How should we respond to James 5:14 – the prayer for healing?

Several commentators have analysed carefully the meaning of the Greek words used, noting that James is a careful writer, but even after all their observations and researches, we are left, in my view, with little option but to accept the common translation as expressing James’ meaning. It can be properly argued that the circumstances and the words James uses imply a severe illness, confining the patient to bed. Various other expositions of the Greek words have been recruited but commentators generally seem agreed that the usual translations are right. And suggestions that the words have reference to eschatological healing are not generally accepted.

It is clear that in many situations where prayer is offered, sometimes with the anointing of oil, healing does not result. Is James therefore to be trusted?

In fact the resolution of these difficulties must remain with the Sovereignty of God. I have no problems acknowledging that divine characteristic. But it must lead to one of two conclusions. If I have a belief – a faith sent from God about the patient, then I can pray believingly for healing. If on the other hand I am not sure, then I am in some way making an enquiry. With regard to the first, it is important that I learn to distinguish between recognising what God has implanted in my heart, and the desire, however earnest and sincere, that springs from my own hopes. Yet this leads to the alternative. There are situations of desperation, where human aid is either unavailable or unavailing, and in that desperation we cry out to God. There is a far cry from the routine prayer, or the controlled experiments found on a Medline search. It leads to the cry “Your will be done.”

Is not this the secret of all prayer? We remember that the Lord Jesus said “If you ask anything in My Name, I will do it.” We have learnt that the phrase “in My Name” is not a talisman, a magic formula, but it should send us to seek out the will of God. Is it right to pray for healing and to ask the elders to anoint with oil as they pray? James so instructs. (He does not mention the laying on of hands). Certainly it is right to tell God about our desires but in so doing we are to seek to bring them in to line with his will, “not my will, but yours be done.”

And it leads to a further enquiry: “What about ourselves?” Most doctors resort to medical means when they are ill. They know the possibilities, and, while Christians may commit themselves to divine care, they go through the regimes that they know, with some insight into the expected result. Is it that our primary faith is in medicine? We acknowledge that its resources have their origin in God’s providence, and have the hopes that accompany our human condition, but I suspect we usually have no special expectation of divine intervention. James 5 is not our first port of call.

In my experience, others in the church are quicker to lay on hands and pray for healing, believing that they have the imprimatur of James for doing so. Perhaps we should be less insistent that God will do what we want, and more ready to accede to his will as he reveals it – and that not grudgingly, but gladly.

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Neurology and the
Part 2 – A Case of

In the modern scientific age it is unfashionable to believe in demons or evil spirits. However Christians reading the New Testament find many references to demons particularly associated with the healing work of Jesus. The accounts of seizures or epilepsy in the Scriptures seem particularly associated with demonic activity. Such concepts seem, on the surface, to be at odds with the precept of modern medicine that diseases including epilepsy have a natural cause. How then should a contemporary reader view this apparent conflict? A review of ancient medical thought on epilepsy, which is the foundation for western medicine, and an analysis of the New Testament accounts of Jesus healing the epileptic boy give some insight in this issue.

Epilepsy has been recognised as a unique disorder for over 3000 years. The terms epilepsy and epileptic are Greek in origin and are derived from the Greek verb epileambanein which translates to seize or to attack. In classical literature an affliction of someone by a spirit may take different forms including possession, control or invasion. In Herodotus, the god Dionysos could “take control of” (lambanei) people and control their actions. Such terminology had its origin in Babylonian medicine where all afflictions were believed to be attacks by gods or demons. This view gave epilepsy a social significance as an attack by a god could represent a bad omen. The Romans for example referred to epilepsy as the morbus comitialis as an attack would upset the day of the comitia, the assembly of the people.

Diseases in ancient times could be considered of divine origin and treated by supernatural means or they may be attributed to natural causes and treated by natural means. The battle between these two conflicting views began with the development of Hippocratic medicine but continued through the Middle Ages to the modern scientific era. The condition of epilepsy has been at the centre of this debate as it notably has both physical and psychic features and more than other diseases might be interpreted as an affliction of the gods.

With the development of Hippocratic medicine came the notion that diseases had natural causes and treatments. The Hippocratic text On the Sacred Disease which refers to epilepsy contains not only careful description of seizures but also the strongest arguments that epilepsy has natural causes and is no different from other afflictions. At the outset the author states his thesis “I am about to discuss a disease called sacred. It is not in my opinion more divine or more sacred than other diseases but has a nature and a cause. But humans have considered it a divine thing through their inexperience and their wonder at its peculiar character.” In this passage epilepsy is referred to not as the sacred disease but as the disease called sacred. By using this phrase, the author separates his opinion from the traditional name and implies a different mechanism of disease.
In the Gospels, Matthew chapter 17 (verse 1), Mark chapter 9 (verse 2) and Luke chapter 9 (verse 28) the transfiguration of Christ is described. All three evangelists follow this description with the healing of the epileptic. The painter Raphael incorporated the transfiguration and the healing episode into one great masterpiece. The painting shows the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor in the upper half whilst the lower half reveals the desperate father bringing his epileptic son to the disciples. He pleads with them to help his son who during his seizures “often falls into the fire or into the water”. But as Mark records, they did not have the power to heal him and it is only Christ who heals the boy by driving out the demon.

The father describes his son as having a mute spirit and whenever it seize him he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. Such features could reasonably be attributed to epilepsy. Jesus addresses the demon as a separate being from the boy, as he often does. This makes it difficult to believe that Jesus was merely indulging popular belief in a superstition. He regarded the demon as the cause of the boy’s illness. This particular case of demon possession was too much for the disciples though Jesus had given them authority over unclean spirits (Mark 6:7). Apparently some demons are stronger or more intimidating than others. Ephesians 6:12 seems to ascribe different ranks to demons and so it is reasonable to assume that some might have more power than others. Jesus admonishes the disciples for their lack of faith, “O faithless generations, how long shall I be with you” and after healing him he took him by the hand and lifted him up.

How then is a physician to rationalise the theory of epilepsy as a natural neurologic disorder with an apparent biblical account of a demonic cause. It is known for example that epilepsy affects approximately 0.5% of the population or 100,000 Australians. No one would suggest such a number are demon possessed. Although the cause of all cases of epilepsy is not known, it is clear that patho-physiological processes in the brain are responsible. But things are not always what they seem. Neurologists increasingly recognise that in a number of cases pseudo-seizures are mis-diagnosed as epilepsy but the cause is different and may have a psychological origin.

The writers of the New Testament were not medical men but they accurately recorded an incident of healing to convey a message rather than make a medical diagnosis. Hippocratic medicine which pre-dates the gospels by over six centuries strongly advocated a natural cause for epilepsy. The Bible passages need not be opposed to the medical view of disease, indeed scriptures make it plain that not all ailments are due to demonic activity – it was that in this particular case, the young boy was afflicted by a supernatural force. Although there were characteristics that resembled epilepsy, the condition would be best described as pseudo-seizures. The evangelists relate the episode to demonstrate that the battle with evil is a difficult ongoing struggle. The importance of this story is the documentation in scripture of the miraculous power of Christ over evil and the imperative of faith for believers. Reading the Bible passages through the lens of modern medicine certainly leaves many questions unanswered regarding the nature of demonology and disease. However the narratives convey an important spiritual message rather than a description of a medical case history for general application.

References