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

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Summary*

The textual and visual tradition of the story of the woman with the haemorrhage (Mark 5.24b–34), the so-called Haemorrhoissa, is related in a specific way to Christ's healing miracles, but also to conceptions of female menstrual blood. We notice that with regard to the specific ‘issue of blood’ of the Haemorrhoissa there is a visual lacuna in the specific iconography that developed around the story from early Christian times: in the transposition from text to image, there is no immediate depiction of her bleeding. However, the early-medieval reception of the story also became an important catalyst for uterine taboos, menstruation and its relation to magical healing, understood as a system of health practices. In this context, the dissemination of the motif in everyday material culture clearly points to a deep-rooted connection to uterine and menstrual issues. The paper considers both expressions and their – anthropologically framed – relation to this female ‘issue of blood’, which the Haemorrhoissa came to embody and epitomise literally, as well as figuratively.

Introduction

Among the miraculous healings of the Bible, the story of the Haemorrhoissa (the haemorrhaging woman) holds a special place (Mark 5.24b–34). The healing takes place through touch, at the initiative of the sick person herself, in this case a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. The synoptic gospels suggest that this initiative on the woman’s part is something that, in this period, was seen as crossing the boundaries of decency. Moreover, this touching was experienced as a charged undertaking. Christ felt a certain power flow from himself, as

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if the woman’s touch took something away from him. The synoptic text thus holds considerable complexity: there is a remarkable relationship between touching and healing, and it involves a woman of whom several exegetical commentaries on the text suggest that she is – because of the specificity of her illness, her so-called ‘issue of blood’ – impure by law. In addition, the episode is framed within the context of another miracle: the raising of Jairus’ daughter.

This chapter treats the theme of the Haemorrhoissa as located in the interstices of exegesis, iconology and anthropology, with an interdisciplin ary focus on the issue of blood. The first part – ‘Text and intertext: what kind of bleeding?’ – pursues the exegetical question of the specific nature of the ‘issue of blood’. In the second part – ‘From narrative to iconic space: the lacuna of the issue of blood’ – we will confront this analysis with the genesis of the motif of the Haemorrhoissa in art, from which the depiction of the issue of blood is absent. The third part – ‘Healing and amulets: the motif’s dissemination’ – will examine the movement of the Gospel miracle story into the world of everyday material culture. The motif will therefore be situated in the anthropological context of blood, uterine taboos and magical healing. We understand magical healing1 in this late antique context as a system of health practices based on the exploitation and manipulation of impersonal coercive forces at work in the world, bearing in mind that in late antique times magic, miracle and medicine were competitive in their relation to healing, but that at the same time the distinction between them was blurred.

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1 Ogden D., Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds. A Sourcebook (Oxford: 2009) 4 notes that the definition of ‘magic’ is ‘famously problematic’, since there is no consensus in defining the term, which has been in use since Antiquity. This is partly due to the history of magic itself, revealing crucial shifts in how magic was conceptualised and in the understanding of how it worked. Scholars currently tend to look at how magic was understood and worked in particular instances. See also Collins D., Magic in the Ancient Greek World (Malden: 2008) and Labahn M. – Lietaert Peerbolte B.J. (eds.), A Kind of Magic. Understanding Magic in the New Testament and its Religious Environment (London: 2007). We therefore use a heuristic definition of late antique magic as a system of health, following Kee H.C., Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times (Cambridge: 1986) 3: ‘Magic is a technique, through word or act, by which a desired end is achieved, whether that end lies in the solution to the seeker’s problem or in damage to the enemy who has caused the problem’, or further, as in contrast to the (Christian) miracle supplicated from the divine and understood as personal, 123: ‘In the realm of magic the basic assumption is that there is a mysterious, inexorable network of forces which the initiated can exploit for personal benefit, or block for personal protection’. Magic’s relation to the cause or onset of sickness or disability reflects this: such situations result from invisible, coercive forces (gods and all other powers) at work in the world, or from a magical curse. See also Greenwood S., The Anthropology of Magic (Oxford: 2009).