

Talitha Qum! An Exploration of the Image of Jesus as Healer-Physician-Savior in the Synoptic Gospels in Relation to the Asclepius Cult

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Abstract:

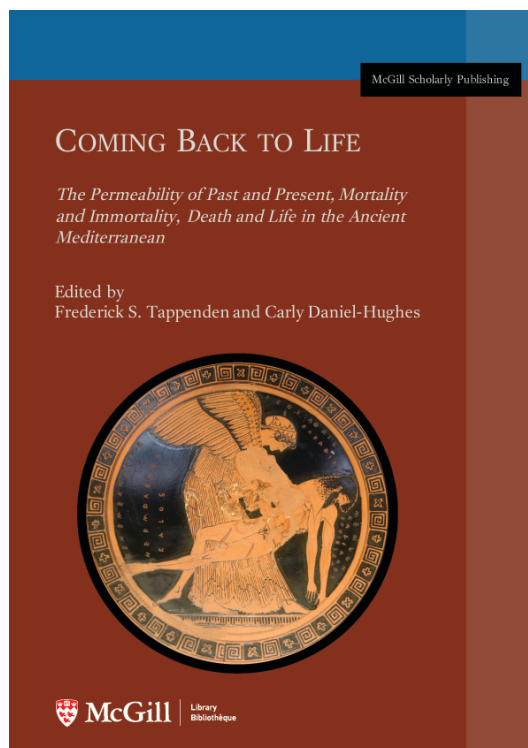
Using social memory theory, I examine three pericopes in the Synoptic Gospels—(i) the raising of Jairus’s daughter from the dead, (ii) the healing of the chronically bleeding woman, and (iii) the raising from the dead of the son of the widow of Nain—to argue that already by the late first century or early second century the earliest Christian audiences of the Gospels would have heard these stories through the lens of traditions associated with the most famous healer of the time, Asclepius—the dream-god known as the “Savior” and “Divine Physician.” I show that the Synoptic Gospels construct the figure of Jesus as healer and divine doctor by contesting the reputation of Asclepius, establishing that Jesus was a better Divine Physician who overcame the constraints of geography, money, time, travel, and ritual that Asclepius placed on his supplicants. This interpretation, firmly situated within the context of Hellenistic Judaism and the influence of the Greco-Roman Asklepieia, resolves a number of puzzling textual elements in these pericopes.

Bibliography:

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Talitha Qum! An Exploration of the Image of Jesus as Healer-Physician-Savior in the Synoptic Gospels in Relation to the Asclepius Cult¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the late nineteenth century, Adolf von Harnack (1892, 96) noticed so many similarities between the portrayal of Christ and the Divine Physician Asclepius that he concluded, “Christianity is a medical religion.” Some early Church Fathers certainly viewed it this way, including Ignatius of Antioch, who spoke of “Jesus Christ, our Doctor” ([Eph. 7.2](#)). Since Harnack, several scholars have cited evidence from text, liturgy, and iconography in early Christianity to definitively establish that Christians from the second to fifth centuries remembered Jesus as a healer and physician in terms that elicited a comparison, if not a direct rivalry, with Asclepius. Since Asclepius had set the cultural standard for a Divine Physician for over five hundred years, they could not help but contend with the tradition, as in these words of Justin Martyr: “When we say that [Jesus] cured the lame, the paralytics, and those blind from birth, and raised the dead from life, we seem to attribute to him actions

¹ Through presentations at two invited conferences, the early stages of this article benefitted from the thoughtful comments of many esteemed colleagues in the fields of New Testament, Classics, and Second Temple Judaism. In addition to my deep appreciation for the organizers of the “Coming Back to Life” conference at McGill University and Concordia University in May 2014, I wish to also extend my sincere thanks to Rodney Werline and to Barton College for the Barton Scholars Conversations Workshop, held in June 2014, at which I received invaluable feedback. Finally, I humbly offer this article in memory of our friend and colleague Ellen Aitken, whom I was lucky to know.

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similar to those said to have been performed by Aesculapius” ([1 Apol. 22.6](#)).

While much excellent scholarly work has addressed the theme of Jesus as healer in late antiquity, far less attention has been paid to literary-critical investigations of the Synoptic Gospels in light of possible influences of the Asclepius cult. By employing social memory theory, I examine three pericopes in the Synoptic Gospels—Jesus raising Jairus’s daughter from the dead ([Mark 5:21–24](#), [35–43](#) // [Matt 9:18–19](#), [23–26](#) // [Luke 8:40–42](#), [49–56](#)), Jesus healing the chronically bleeding woman ([Mark 5:24–34](#) // [Matt 9:20–22](#) // [Luke 8:42–48](#)), and Jesus raising from the dead the son of the widow of Nain ([Luke 7:11–17](#))—to argue that already by the late-first or early second centuries the earliest Christian audiences of the Gospels would have heard these stories through the lens of a collective memory that enshrined Jesus as a healing deity who is superior to Asclepius. I further suggest that the “composers” of the Synoptic Gospels² have intentionally constructed the figure of Jesus as healer and divine doctor by contesting the reputation of Asclepius. The pericopes establish that, unlike Asclepius, only Jesus can routinely heal the sick and raise even the dead as if they were sleeping, without attachment to a physical place, without fees, and regardless of purity boundaries. Presumably, the Synoptics imply that these expectations apply also to the later followers of Jesus who act as healers, as in the example of the apostles in Acts. In this way, early Christian audiences, and perhaps the composers of the Synoptics, reframe the Greco-Roman divine-healer traditions in terms of an emerging Christian *kerygma* that places physical, psychological and social healing in the context of social inclusivity and egalitarianism. Thus, this paper seeks to explore by what date Christians drew the

² By the term “composers” I mean to capture the complex oral, written, and redactive processes that ultimately resulted in the early written manuscripts of the Gospels. For the composite Greek text I use the NA²⁸, which is conveniently hyperlinked to the online edition hosted by the [German Bible Society](#). For all primary other sources, the embedded hyperlinks offer easy reference to open-access (though often older) scholarly editions.

comparison between Jesus and Asclepius, concluding that it is at least as early as the dating of the written composition of the Synoptics themselves.

II. MAJOR INFLUENCES ON THIS STUDY

Since Harnack (1892), several scholars have convincingly shown that many early Church Fathers, including Athanasius, Irenaeus, Augustine, Hippolytus, and Justin Martyr, remember Jesus as a physician or healer in terms that evoke a comparison with the Asclepius cult (Honnecker 1985; Barrett-Lennard 1994; and Porterfield 2005).³ However, these studies do not engage in a careful literary-critical exegesis of the Gospels. Honnecker (1985, 308) even maintains that “Ein Idealbild des christlichen Arztes ist zudem nicht neutestamentlich zu begründen.” By contrast, Wolmarans (1996) plucks out parallels between various New Testament texts on healing and the Asclepius cult to conclude that the two worldviews were essentially the same. Yet by failing to examine the Gospel stories as coherent, whole narratives, he elides critical differences that exist between the Asclepius traditions and the Synoptic Gospels.⁴ Rengstorf (1953) examines some themes in the Johannine corpus as a reaction to the Asclepius cult, but he only skims over the Synoptic Gospels.

The study of Christian and Greco-Roman art has been invaluable in establishing that early Christians understood Jesus to be a healer in the fashion of Asclepius. Jefferson (2014) and Dinkler (1979) have shown that beginning in the second century CE and peaking in the fourth century CE, the earlier portrayal of a young, beardless Jesus

³ There has been a little resistance to these studies, such as the theological/socio-historical thesis of Kee (1983), which basically argues that Christianity favors miracles over medicine, and Ferguson (1993, 212) who shows discomfort with a comparison between Jesus and Asclepius.

⁴ While there are some contributions in Wolmarans’s (1996) essay, the conclusion is too stark and includes curious errors, such as that differences between the two systems were caused by Christians’ lack of access to sanctuaries, and that Christians, unlike pagans, saw good as associated with “above” and evil with “below” (124–25).

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gave way to one in which Jesus takes on characteristic iconographic features of Asclepius that had been used since the fourth century BCE. These include: a dense head of curly or wavy hair that hung loosely down to his shoulders, variously parted, and framing his face; a bared forehead with no bangs; a full and curly beard revealing full lips, usually slightly parted; large eyes and a straight nose; a flowing, open robe or *pallium* without an underlying tunic, which showed off his bare and often muscular arm, chest and torso; and a hand holding a staff or a scroll (Jefferson 2014, 100–01; Dinkler 1979, 77–87; Kaltsas 2003, nos. 428, 432).⁵ Thus, by the time that Christian iconography of the second century CE featured Jesus as a healer with these same features, it was drawing on iconography of Asclepius that had been standard throughout Mediterranean antiquity for at least five hundred years. As Jefferson (2014, 53) has recently concluded, “Christian authors recognized Asclepius’s threat and . . . appropriated traits of the god to promote the peerless nature of Jesus . . . [which] can be witnessed in the visual art of Christ the Miracle Worker.” A second century relief of a bearded, muscular, partially robed Jesus standing with outstretched hand healing the sick thus closely mirrors reliefs of Asclepius healing dream incubants, down to the features of his face (Dinkler 1978; Van Straten, 1981, fig. 41).⁶

⁵ For images of Asklepios holding a scroll, see Kerényi 1959, 66–67 (nos. 43–44, from 130 CE, probably a copy of an original from the early 4th cent. BCE). For online image databases of Asklepios, see the [Warburg Institute Iconographic Database: Aesculapius](#) (University of London) and also the [Greek-Gods.info Picture Gallery of Asclepius](#).

⁶ Compare, for example, a 4th cent. BCE votive relief of Asklepios and Hygieia ([National Archaeological Museum, Greece, Piraeus, ΜΠ 405](#); higher resolution available at the [Εφορεία Αρχαιοτήτων Δυτικής Αττικής, Πειραιώς και Νήσων](#) blog) with a 3rd/4th century CE plaque depicting images of Jesus in various biblical scenes (Museo Nazionale Romano nos. 67606 [= [Weitzmann 1979, 414 no. 372](#)] and 67607 [= [Weitzmann 1979, 415 no. 373](#)]). The iconographic features of Asklepios and Jesus in the two reliefs are noticeably consistent. Both Asklepios and Jesus are seated on a rock (or for Asklepios, perhaps an *ὀμφαλός*), with wavy hair and beard, one hand raised, chest and

The work of Avalos (1999) deserves special mention in this review of scholarship for its perceptive contextualization of similarities between Asclepius and Jesus in an examination of the total health care system of early Christianity, which Avalos concludes formulated a response to inadequacies and inequities in the Greco-Roman and Jewish health care systems. Using methods drawn from medical anthropology and religious studies, he convincingly shows that the early Christian health care system promised healing without the costly investments of time, money, and travel necessitated by other health care systems, regardless of a person's social standing or purity or temporal restrictions (83–114). For Avalos, early Christianity's initial orientation was as a Jewish sect that sought to reform the Jewish and Greco-Roman health care systems, a strategy that contributed greatly to the successful spread of Christianity (117–19). Jefferson's (2014) recent study on material culture, which details Christian appropriation of Asclepius imagery in the Roman era, also nuances the portrait of the period as one of mutual cultural exchange. He points out that by the fourth century CE Christianity was so successful in caring for the poor that the "Apostate" Emperor Julian refashioned the god Asclepius to take on more of these aspects of the compassionate Christ (42, 45–53). Thus, the two figures merged in both directions.

The present study builds on these investigations, but especially on the insights of Avalos, to examine three pericopes in the Synoptic Gospels in light of the influence of earlier and contemporary Asclepius traditions. This reading in no way precludes the insights of those who have established Jewish and Israelite referents for the figure of Jesus as healer. Rather, it maintains that both Jewish and

muscular arm bared, and clad only in the *pallium*. On the Christian plaques we see Jesus holding a scroll in one hand, as in early depictions of Asklepios, while he heals various afflicted persons. Regarding the votive relief, this is a superb example of Asklepios healing a dreaming patient. Jefferson (2014, 101) notes that Asklepios is not shown healing in sculptures and that reliefs of him healing are rare. However, the few reliefs that do depict Asklepios healing support the pervasive descriptions known from cultic testimonials.

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Greco-Roman traditions informed the Gospel accounts. Archaeologists have shown that Jewish Galilee of Jesus's time included the highly Hellenized and urban Sepphoris, just four miles from Nazareth (Meyers, Netzer, and Meyers 1992). Likewise, scholars such as Richard Horsley (1997, 2002) have illuminated the clear influence of Roman institutions and culture on Paul and the Gospels. While the historical Jesus remains elusively out of reach, by employing social memory theory I hope to shed light on the profound influence of the Asclepius traditions on the motif of Jesus as Healer in some of the earliest Christian interpretations of the Gospels and perhaps in the compositional history of the stories themselves.

III. SOCIAL MEMORY THEORY: SOME KEY POINTS

The introduction of social memory theory to biblical studies is still relatively fresh and holds tremendous promise for the study of the Gospels, since the main tools of biblical scholarship are written texts from the past that present an even older past and that enjoy either claimed or ascribed authority.⁷ Two insights from social memory theory are particularly relevant. First, the remembered past is not static, but rather socially constructed in terms of its impinging relevance to the present realities of the early Jewish/early Christian authors. This position requires that any interpretation of the Gospels attend to an historical critical reading of the context of oral/written/redacted composition. Second, through its “coherence-bestowing activities,” collective memory continues to inform the dynamically unfolding present of these authors, so that “the present

⁷ The role of social memory in the composition of biblical texts becomes more complicated when we consider that the texts were not necessarily written as “scripture.” In the case of the New Testament, it was not until the fourth century that the social memory inscribed in these texts aligned with the collective memory of those early Church leaders who enjoyed good relations with the Roman authorities, so as to produce the canon. This “Romanization” may well have favored a portrayal of Christ as an Asclepius-style healer in this century, particularly as a counter to Emperor Julian’s elevation of pagan religion and Asclepius.

is always emerging from its own past” (Kirk and Thatcher 2005, 10 and 15 respectively; see pp. 7–15 generally).

Thus, a collective memory such as the portrayal of Jesus not only acts politically as a model *of* society, drawing on past traditions, but also acts as a model *for* society, so that memory itself is a social frame (Schwartz 1996, 908). When the Synoptic Gospel writers were fashioning the narratives that would remember the life of Jesus, they did so as models *of* society in the framework of the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures of their day. Additionally, though, as models *for* society, the Synoptic authors also wrote the Gospels with *framing capacities* informed by political, affective, and value-laden goals (Schwartz 1996, 909).

Collective memory, as enshrined in commemorations such as the Gospels, is thus laden with programmatic meaning in ways that foster or limit certain futures, so that “Memory is a cultural program that orients our intentions, sets our moods, and enables us to act” (Schwartz 1996, 921). The Gospel narratives capture a dynamic cycle: the social frames of the present culture of the composers shape some collective memory of Jesus from the past, which is transmitted as oral/written/redacted text. This portrayal of Jesus in turn has “orientational power” for future readers of the text (Schwartz 1996, 909–10).

Since memory carries this social framing capacity, social memory is often strongly contested as a marker of self-identity and future power when existing social groups vary widely in power (Stoler 2009; Namer 1987). As people living in the Roman Empire under the vast shadow of Hellenism, the early audience of the Gospels and their composers drew on the five- to seven-hundred-year-old standard referents for who constituted a Divine Healer-Physician-Savior, namely, Asklepios/Asclepius. As adherents of a relatively imperiled new version of Judaism, they framed the social memory of Jesus in ways that programmatically contested the power of the Asclepius cult as Christianity moved forward.

IV. MYTHIC AND CULTIC TRADITIONS OF
ASKLEPIOS/ASCLEPIUS

Early Christian writers interested in shaping a collective memory of Jesus as healer would have been unavoidably familiar with the traditions associated with Asclepius, who was by far the most popular Hellenistic and Roman god of healing. His myth and cult are strongly tied to the practice of medicinal, surgical, and therapeutic healing by dream incubation through his associations with the Hippocratic school of medicine, his status as patron of physicians called *Asclepiads*, and his relationship with his daughter Hygieia, the goddess of Health, alongside whom he was often worshipped (Renberg 2014, 94; Edelstein and Edelstein 1945, 2:20).⁸ Homer first mentions Asklepios as an outstanding human physician ([Il. 2.728–733](#); [4.193–194](#); [4.218–219](#); [11.517–518](#)).

Other writers portray his life as a physician as being bound up in violent deaths wrought by impulsive gods, followed by eventual apotheosis as a divine physician. In his well-known birth story his father Apollo killed his mother Koronis when she was still with child. He regretted it and took the child from her womb by C-section (Meier 1967, 24), entrusting him to the care of the centaur Cheiron, who trained the boy in medicine (e.g., [Ovid, *Metam.* 2.542–648](#); [Pindar, *Pyth.* 3.1–58](#); cf. [Pausanias, *Descr.* 2.26.5](#)). Later, Asklepios became such a skilled physician that he raised someone from the dead, but Zeus killed him with a lightning bolt in anger over the cure before relenting and resurrecting him as a healing deity ([Pindar, *Pyth.* 3.1–58](#); [Euripides, *Alc.* 3–4](#)). As a result he became the star Serpentarius in the Ophiuchus constellation, and it was believed that some people born under that star became doctors (Aristides, *Hier. Log.* 4.5ff.; Meier 1967, 30–31). After his apotheosis, Asklepios could appear in an epiphany at will in his

⁸ I thank Gil Renberg for providing me, back in 2014, a pre-publication draft of his forthcoming *Where Dreams May Come: Incubation Sanctuaries in the Greco-Roman World*. All references and citations of Renberg 2014 refer to the pagination of that draft. The reader is encouraged to consult the final published version for up-to-date pagination.

various cults, in which the divine physician continued to heal the chronically ill.

While other healing cults existed, none rivaled the popularity of the *Asklepieia*, probably because of an association with actual physicians (Wickkiser 2008, 45). By the early 5th century BCE the cult of Asklepios had begun to practice therapeutic dream incubation for physical and sometimes mental ailments (Wickkiser 2008; Renberg 2014, 87). Practicing physicians probably operated at some sites, as evidenced by medical equipment excavated at the *Asklepieion* at Corinth. Some healing cults, such as the Egyptian cults of the architect-scribe-healing dream god Imhotep/Imouthes at Saqqâra and the many cults of the healing god Sarapis, were folded into the Asklepios phenomenon through syncretistic identification with the god ([P.Oxy. 11.1381, lines 51–57](#); Renberg 2014, 79–80, 254, 264, 326–36; Meier 1967, 45–52). By the end of the Hellenistic period, hundreds of *Asklepieia* practicing therapeutic and medicinal dream incubation flourished throughout the Roman Empire, including in Athens and Rome, such that Asklepios enjoyed “a near monopoly on therapeutic incubation” and a “track record of widely heralded successes” (Renberg 2014, 87–94). By the time of the Gospels’ composition in the Roman period, Asclepius had been the divine patron of Julius Caesar and Augustus and enjoyed enough status that the people of Corinth rededicated and revived their *Asklepieion* as a new, major healing complex in the first century CE (Wickkiser 2010, 57).

In the Greek and Roman eras, Asklepios/Asclepius was commonly referred to as “The Physician” as well as “Soter,” or Savior. The title Σωτήρ frequently appears in dedications to the god and in other inscriptions associated with his cult, especially at Pergamon, and in literary sources such as Aelius Aristides’s *Sacred Tales* (Renberg 2014, 93 n. 225). It also appears in obscure texts, such as a pseudo-Menander papyrus (*P. Didot* 1.9–11) that describes a person feeling like he had just incubated a dream at the Asclepius cult and was “saved” (σωθείς) (Wickkiser 2008, 38).

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For the chronically ill, participation in the Asclepius cult was complex, expensive, and time consuming, necessitating vast geographical travel with no guarantee of a cure (Avalos 1999, 91–119). At one of the hundreds of temple sites dedicated to the god, incubants conducted a series of potent preparatory rituals (washing, changing into pure clothing, sacrifice, and at some sites traversing a spiral *θόλος* maze housing snakes) after which they slept in a sacred *ιερόν* or *ἄβατον* (Aristides, *Or.* 48.27; Edelstein and Edelstein 1945, 1:286–87; LiDonnici 1995, 11–12; Hamilton 1906, 11; Meier 1949, 69–83; Flannery-Dailey 2004, 99–108). At several sites, including the most famous at Epidaurus, the incubant slept by a statue of the god in the hope of procuring a dream of the god or of his companion animals, the dog and the snake. The patients typically faced an incurable, chronic health problem (Wickkiser 2010, 56; LiDonnici 1995) although a few incubants sought help from the god in finding lost things (LiDonnici 1995, tales B4, C3, C22).

A dream was not guaranteed and could take many visits or a long stay to procure, but the fortunate appearance of the god and/or his representative was thought to result in healing that could occur either immediately or eventually. In the dream the patient would “see” the god, who would seem to be standing by the ill person (LiDonnici 1995; Flannery-Dailey 2004, 104); Asklepios then would typically either convey some instructions for healing or touch the patient with his curative hand (National Archaeological Museum, Greece, Piraeus, [ΜΠ 405](#) [higher resolution available at the [Εφορεία Αρχαιοτήτων Δυτικής Αττικής, Πειραιώς και Νήσων](#) blog], also [3369](#); Lang 1977, 9). At this point the incubant was expected to give money, a thank offering, or a votive or other dedication to the cult, such as may be found among the extensive *iamata* testimonial plaques at Epidaurus or the one hundred plus terracotta votive models of the affected body part, most of them life-sized, retrieved from Corinth (LiDonnici 1995, 42; Wickkiser 2010, 43, 45; Lang 1977, 15).

In sum, by the time of the composition of the Gospels, the traditions about Asclepius the Divine Physician were archetypal

throughout the Roman Empire. As Wickkiser (2010, 45; 2008) has noted, his outstanding popularity derived from his close association with human physicians, and his reputation and fame as a healer were unparalleled. This reputation would have reached even a new version of Judaism.

V. SOCIAL MEMORY THEORY AND JESUS AS HEALER-PHYSICIAN-SAVIOR

The field of Biblical Studies has paid far less attention to Jesus's role as physician/healer, *ιατρός*, than it has to his role as savior, *σωτήρ*. However, in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus twice refers to himself as a physician or *ιατρός*. In Luke (4:23), Jesus reads from the Torah scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth and states to the congregation, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself (*ιατρέ, θεράπευσον σεαυτόν*)!'" Immediately after saying this in the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus goes to Capernaum and begins exorcising demons and performing many healings, beginning with Simon's mother-in-law who had a fever (Luke 4:39) and proceeding on to raising the dead son of the widow of Nain in a funeral procession (Luke 7:11-14). In each Synoptic Gospel, Jesus also compares himself to a physician, retorting to his critics, "Those who are well have no need of a physician (*ιατροῦ*), but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:17; also Matt 9:12; Luke 5:31). The passage either presents the idea of a physician as a metaphor for one who calls sinners to repentance, or it presents as intertwined the roles of a physician and one who calls sinners to repentance.

Three healing pericopes in the Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as a healer who brings to mind the famous Asclepius, but who also is distinctive in that he contravenes the codes of purity of both the Jerusalem Temple and the Asclepius cult, such that physical healing becomes a medium for demonstrating the role of belief and the forgiveness of sin.

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Jesus Raises the Daughter of Jairus from Death to Life

In each version of this story, a leader of the synagogue, whom Mark and Luke call Jairus, begs Jesus to come to his house because his daughter is dying, or even has died (only in [Matt 9:18](#)). Jesus complies, but in each case when the physician-healer arrives at the house he is seemingly too late—the girl is already dead. The public audience in the story knows that the girl is dead and they have already commenced their mourning. Jesus contradicts them, saying:

Why do you make a commotion and weep? *The child is not dead but sleeping* (τὸ παιδίον οὐκ ἀπέθανεν ἀλλὰ καθεύδει).
([Mark 5:39](#))

Go away; for the girl is not dead but *sleeping* (καθεύδει). ([Matt 9:24](#))

Do not weep; for she is not dead but *sleeping* (καθεύδει).
([Luke 8:52](#))

While it is true that many ancient accounts note that death resembles sleep (Flannery-Dailey 2004, 25–28, 37, 49–50, 65–67, 72–73, 76–77, 90–93, 238–49), sleep is not the opposite of death. We might have expected Jesus to say instead, “She is not dead, she is alive.” The pronouncement that she is *sleeping* as a consistent structural feature in each Synoptic parallel suggests that we are in the locus of motifs from the Asclepius cult: an ill person lay asleep while the physician deity stands next to her/him to heal the patient. Since Jesus proceeds in each story to heal the girl who is “sleeping” (καθεύδει), the texts readily evoke the image of the god Asclepius, who stands by sleeping patients and heals them with an outstretched hand.

Without becoming mired in the complex relationships of the literary and oral dependence of the Synoptic traditions, several common story elements take on new significance if we consider them to be in conversation with the Asclepius healing tradition. Each story begins as the leader of the synagogue comes to Jesus to

say that his daughter is so sick that she is on the point of death ([Mark 5:23](#); [Luke 8:41-42](#)) or has just died ([Matt 9:18](#)). Read in light of the fame of the foundational identity myth of Asclepius, we may recall that Zeus killed the physician for raising the dead, but relented and raised him again as a healing deity (e.g., [Pindar, *Pyth.* 3.1-58](#); [Euripides, *Alc.* 3-4](#)). Some scholars have pointed out that Jesus similarly raises the dead, and, intriguingly, is also killed and raised from the dead in a new, deified state (Rengstorf 1953, 10). Jesus also heals the same kinds of illnesses as does Asclepius: both cure leprosy, blindness, deafness, and paralysis.⁹

The manner in which Jesus heals the little girl is also reminiscent of traditions about Asclepius. In Matthew and Mark the father begs Jesus, saying: “*come and lay your hands on her* (ἐλθὼν ἐπιθεῖς τὴν χεῖρά σου ἐπ’ αὐτήν) and she will live” ([Matt 9:18-19](#)); “*Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live*” ([Mark 8:23](#)). While in some cures Asclepius prescribes a medicine or course of treatment, he was also known as *apochair* (“from the hand”) for his curative touch that he applied to sleeping incubants at his healing temples; hence, standard iconography depicts him reaching out to lay his hand(s) on sleeping patients.

Social memory theory would have us take seriously that the composers’ framing of Jesus as a physician of the sleeping sick is an image that speaks to their relevant present context, namely, familiarity with the Asclepius traditions in which the Divine Physician heals his sleeping patients. Yet, there are crucial differences that show that the pericopes do not mean simply to compare, but rather to contest. First, the claim that Asclepius could raise the dead lay in the long ago past, not in the contemporary activity of his cult. The composers of the Gospels, however, are writing shortly after Jesus lived and claiming that Jesus actually did

⁹ See the *iamata* in LiDonnici 1995, in which Asklepios purportedly cured a far wider range of ailments, including muteness [A5], stones [A8, A14], tattoos [A6, 7], leeches [A13], baldness [A19], extra lengthy pregnancy [A1, A2], parasites [B3], malignant growths [B6], false pregnancy [B5], lice [B8], headache [B9], pus [B10], infertility [B11, 14, 19], and so forth.

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raise the dead; Acts will claim that the apostles did as well (e.g., [Acts 9:40](#); [20:9–12](#)). Second, God does not kill Jesus as punishment for raising the dead, as Zeus killed Asclepius. Jesus raises the dead with at least implicit divine approval, which makes him a physician more favored by God/the gods. The Epidaurian *iamata* never mention Asclepius healing someone on the verge of death or raising the dead. Jesus is thus portrayed as a different kind of physician than Asclepius or the priests of the Jerusalem Temple who were in charge of overseeing healing, since he knowingly touches and heals the dead.

Third, the father's request is that Jesus "come" (ἐλθὼν) to the house of the girl. Pilgrims in the cult of Asclepius went to enormous expense to travel to the Asklepieia and remain there for the duration of their cure. Some even took up residence in the precincts, as did the prolific Aelius Aristides, who stayed for two years. As Patton (2004, 204) puts it,

[T]he element of locality is not negotiable. If I want to be healed by Asclepius, I must bring my wounded body to him at his shrine, and after I have fasted and purified myself and made special offerings in the walled temple precinct, I must sleep in the *abaton*, together with other sufferers and under the watchful, scripted mediation of priests, with the shared goal of receiving a therapeutic dream from the god.

In Mark and Luke, the father asks Jesus to come to his home when the little girl is very ill, on the point of death; in Matthew she is already dead at the time of the request. In either case, there would have been no hope of cure for her by Asclepius, for she would never have been able to make the journey to an Asklepieion, the elaborate rituals of which were not conducive to dire emergency cases nor to resurrecting the dead. By contrast, the Gospel story implies, this girl is fortunate because her father relies on Jesus. The story is making the point that Jesus is a doctor who makes house calls!

Intriguingly, the father is the "leader of the synagogue" ([Mark 5:22](#) // [Matt 9:18](#) // [Luke 8:41](#)), but in what city? In Luke, the

Nazareth synagogue is the location at which Jesus earlier referred to his reputation as a Physician ([Luke 4:23](#)). Both Matthew and Luke place the location of the raising of the girl from death to life in the city of Nazareth ([Matt 9:1](#); [Luke 8:19–21, 40](#)). Mark also places Jairus’s house as Jesus’s last stop before he “came to his hometown,” suggesting proximity to Nazareth ([Mark 6:1](#)). While any claims about the historical Jesus must remain tenuous, the literary connections to the Nazareth synagogue offer intriguing support for some scholars studying the historical Jesus who claim his reputation was in part as a healer (Meier 1994; Crossan 1989, 75–101; Borg 2005).

A Chronically Bleeding Woman is Healed by Touching the Cloak of Jesus

Each Synoptic Gospel interweaves the story of the healing of Jairus’s daughter with a tale of the healing of a chronically bleeding woman, sandwiching it in the middle between Jairus imploring Jesus to come to the house and the scene in which Jesus heals the dead girl. In each version of this middle section, a woman with a constant flow of blood (*ἐν ῥύσει αἵματος*) touches Jesus’s cloak when he is in a crowd, after which Jesus tells her that her faith (*ἡ πίστις*) has healed her ([Mark 5:24–34](#); also [Matt 9:20–22](#); [Luke 8:42–48](#)). Mark ([5:25](#)) makes it clear that she has sought healing from many other physicians (*ὑπὸ πολλῶν ἰατρῶν*), and Luke ([8:43](#)) adds that “she spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her” (*ἥτις ἰατροῖς προσαναλώσασα ὅλον τὸν βίον οὐκ ἴσχυσεν ἀπ’ οὐδενὸς θεραπευθῆναι*). Given the reputation of Asclepius for extracting his fee, this may be read as a criticism at the kinds of human physicians for whom the god served as patron.

As a storehouse of latent memory, the Gospels draw on a plethora of intertextual and cultural Jewish and Greco-Roman referents. The sandwiched story cycle of Jairus’s daughter/the chronically bleeding woman shows Jesus contravening not only Greco-Roman purity norms, but also Jewish levitical purity laws. While it is important not to overstress the taint of impurity in

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Judaism, since it was a regular ritual state with which all Jews had to contend, the act of entering the house of the dead girl and touching her corpse would have made Jesus impure according to biblical law ([Lev 21:11](#)). If the woman had a *zōv* (זוּו), an issue of blood lasting for more than a day, she would be impure by levitical standards ([Lev 15:19–27](#)). By contagion, her act of touching Jesus’s robe (τῶν ἱματίων) should make him impure, yet the story’s emphasis is not on her action affecting his ritual purity, but rather on his power flowing into her and curing her.

It is less clear if the story of the chronically bleeding woman also implies that Jesus overcomes Roman purity norms. To my knowledge, there is no clear evidence that either Roman religion or the Asclepius cult considered either normal or abnormal menstruation or vaginal bleeding to be polluting (Beck 2004, 209), although childbirth, which entailed vaginal bleeding, was certainly associated with the pollution of death. The *iamata* plaques that depict the god Asclepius aiding women in childbirth stress that the god induced childbirth as soon as—but only after—they left the boundary of the sacred sleeping area or ἄβατον: “she rushed out of the Abaton, and as soon as she was outside the sacred area, gave birth to a daughter” (LiDonnici 1995, 13, 87). However, in the story of Jairus’s daughter, Jesus clearly ignores Roman purity concerns by entering the home with the dead child, since Romans considered a corpse *remaining* in a home to be highly polluting (Beck 2004, 509–11).

Overall, then, the story cycle of Jairus’s daughter/the bleeding woman elicits both comparison and contrast with the Asclepius traditions. It begins by evoking memories of Asclepius incubation when a dead girl is explicitly said to be *sleeping* while a *healer*—and no less one who elsewhere compares himself to a physician—stands beside her and heals her of her illness through *laying his hands on her*. As the story cycle proceeds, however, it elicits a contrast with the Asclepius cult: Jesus’s mobile presence heals people in unexpected places, including those patients who are normally

excluded from healing, as he overturns Roman and/or Jewish purity laws regarding death and discharges.

Perhaps the most vital contrast is the way in which the Synoptic Gospels, as opposed to the Asclepius traditions, tie divine healing to faith/belief (ἡ πίστις). The emphasis on faith weaves together the stories of Jairus's daughter and the chronically bleeding woman in a way that relocates the sphere of physical, medical healing to the realm of psychological and spiritual healing in terms of the Christian *kerygma*. In the story of Jairus's daughter, faith is the key to physical healing and to "being saved." Before the father has returned home, he receives word that his daughter has died, to which Jesus immediately says, "Do not fear, only believe" (μὴ φοβοῦ μόνον πίστευε, [Mark 5:36](#)) and "Do not fear, only believe and she will be saved" (μὴ φοβοῦ μόνον πιστεῖτε καὶ σωθήσεται, [Luke 8:50](#)). Similarly, after the bleeding woman touches Jesus's garment, he replies to her with a cause and effect explanation that her proactive belief has resulted in both peace and medical healing: "Daughter, *your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease*" (ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε ὕπαγε εἰς εἰρήνην καὶ ἴσθι ὑγιῆς ἀπὸ τῆς μάστιγός σου, [Mark 5:34](#); cf. [Matt 9:22](#); [Luke 8:48](#)). This is a story of "faith healing" that establishes a causal link between belief on the one hand, and psychological and physical healing on the other.

The Synoptics also maintain that healing is somehow interrelated with the forgiveness of sins. When friends bring a paralyzed man on a bed to Jesus, he says the unexpected: "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." He then cures him saying, "Stand up, take your bed and go to your home" ([Mark 2:1-12](#) // [Matt 9:2-8](#) // [Luke 5:17-26](#)). This story implies that the Gospels see sin and illness as intertwined, an idea implied in Jesus's statement: "Those who are well have no need of a physician (ιατροῦ), but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" ([Mark 2:17](#); also [Matt 9:12](#); [Luke 5:31](#)). This association between the sick and sinners is likewise evident in the Hebrew Bible. Certain sins resulted in physical ailments according to the Covenant ([Deut 28:22, 27-28](#)), and the Jewish Temple system also clearly associates chronic illness with

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impurity (e.g., Lev 13–15, also 4QMMT, Temple Scroll, 1QS). Impurity and moral sins are not identical in Jewish law, since one can incur impurity simply through emitting normal physiological discharges (e.g., [Lev 15:16–23](#)). However, the concepts of “sin” and “impurity” overlap. What we might think of as “moral sins” as well as impurities resulting from touching things that are unclean required a sin offering ([Lev 5:1–6](#)), indicating a complex understanding of “sin.” In fact, the Day of Atonement may have functioned to cleanse the Temple from impurity that clung to it on account of moral sins as well as ritual infractions ([Lev 16:16](#); Milgrom 1998–2001; Levine 1989, 92).¹⁰

At any rate, the Asclepius cult does not appear to have associated sin with illness, nor did it view the healing of patients as being contingent on their belief. Rather, healing was contingent on the pious fulfillment of rituals and sometimes occurred in spite of a lack of faith. For instance, a cure posted at Epidauros states that a man with nine paralyzed fingers came as a suppliant, but “When he was looking at the plaques in the sanctuary, he didn’t believe in the cures and was somewhat disparaging of the inscriptions.” He carried out the rituals, however, and then saw a dream of Asclepius in which the god healed all his fingers. Next, “the god asked him if he would still not believe the inscriptions on the plaques around the sanctuary and he answered no.” To this, the god replied in the dream, “Therefore, since you doubted them before, though they were not unbelievable, from now on,” he said, “your name shall be ‘Unbeliever.’” The new name was Ἀπιστος, literally, “no-faith” or “no-belief.” Yet the plaque concludes, “When day came he left well” (LiDonnici 1995, 86–87).

¹⁰ The complex topic of exorcism in the Gospels and its relationship to healing also bears further study. Since the Synoptics repeatedly tie healing to salvation and belief, and illness to sin and unbelief, so, too, do they link demon possession to both illness and unbelief (e.g., [Mark 9:24](#)). The way in which the Gospels construct Jesus as a Divine Healer and as an exorcist is one way in which they differ from / transform the Greco-Roman Asclepius traditions, which do not attribute illness to demonic possession.

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Some cure tales do imply that the earnest prayer of the patient plays a role in obtaining a cure (LiDonnici 1995, 94–95, 112–13, 120–21), but it is unclear if the act of praying included real belief or simply the pious fulfillment of a ritual. Other cure tales explain that a person could still be cured even with no belief in the cures, if only the promised fee was paid (i.e., if ritual obligations were fulfilled). Such was the case of a woman who ridiculed the posted cures but had a dream in which the god required her to dedicate “a silver pig in the sanctuary as a memorial of her ignorance.” She was cured after awakening, despite her unbelief, as long as she paid afterwards (LiDonnici 1995, 88–89).

Hence, unlike Jesus, Asclepius did not typically take charity cases, but expected due payment as part of the fulfillment of vows. Socrates’s last words to Crito at the end of [Phaedo \(118\)](#), “We owe a cock to Asklepios,” have immortalized the importance of fulfilling this obligation. Plato appears to critique Asklepios by saying that he picked his patients by determining their ability to pay him or society: “But if a man was incapable of living in the established round and order of life, he did not think it worthwhile to treat him, since such a fellow is of no use either to himself or the state” ([Plato, Resp. 3.407E](#)). Several cure plaques displayed at Epidauros warn suppliants that if they fail to pay, the cure reverts. Such was the fate of Hermon of Thasos, cured of blindness through a dream, however: “when he didn’t bring the offering, the god made him blind again” (LiDonnici 1995, 100–01). Similarly, another plaque relates that Amphimnastos swore to give a tenth of the profit of a catch of fish to Asclepius, “but he didn’t do it, as he should,” whereupon the fish were struck by lightning and their bodies were burning up, along with the man’s profit. After the man confessed to a surrounding crowd and then prayed to the god, the catch of fish “appears to live again,” whereupon Amphimnastos dedicated the promised 10% to the god (LiDonnici 1995, 120–21). This votive tale is the closest cure we get

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to Asclepius raising the dead, and its prominent display makes the clear point that patients had better pay up.¹¹

In light of the reputation for acquisitiveness affixed to Asclepius and his client physicians, the lack of mention of monetary payment for Jesus's healings is thus not simply an incidental omission. Rather, the remark that the bleeding woman had spent all that she had on physicians takes on sharp significance, as does the claim that belief can result in both peace and physical healing.

Jesus Raises the Son of the Widow of Nain from Death to Life

This final pericope, which occurs only in Luke ([7:11–17](#)), also suggests a contested social memory between the Jesus and Asclepius traditions. In this story Jesus passes a funeral procession in Nain in which a widow's only son is being carried on a funeral bier. This pericope breaks down into three parts. In part one, Jesus sees the dead child, has compassion for the parent, and touches an object made impure with death—in this case the funeral bier ([Luke 7:11–14](#)). The Greek resembles the earlier Aramaic exclamation of “Talitha qum”: “young man (*νεανίσκε*), I say to you, rise (*ἐγέρθητι*)!” ([Luke 7:14](#)). This raises the son back to life, and possibly gestures back to the story of Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus.

In part two of the pericope the disciples of John the Baptist arrive to ask, “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” ([Luke 7:19](#)). Jesus's answer focuses on his ability to cure disease:

Jesus had just then cured many people of their diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive their sight, the

¹¹ I should note that this is the only place in which I disagree with the conclusions of Jefferson's (2014) excellent study, since he stresses Asklepios's compassion for the poor. For example, Jefferson reads a compliment about Asklepios in a satire straightforwardly (41), whereas I see the opposite meaning intended.

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lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.” ([Luke 7:21-22](#))

This list fulfills the descriptions of “the one who is to come,” drawing on the passage in [Isa 29:18-20](#), but expands those healed to include lepers, the lame, and the dead. When read through the lens of social memory theory, this stress on Jesus as Healer is in conversation with the traditions of the most famous healer, Asclepius, who cured the blind, lame, lepers, deaf, and the dead.

However, Zeus killed Asclepius for raising the dead, whereas Jesus heals the dead with divine approval when he raises the widow’s son and Jairus’s daughter. The sharpest contrast comes with Jesus’s statement that “the poor have good news brought to them” ([Luke 7:22](#)). Greek plays preserve a sharp criticism often leveled at the vast network of medical dream cults of Asklepios, with their hundreds of expensive votive offerings: it was too successful as a money making enterprise. A character in [Aristophanes’s *Ploutos* \(407-408\)](#) whines that physicians are only available when there is adequate payment, but Ploutos himself, the god of wealth, is wealthy enough to go to a temple of Asklepios to have his blindness cured ([633-747](#); also [Theophrastus, *Char.* 21.10](#); Wickkiser 2008, 38). Cultic remains, including the *iamata* at Epidauros, may explain the social reality behind the critique. On one plaque Asklepios famously requires a poor boy to pay with ten dice, the only valuable item he owned, after asking, “What will you give me if I make you well?” (LiDonnici 1995, 92-93; cf. Jefferson 2014, 41).

Thus, given Asclepius’s reputation for avarice, Jesus’s whole list of proofs that he is “the one” easily reads as a pointed critique of the most famous Divine Physician and/or the human physicians for whom Asclepius served as patron: “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” ([Luke 7:22](#)). Jesus’s retort might fairly be paraphrased as: *I can do every cure that he can do, as well as raise the dead without God killing me for it, and I am not exploiting the poor—instead I bring them good news.*

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If this reading is sound, what follows in part three of the story may well be another barb aimed at the Asclepius cult's financial gain. After concluding his speech to John's messengers about his credentials as "the one," Jesus then addresses the crowd, saying, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken in the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces" ([Luke 7:24](#)). Traditions about Asclepius may also shed new light on these images. Jesus was a roughly clad traveling healer, whereas the hundreds of ornate Asklepieia temples scattered about the Roman Empire preeminently featured a statue or relief of the god dressed in only a robe with no underlying shirt, his signature iconographic style. Asclepius also sometimes appears in reliefs in his Temples as sitting on a throne in sumptuous palatial surroundings (Athens, National Archaeological Museum 1381). This foil may also help explain the image of the reed shaken in the wind as a writing implement.¹² In Greek and Roman Egypt, Asclepius was identified with the architect-scribe Imhotep-Imouthes, whose tomb was called "the Asklepieion" in Greek sources and who was worshipped at Saqqâra, Deir el-Bahri, Memphis and elsewhere as both Divine Physician and Divine Scribe, which accounts for the frequent depictions of him holding a scroll (Renberg 2014, 326–36). Jesus might have said, *You expected maybe to see a scribe out here in the wilderness, or someone outside dressed in soft robes? You'll find that healer in an Asklepieion!*

Hence, in light of social memory theory, all three parts of this Lukan pericope may read as a strong criticism leveled at those who make financial gains from healing, whether that be the god Asclepius, his priest-physicians the *Asclepiads*, or the Hippocratic school of medicine for which he served as patron. Luke shows Jesus raising the dead to life, then claiming to be "the one" on account of his ability to cure diseases, raise the dead, and care for the poor, before finally retorting that while the people expected a scribe clad

¹² The trees shaking in the wind from [Isa 7:2](#) and the images of a bruised reed in [Isa 42:3](#) (etc.) are not contextually logical or helpful here.

in a soft robe in a palace, they instead have John the Baptist and himself dressed simply and out in the wilderness.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

When read in light of social memory theory, the three healing pericopes examined here function as stories that contest the authority of the famous Divine Physician-Savior Asclepius by presenting Jesus as the best Ἴατρός and Σωτήρ, Physician and Savior. This is not just the composers' interpretation of the past, but also a way to make a programmatic claim for the future that positions Christianity over a competing cult. Unlike Asclepius, the Gospels stress, Jesus heals the dead with divine approval. Unlike in the dream cult, the sick can be healed without travel to a Temple if only they have faith, regardless of their socio-economic and purity standings.

These Gospel portraits testify that Christian comparisons between Jesus and Asclepius adhered already in the first century, establishing a social framing for the memory of Jesus that intensified over the next several centuries. As Jefferson (2014, 141–43) notes, from the second to fourth centuries Christian appropriation of imagery from the Asclepius cult enabled Christianity to compete so successfully that the Emperor Julian in turn sought to bolster the image of Asclepius by appropriating aspects of Christ. As Avalos (1999, 117–19) shows, the success of the Christ as Healer motif owed above all to the distinctions that it made over and against the cult of Asclepius: Jesus was a Healer-Physician who overcomes the constraints of geography, money, time, and ritual that restricted suppliants of the pagan dream cult.

To these insights must be added another factor in Christianity's transformation of the motif of Jesus as Healer and subsequent spread throughout the empire, namely, that the Gospels spiritualized the healing stories in terms of the early *kerygma*. The pericopes of Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus and the son of the widow of Nain are interwoven with claims that it is faith that facilitates healing and that raises the dead. Since, theoretically,

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anyone can have faith, this message suggests that the scope of healing activity extends beyond the borders of the narrative encounter to the audience: anyone can attain *eternal life after death* if only they have faith. The pericopes we have examined of Jesus healing the sick and the dead then function partly as proof of this *kerygma*, which is accessible to all.

However positive the association between belief and healing may seem, it rests on an assumption that deserves to be brought into the harsh light of the twenty-first century. As a modern reader of the Synoptic Gospels, I find the equation of sin with illness and of belief with physical healing to be highly problematic, in that it stigmatizes those suffering from physical maladies as being somehow blameworthy.

Without attempting to rescue the text for modern sensibilities, I can, however, still appreciate the transformations that Jesus's actions effect in those who are suffering. When he tells the troubled to "go in peace" on account of their faith, which also simultaneously heals them of their diseases, Jesus is acting as a doctor as well as practicing *ψυχὴ ἰατρεία*—doctoring of the spirit—from which we derive our term "psychiatry." Although the Synoptic Gospels distance Jesus's healing activity from the practice of dreaming, which is known to serve a therapeutic function, I find that the portrait of Jesus as Divine Physician retains and significantly develops the important recognition that the healing process entails not only physical changes, but also emotional, psychological, and social transformations as well.

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