misunderstanding of anointing arises when one culls the ancient references in Strack-Billerbeck's *Kommentar* or in the entry on 'aleiphō', in the *Theological Dictionary of the NT* by Schlier, who is himself almost wholly dependent upon Strack-Billerbeck. Some authors refer the reader to the first century Celsus, who in his *De Medicina*, Books I–IV, gives some attention to anointing with oil. Wilkinson thus quotes from *De Medicina* II, 14, 4 (Spencer's translation) 'it is desirable that even in acute and recent diseases the whole body should be anointed' to prove that anointing was a panacea. But not only does Wilkinson disregard the fact that Celsus used all sorts of natural oils (not necessarily olive oil), he quotes only the positive part of the opinion; Celsus goes on to say '. . . but only during remissions and before food. But prolonged rubbing is unsuitable in acute and increasing diseases . . . it should never be applied whilst a fever is increasing.' He recommends anointing for headaches and for pain in a bodily member, but not when the pain is at its peak. No one who reads Celsus' arcane remedies at any length could assert that he thought of oil (let alone olive oil) as a cure-all. Galen's approach in his *On the Natural Faculties* is similar.

The Jews' approach to medicine was also fairly sophisticated: the Babylonian Talmud records all sorts of remedies, of which

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[12] So argue Cantinat, 249; Lenski, 664; Adams, 108; cf. esp. Wilkinson, 153ff.—he asserts that every method of modern healing is represented by some member of the Church today and that modern medical technology is thus the Church's equivalent for anointing.

anointing with oil plays a minor role. Oil is often cited as an aid to good hygiene, but healing is said to result from proper diet, hygiene, and folk remedies, e.g.; 'Six things cure an invalid from his sickness, and their remedy is an efficacious remedy: cabbage, beet, a decoction [i.e., being boiled down] of dried poley, the maw, the womb, and the large lobe of the liver. Some add: also small fish (*b. Ber. 57b*).'[13] *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 28b–29a recommends vinegar rinses and potions, a good diet, herbs and leaves. To be sure, *Test. Adam* 1:7 states that at the seventh hour of the night 'the waters [from above the heavens] (can be) taken up and the priest of God mixes them with consecrated oil and anoints those who are afflicted and they rest.' But this reference ascribes the rest to the celestial waters rather than to the oil, and the whole section is less than literal at any rate.

Therefore, both Hellenistic and Jewish sources indicate that a first-century author could easily have said 'use the best available medicine, then let the elders pray' if that is what he meant. With that in mind, is it feasible to claim that oil was the best medicine available and thus provide an analogy to modern medicine? Would it not be equivalent to a modern pastor telling the sick to take two aspirin and pray about it?

Second, it is the prayer that saves the sick, not the oil; note the emphatic position of *hē euchē tēs pisteōs*, 'the prayer of faith'. In the plan for healing in Jas. 5, oil or medicine simply play no efficacious role. James is certain that prayer saves the sick. Of course, he does not rule out medicine either.[14]

Third, some of the illnesses in question are caused by a spiritual problem—by the Lord's chastisement for unconfessed sins. Anointing does no good for disciplinary illness if confession and repentance are lacking.

Fourth, the 'best medicine' view cannot explain the parallel passage in Mk. 6:13—'And (the apostles) were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil (*ēleiphon elaiō*) many sick people and healing them.' Since these apostolic healings were miraculous, it must be asked why the apostles would use the best medicine if they were healing through the direct power of God? Anointing in Mark 6:13 is hardly as a perpetual sacrament (since it is the only such reference in the gospels to anointing), nor is it medicine. While we have said that the healing in Jas. 5 was not

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[13] All Talmudic references are to *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. by I. Epstein, 18 vol., London, 1961; they may be accessed by individual tractate.

[14] *Sōzō*, 'save,' is often used with non-soteriological meaning; note its use for physical healing in Matt. 9:21.

charismatic, the role of the oil is similar: James underscores the fact that it is the prayer which effects the healing, not the oil.

Fifth, the anointing is to be accompanied by the invocation of the name of the Lord, implying that the oil does no good without the Lord's intervention. Jay Adams, however, claims that 'what James advocated was the use of consecrated, dedicated medicine . . . But when medicine is used, it must be used in conjunction with prayer. That is why James said that the prayer of faith makes the sick well.'[15] But why then, we must ask, does modern medicine cure those who do not pray?

Sixth, a whole-body anointing offends our sense of propriety if male elders performed it themselves (the participle would certainly imply that they do.)

Here is where a problem of hermeneutical presupposition must be raised. Might we not be assuming that James advocates the 'best medicine' along with a general prayer precisely because that is what twentieth century Christians do? The evidence against that position is all but insurmountable, and it behooves us not to assert its truth against the clear data.

2. Oil denotes the Sacrament of Extreme Unction

The Catholic Church formally made Extreme Unction (the so-called 'Last Rites', but known since Vatican II as the Anointing of the Sick) a sacrament in AD 852, and reaffirmed it at Trent (Session XIV, 1); it also drew the sacrament of Auricular Confession from Jas. 5:16. This sacramental anointing accompanies a final confession of sins before death. God will forgive these last sins, he will be 'saved' and 'raised up' (i.e. resurrected).

This sacerdotalist view directly contradicts James' expectation of healing, not of a better state of preparedness for the after-life.[16] The illness is not necessarily life-threatening,[17] and a soteriological understanding of 'save' and 'raise up' damages James'

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[15] Cf. Adams, 108.

[16] See Franz Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief*, HTKNT: 13 (Freiburg, 1964), 220 and Davids, 193, who take a sacramental view of anointing on the basis of the 'eschatological oils' of Isa. 61:3, *Adam and Eve* 36, and *Apoc. Mos.* 9:3. But the 'oil of gladness' in Isa. 61:3 is clearly metaphorical; the 'oil of mercy' in *Adam and Eve* 36 (= *Apoc. Mos.* 9) is not stated to be eschatological, and it is interpreted in a Christian interpolation at *Adam and Eve* 42 to be a metaphor of salvation in Christ. Wilkinson, 150, is more to the point: neither official authority nor charisma is present; the elders pray as representatives of the congregation, which according to James 5:16 has the authority to pray for healing.

[17] Cf. Cantinat, 247.

discussion of physical healing through 16 (note his use of *iaomai*, 'heal').[18]

Sophie Laws suggests that those who rule out a medicinal meaning for oil are making too sharp a distinction between medicine and sacrament in the first century mind.[19] While the point is well-taken, the Talmud certainly knows of the distinction, although it is not as sharply defined as it is in our own century.

It is worth noting that Irenaeus (*Haer.* I, 21, 3) knew of heretics who anoint their initiates with appropriate abracadabras and those who err by substituting anointing with oil and water in place of baptism.

3. Oil was used as a Psychological Reinforcement

In this interpretation the oil is 'a supplementary aid for awakening faith' in a suggestible mind, comparable to Isaiah's fig poultice (2 Ki. 20:7) or Paul's handkerchief (Acts 19:12).[20] This viewpoint is fraught with problems as well. First, 2 Kings is vague on the point of whether or not Isaiah used a placebo, and Paul's use of cloths was as proof that the healing came from Paul's God. Second, neither Isaiah nor Paul recommended their tokens as a universal practice in the way that James does with oil. Finally, it is the elders who must pray in faith in this passage (14), not the patient.

4. Oil was used as a Symbol of Divine Favor

The interpretation which is here recommended is that anointing was neither medicine nor Extreme Unction, but rather a sign of God's healing presence. Anointing as the pouring or smearing of oil on the head was an ancient ritual in Israel. Prophets (Is. 60:1), priests (Ex. 29:7), and kings (1 Sa. 10:1) were anointed when they were set apart unto God. Oil was a general symbol of God's special presence, election, and good favor.

The standard argument against our view goes that if James had been speaking of a religious-symbolic use of oil he would have used *chriō* ('anoint sacramentally') rather than *aleiphō* ('anoint').[21] It must be said first of all that such a rigid distinction comes from an idealism about language which was popular before the advent of modern linguistics. But even then, it is noteworthy that a master of

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[18] See Calvin and Mayor for comments on Extreme Unction.
[19] See Laws, 227.
[20] Mitton, 198–9.
[21] See Adams, 107.

the old school such as Richard C. Trench, does not rule out the possibility that *aleiphō* might refer to religious-symbolic anointing: '*Aleiphein* is used indiscriminately of all actual anointings, whether with oil or ointment; while *chriein* . . . is absolutely restricted to the anointing of the Son.'[22] Trench points out that in the LXX *aleiphein* is used of 'religious and symbolical anointings' twice (of priests in Ex. 40:13 and Nu. 3:3; we should add Gn. 31:13), examples which disprove the 'secular' meaning of *aleiphō*. We might say that *chriō* is usually restricted to religious anointing, while *aleiphō* can refer to any anointing.

The discussion of whether *aleiphō* can denote a religious symbol becomes academic in that the word was used in Mk. 6:13 to refer to miraculous healing accompanied by anointing. In Jas. 5 the prayer of faith takes the place of an apostolic miracle and once again oil is deprived of any inherent healing properties.

An advantage to the view of oil as religious symbol is that we need not imagine the Twelve or the presbyters using oil as a body lotion. Even apart from the issue of propriety, it is impractical to picture the Twelve anointing multitudes in the open air and in the villages. They must have used the other method of anointing, which was carried on in the Early Church: that of pouring or rubbing the oil onto the head.

James confidently predicts the results of these actions:

> The prayer offered in faith will rescue (*sōsei*) the sick;
> The Lord will raise him up (from sickness);
> If he has committed any sins, the Lord will forgive them.

There is clearly a spiritual side to the healing, that the Lord (not the medicine!) will forgive 'if he is in the state of having committed sins' (perfect periphrastic participle). In some cases, forgiveness and healing must go together. We gather that the elders will inquire about unrepentance before they pray (cf. Jn. 5:14, 9:3; 1 Cor. 11:28–30). James knows that not all illness is caused directly by sin, but the possibility is real (notice the Future More Probable condition).[23]

James does not say whether or not the healing is instantaneous; he does say that it is forthcoming unless, presumably, there is some extenuating cause for the affliction. He does refer to the 'prayer of faith' in 15, which he commends in 1:6, 4:2–3, 5:16b–18. He contrasts this faith with double-mindedness both in 1:8 and 4:8, with 'doubt' in 1:6, and with praying with pleasure

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[22] Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (9th. edn.; London, 1988), 137. *Chriein* is so restricted in NT Greek, but the papyri show that *chriō* and *chrisis* were used of rubbing oil on animals (Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary of the NT*, 21, 693).

[23] See Wilkinson, 149, for a balanced picture of sin and sickness.

seeking in 4:3; James does not allow the possibility that a desire for health is a poor motive for prayer.[24] The context of James negates the opinion of Rendel Short,[25] viz., faith in Jas. 5:15 and in 1 Cor. 12:9 are the same thing, a kind of temporary supernatural endowment which is God's to give and not available when healing goes against God's will. Short labels any other prayer for healing 'false optimism'; he thus contradicts James' teaching about faith in Jas. 1. The prayer of faith in 5:15 is surely a prayer in which the elders pray for healing and *believe that healing will result.*

James concludes this section in 16a with a general exhortation: 'Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.' James is moving to the daily life of the congregation (he switches from aorist jussives to present imperatives): if all Christians were to be admitting their sins to each other and praying for each other, the ultimate remedy of summoning the elders might be averted.[26]

In summary, we may glean from James this course of action:

1. the sick Christian should summon his or her own elders
2. the elders should ask about past sins and urge repentance
3. the elders should anoint (rub oil on the head) in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ
4. the elders should pray for healing, believing that healing will be forthcoming.

Anointing with oil and praying for healing was practised for some time in Church history. In AD 416 Innocent I refers to James, and says that oil blessed by the bishop can be used by laypeople without a priest present.

In contrast to Jas. 5:15 and the unequivocal promise of healing, the Biblical record implies that God does not always heal: Trophimus is probably best known to us for having been 'left sick at Miletus' (2 Tim. 4:20). At the very least, all Christians before the Parousia will succumb to final illness and death. Christians are guaranteed final healing in the resurrection, and are also assured of God's concern to heal in this age.

In his discussion of Jas. 5:15, Francis MacNutt helpfully lists no fewer than 'Eleven Reasons Why People are not Healed.'[27] James has already taken into account the possibility of God's discipline. Paul's experience in 2 Cor. 12:7–9 points to sickness as a means of

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[24] Cf. Mussner, 224.

[25] Cf. R. Short, *The Bible and Modern Medicine* (London, 1953), 125.

[26] See Adams, 105–27.

[27] Fr. Francis MacNutt, *Healing* (Notre Dame, 1974), 248–61. It is unfortunate that Fr. MacNutt is heavily influenced by Agnes Sanford and the 'inner healing' movement, but he still provides much that is useful.

learning dependence upon God, if the 'thorn' is a physical ailment.[28]

According to James, the primary reason Christians are not healed is a lack of faith in prayer (MacNutt lists it first). A safe, generalized prayer for God to bless the sick runs directly counter to the prayer of faith. Unlike modern Christians, James does not immediately mitigate the possibility of healing in order to spare the feelings of the very sick or the unhealed. Faith always entails risk, or it is not faith. The unspoken assumption is that if God does not heal, it will be out of the ordinary.

Evangelicals should take heart from Jas. 5 and not be pulled away from it because of appearances.[29] After all, anointing and praying are not the same as going to a faith healer, nor are we seeking healing along the lines of the 'natural laws' of non-Christian mystical healers. If anything, Jas. 5 leads us away from charismatic healings, and there is no NT passage which connects anointing with miraculous healing after the Resurrection. Modern 'faith healers,' self-healers, and mystical healers do not urge their adherents to call for their own elders for anointing and prayer. Nor will we be sacerdotalists through using oil as a symbol. Nor will we be using a rite meant only for early Jewish Christians—such anointing is a part of the New Covenant, not of the Old.

My initial experiences with anointing come through serving as a Church elder at Stony Lane Baptist Church in Rhode Island. We taught that the sick Christian should initiate the process by asking for prayer, and also that the elders were responsible for reminding the congregation of that option. We did not rule out nor did we demand instantaneous healing. We discouraged people from throwing out their medicine or stopping their visits to the doctor. If healing did not come within a reasonable period of time, we did not ignore the physical symptoms and rationalize that it did come, yet invisibly. Healing in James is healing which can be seen, and not merely through the eye of faith; in such cases continued prayer is necessary.

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[28] But note that Paul prayed three times fully expecting God to remove the thorn (12:8), that it was by revelation that God showed him its purpose (12:9), and that Paul seems to believe that this was unusual and needed explanation.

[29] Cf. the unwarranted caution shown by the Reformed scholar A. W. Pink, *Divine Healing: Is it Scriptural?* (Swengel, Penn., 1952), 24–25; he reasons that it is permissible to anoint with oil, but that he would not want to 'dogmatize' about it. He also concludes that modern elders are not spiritual enough to carry out such faithful prayer. For a better-balanced Reformed viewpoint, note William Henry Anderson, Jr., *Christianity Today* 5, Jan. 30, 1961, 8–9.