

The Mystery of the Vanishing Sources:

(How New Testament Scholars Superficially and Uncritically Identified the Ancient Background of Luke 8:43-48, Acts 5:15, and Acts 19:12.)

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Introduction

In my licentiate's thesis¹ I examined the historical background of the indirect healings recorded in Luke-Acts. I wanted to find out what might have led (1) the sick and possessed to take the initiative in pursuing healing through the garment of Jesus (Lk 8:43-48), the shadow of Peter (Acts 5:15), and the handkerchiefs and belts of Paul (Acts 19:12); and (2) Luke to include these three reports of indirect healings in his *Doppelwerk* and then present them the way he did.

In the course of my studies I was surprised to realize that many New Testament scholars identified the historical background of the indirect healings of Luke-Acts in a very superficial manner. This weakness could be detected in most standard reference works and commentaries on Luke-Acts. I found out, for example, that scholars took over statements of their colleagues too quickly and uncritically, and that they did not take the time to verify the ancient proof texts themselves.

That this really is the case with regard to the identification of the historical background of the indirect healings of Luke-Acts will be demonstrated in the present article. Exposing this superficial approach may serve as a deterrent example as well as an indication of the need for more careful identification of the historical background of New Testament texts, i.e., an identification that is based on and does justice to the available ancient data.

Luke 8:43-48

Most New Testament scholars agree that when she touched Jesus' garment in order to be healed, the woman with the flow of blood acted according to religious or magical conceptions prevalent in her surroundings. John P. Meier, for example, writes that "with popular religious ideas that smack

¹ Paschke, *Healings*.

of magic, she believes that to be healed she must physically touch Jesus or at least his clothing.”²

Unfortunately, Meier refers neither to any ancient source text nor to a modern reference work to prove that the idea of receiving healing by touching the healer’s clothes actually was one of the “popular religious ideas” of the woman’s environment.

Meier does not stand alone with this lack of proof texts. When it comes to the identification of the historical background of the woman’s touching of Jesus’ garments, most New Testament commentators uncritically adapt what others have written on the subject. The following examples make that very obvious.

In his exegesis of Mk 5:27 (i.e., the synoptic parallel to Lk 8:44), Walter W. Wessel writes concerning the woman with the hemorrhage: “She apparently shared the belief, common in her day, that the power of a person was transmitted to his clothing.”³ Like his colleague Meier, Wessel offers no reference to either primary or secondary literature and therefore no evidence for his claim that the transfer of a human’s power into his clothing was a “common” belief in New Testament times.

Furthermore, Wessel’s statement is already found in earlier literature – worded in a very similar fashion. Most likely it did not originate with him. He could have taken it from William L. Lane who comments on the woman’s touch: “The desire to touch Jesus’ clothing probably reflects the popular belief that the dignity and power of a person are transferred to what he wears. On this understanding, her touch combined faith with quasi-magical notions which were widespread in that day.”⁴

In a footnote Lane refers to two modern New Testament reference works in order to underpin his statement. The first one is page 520 of the Matthew commentary of Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck.⁵ None of the – late! – rabbinic sources offered on this page, however, can be considered a proof text for Lane’s claim that the belief that a person’s dignity and power pass into his clothing was widespread in the woman’s day.

The closest parallel to Mk 5:27 found on that page is the account of the school children touching the garment of Chanan ha-Nechba while begging for rain (b. Taan 23b). In view of these negative findings it is surprising to read in Darrell L. Bock’s commentary on the Gospel of Luke: “On the Jewish

² Meier, Jew 709.

³ Wessel, Mark 661.

⁴ Lane, Gospel 192.

⁵ Strack / Billerbeck, Matthäus 520; abbreviation: Bill. I:520.

tradition of healings by touch, see SB 1:520; Schürmann 1969:491 n. 139.⁶ And what then surprises even more is the information that Heinz Schürmann offers on page 491 in footnote 139 of his commentary on Luke: “Vgl. auch Apg 19,12 (5,15). – Jüdische Parallelen von Kontaktheilungen bei Billerbeck I,520.”⁷

That means that neither Lane nor Schürmann checked the content of Bill. I:520 and that Bock neither checked Bill. I:520 nor Schürmann’s commentary. Had he taken the time to check the content of Schürmann’s footnote he would not have ended up with two references to exactly the same page of the same reference work which, however, has nothing to say concerning the Jewish tradition of healings by touch!

The second New Testament reference work that Lane mentions in order to underpin his statement is Hendrik van der Loos’ book *The Miracles of Jesus* 313-317. This is the evident source for Lane’s (and Wessel’s) statement. Van der Loos writes: “The motivation for this touching is to be found in the widespread belief that the dignity and the power of a person pass into his clothing.”⁸ Van der Loos refers to the writings of Friedrich Fenner,⁹ Alfred Bertholet,¹⁰ Johannes Pedersen,¹¹ and Ludwig Blau¹² in order to underpin his statement. After consulting these four works as well as the one that Fenner turns to for evidence, i.e., Julius Röhr’s *Der okkulte Kraftbegriff im Altertum*,¹³ only the following four primary sources emerge as “proof-texts:” Ps 45,9[8]; Sir 50:11; Ex 28:2–3; b.BB 153a (cf. Goldschmidt 408¹⁴).

None of those texts, however, is a convincing proof text for the statement of van der Loos, Wessel, and Lane that in ancient times there existed a “widespread belief that the dignity and the power of a person pass into his clothing.”¹⁵ That means that the statement is not backed up by ancient sources. Thus, when Van der Loos – about 200 pages later in his book – attempts to explain the account of the woman with the flow of blood he bases his exegesis on a doubtful background study. That in turn also makes his exege-

⁶ Bock, Luke 794, footnote 15.

⁷ Schürmann, *Lukasevangelium* 491, footnote 139.

⁸ Van der Loos, *Miracles* 317.

⁹ Fenner, *Krankheit* 83.

¹⁰ Bertholet, *Kleidung* 1066-1068.

¹¹ Pedersen, *Israel* 227.

¹² Blau, *Zauberwesen* 82.

¹³ Röhr, *Kraftbegriff* 14f.; 23.

¹⁴ „Hierauf sprach sie: Mag dein Schiff untergehen; du täuschest mich. Da weichten sie das Gewand Rabas in Wasser ein. Dennoch entging er dem Untergange nicht.“

¹⁵ Van der Loos, *Miracles* 317.

sis doubtful. He is, for example, certainly going too far in writing concerning the sick woman: “Like countless of her fellows, she wrongly believed that the vessel’s power communicated itself or was transferred to the clothing that he wore, so that thoughts of magic were doubtless involved here.”¹⁶

Acts 5:15

In a few commentaries on the Book of Acts the identification of the historical background of the healings through the shadow of Peter has been done in a superficial manner quite similar to the above demonstrated treatment of the ancient background of Lk 8:43-48.

In his commentary *Die Apostelgeschichte des Lukas*, published in 1982, Walter Schmithals, for instance, wrote: „Der Schatten eines Menschen (vgl. Lk. 1,35) hat im magischen Denken dieselbe Wirkungskraft wie der Mensch selbst, seine Hand, sein Wort, seine Kleider (19,12). Lukas ist diesem Denken seiner Zeit durchaus verbunden und setzt die entsprechenden Motive in seine Erzählung ein.“¹⁷ Even though Schmithals states that in Acts 5:15 Luke expressed the idea that a person’s shadow has the same power as the person itself because this motive was part of the „Denken seiner Zeit“ he mentions not one proof-text in order to show that conceptions of that sort were actually prevalent in the ancient world.

Schmithals’ lack of proof is inexcusable because collections of various ancient “shadow-sources” existed at the time he was working on his commentary. The existence of these collections are due to the Dutch New Testament scholar Pieter W. van der Horst who in three articles, published in 1976,¹⁸ 1979,¹⁹ and 1992,²⁰ presented a compilation of many ancient primary sources dealing with the shadow.

It can be observed that – in contrast to Schmithals – most of the more recent commentators refer to Van der Horst’s publications and also follow his conclusions. Even though Van der Horst has devoted much attention to carefully collecting and compiling ancient “shadow” sources it must be said, however, that his conclusions are drawn too quickly and therefore are doubtful. Thus, commentators taking over Van der Horst’s conclusions do not seem to have been engaged in a thorough reading of the ancient sources

¹⁶ Van der Loos, *Miracles* 514.

¹⁷ Schmithals, *Apostelgeschichte* 57.

¹⁸ Van der Horst, *Peter’s Shadow*.

¹⁹ Van der Horst, *Schatten*.

²⁰ Van der Horst, *Shadow*.

themselves. That this criticism on Van der Horst as well as those commentators following him is justified will become apparent in the following presentation and discussion of Van der Horst's articles.

The main conclusions that Van der Horst draws from the ancient data he collected are that (1) a so-called *alter ego* principle existed in the first century A.D.; and (2) this principle provides the historical background of Acts 5:15. It will be demonstrated, however, that neither of these two conclusions is supported by the ancient sources.

Van der Horst's position that "the idea that a shadow could have a powerful positive or negative effect upon another person is the background of the story about the miraculous healing of the sick Jerusalemites by Peter's shadow in Acts 5:15"²¹ rests on the so-called *alter ego* principle:

Der Schatten eines Menschen oder eines Tieres (bisweilen auch eines Objekts) ist dessen Seele, dessen Lebenskraft, dessen belebter Doppelgänger oder *alter ego*. Man kann jemandem schaden, indem man seinen Schatten gewalttätig behandelt. Und es kann gefährlich oder auch segensreich sein, wenn man vom Schatten bestimmter Menschen oder Tiere berührt wird.²²

The correctness of this statement will be tested in two steps. The first step will include dealing with the following three questions: Do the available ancient sources state that (1) an animal as well as a person could be influenced via its shadow; (2) an animal could have a supernatural – beneficial as well as harmful – influence on other creatures or human beings through its shadow; and (3) a person could have a supernatural – beneficial as well as harmful – effect on others?

In a second step it will then be asked if the character, amount, and content of the ancient sources examined in step one allow the view that the conception of the shadow as a person's *alter ego* (in the sense of Van der Horst's definition) existed in the ancient world of the first century A.D.

Step 1

Question (1) can be answered positively. According to the Greek philosopher Aristoteles

(384-322 B.C.) humans as well as animals could be influenced via their shadows: "In Arabia they say there is a species of hyaena, which, when it sees a beast in front, or comes into the shadow of a man, produces dumbness, and such paralysis that it is impossible to move the body. It has the same effect on dogs" (Aristoteles, *mirabilia* 145).

²¹ Van der Horst, *Shadow* 1149.

²² Van der Horst, *Schatten* 27.

The idea that urinating on another person's shadow was harmful for that person is probably the reason for the following prohibition: "The Magi say that when making urine one must not expose one's person to the face of the sun or moon, or let drops fall on anyone's shadow" (Plinius maior, *naturalis historia* 28,69).

The only Jewish witness to a similar belief is found in the tractate *Vayassa'* of the *Mekilta* of Rabbi Ishmael: "They say that when the viper looks upon the shadow of a flying bird, the bird immediately is whirled around and falls in pieces" (Lauterbach 88).

Ancient statements of a different kind deserve attention here because they also speak for answering question (1) in the affirmative: According to some ancient witnesses the well-being of a person depends on the existence or length of its shadow. The Greek author Pausanias (A.D. 115-180) writes:

Among the marvels of Mount Lycaeus the most wonderful is this. On it is a precinct of Lycaean Zeus, into which people are not allowed to enter. If anyone takes no notice of the rule and enters, he must inevitably live no longer than a year. A legend, moreover, was current that everything alike within the precinct, whether beast or man, cast no shadow. For this reason when a beast takes refuge in the precinct, the hunter will not rush in after it, but remains outside, and though he sees the beast can behold no shadow" (Pausanias 8,38.6).

According to this text loosing one's shadow in the precinct of the Zeus-sanctuary on Mount Lycaeus was closely connected with another story according to which a person had to die within a year after it entered the forbidden place. Furthermore, people did not enter the sanctuary because they were afraid of loosing their shadow. It does not take much imagination to bring together all this information and conclude that because the lost shadow was a sign of near death people were afraid to enter the precinct. Those considerations are proved correct by the following words of Plutarch:

The tale, however, that no shadow is cast by a person who enters the Lycaeon is not true, although it has acquired widespread credence. Is it because the air turns to clouds, and lowers darkly upon those who enter? Or is it because he that enters is condemned to death, and the followers of Pythagoras declare that the spirits of the dead cast no shadow, neither do they blink? Or is it because it is the sun which causes shadow, but the law deprives him that enters of the sunlight?" (Plutarch, *questiones Graecae* 300 C).

As in the preceding cases it must be said that Jewish ideas of that type are only witnessed in late Talmudic literature: "He who desires to set out on a journey and wishes to ascertain whether he will return home again or not, let him station himself in a dark house; if he sees the reflection of his

shadow he may know that he will return home again" (b.Hor.12a; cf. b.Ker. 5b-6a). In his first article on the shadow, Van der Horst admits: "It cannot be demonstrated, however, that this idea existed among the Jews already in New Testament times."²³ In his following two articles Van der Horst then is more confident that the idea that the existence or non-existence of a person's shadow was an indicator of that person's life-force existed in the Jewish world of the first century a.d. already. He particularly points to Num 14:9 as well as the lxx-translations of Job 15:29, Ps 139:8 [=140:7], Deut 33:12, and Ex 40:35.²⁴ With the possible exception of Job 15:29 none of those texts, however, is a convincing proof text for Van der Horst's change of mind. His exegesis of those texts seems rather forced.

Apparently not only the consequences of the existence or non-existence but also those of the length of a human shadow were being discussed in the Greco-Roman world of the first century a.d. The Writer Dio Chrysostom (a.d. 40-120) creates the following scenario:

Suppose, then, there should be a person so constituted as to live with an eye to his own shadow, with the result that as it grew he would become elated and boastful and not only offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the gods himself but also bid his friends to do so, while as his shadow diminished he would be grieved and show himself more humble, and the more so the smaller his shadow became, just as if he himself were wasting away, methinks he would afford wondrous amusement ... Yes, for on the same day sometimes he would be sad and sometimes happy. For instance, early in the day, when he saw his shadow at dawn very long, almost larger than the cypresses or the towers on the city walls, manifestly he would be happy, supposing himself to have suddenly grown to the size of the sons of Aloeus, and he would go striding into the market-place and the theatres and everywhere in the city to be observed by one and all. However, about the middle of the morning he would begin to grow more sad of countenance than he had been and would go back home. Then at noon he would be ashamed to be seen by anybody and would stay indoors, locking himself up, when he saw his shadow at his feet; yet again, toward afternoon, he would begin to recover and would show himself ever more and more exultant toward evening" (Dion Chrysostomos 67,4-5).

Question (2) is to be answered in the negative because the relevant ancient sources Van der Horst offers just testify to a harmful but no beneficial effect of an animal's shadow. The Greco-Roman Sophist Ailianos (A.D. 170-235) writes about the hyena:

And it attacks dogs in the following manner. When the moon's disc is full, the hyena gets the rays behind it and casts its own shadow upon the dogs and

²³ Van der Horst, Peter's shadow 210.

²⁴ Cf. Van der Horst, Schatten 34; Shadow 1149.

at once reduces them to silence, and having bewitched them, as sorceresses do, it then carries them off tongue-tied and hereafter puts them to such use as it pleases“ (Ailianos, *de natura animalium* 6,14).

Plinius’s report on the hyena sounds quite similar: “when its shadow falls on dogs they are struck dumb” (Plinius maior, *naturalis historia* 8,106).

Question (3) must be denied on the same grounds as the previous one: There are *no* ancient sources which testify to a beneficial – not to say healing – effect of a person’s shadow. Both of the available ancient sources talk about the *dangerous* effect of a person’s shadow.

The main character of one of the plays of the Roman dramatist Ennius (B.C. 239-169) is a certain Thyestes, a criminal. Ennius puts the following words into his protagonist’s mouth: “Strangers, draw you not near to me! Back there, back! Lest a tainted touch from me, lest my very shadow harm you that are sound. Oh, such a deadly violence of sin clings to my body!”²⁵ (Ennius, *Tragoediae* 356-360) The Roman writer Cicero (B.C. 106-43) quotes those lines with only one minor textual variation (i.e., insertion of *inquit* between *Nolite* and *hospites*) in *Tusculanae disputationes* 3,12.26.

After the examination of the ancient sources that Van der Horst offered in his collection it must clearly be said that there exists no ancient parallel to the indirect healing through Peter’s shadow in Acts 5:15.

Those sources which express the idea of supernatural effects of a person’s or animal’s shadow mention exclusively harmful ones. In view of this undeniable fact it seems quite strange that Witherington states: “Clearly enough, Luke portrays the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding area as having a belief in the potency of Peter’s shadow because he was a holy man, apparently a not uncommon idea in antiquity.”²⁶ That statement is not backed up by any ancient text. In both sources that describe the effect of a person’s shadow the person in view is not a holy man but a criminal!

It must be pointed out, however, that the two ancient references to the supposedly harmful effect of Thyestes’ shadow (Ennius, *Tragoediae* 356-360 and Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* 3,12.26) are the closest analogies to the account in Acts 5:15.²⁷ It is certainly imaginable that just as a criminal’s shadow was thought to be dangerous a miracle-worker’s one would be

²⁵ “Nolite hospites ad me adire, ilico istic! / Ne contagio mea bonis umbrave obsit. / Meo tanta vis sceleris in corpore haeret!”

²⁶ Witherington, Acts 226-227.

²⁷ So it is understandable that many commentators point to the Cicero text in their identification of the historical background of Acts 5:15; cf. e.g. Barrett, *Commentary* 276-277; Pesch, *Apostelgeschichte* 207.

viewed as transferring healing powers. Such reasoning, however, remains speculation and has no ancient literature to stand on.

Step one can be concluded with Gerhard Schneider's critical and excellent evaluation of Van der Horst's shadow sources. He refers to them with the comment that they are „(entferntere) religionsgeschichtliche Parallelen.“²⁸

Step 2

With all this being said, Van der Horst's identification of the ancient background of Acts 5:15 is not yet disproven. That is the case because his main thesis does not rest on any individual ancient sources but rather on a whole system, i.e., the *alter ego* principle, according to which a person's shadow is a person's double.

It must now be asked if the character, amount and content of the compiled ancient sources (see above step one) demonstrate that the conception of the shadow as a person's *alter ego* existed in the ancient world of the first century A.D. In other words: Is Van der Horst right to call the *alter ego* principle a “popular conception?”²⁹

It has become obvious above (step one) that especially the amount of ancient sources that testify to the idea that a person's (or animal's) shadow has the same effect as the person (animal) itself is very small. Therefore Van der Horst's *alter ego* theory rests on too weak a ground. Van der Horst seems to have taken over a theory of nineteenth century cultural anthropology and placed it in the first century A.D. In view of the small number of ancient sources he definitely goes too far in stating: “We may safely conclude on the writers surveyed that in Acts v.15 Luke uses this concept of shadow in order to extol Peter's healing power.”³⁰

It can be concluded that the ancient texts in Van der Horst's compilation neither contain a parallel to the healings through Peter's shadow (Acts 5:15) nor allow to say that a so-called *alter ego* conception existed in the first century A.D.

Those commentators who follow Van der Horst's conclusion do so too quickly and uncritically. Because of that they make unsupported and therefore doubtful statements. Howard I. Marshall offers one example for that: “The idea that shadows had magical powers, both beneficent and malevolent, was current in the ancient world and explains the motivation of the

²⁸ Schneider, *Apostelgeschichte* 382.

²⁹ Van der Horst, *Peter's shadow* 210, footnote 5.

³⁰ Van der Horst, *Peter's shadow* 210.

people.”³¹ And Rudolf Pesch writes: „Die Antike kennt die Vorstellung, daß der Schatten von Menschen und Tieren mit der heilenden oder schädigenden Kraft (dem Mana) des Schattenspenders geladen ist.“³²

Also John van Eck refers to and follows Van der Horst’ articles. In doing so, however, he is more cautious than both Marshall and Pesch. Van Eck comments on Acts 5:15:

“De schaduw werd in de antieke wereld als een deel van de persoon gezien. Het was zijn geestelijke dubbelganger, deelhebbend aan zijn levenskracht ... De schaduw hoort tot de persoon en heeft deel aan de krachten die in hem huizen. Dat kunnen negatieve krachten zijn.”³³

In order to prove his last remark Van Eck refers to Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* 3,12.26. Thus, instead of – like Marshall and Pesch – uncritically repeating Van der Horst’s conclusion, Van Eck carefully points out that the powers transmitted through human shadows *can* be negative (“Dat *kunnen* negatieve krachten zijn”³⁴). It can be even said with more certainty: According to the relevant ancient sources those powers not only *can* be negative but *are* negative without exception.

Acts 19:12

Superficialities can finally also be detected in the identification of the historical background of the indirect healings in Acts 19:12. The commentary that has been a signpost is Oster’s *Historical Commentary on the Missionary Success Stories in Acts 19:11-40* from 1974. Oster writes: “The belief that the bodies of divine men and whatever touched them could contain a thaumaturgic power was widespread in the Graeco-Roman world, and rested upon a common idea about the nature of power.”³⁵

In order to underpin this thesis, Oster points his readers’ attention to the healing abilities that were attributed to Hadrian (Ailianos Spartianus, *de vita Hadriani* 35,1-4³⁶), Vespasian (Suetonius, *divus Vespasianus* 7,2-3; Tacitus,

³¹ Marshall, *Acts* 115; in a footnote Marshall refers to Van der Horst, Peter’s shadow.

³² Pesch, *Apostelgeschichte* 207; in a footnote Pesh refers to both Van der Horst, Peter’s shadow and Schatten.

³³ Van Eck, *Handelingen* 137.

³⁴ Van Eck, *Handelingen* 137; my emphasis.

³⁵ Oster, *Commentary* 33.

³⁶ According to this report of Aelius Spartianus, who supposedly was one of the six authors of the so-called Augustan History (but cf. below footnote 41), a blind woman was healed after she had both kissed Hadrian’s knees and washed her

historiae 4,81; Cassius Dio 65,8.1),³⁷ Pyrrhus (Plutarch, Pyrrhus 3,4³⁸), Moses (Artapanus, quoted in Eusebios, Praeparatio Evangelica 9,27 [Gifford 465³⁹]), and Asclepius.⁴⁰

The small amount of those sources, however, definitely does not lead to the view that the belief in the thaumaturgic power of certain people's bodies was "widespread." In fact, two of those sources, i.e., Ailianos Spartianus, *de vita Hadriani* 35,1-4 and Eusebios, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9,27, do not even qualify as ancient witnesses for the first century A.D. because they are of a late date. The Artapanus quotation of Eusebius (A.D. 260-339) dates from the third or fourth century A.D. and Aelius Spartianus' account on the life of Hadrian was probably written during the reign of Diocletian (A.D. 284-305) or maybe even later in the time of emperor Julian (A.D. 361-363).⁴¹

Furthermore, the sources Oster refers to only underpin the first part of his statement, i.e., his assertion that the belief that the *bodies* of particular people had thaumaturgical powers existed – widespread or not – in the ancient world. Those texts do not, however, prove that according to ancient belief also "whatever touched" those powerful bodies shared in their thaumaturgical powers.

eyes in the waters at the temple. Also a blind man received back his sight by way of touching Hadrian.

³⁷ According to these three ancient texts Vespasian healed a blind eye by spitting on it (Suetonius, *divus Vespasianus* 7,2-3; Cassius Dio 65,8.1), a lame leg by touching it with his heel (Suetonius, *divus Vespasianus* 7,2-3), and a hand-capped hand by stepping / trampling on it (Tacitus, *historiae* 4,81; Cassius Dio 65,8.1).

³⁸ According to Plutarch, *Pyrrhus* 3,4, sick people asked Pyrrhus to touch them with his right foot so that they might be healed.

³⁹ "And when the king heard it he fell speechless, but was held fast by Moses and came to live again."

⁴⁰ Cf. Oster, *Commentary* 36; Oster here refers to Weinreich, *Antike Heilungswunder* 28f.51. When checking these pages it becomes obvious, however, that Weinreich refers to healings that don't qualify as historical background for Acts 19:12 because they are performed by the *divine* Asclepius who either appears in healing visions to people visiting his temple (28-29) or heals people by a salve of his daughter Panakeia (51).

⁴¹ Cf. Berrens, *Sonnenkult* 12-13; for the sake of completeness it should be pointed out that according to the majority of today's scholars of antiquity the *Historia Augusta* was not written by six but rather by just one author; cf. Berrens, *Sonnenkult* 8. Stephan Berrens writes that "mittlerweile die Diskussion um die Autorschaft als geklärt angesehen werden darf und von einem einzelnen Autor auszugehen ist."

Oster offers no ancient sources for the second part of his statement but merely refers to pages 530ff. of the second volume of Friedrich Pfister's book *Der Reliquienkult im Altertum*⁴² with the vague comment that Pfister "mentions the similarity between the concept of power assumed by the relic cult of antiquity and the account of cloth being taken from Paul's body in Acts 19:11ff."⁴³ So Oster leaves his readers with a general statement of which the first part is backed up by just a few (and partly late) ancient sources and of which the second part is not underpinned by any ancient sources but merely by a vague reference to and comment on the book by Pfister.

In spite of these deficiencies, more recent scholars follow Oster's identification of the historical background of Acts 19:12 without critically questioning its correctness and harmony with the ancient data. Paul Trebilco, for example, writes: "the belief that the bodies of particular people, or whatever touched them, had thaumaturgical powers was ... widespread in antiquity."⁴⁴ He not only refers to Oster to indicate where he got the statement from but also offers two of the ancient sources that are found in Oster's commentary, i.e., Plutarch, *Pyrrhus* 3,4-5 and Eusebios, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9,27. Interestingly, from the two "proof-texts" he picks, one even happens to be one of Oster's late sources that make no contribution to the identification of the religious mindset of the first century A.D. And because Trebilco offers no additional sources he also ends up with a statement of which only the first part is – insufficiently – covered by the ancient material. Trebilco himself already (unconsciously) reveals this one-sidedness of his "proof texts" when he summarizes them in pointing out that according to Plutarch's text "Pyrrhus' right foot had healing power"⁴⁵ and that the Eusebius text testifies to "the power of Moses' body to perform wonders."⁴⁶

In spite of the fact that Oster's (as well as Trebilco's) statement is based on insufficient and late ancient material Ben Witherington takes it over – without indicating his source. The fact that he refers to both Plutarch and Eusebius in brackets makes it more likely that he took the statement over from Trebilco. Witherington even feels comfortable enough to strengthen the statement by inserting a "clearly." And he replaces "thaumaturgical powers" with "healing powers." So, after the treatment through Ben Witherington, Oster's (and Trebilco's) statement reads as follows: "Clearly the belief that the bodies of particular persons and whatever touched them had healing

⁴² Pfister, *Reliquienkult*.

⁴³ Oster, *Commentary* 37.

⁴⁴ Trebilco, *Asia* 313.

⁴⁵ Trebilco, *Asia* 313, footnote 92.

⁴⁶ Trebilco, *Asia* 313, footnote 92.

powers was widespread in antiquity (Plutarch, *Pyrr.* 3.4-5; Eusebius, *PE* 9.27).⁴⁷

Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate how many New Testament scholars identify the historical background of the indirect healings of Luke-Acts in a very superficial manner because they (1) make statements without referring to either primary or secondary sources at all;⁴⁸ (2) offer secondary literature but no primary sources to prove the correctness of statements or certain parts of them;⁴⁹ (3) refer to or copy secondary literature without critically checking its content, substance, and relevancy;⁵⁰ (4) modify doubtful “scholarly” statements with the effect that they become even less sure;⁵¹ (5) draw conclusions which are not (totally) supported by the primary sources offered;⁵² (6) refer to primary sources without realizing or indicating that those sources might be too late to serve as witnesses for the historical background of the New Testament;⁵³ (7) make general statements concerning ancient belief on the basis of very few ancient sources;⁵⁴ and (8) make confident statements about the historical background of the three Lucan accounts of indirect healings too quickly (e.g. by labeling a conception “widespread,” and “common”).⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Witherington, Acts 580.

⁴⁸ Meier, Jew 709; Schmithals, *Apostelgeschichte* 57; Wessel, Mark 661.

⁴⁹ Bock, Luke 794, footnote 15; Lane, *Gospel* 192; Marshall, Acts 115; Van der Loos, *Miracles* 317.

⁵⁰ Bock, Luke 794, footnote 15; Lane, Mark 192; Marshall, Acts 115; Pesch, *Apostelgeschichte* 207; Schürmann, *Lukasevangelium* 491, footnote 139; Van der Loos, *Miracles* 317; Witherington, Acts 580.

⁵¹ Witherington, Acts 580.

⁵² Oster, *Commentary* 33; Pesch, *Apostelgeschichte* 207; Trebilco, Asia 313; Van der Horst, *Peter's shadow*; ders., *Schatten*; Witherington, Acts 580.

⁵³ Oster, *Commentary* 35-36; Trebilco, Asia 313, footnote 92; Witherington, Acts 580.

⁵⁴ Trebilco, Asia 313, footnote 92; Van der Horst, *Peter's shadow*; *Schatten*; *Shadow*; Witherington, Acts 580.

⁵⁵ Lane, Mark 192; Oster, *Commentary* 33; Trebilco, Asia 313; Van der Loos, *Miracles* 317; Wessel, Mark 661; Witherington, Acts 580; for a more careful statement concerning the historical background of Lk 8:43-48 cf. Liefeld, Luke 916: “the intrusion of Hellenistic ideas and superstitions *may* indeed have influenced her action” (my emphasis).

Interestingly, in some cases the above demonstrated weaknesses occur in works in spite of the fact that they are supposed to be “historical”⁵⁶ or pay special attention to the first century Greco-Roman setting.⁵⁷ Furthermore, for some commentators the historical background seems of so little importance that they either don’t mention it at all⁵⁸ or merely in a footnote.⁵⁹

It is not surprising that this superficiality in the identification of the ancient background leads to a misleading understanding of the texts in question.⁶⁰

In view of the above demonstrated deficiencies the question concerning the historical background of the indirect healings of Luke-Acts needs to be asked and answered anew. In so doing it is necessary to go back *ad fontes*, i.e., to the ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish primary sources. This approach includes (1) searching for ancient parallels or analogies to the indirect healings of Luke-Acts; and (2) determining whether the parallels or analogies which are found allow for the conclusion that the indirect healings of Luke-Acts or the underlying conceptions were prevalent ones.⁶¹ Furthermore, it needs to be proved if a superficial treatment similar to the one detected in this article is also practiced with regard to the historical background of other New Testament (or Old Testament) passages.⁶²

⁵⁶ Oster, Commentary.

⁵⁷ Note that Trebilco’s article “Asia” appeared in a work entitled “The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting.”

⁵⁸ Bovon, Luke 333-341.

⁵⁹ Schürmann, Lukasevangelium 491, footnote 139; Bock, Luke 794, footnote 15.

⁶⁰ Cf. Van der Loos, Miracles 514: “Like *countless* of her fellows, she [the woman with the flow of blood] wrongly believed that the vessel’s power communicated itself or was transferred to the clothing that he wore, so that thoughts of magic were doubtless involved here” (my emphasis).

⁶¹ For a realization of such a more careful approach cf. Paschke, Healings 27-52.

⁶² Cf. Lalleman, Healing 355-361. With regard to the identification of the historical background of “healings by a mere touch,” i.e. *direct* healings reported in the New Testament, Lalleman made an observation that is quite similar to the ones presented in the present article. See especially 357: “The first part of Otto Weinreich’s monograph *Antike Heilungswunder* is devoted to miracles attributed to the hands of the deities. Weinreich suggests that the therapeutic touch without concomitant activity frequently appears in Classical sources. Exactly this, in my opinion, is not the case: none of the sources he refers to contains this idea. Nevertheless, later scholars usually refer to Weinreich’s book as authoritative and we are led to think that the idea of a healing touch is very common in Greek and Hellenistic sources in pre-Christian times.”

Summary

The present article demonstrates that many New Testament scholars identified the historical background of the indirect healings reported in Luke-Acts (Lk 8:43-48; Acts 5:15; 19:12) in a very superficial and uncritical manner. It became obvious, for example, that statements concerning ancient practices and beliefs are not or insufficiently backed up by ancient texts. Instead of carefully studying the available Greco-Roman and Jewish primary sources, many scholars took over (wrong) conclusions from secondary literature too quickly and uncritically. Consequently, these scholars ended up with an inadequate picture of the ancient background. This, again, can easily result in an improper exegesis of the New Testament texts in question. The deterrent examples presented in the present article should serve as an indication of the need for more careful and critical identification of the historical background of New Testament texts.

Zusammenfassung

Anhand der drei lukanischen Berichte über indirekte Heilungen (Lk 8,43-48; Apg 5,15; 19,12) wurde im vorliegenden Artikel nachgewiesen, dass viele Neutestamentler die Bestimmung des antiken Hintergrunds leider nur in einer sehr oberflächlichen und unkritischen Art und Weise vornehmen. So werden z.B. Aussagen über antike Verhältnisse gemacht, die gar nicht oder nur teilweise von den antiken literarischen Quellen abgedeckt sind. Anstatt die vorhandenen griechisch-römischen und jüdischen Primärquellen einem gründlichen Eigenstudium zu unterziehen, werden (falsche) Einschätzungen aus der Sekundärliteratur einfach unkritisch übernommen. All dies führt zu einer unzutreffenden Darstellung des antiken Hintergrunds, was sich wiederum negativ auf die Exegese der neutestamentlichen Texte auswirkt. Die in diesem Artikel aufgezeigten Negativbeispiele sollen zu einer sorgfältigeren und kritischeren Erueierung des antiken Hintergrunds neutestamentlicher Texte motivieren.

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