



The Body and the Blood: A Theological Reinterpretation of the Hemorrhaging Woman

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The Body and the Blood:
A Theological Reinterpretation of the Hemorrhaging Woman

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Abstract:

Traditional theological understandings of the healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman (Haemorrhissa) found in Mark 5:21–43, Matthew 9:18–26, and Luke 8:40–56 have overlooked key parts of her identity, reducing her to a mere symbol or theological device. Using disability studies and theology informed by the author's own battles with chronic pain, this analysis reclaims the woman's identity as it is presented in the original Markan text. By examining her as an impure, poor, lonely, and unnamed woman who was healed by Jesus through her own faith, this piece argues that the woman's marginality positioned her to have a unique and meaningful relationship with God. The research asserts that the story of the Hemorrhaging Woman offers an example of faith and resilience, and demonstrates that vulnerability can bring one closer to the divine.

INTRODUCTION:

Sitting in my senior year English class on a snowy January day, working on my year-long project, a ten-page research paper, I felt it. Flames suddenly ignited in my body, burning me from the inside out. The pain manifested externally. I was suddenly drenched in sweat, strange for a girl who was always cold. My vision went blurry, and my mind could only focus on finding any source of relief: water, or the cold metal of my desk against my palms. But these solutions only partially eased the pain, which worsened by the second. The only feasible option I could think of was going outside until the pain ceased. Raising my hand, the entire class's eyes turned toward me. Somehow through the pain, I muttered, "Can I go outside?" My teacher, a man in his sixties, responded as most high-school teachers would, "You're not allowed to leave the building unsupervised, why would you want to go outside?" "Please, I'm just having a medical flare up, I have to go outside, I promise it will only be a minute." Every second the flames grew hotter. "What's going on?" My poor, sweet teacher asked the golden question. I was forced to answer honestly. "I'm having a hot flash." It was the only answer I had, and it was true, I was on medicine that suppressed my hormonal system and caused a medically induced pseudo-menopause in my seventeen-year-old body. "Aren't you a little *young* to have hot flashes?" he responded in a humorous tone. My classmates, equally intrigued, giggled, while I waited for the sweet release of cold air.

I struggled with chronic gynecological pain for years. This was just one of the many distinct "pains" I had grown accustomed to, though it was particularly debilitating, some days I would have upwards of ten hot flashes. Some days my pain would radiate from one side or the other. Other "pains" I felt more in my chest, though they originated from my ovaries. The worst pain, though, was in every fiber of my being. It radiated from my stomach and reached its way to

every nerve, to the point where my fingers and toes tingled. This pain kept me in bed, unable to move for multiple hours, sometimes days. Every day was a question of if or when the pain would strike. My doctors refused to address this new, sudden, terrible pain, even when I was hospitalized for it, even when it was happening as frequently as every week. So I self-medicated, slept a lot, ate comfort foods, and avoided any stretch that would irritate the scar tissue that had formed throughout my abdomen.

My teacher did, eventually, let me go outside, and we never spoke of it again, but he was unaware of the impact this seemingly small moment would have on my mental health as it related to my condition. Not only did he call attention to my “difference,” he disqualified it, saying I was “too young” to experience the symptom that was plaguing me, and denied my ability to understand and treat my condition. He triggered a self-consciousness I had fought hard to dismiss, making me wonder whether there was something wrong with me, *whether I was lesser because I was in pain.*

My chronic pain created disconnects in most areas of my life. I was so young that none of my classmates understood what was happening. None of them could comprehend my situation, let alone the larger questions it gave me. When I tried to lean into my religious understanding, nothing could answer why I was suddenly changed from a happy, healthy teenager, into a shrunken version of myself that was terrified of my own body.

Though my family regularly attended church, faith was not a matter of personal connection so much as a weekly routine. I enjoyed the songs and the fancy stained glass, but nothing prompted me to ask deeper questions. That was until I was confronted with chronic, undiagnosed pain. As often as I felt it, I wondered whether my pain distanced me from God the way it distanced me in every other area of my life. As a young girl in the church, I was taught to

admire the Virgin Mary, the picture of sanctity and fertility. But suddenly, when confronted with these larger questions, I could not see myself in her image, a change that made me question my role in the church and life. For months I struggled with how to reconcile my seemingly conflicting personal experiences with a theology I was just coming to understand. I now believe it was this time of questioning that transformed routine religious practice into realized faith. Asking these hard questions showed me the heartbreak of knowing that sometimes bad things happen, and the comfort of knowing I will persevere. Working through this, I realized my connection to God is not dictated by my ability to relate to Mary, but my continued search for faith, even, and especially, when faith is difficult. This led me to seek ordination in the United Methodist Church, pursue graduate education, and ask the questions I will explore more in this piece.

On the days I was most restricted by my pain, I often found comfort on online forums, reading other people's descriptions of pain and comparing them with my own, trying to diagnose myself when doctors couldn't, which seemed to be what everyone else online was doing. My community became the comment section on any random woman's blog where she told her medical history in vivid detail. Dozens of other people, struggling with similar issues, would comment about their experiences, all using the same heartbreaking language describing doctors not listening, failed treatment attempts, life-altering pain, and infertility.

My search for medical answers led me to YouTube videos on faith and chronic pain. Here, at the intersection of two major parts of my life, I hoped I might find answers. I spent hours scrolling through videos looking for any hint. Unfortunately for me, most of the videos had clear messages that either said that someone's pain is the consequences of their sins, for which they have to repent, that someone's pain isn't their fault, but they would only be cured if they

have enough faith, or that some, if not all, medical and fertility issues indicated the presence of demons which need to be exorcised.

These videos became blatantly sexist when it came to topics of menstruation or fertility. Men preached publicly about the woman's need to serve her husband, and how, if she disobeyed these commands, she would be punished with pain and infertility. Thus, the only way to cure one's body and soul was to simply trust God and the prescribed domestic role of women. As someone interested in religion, and dealing with questions of my own reproductive chronic illness, I wondered why these were the perspectives that prevailed on the internet because none seemed helpful or accurate to my experience.

My exposure to these messages on YouTube taught me that, in mainstream Evangelical landscapes, if there is any discussion on chronic pain, particularly women's pain, there remains a tendency to dismiss the person's needs and push upon them a sense of guilt and obligation. Faith is not used as a lens through which we understand our pain, but as the direct cause and solution. As a young person seeing these arguments, I questioned whether my illness made me less holy, less beloved.

This consumed me. Though I had often wondered whether my illness made me different, these videos seemed to confirm my fears using religious language. It was only when I turned to scripture in search of answers, that I was reassured of my worthiness. The unnamed woman with the issue of blood, found in Mark 5:21-43, Matthew 9:18-26, and Luke 8:40-56, captured my loneliness, my desperation, my pain, so perfectly. And, for this scared young girl, the woman's story exemplified the message that love and faith are not bound by our physical limitations. In the moments when I was shamed for speaking openly about my pain, it was the image of the Hemorrhaging Woman that reassured me of my worth.

I've chosen to focus on the story in its oldest form, in the Gospel of Mark. The story of the Hemorrhaging Woman, as told in Mark 5:21-43, describes an anonymous woman who bled for twelve years. Though she saw many doctors and she spent all of her money looking for a cure, her condition only worsened. One day, Jesus was on his way to the house of Jairus, a synagogue leader whose daughter was dying. The Hemorrhaging Woman approached Jesus, touched his hem from behind, and was instantly healed. Jesus, feeling the power leave him, asked the crowd who touched him. Reluctantly, the Hemorrhaging Woman revealed herself. Jesus told the woman that her faith healed her, and to go in peace. At that moment, Jairus was told that his daughter had died. Jesus instructs Jairus to have faith, and Jesus leaves to resurrect the young girl.

Like other healing miracles, this narrative demonstrates Jesus's commitment to healing the sick. However, the Hemorrhaging Woman, as a poor, lonely woman who was considered ritually impure, was among the most socially distinct of those healed by Jesus. Previous engagements with the miracle of the Hemorrhaging Woman (also known as ἡ αἱμορροοῦσα or Haemorrhissa, as she will often be referred to here), either overlook the woman or attempt to identify and/or diagnose her. In this paper, I will lean into her anonymity, looking closely at how the text describes the woman's status and condition for evidence of Jesus's larger ministerial commitment to serve the suffering, regardless of their social, physical, or religious position. In this way, I argue, that prolonged pain does not separate a sufferer from God. Instead, pain can be an invitation for a unique experience with the divine.

To explore the woman herself, and the strength of her faith, in this paper I will analyze the few things we know about her: first, that she was considered ritually impure as a result of her condition, second, that she spent all of her money seeking care, third, that she was alone, fourth,

that she was unnamed, and finally, that she was healed. I will ground the exploration within my own story of seeking care for a chronic pain condition, to root this research in the everyday lives of people who suffer; those stuck between being told they were too sick to be holy, or too holy to be sick.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION:

As a piece of religious text, this miracle account has been interpreted and reinterpreted thousands of times. The commentaries discussing the woman's identity and condition are exhaustive, ranging in topic and theory from a woman with nosebleeds, to a woman who Jesus encountered more than once. Though the theological implications of these perspectives are fascinating in their own rights, in pursuit of her identity, the significance of the woman's anonymity and status is often overlooked. Here, I will explore the historical interpretations to highlight the gap in which key parts of the woman's description are overlooked.

The Hemorrhaging Woman was often referenced in early Christian discussions as evidence of women's role in the Church. This is a pattern in early Christian interaction, which does not explore the woman herself, but the implications of her story on menstruating women in church settings. One third-century interpretation from Dionysius of Alexandria recounts that the woman did not touch Jesus, but his hem. As he puts it, "The woman who had the issue of blood of twelve years' standing did not touch (the Lord) Himself, but only the hem of His garment, with a view to her cure."¹ Dionysius uses this as evidence of women's self-awareness of their impurity. He argues:

¹ "The Works of Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Archelaus : Gregory, Thaumaturgus, Saint, Ca. 213-Ca. 270," T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1882, <https://archive.org/details/worksofgregoryth00gregiala/page/vi/mode/2up?q=women>. Page 200.

The question touching women in the time of their separation, whether it is proper for them when in such a condition to enter the house of God, I consider a superfluous inquiry. For I do not think that, if they are believing and pious women, they will themselves be rash enough in such a condition either to approach the holy table or to touch the body and blood of the Lord.²

Dionysius, therefore, does not explicitly identify the woman in any terms other than those given in the Gospel accounts, but he uses her as a reflection of how women should approach the Sacred: with restraint while in a predefined state of impurity.

This discussion continued into the seventh century when Pope Gregory the Great wrote in a letter to St. Augustine of Canterbury that “a woman should not be forbidden to enter the Church during the times of her monthly period; for the workings of nature cannot be considered sinful, and it is not right that she should be refused admittance since her condition is beyond her control.”³ Pope Gregory goes on to cite Haemorrhissa’s humility and acceptance from Jesus as evidence of the sanctity of both men and women in the presence of the Lord, thus allowing them to take communion together. As he puts it, “If it is objected that the woman in the Gospels was compelled by disease while these latter are bound by custom, then remember, my brother, that everything that we endure in this mortal body through the infirmity of its nature is justly ordained by God since the fall of man.”⁴ Pope Gregory’s perspective seems to be in the minority of his time, though. His declaration that women could take communion while menstruating was strongly opposed by later Bishops Timothy of Alexandria and Theodore of Canterbury.

² “The Works of Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Archelaus : Gregory, Thaumaturgus, Saint, Ca. 213-Ca. 270,” T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1882, <https://archive.org/details/worksofgregoryth00gregiala/page/vi/mode/2up?q=women>. Page 200.

³ Pope St. Gregory the Great, and Augustine. “Menstruation and Holy Communion: To St. Augustine of Canterbury.” Accessed March 10, 2025. https://jbburnett.com/resources/gregory-grt_menstru.pdf.

⁴ Pope St. Gregory the Great, and Augustine. “Menstruation and Holy Communion: To St. Augustine of Canterbury.” Accessed March 10, 2025. https://jbburnett.com/resources/gregory-grt_menstru.pdf.

Another example of the earliest interactions with the woman is in the Gospel of Nicodemus, also known as the Acts of Pilate, a fourth or fifth-century apocryphal text that identifies the Hemorrhaging Woman as Veronica, the same woman who famously wiped Jesus' face on the way to his crucifixion.⁵ The tradition of identifying the Hemorrhaging Woman as Veronica has continued in Catholic and Orthodox traditions to this day, with both traditions identifying her as a Saint, and as a station of the cross.⁶

Eusebius, a fourth-century Church historian, does not explicitly identify the woman as Veronica, but focuses on another detail discussed in the Gospel of Nicodemus: the historical figure of the woman and the statues depicting her healing. Traditionally, these statues were said to be on the woman's property, implying she either came from great wealth or her wealth was restored after she was cured. Eusebius credits the statues' commission to Gentile worshippers, whom he says, "were accustomed to pay this kind of honor indiscriminately to those who were as saviors or deliverers to them."⁷ Like many early commentaries, Eusebius does little to engage with the story as it is presented in the Gospels but draws upon early Christian apocryphal texts for explanation. As a historian, he is more concerned with the text's reception and the story of what happened after her healing. He pays closer attention to the statues, which were said to depict the miracle, than the miracle itself.

Significantly less attention is paid to Haemorrhoida in the Medieval period, though not for lack of discussion. While the narrative of the Hemorrhaging Woman remained a significant

⁵ "The Gospel of Nicodemus: Acts of Pilate," From *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Translation and notes by M.R. James, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924.

⁶ Fr Gabriel, "The Simple of Faith of St. Veronica, The Woman with the Issue of Blood," St. Mary Magdalene Orthodox Church, November 7, 2018.

⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*. Translated by Christian Frederic Crusé, United States: Stanford & Swords, 1850. Page 289.

example of Christ's healing abilities, there was much less discussion on the woman or the nature of her condition. Much of the formal church discussions on this miraculous healing, and the church art that depicts it, focus on the woman's positioning, pointing towards humility and submission to Christ. Therefore, it was much more likely, in formal settings, to encounter this story as a message of Jesus' healing capabilities, and a reminder to submit oneself to God's will through faith. However, according to findings by Barbara Baert, Liesbet Kusters, and Emma Sidgwick, it was localized Christianity and pagan reception of the story that focused on the woman and her bleeding. As they found in their exploration of Medieval art and material culture, "the Haemorrhoid hysteria does appear in late-antique and early Byzantine exorcism charms, intaglios and protective amulets. This reveals an ongoing interaction between the textual miracle and magical practices."⁸ This had larger theological significance in that "the Haemorrhoid is lifted outside the gospel to lead a life of her own as a protector for women against bleeding from the uterus, and for men against dangerous swellings."⁹

Commentary on Haemorrhoid herself, and her legendary statue(s) is continued later by seventeenth-century Jesuit Cornelius Lapide, who, in his discussion of the Healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman, overlooks the obvious themes of menstruation and purity, and rather focuses attention on the healing as evidence of relics. Like Dionysius, Lapide argues that Jesus' hem held mystical powers which not only healed her, but gave her a relic in the form of a statue, "from whose base grew an herb which cured all diseases."¹⁰ Like the Gospel of Nicodemus and

⁸ Barbara Baert, Liesbet Kusters, and Emma Sidgwick, "An Issue of Blood: The Healing of the Woman with the Haemorrhage (Mark 5.24B-34; Luke 8.42B-48; Matthew 9.19-22) in Early Medieval Visual Culture," *Journal of Religion and Health* 51, no. 3 (2012): 663–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41653858>.

⁹ Barbara Baert, Liesbet Kusters, and Emma Sidgwick, "An Issue of Blood: The Healing of the Woman with the Haemorrhage (Mark 5.24B-34; Luke 8.42B-48; Matthew 9.19-22) in Early Medieval Visual Culture," *Journal of Religion and Health* 51, no. 3 (2012): 663–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41653858>.

¹⁰ Cornelius Lapide, *The great commentary of Cornelius à Lapide*. Translated by Thomas Wimberly Mossman. London. 1889.

his Catholic tradition, Lapidé identifies the woman as Veronica, and attributes to her a variety of relics, including Jesus' hem, her curing statue, and the cloth of Jesus' face from the original story of Veronica. However, in search for answers in the physical objects in Haemorrhissa's story, Lapidé neglects the woman herself, attributing the miracle to the power of Jesus' hem rather than the woman, despite Jesus, in all three retellings, saying that it was the woman's faith that healed her.

Interpretations in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, too, tend to overlook the woman in a distinct way from other historical trends. In particular, many focus on Jesus' actions in the narrative to use the healing of Haemorrhissa as evidence of Jesus' divergence from Jewish theology. One example is by theologian Marla J. Selvidge, who argues that Mark's description of the healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman "subtly shatters the legal purity system and its restrictive social conditioning."¹¹

Attempting to pinpoint Jesus' divergence from Jewish theology, Selvidge uses the word "primitive" to refer to the Jewish tradition that observes menstrual purity rituals. This implies that Jesus, in rejecting purity rites, would have "advanced" the religious practice. However, theologically, historically, and practically, the observance of purity laws fell out of popular practice within two centuries of the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., not because Jesus eliminated a need for purity laws, but because "it had been the Temple that served as the space of holiness to be separated from impurity."¹² Selvidge's argument seems to imply that Jesus rejected purity laws and, therefore, would have allowed the woman to enter the Temple in an

¹¹ Marla J. Selvidge, "Mark 5:25-34 and Leviticus 15:19-20: A Reaction to Restrictive Purity Regulations." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, no. 4 (1984): 619–23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3260473>.

¹² Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2000. Page 20.

“unclean” state. This, too, seems unlikely considering the lengths Jesus went to in preserving the integrity of the Temple in Mark 11:15-19 and Luke 17:14. In these examples, Jesus clears the Temple of markets and instructs newly healed lepers to cleanse themselves before entering the Temple. In these, and many other instances, it becomes clear that Jesus encouraged some division between the sacred and profane.

Modern interpretations like Selvidge’s walk two lines of thought that verge on supersessionism: first, that the purity laws were “primitive,” and second, that Jesus was making a statement on Jewish laws by placing himself in situations of impurity.¹³ However, while modern readers of the Bible can disagree with the beliefs of purity laws, looking for justification in the actions of Jesus not only disagrees with Jesus’s Jewish tradition but diminishes the messages behind his actions. My intervention argues that Jesus’ interaction with Haemorrhissa implies that his ministry is not limited to those in a “pure” state. Rather than dismissing purity laws, Jesus’ actions liberate the woman within the boundaries of purity laws. As I will later argue, he does not intend to diverge from purity laws but, instead, tends to the pure and impure alike.

With medical advancements in female reproductive care, there, too, came a shift in religious interpretation of the miracle of the Hemorrhaging Woman, one that sought to diagnose the woman in modern medical language. Joel S. Baden and Candida R. Moss’s *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* is one example of an increasingly popular engagement with the text, searching for theological meaning within her unknown condition. “Chapter six: Barrenness and the Eschaton” explores the story of Haemorrhissa and the text’s implication that she is infertile. Baden and Moss deduce that the

¹³ See: Marla J. Selvidge, “Mark 5:25-34 and Leviticus 15:19-20: A Reaction to Restrictive Purity Regulations.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, no. 4 (1984): 619–23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3260473>.

text's imagery implies that the woman likely remained infertile after her interaction with Jesus. For Baden and Moss, this is a distinction in the New Testament that separates womanhood from motherhood. Their argument draws upon a primary piece of textual evidence, a single word that describes the woman's blood loss, which is later used to describe the shriveling of the fig tree. As an exegetical observation, it has fascinating messages on infertility. However, I feel that there are similarly fascinating arguments to be drawn focusing exclusively on the Hemorrhaging Woman's narrative, focusing on what I will later call her "social infertility" rather than biological infertility.

These sorts of attempts to diagnose the woman have become increasingly popular among traditions that use literal interpretations of the Bible. One such study by Serekara Gideon Christian and Baribefe Daniel Koate argues that, due to the primary symptom being prolonged bleeding, a likely cause of the woman's suffering would be the modern diagnosis of menorrhagia.¹⁴ Menorrhagia, though, is understood to be generalized heavy bleeding with a slew of potential causes or treatments. As a diagnosis, it offers little more explanation on her condition than the Biblical text.

Other popular diagnosis theories include fibroids, cancer, hemorrhoids, even chronic nose bleeds.¹⁵ Some, too, such as J. Duncan M. Derrett, argue that the ambiguity of the woman's condition is strategic to represent all abnormal bleeding as curable through Jesus.¹⁶ While these,

¹⁴ Serekara Christian and Baribefe Koate, "The Haematological Perspective of The Biblical Woman with issue of Blood," 2017.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339299241_The_Haematological_Perspective_of_The_Biblical_Woman_with_issue_of_Blood_by_Serekara_Gideon_Christian_Baribefe_Daniel_Koate

¹⁵ Mark R. D'Angelo, "Power, Knowledge and the Bodies of Women in Mark 5:21-43," *The Woman with the Blood Flow (Mark 5,24-34). Narrative, Iconic, and Anthropological Spaces* (ed. B. Baert) (Art & Religion 2; Leuven & Walpole, MA: Peeters 2014).

¹⁶ Derrett, J. Duncan M. "Mark's Technique: The Haemorrhaging Woman and Jairus' Daughter." *Biblica* 63, no. 4 (1982): 474-505. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42707153>.

too, have fascinating theological implications, it is also worth noting, particularly for the scope of this study, that “literary sources irrefutably reveal that in early Christianity the Haemorrhissa was perceived as suffering from severe menstrual bleeding and was as such considered impure.”¹⁷ Diagnosing the woman now does not change the ways she was able to engage with society in her context, nor does it change Jesus’ interaction with her. Within her context, the most specific diagnosis of her bleeding would be prolonged abnormal bleeding, classifying Haemorrhissa as a *zavah gedolah*, a designation I will more thoroughly describe in the section on her impurity.

Countless commentaries have searched for the woman’s identity, history, or diagnosis. While this has led to great theological discussions, they often overlook the other factors of her identity, and what her status may say about her interaction with Jesus. Or they neglect the theological significance of her anonymity, particularly as it is so clearly contrasted with the figure of Jairus. This oversight in textual interaction is where I position myself. I will instead focus on how her demographics, as described by the original Markan text, impact the theological significance of her interaction with Jesus.

IMPURE:

In the summer of 2016, I attended my youth group’s annual service trip to north Georgia, where we were working on external repair of low-income homes damaged during storms. It was hard work, but a trip that I looked forward to all year. Generally, our days contained solemn work, followed by worship and fellowship filled with laughter and games and too much candy.

One morning, though, my fun was interrupted by a shocking pain. Being fifteen at the time, I was scared that I had done something to myself, ‘the candy finally got to me.’ I kept the

¹⁷ Barbara Baert et. al., “An Issue of Blood: The Healing of the Woman with the Haemorrhage (Mark 5.24B-34; Luke 8.42B-48; Matthew 9.19-22) in Early Medieval Visual Culture.” *Journal of Religion and Health* 51, no. 3 (2012): 663–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41653858>.

pain close to my chest until it demanded to be felt, and I began quietly crying in the back seat of our fifteen-seater van. After a few failed attempts to self-medicate (ginger ale and Advil), a nurse on the trip diagnosed me with a bursting ovarian cyst. The pain came in waves, so I felt fine for a few moments, only to be completely helpless the next. I remember crying and, unfortunately, embarrassing myself in front of my friends and the cute boys from the other churches.

In between waves of pain, what occupied my mind more than the cyst was a discomfort around the conversations I knew everyone else was having: “What happened to Kelley?” “It’s her period?” “What’s an ovary?” But the truth is, I barely knew what an ovary was. My abstinence-only sex education had done little to prepare me for the complications of having a body, and even less about having open and honest conversations about those complications. All I could do was pray for the pain to stop. Fourteen hours later, as I closed my eyes to go to bed, it finally did.

Routinely in his ministry, Jesus was willing to place himself in positions of social and religious impurity to better serve those in need, Each Gospel account recalls Jesus healing lepers, eating with tax collectors, and raising the dead. Haemorrhoid’s story is no different. Historically, though, conversations about the theological implications of Haemorrhoid’s healing have argued that Jesus’s response was pushing against purity laws. However, multiple times in the Gospel accounts Jesus himself claimed that he did not want to overturn Jewish tradition or purity laws.¹⁸ Instead, Jesus placed himself in positions of social, physical, and religious impurity to make a more meaningful statement that his ministry was not limited to those in “pure” states, and, in fact, is most needed by those who are considered “impure.” To better understand this relationship between Haemorrhoid and her cultural context, it is necessary to explore the foundation and reception of purity laws.

¹⁸ Matthew 5:17-19, Luke 5:14, Mark 8:22

In Second Temple Judaism, between the fifth century BCE and the first century CE, all were bound to certain rituals that were meant to preserve a distinction between the sacred and profane, particularly aimed at maintaining the purity of the Temple.¹⁹ Purification practices were most rigid among those who were regularly engaging with the Temple, but “there was a general agreement among Jews that purification was necessary not just for priestly figures but also for the laity.”²⁰ For some, this included morning baths, for others, strict diets. There were varying degrees of observance, but it was undoubtedly a part of everyday life, and, for those strict observers, greatly impacted who or what they interacted with.

Any person’s bodily impurity was seen as contagious and could spread between people and objects. For this reason, in addition to exclusion from the Temple, any bed or chair that an unclean person used was to be avoided by others to maintain their own purity.²¹ Similarly, any food or object that was important for rituals was forbidden from people in an impure state.²²

While twenty-first-century understandings of these Laws would see them as inherently sexist, it’s important to grasp the Second-Temple context to better understand the message behind this particular healing miracle. Purity rites included cleansing after most forms of bodily discharge, particularly semen,²³ childbirth,²⁴ menstrual blood,²⁵ and any genital emission classified as “abnormal.”²⁶ There was a close symmetry between the genders on the types of bodily impurities and in the routines of purification for those impurities. However, largely due to “the physiological differences” between types of impurity, women were more often in a state of

¹⁹ Hannah Harrington, *The Purity Texts*, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006, 7.

²⁰ Hannah Harrington, *The Purity Texts*, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006, 7.

²¹ Leviticus, 15:4-13

²² Leviticus 19-20

²³ Leviticus 15:16-17

²⁴ Leviticus 12:2-5

²⁵ Leviticus 15

²⁶ Leviticus 15:2

impurity, and the lengths of time required for purification were longer.²⁷ Seminal discharge made a man impure until sunset, while menstruation, because of its longer period of discharge and perhaps greater impurity, made women impure for seven full days. There were some laws, though, that were clearly imbalanced. For example, a woman who gave birth to a female baby was unclean for twice as long as a woman who gave birth to a male baby.²⁸ Among ancient Jewish purity scholars, it is generally understood that while sexism played into the purity laws themselves, it was not necessarily the driving motivator for their existence.

The term *niddah* is used to refer to both the menstruating woman and the period of impurity during menstruation: seven days, which were meant to encompass the bleeding. More than other forms of impurity, the *niddah* was thought to hold particular powers. In addition to her ability to make others and holy objects impure, the mystical, demonic qualities of *niddah* were popularized in local lore and even formalized in religious commentary. These perspectives were pervasive in antiquity. One example of this ancient understanding of menstruation is in *Natural History*, written in the second century by Pliny the Elder. *Natural History* described “the monthly flux of women” as being able to turn wine sour, dim the reflection of mirrors, and rust metal. Pliny also claimed that tasting menstrual blood “drives dogs mad and infects their bites with an incurable poison.”²⁹ Ancient Jewish texts were not immune to these cautions. The Babylonian Talmud references women, along with gods, palm trees, pigs, and snakes, as things men should not pass between, presumably for fear of impurity.³⁰ A section of the Gemara also

²⁷ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “*Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*,” Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2000. Page 45.

²⁸ Leviticus 12

²⁹ Pliny, *Natural History*, Volume 7, 15:64

³⁰ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “*Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*,” Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2000. Page 35.

says that if a woman at the beginning of her *niddah* passes between two men, one of them will die.³¹

Niddah has two potential linguistic origins which depict the varying theological interpretations for the period's purpose. As outlined by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "The first option is *n-d-d*, 'to depart, flee, wander.' The second option is *n-d-h*, 'to chase away, put aside.'"³² The main difference between these understandings, both linguistically and socially, is the autonomy the woman has over her seclusion during menstruation. For some interpretations, it is the woman who separates herself as part of her religious duties, for others, it is a routine shunning of natural female bodily functions.

These two contrasting lineages mirror retellings of the origins of *niddah* outlined in Babylonian and Palestinian Talmudic texts. The Palestinian Talmud offers a more punitive understanding that women, as descendants of Eve, would routinely have their blood spilled as punishment for their own sins, and for the sins of their foremothers.³³ Menstruation was the price they humbly paid. Conversely, the Babylonian Talmud presents an origin that women's menstrual duties are "human obligation in response to God's gift of life."³⁴ This understanding implies that blood is the cost of creating life, a condition of being a creator. It is unknown what the Hemorrhaging Woman's perspective on menstruation would have been, or, for that matter, whether her condition was related to menstruation. However, considering the textual evidence

³¹ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2000. Page 36.

³² Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2000. Page 17.

³³ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2000. Page 32.

³⁴ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2000. Page 33.

and early Christian sources that point towards her being considered a *zavah gedolah*, it can safely be assumed that, at the very least, she was expected to abide by purity restrictions.

The term “*zavah*” was used to designate a woman experiencing bleeding outside her *niddah* period. The distinction between “normal” *niddah* and “abnormal” *zavah* bleeding impacted the amount of time a woman needed to wait before being considered pure, and the rituals that ended the seclusion. *Niddah* purification processes took seven days from the start of the flow of blood, while *zavah* purification required the woman to remain without bleeding for seven additional days.³⁵

The distinction between *niddah* and *zavah* separated “normal” and “abnormal” bleeding, but, unlike diagnosis as we know it today, the terms only went as far as distinguishing between a singular or short-term abnormality, known as *zavah ketana*, and a long-term abnormality lasting more than three days, known as *zavah gedolah*.³⁶ Classification as any of these was enough to keep one from being permitted into the Temple until the end of their prescribed purity processes. In the case of the Hemorrhaging Woman, this meant that even if she did not bleed for six days straight within the twelve years she suffered, she would not have been allowed in the Temple.

Everything changes when Haemorrhissa is healed. Not only is she freed from her pain, but she is finally able to observe religious traditions in the Temple, from which she was forbidden for the entirety of her bleeding. To combat the argument that this is Jesus’ rejection of purity laws, it is important to look at what Jesus did *not* do, as well as what he *did* do. Jesus did not enforce purity restrictions by seeking his own purification or shame the woman for not

³⁵ Leviticus 15:25–28.

³⁶ Tirzah Meacham, “Female Purity (Niddah),” Jewish Women’s Archive, 2024, jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/female-purity-niddah.

following them herself. When he felt the power drain from him, or when the woman came forward, Jesus did not reprimand her for “stealing” from him or making him impure. Instead, he welcomed her with open arms.

However, Jesus also did not completely disregard the purity laws either. Rather, he relieved her of her abnormal discharge, thus the restrictions that were associated with it. This would have finally allowed her to enter the Temple as a ritually clean person. Rather than dismissing Haemorrhoids's status, he got rid of her blood, the thing that bound her to the status of impurity. When the appropriate rituals had been followed, the woman would, once again, be able to enter the Temple and interact with people more intimately. With Jesus's help, the woman was able to return to her religious practice within the bounds of purity laws.

If Jesus sought to make a statement on purity laws, he may as well have simply slept with a menstruating woman. Instead, he raises the dead, heals the leper, and aligns himself with the socially ostracized. Jesus is not speaking out against purity laws, he is asserting that his ministry goes *beyond* them, that the love of God is present, even, and especially, for people in an unclean state.

POOR:

One of the biggest constraints on my ability to seek care was finances. Specialists charged hundreds of dollars for each test, even those that were inconclusive, and, without a diagnosis, my family's insurance was hesitant to cover any part of the cost. This became particularly confusing as it limited the medications I could try and the kinds of doctors I could see, even with referrals. When the idea of trying other doctors came up, finding any place that would take our insurance without a large copay became impossible in our small town. Any serious care would require traveling and cost even more. It became a question of whether a potential diagnosis was worth the financial risk.

Though my parents never complained about the cost of my medical care, I constantly worried about the financial burden it added. When I was old enough to go to appointments alone, and especially when I was making my own money, I subconsciously took on the financial burden of my care in an attempt to ease the strain on my parents. I swallowed hard at each ultrasound. Even with insurance, the appointment cost the amount I had earned at my minimum-wage job the week before, just to be told, once again, that “everything looked normal.”

Years of doctors appointments, and “everything looks normal,” and “maybe we try a new combination of medications.” Hundreds of dollars spent trying pain management techniques and period products that never seemed to agree with my body.

Among the most vivid details the text gives about Haemorrhissa is her financial status. One of the two sentences that describe her background focuses on her financial situation. It is said that “she had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse.”³⁷

In his article “The Hemorrhaging Woman and Jairus’ Daughter as Representatives of Israel,” Adam Kubis argues that “the long period of twelve years of medical treatment corroborates her once-significant financial status, which might point toward her state of widowhood.”³⁸ Further, Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh assert that Haemorrhissa “could be originally a member of the elite, since professional physicians were used primarily by economically privileged social groups.”³⁹ Though it’s impossible to definitively assert whether the woman was once rich, always poor, or the widow of a rich husband, it is Jesus’s engagement

³⁷ Mark 5:26

³⁸ Adam Kubis, “The Hemorrhaging Woman and Jairus’ Daughter as Representatives of Israel. An Attempt at the Symbolic Reading of Mark 5:21-43,” *The Biblical Annals* 10 (2020): 355–87. <https://doi.org/10.31743/biban.9313>.

³⁹ Adam Kubis, “The Hemorrhaging Woman and Jairus’ Daughter as Representatives of Israel. An Attempt at the Symbolic Reading of Mark 5:21-43,” *The Biblical Annals* 10 (2020): 355–87. <https://doi.org/10.31743/biban.9313>.

with her as a poor person that is significant. The text indicates that, regardless of where she started financially, she gave everything she had looking for a cure, a sign of true desperation.

Jesus's history of interacting with the poor transcends the Gospel distinctions and is found throughout his ministry. Often very explicitly, Jesus claims that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the poor, and that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."⁴⁰ However, though his ministry was preached to and about the poor, there are very few occasions when someone's financial position is mentioned as they are healed by Jesus.

It can be safely assumed that many of the other people who Jesus healed were lower class; including, but not limited to the lepers, the blind, and the slave who is healed in Matthew and Luke. However, the miracle healing Haemorrhissa is one of only two times that Mark explicitly states that Jesus healed a poor person. The other time Mark mentions the financial status of one who is healed is in the healing of the blind man named Bartimaeus, who is described as a beggar.⁴¹ Similar to Haemorrhissa, when Bartimaeus is healed, Jesus says, for the second time, "Your faith has made you well." Though the phrase is repeated in other moments in the other gospels, it is distinct within Mark that the two times Jesus repeats the phrase is in the healing of a poor person.

Haemorrhissa's financial position is important in that it is her illness that caused her financial depletion, as is explicitly stated in the text. As with the woman's purity, Jesus healing Haemorrhissa not only ceased her suffering, it granted her new opportunities. Many of the healing miracles describe Jesus healing people from debilitating illnesses or physical disabilities

⁴⁰ Mark 10:25

⁴¹ Mark 10:46-52

which would keep those people from financial freedom, either by requiring extensive care or leaving them unable to work. In this way, Jesus was equitably serving the poor.

Jesus's healing miracles are a physical, practical embodiment of the message he hopes to spread. It sets the example that "speaking the good news" is not all that faith requires, it also demands an effort to help others. Jesus helped the poor and suffering, not only through his presence and teachings, but also through miracles. He ate with them and talked with them, but also relieved the burdens that plagued them. Though she had nothing else, she had faith. This is what qualified her for Jesus' ministry.

Though much about Haemorrhissa is unknown, the text plainly states that her condition is the cause of her financial ruin. In this miracle, Jesus' ministry to the poor is further demonstrated, and she becomes liberated from the condition which caused her financial devastation. Though Jesus cannot return everything she lost, he gives her the cure she so desperately searched for, free of charge.

ALONE:

Prolonged menstruation and distinctly painful cramping became an everyday occurrence. In high school, I built a reputation as the girl whose lunchbox rattled with pill bottles containing various medications, which I needed to combat any potential flare-up. At eighteen, I had been prescribed more combinations of birth control than most women take in their lifetime, so as my friends became interested in contraception, I was able to answer their questions about the chemistry of the pills, and the various stages of a menstrual cycle.

But though I could answer my classmates' questions, I could no longer relate to them. My constant quivers from pain made me a reminder of our fragility at an age where we like to think we're invincible. Pain, chronic pain, particularly gynecological pain, insists on contemplation about fertility and mortality; two things other kids my age didn't want to discuss. So, while my

friends worried about Friday's football game, I was wondering what this pain was, how long it would last, and whether it would impact my ability to bear children. While they sat in class, I sat in doctor's offices and hospital beds.

One of the most distinct details that the text depicts about Haemorrhissa is her isolation. Aside from her confession to Jesus, which is not described in the text, the only time she “speaks” in the text is to herself.⁴² Unlike other people who were healed by Jesus, the Hemorrhaging Woman had no prior relationship with Jesus, or even a conversation where she asked to be healed. And, unlike the paralyzed man, Peter's mother-in-law, Lazarus, or Jairus's daughter, Haemorrhissa had no one to approach Jesus on her behalf. Based on the woman being alone, and the assumption that her condition was gynecological, it is often argued that the nature of the Haemorrhissa's condition was accompanied by infertility. While this may be so, it is not established in the text as the reason she was healed, a distinct difference from other Biblical accounts where God, in this case Jesus, interacts with a woman's reproductive system. Here, Haemorrhissa is not healed to restore her fertility, she is healed because she was in pain and because she had faith. This interaction's disregard for her fertility is unique from other Biblical accounts in its presentation of women as people beyond their ability to bear children.

The woman's lonely presentation in the text has led recent scholars to argue that “the ailment of the woman with a flow of blood was gynecological in nature and made her incapable of childbearing.”⁴³ The woman being alone, however, does not necessarily mean that she is biologically incapable of bearing children. There is little textual evidence to support the claim of biological infertility aside from “the Greek term *ξηπαίνω*, used in Mark 5:29, [which] means

⁴² Mark 5:28

⁴³ Adam Kubis, “The Hemorrhaging Woman and Jairus' Daughter as Representatives of Israel. An Attempt at the Symbolic Reading of Mark 5:21-43,” *The Biblical Annals* 10 (2020): 355–87. <https://doi.org/10.31743/biban.9313>.

literally ‘dried up,’ ‘scorched,’ or ‘hardened.’ In other places, Mark uses this verb to describe the withering of a fig tree.”⁴⁴ However, this may also refer to the loss of lifeblood, a permanent state of infertility, or menopause.⁴⁵

Though it is impossible to say whether the woman’s condition made her biologically infertile, it is almost certain that her condition contributed to a sort of “social infertility,” the so-called *mitzvat niddah*, a commandment of avoiding intercourse with a menstruating woman. Midrashic texts at the time of Jesus’ ministry suggest that the cause to abstain from intercourse with a *niddah* was divine instruction as a result of the Fall from Eden.⁴⁶ *Mitzvat niddah* was not only concerned with preserving the sanctity of the Temple but also following the commandments of God. As such, it was one of the most widely observed purity rituals and the practice outlasted most other purity laws, many still encourage it today.

Having intercourse with a *niddah* was among the most impure things any person could do. Babylonian Talmudic commentaries describe that sex with a menstruating woman would result in death from exposure to the mystical qualities of menstrual blood, opening up the “realm of demons and spirits.”⁴⁷ Biblically commanded abstinence from menstrual sex was “one of the cornerstones of marital life.”⁴⁸ Failure to abstain would result in social exclusion (*karat*), as menstrual sex would make both parties impure for seven days. As someone considered a *zavah gedolah*, someone with abnormal menstrual or menstrual-related bleeding, these restrictions

⁴⁴ Adam Kubis, “The Hemorrhaging Woman and Jairus’ Daughter as Representatives of Israel. An Attempt at the Symbolic Reading of Mark 5:21-43,” *The Biblical Annals* 10 (2020): 355–87. <https://doi.org/10.31743/biban.9313>.

⁴⁵ Candida R. Moss, and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness*, Princeton University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc776ck>. Page 203.

⁴⁶ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2000. Pages 29-33.

⁴⁷ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2000. Page 36.

⁴⁸ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2000. Page 36.

would have applied to Haemorrhissa, keeping her from most intimate sexual, romantic, or even platonic relationships for the duration of her abnormal discharge.

Further evidence of her social infertility is found in the circumstances and longevity of her suffering and impurity. As the text describes her bleeding for twelve years, it can be assumed that she was either nearing or past marriageable age. And, given her impure status, it can also be safely assumed that, unless she had been married before the condition arose, she remained single. Kubiś argues that “the attempted medical treatment of her vaginal bleeding led to her complete financial deprivation as she depleted all her resources. The fact that she herself is spending her own money suggests that she is alone, unmarried” either through divorce, death, or an inability to marry due to her condition.⁴⁹

Even more theological significance arises when we separate the woman’s fertility from her menstrual condition. While many ancient Jewish commentaries discuss the realities of monthly menstruation outside of reproduction, few Biblical references distinguish the two. One instance in Genesis 31 has Rachel sitting upon her father Laban’s *terafim*, a household god, which she had stolen. As he searched for it, she refused to stand, lying and claiming that “the way of women” was upon her.⁵⁰ However, this is one of the only occasions in the narrative Bible that references menstruation without mentioning its function for childbearing. When God interacts with the female body in the stories of Rachel, Sarah, and Hannah, it is to restore their fertility. In fact, Haemorrhissa’s “is the only healing story in the Gospels that involves a gynecological ailment. While barrenness and sterility figure prominently in the Hebrew Bible,

⁴⁹ Adam Kubiś, “The Hemorrhaging Woman and Jairus’ Daughter as Representatives of Israel. An Attempt at the Symbolic Reading of Mark 5:21-43,” *The Biblical Annals* 10 (2020): 355–87. <https://doi.org/10.31743/biban.9313>.

⁵⁰ Genesis 31:35

the New Testament is surprisingly quiet on the matter.”⁵¹ Almost every Biblical narrative where God interacts with female reproduction is explicitly focused on restoring fertility, with the distinct exception of Haemorrhissa.

Scholarship has debated whether the woman’s fertility was restored when her bleeding stopped. Some, such as Candida Moss and Joel Baden, argue that the woman’s fertility or infertility was not impacted in the healing because it was not the primary symptom that needed curing.⁵² In other words, whether the woman was infertile or not, there is no indication in the text that would suggest her fertility was restored, or that she was healed *because* she was infertile. This is a drastic shift from previous interactions between God and menstruation, during which the focus is on the ability to bear children.

If she was not healed to restore her fertility, then what was the reason for her healing? There could be many potential explanations for the woman’s healing, each with its own important theological messages. The simplest answer, and that which is explicitly stated by Jesus, is that she was healed because she had faith. Similarly, perhaps she was healed because she was in pain, and Jesus, or God, or the woman, whomever you credit with the healing, wanted to end her suffering. Other potential answers include the themes that I explore above: perhaps it was to restore her “social fertility,” her financial independence, or her ability to worship in the Temple. Or perhaps it was to make a statement to the surrounding crowd that an impure, poor, and lonely woman could have great faith, and be worthy of being loved by Jesus.

⁵¹ Candida R. Moss, and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness*, Princeton University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc776ck>. Page 201.

⁵² Candida R. Moss, and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness*, Princeton University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc776ck>. Pages 200-210.

The definitive answer will always elude us as interpreters, but it remains significant to address that in this story it is the woman herself, not the children she might bear, who is the focus. This, too, correlates with shifts in early Christian interpretations of the body, which went on to believe that “the ideal body could be barren, because fertility was not seen as a constitutive element of a glorified body.”⁵³ She is not healed so that she can be fertile, she is healed because she was in pain, and because she demonstrated great faith.

UNNAMED:

Part of the appeal of finding connection via online chat forums was the anonymity it allowed me. Without pressure to comment or justify my presence, I could quietly observe the stories and treatments of other women, taking the information I needed to find support, and leaving without a trace.

Although I had support in other areas of my life, through church, friends, and family, none could offer the connection that online communities offered, the connection of other people suffering the same ways I was. Interacting with other women who suffered from their own bodies and from the medical systems designed to make them “well” made me feel seen, justified, and validated. It also made me heartbroken to see that the system that had harmed me had done the same to women across the world, disproportionately harming Black and Indigenous women. This woke me up to the reality of my situation, the privilege I carried, and the systemic bias in medicine against women, particularly women of color.

I struggled to open up to people in real life because of social pressures to “just be okay,” or the fact that my pain was so intimate and, frankly, embarrassing. I didn’t want everyone to know what was going on with my body, I wanted them to think I was as healthy and happy as anyone else my age. Finding support online allowed me to do that, no strings attached; anonymous.

⁵³ Adam Kubis, “The Hemorrhaging Woman and Jairus’ Daughter as Representatives of Israel. An Attempt at the Symbolic Reading of Mark 5:21-43,” *The Biblical Annals* 10 (2020): 355–87. <https://doi.org/10.31743/biban.9313>.

The miracle of Haemorrhissa is contextualized in its positioning within the miracle of Jairus's daughter, as the stories are intertwined in a format popularly called the "Markan sandwich."⁵⁴ This account is only one of two instances in which Mark's original "sandwich" format is followed by both Luke and Matthew. It is also the only healing miracle that follows the "sandwich" structure. In terms of theological significance, James Edwards argues that, in Markan sandwiches, it is the inserted "middle" story that "provides the key to the theological purpose" of the larger story.⁵⁵ As he understands it:

The insertion of the woman with the hemorrhage into the Jairus story is not an editorial stratagem whose primary purpose is to create suspense or "to give time for the situation in the main incident to develop." The woman's faith forms the center of the sandwich and is the key to its interpretation. Through her Mark shows how faith in Jesus can transform fear and despair into hope and salvation. It is a powerful lesson for Jairus as well as for Mark's readers.⁵⁶

So, while Haemorrhissa's story may be the "key," we also need to understand the "lock" before fully grasping the significance of Haemorrhissa's character and story.

The Markan account details that, as Jesus comes into town, he is approached by Jairus, a synagogue leader, whose twelve-year-old daughter is dying.⁵⁷ On his way to see her, Jesus is accosted by crowds, in which the Hemorrhaging Woman touches his hem and is healed. After healing the Hemorrhaging Woman, it is announced that Jairus's daughter is dead. He is told not to bother Jesus, but Jesus responds and tells Jairus to have faith. Jesus raises the young girl from

⁵⁴ James R. Edwards, "Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives," *Novum Testamentum* 31, no. 3 (1989): 193–216. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1560460>.

⁵⁵ James R. Edwards, "Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives," *Novum Testamentum* 31, no. 3 (1989): 193–216. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1560460>.

⁵⁶ James R. Edwards, "Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives," *Novum Testamentum* 31, no. 3 (1989): 193–216. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1560460>. Matthew 28:18.

⁵⁷ Twelve years was also the length of Haemorrhissa's ailment. Scholarship which explores the significance of this correlation includes Samuel Zakowski's "'She Was Twelve Years Old': On Γάπ and Mark 5:42." And Adam Kubis' "The Hemorrhaging Woman and Jairus' Daughter as Representatives of Israel. An Attempt at the Symbolic Reading of Mark 5: 21-43."

the dead and instructs all who are present to tell no one. It is Jesus's actions in the miracles which demonstrate an awareness of the message that faith can come from anywhere. First by telling Jairus to show the kind of faith that the woman had, and second by bringing the crowd's attention to Haemorrhoid's healing, but not Jairus's daughter's.

Haemorrhoid is an anonymous character, both to readers of the Biblical text, and within her own context. Her character being presented without a name, at first, seems like an oversight by the authors, however, her anonymity contributes to her story in a way that feels too significant to be ignored, especially when contrasted with Jairus's character. Examples of her anonymity is the way the text presents her desire to stay hidden, crawling on the ground among the crowd to touch Jesus, and her trepidation when Jesus asks who touched him. Similarly fascinating is the response from the crowd, who didn't realize she was there either. A significant part of her character is that she wants to remain anonymous. Conversely, Jairus very publicly approached Jesus upon his arrival in town, asking for his help to save his daughter. Though he was responding in desperation, his character, compared to Haemorrhoid's, is clearly unafraid of being seen. A particularly important theological message is clear, then, when Jesus reverses the character's roles in his interactions with them.

Jairus is a man who is named in the text and has the spiritual and social authority of being a synagogue leader. His figure seems to have everything that the Hemorrhaging Woman does not: wealth, power, a family, even a name. As a woman, Haemorrhoid is already on a lower status than Jairus, but her condition, too, has made her impure and second-class.

Jesus, however, does not respond to them according to their social statuses. In fact, his responses seem to reject their prescribed roles. One such way is the interaction that binds the two characters: Jesus' message of faith. When Haemorrhoid is healed, Jesus commends her on her

faith, saying it is what healed her. Moments later, when Jairus is told that his daughter is dead, Jesus' response to him is similar: "have faith." The tension between these two moments contrast one another, for it is the impure woman who exemplifies faith to the synagogue leader. As James Edwards argues, "Jesus reverses their roles, for it is the woman who displays the greater faith."⁵⁸ Jesus' response to Jairus demonstrates an awareness of the social irony, one which dismisses their prescribed statuses and instead judges them by their faith.

Another way Jesus changes the social and theological "roles" of these figures is the attention he brings to one but not the other. Despite the woman attempting to stay anonymous, Jesus publicly praises Haemorrhissa's faith. Later, in the raising of Jairus' daughter, the miracle is not celebrated by crowds, but kept hidden by Jesus himself.

The circumstances of the healings indeed contributed to the attention they received from Jesus. Haemorrhissa was healed among a crowd, while Jairus's daughter was healed in the privacy of their home. But even given the circumstances of these miracles, Jesus takes great care to keep one private while bringing the crowd's attention to the other. While Harmorrhissa's healing happened in a public setting, the healing itself was only witnessed by Jesus and the woman. Jesus's response to the woman, "Your faith has healed you," then alerts the crowd's attention to the fact that a miracle has occurred. This is a stark contrast to the miracle that happened a moment later. As Jesus entered the house, "he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was."⁵⁹ Though a crowd had followed them to the house, hoping to witness the

⁵⁸ James R. Edwards, "Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives," *Novum Testamentum* 31, no. 3 (1989): 193–216. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1560460>.

⁵⁹ Mark 5:39-40.

miracle, Jesus first publicly declares that the girl is simply sleeping, dismissing any rumor that a miracle was to occur, and then removes any onlookers from the space before resurrecting the girl. In this way, though the Hemorrhaging woman's healing happened in public, it was witnessed very privately, only between Jesus and the woman. Yet, Jesus brought the crowd's attention to the miracle and credited the woman with her miraculous healing. Conversely, Jesus turns the very public healing of Jairus's daughter into a private miracle and insists on no one knowing what happened.

A possible explanation for Jesus' desire to emphasize Haemorrhissa's miracle is Jesus's tendency to publicly align himself with the ostracized. Unlike Jairus, the Hemorrhaging Woman was a social and religious outcast for her prolonged impurity. Likely, Jesus didn't need to tell the world that the faith of a prominent religious leader, like Jairus, was deserving of the healing miracles of God. Maybe there was a greater need to tell the world that someone like the Hemorrhaging Woman, someone who couldn't observe religious traditions, someone who was poor, someone who was impure, someone who everyone overlooked, could have faith strong enough to be healed.

Despite wanting to remain anonymous, Haemorrhissa's miracle becomes one that others aspire to. She is unnamed and certainly overlooked in modern interpretation, and by the crowds she traversed to get to Jesus, but Jesus's response to the faith and miracle of the Hemorrhaging Woman brings a powerful message that *anyone* with faith is worthy of Jesus's ministry.

HEALED:

There were many points in my search for a diagnosis when other people inserted their thoughts on my pain, and how I should handle it. Often, well-meaning people would tell me to "just pray on it," or that I was lucky it wasn't worse. Ironically, the story of the Hemorrhaging

Woman, which I understood as a demonstration of strength, was used in these conversations to exemplify submission to God's will.

I knew they were meant to be endearing, but these comments from others left me feeling lower than before. Though my pain had given me much religious clarity, I resented the implication that simply praying more would ease my symptoms. These conversations seemed to dismiss the responsibility of my doctors, who I already felt dismissed by. And it implied that, if faith could heal me, my faith was not strong enough. This, too, held the underlying message that chronic pain was a symptom of weak faith, a sentiment I have always disagreed with.

People seemed to want to tell me what it meant to be healed, to pray hard enough that my symptoms would magically stop. As I reconciled with the reality that I may always struggle with pain, I realized that, for me, part of the healing process was to destigmatize my illness, stop blaming myself, and pursue faith within the context of my pain, not in spite of it.

The concept of “healing” within Jesus’ ministry means very different things depending on the context. Many healing miracles result from the exorcism of demons or the forgiveness of sin. One such instance is the boy who could not speak, where the physical inability to speak was symptomatic of a demonic possession.⁶⁰ Other Biblical examples include the unnamed woman healed from her inability to walk, described in Luke 13:10-17. However, it is understood that not all illnesses are caused by demons. This is most explicitly stated in John 9:1-12, in which Jesus heals a man who had been blind since birth. When asked whether the man’s blindness was a consequence of his or his parents’ sins, Jesus responded that it was neither.

The healing occasion that is most similar to Haemorrhissa’s is the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, who, upon touching Jesus, was healed of her fever, stood up, and began waiting on Jesus and his disciples.⁶¹ As with the case of Haemorrhissa, it is not described whether her

⁶⁰ Mark 9:17-29, Matthew 17:14-21, and Luke 9:40-44

⁶¹ Mark 1:29-31

condition was the result of sin or possession, and the touch of Jesus was directly related to their healing. So, while the type of healing that occurred in Haemorrhissa's case was not itself distinct, the larger message behind the healing, and the point at which she is healed, is important to explore.

Candida R. Moss, in her article "The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25–34," asserts that both Jesus and the woman represent porous bodies that allowed power, purity, and, perhaps, impurity to flow between them upon their touch. It is through this that both the woman *and* Jesus allowed the healing to occur. A key point of evidence for this argument is Jesus's striking response to the woman which occurs in each retelling: "Your faith has made you well."

Miracle accounts, such as the healing of the leper,⁶² and the man cursed with demons⁶³ depict Jesus taking full credit for miracles as the holder of "all authority in heaven and on earth."⁶⁴ It is distinct within the miracle of the healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman that Jesus shifts power to a being other than himself or God. It is not only divine power which can heal, but also faith, even the faith of an unclean woman.

As the woman approaches Jesus, the Bible describes her internal monologue, saying "if I just touch his clothes I will be healed." The Biblical Greek uses the word "σωθήσομαι" for "healed" in this instance. This word, derivative of the term *sōzō*, is repeated by Jesus (Mark 5:34) after the woman is healed. However, *sōzō*, as it is used in Biblical contexts, has two loose definitions. The first is a more physical understanding of healing; to save, rescue, or preserve

⁶² Mark 1:40-44; Matthew 8:1-4; Luke 5:12-15

⁶³ Mark 5:18-20, Luke: 8:38-39

⁶⁴ Matthew 28:18

without harm.⁶⁵ The second definition of the term is one which aligns with spiritual healing; to preserve from being lost, to convert, to save.⁶⁶ Adam Kubis explores the interplay between the definitions, asserting:

The combination of two semantic fields, the physical “healing” and spiritual reality of “salvation,” almost spontaneously invites a play on symbolic meaning. The physical healing is a visible sign and also a symbolic prefiguration of the spiritual and invisible reality of salvation. The “healing” (or resuscitation) of both women is a symbol of “salvation.”⁶⁷

The use of the term *sōzō* here perhaps points towards two types of healing that occur: one of her soul, and one of her body. When the woman touches Jesus’s hem, it is described that her bleeding “immediately stopped, and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.”⁶⁸ The description of the ceasing of the woman’s physical symptoms implies that this was the action and moment that “cured” her: the physical use of *sōzō*. A moment later in verses 30-34, Jesus felt the power flow from him and asked the crowd who touched him. This is the moment when Haemorrhissa comes forward and proves her faith, at which point she is healed in the spiritual sense of *sōzō*. Here, when Jesus tells Haemorrhissa that her “faith has made [her] well,” she is healed in a way distinctly different from the earlier physical healing.

This separation is similarly addressed by Shelly Rambo in her exploration of the text, particularly as it is used to comfort people with chronic or life-threatening illnesses. Rambo argues that readers’ misuse of the text presents God as “one who uses difficult situations to teach, or even to test us, leading us to some greater divine purpose that we cannot see.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ “Mark 5:28 - Original Greek Text,” Greekbible.com, 2025, <https://www.greekbible.com/mark/5/28>.

⁶⁶ “Mark 5:34 - Original Greek Text,” Greekbible.com, 2025, <https://www.greekbible.com/mark/5/34>.

⁶⁷ Adam Kubis, “The Hemorrhaging Woman and Jairus’ Daughter as Representatives of Israel. An Attempt at the Symbolic Reading of Mark 5:21-43,” *The Biblical Annals* 10 (2020): 355–87. <https://doi.org/10.31743/biban.9313>.

⁶⁸ Mark 5:29

⁶⁹ Shelly Rambo, “Trauma and Faith: Reading the Narrative of the Hemorrhaging Woman,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 13 (2010): 233–57. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt.2009.15>.

However, she argues, this demonstrates a disconnect between the text's intended purpose and its perceived message and use in modern ministries. This disconnect can cause suffering people to believe that their sins may have caused their misfortune, or that their lack of adequate faith prolongs it. She compels readers to practice "faith [as] a witnessed movement, involving not only the individual but also the community, not only the mind but also the body."⁷⁰ Rambo distinguishes between the spiritual condition of the body and minds the same way the text separates the moments Haemorrhissa is "cured" and "healed."

When the text describes the physical healing of the woman, it describes her blood as having "immediately stopped." This is the moment in which the woman was cured, perhaps by the touch of Jesus in a way similar to the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. However, I would argue that it is the moments before when the woman approaches Jesus with a determination of faith, and afterward, when she responds to Jesus' confrontation, that she is "healed." This is what Jesus is referring to when he says, "Your faith has made you well." As a commentary on divine interaction with physical health, these distinctions may point toward an understanding of God which wants us to "be made well," even when we aren't fully "healed."

CONCLUSION:

I first began seeing my doctor after my ovarian cyst burst in Georgia. At the time, my doctor felt that an ultrasound would be "too invasive" for a fifteen-year-old girl, and since she was so confident that I had endometriosis,⁷¹ she insisted on a laparoscopy⁷² to diagnose and treat me. She was wrong.

⁷⁰ Shelly Rambo, "Trauma and Faith: Reading the Narrative of the Hemorrhaging Woman," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 13 (2010): 233–57. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt.2009.15>.

⁷¹ A gynecological condition in which the uterine lining grows outside of the uterus.

⁷² An investigative abdominal surgery.

The procedure only left me with more unanswered questions and additional chronic pain from abdominal scar tissue, both of which my doctor refused to address, claiming that if it wasn't endometriosis, I would "grow out of the pain eventually." Afterward, the process of seeking care was lengthy, expensive, and continually heartbreaking. Medication worked for a few months but was eventually rendered ineffective by this mystery illness. Every day was a question of which distinct pain would appear, and how it would impact my day.

After two hospitalizations, eight brands of birth control, dozens of ultrasounds, a year of hormone blockers, and, at some points, bi-weekly doctor's visits, I was loosely diagnosed with adenomyosis,⁷³ a lesser-known endometrium condition that was previously thought to only occur in menopausal women who have kids. I use the term "loosely diagnosed" because the only definitive way to diagnose or treat adenomyosis is with a hysterectomy. My diagnosis was based on symptoms and ultrasound observations, but it is easily dismissed by medical professionals without the physical proof from a hysterectomy.

I first mentioned adenomyosis to my doctor after the failed laparoscopy left me searching for other possible answers. I learned about the condition after a Google search that read "I don't have endometriosis, what now?" This led me to a Reddit forum where people were grieving failed treatments like my own. When I brought up the idea of looking for adenomyosis, my suggestion was shot down by my doctor. Three years later, when I was "diagnosed," I felt both vindicated and terribly sad for my younger self, who had gone through so much to get there, and would who have been saved from a lot of pain, had my doctor listened years earlier.

Ancient interpreters often disregarded Haemorrhissa in the Healing of the Woman with the Issue of Blood, dismissing her as a vessel for a larger message on faith, relics, or menstruating women's place in the Church. Similarly, contemporary commentaries have overlooked major themes in the text in attempting to identify or diagnose her in modern understandings, disregarding the theological messages of her own context. There is also a pattern of using healing narratives like Haemorrhissa's to encourage those suffering from chronic or

⁷³ A gynecological condition in which the uterine lining grows within the uterine walls

terminal illness to “just have faith” and they will be healed. This is the case in many online commentaries which discuss the text. This includes one YouTube video entitled “God Can Heal YOU From Infertility!!,” in which the creator, an adoption attorney, states that “infertility is not just something wrong with your body, it can actually be a spiritual issue.”⁷⁴

This video reflects modern narratives that routinely treat the New Testament’s miracles as the rule of faith; if you have enough faith, you will be healed. This, too, implies that those who suffer from pain are separated from God, and need to have more faith, to become closer to God to be healed. As Shelly Rambo explores in her article “Trauma and Faith,” this perspective attempts to use the figure of God to provide comfort to the suffering, but it can do great religious harm when someone’s faith *doesn’t* heal them.⁷⁵ In Rambo’s interpretation, this miracle should be read within the context that faith, like trauma, lives as much in the body as it does in the mind. She proposes readers understand the miracle as a healing of faith and mind as much as it is a healing of the body.

A pervasive message on the internet, and in many mainstream religious spaces, is one that separates our suffering from God, as though the two are mutually exclusive. The story of the Hemorrhaging Woman is often used as an example of this. But, in my experience as a theologian and a person with chronic pain, I view the story of the Hemorrhaging Woman as one that demonstrates Jesus’ commitment to walk alongside the suffering. The woman herself presents a message that faith can come from anywhere, including the impure, the poor, the lonely, the anonymous, and the people whose identities intersect many of those categories. Jesus’s

⁷⁴ Lucrece Bundy, “God Can Heal YOU From Infertility!!” YouTube, May 8 2024. <https://youtu.be/B53HUFfvhNo?si=PSxbwsLfGjupwl1>

⁷⁵ Shelly Rambo, “Trauma and Faith: Reading the Narrative of the Hemorrhaging Woman,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 13 (2010): 233–57. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt.2009.15>.

interaction with Haemorrhoids tells readers that their pain does not separate them from God but connects them in a new and meaningful way.

Five years later, I no longer work against my pain, but in dialogue with it. I treat it not as a shortcoming, but as part of my person that I have grown to be very proud of. I still have painful days, but I consider myself to be healing. Healing from the stigma I, and others, pushed onto my pain. Healing from the uncertainty that used to terrify me, which I now welcome as a growing part of my story. Though I am not cured, I choose to say I am healing as an acknowledgment of the suffering I went through, and the ways I'm continuing to change because of it.

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