

7. Jairus' Daughter

Mark 5:22-23, 35-43

Jesus in Mark is not just a partisan of a certain interpretation of Scripture, he is a teacher and healer in his own right. Mark gives frustratingly little detail about Jesus' teaching, other than to say that the crowds were impressed by it. But he does give several healing stories (many of which later got upgraded into miracle stories, but that is not our present subject). Probably the most touching of these is the healing of a child, the daughter of one Jairus. In our Bibles, this story is interrupted by another and later one. Here it is as Mark first wrote it, without that later interruption.

And there cometh one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name, and seeing him, he falleth at his feet, and beseecheth him much, saying, My little daughter is at the point of death, I pray thee that thou come and lay thy hands on her, that she may be made whole and live.

While he yet spake, they come from the ruler of the synagogue's house, saying, Thy daughter is dead; why troublest thou the Teacher any further? But Jesus, not heeding the word spoken, saith unto the ruler of the synagogue, Fear not, only believe. And he suffered no man to follow with him, save Peter, and Jacob, and John the brother of Jacob. And they come to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and he beholdeth a tumult, and many weeping and wailing greatly. And when he was entered in, he saith unto them, Why make ye a tumult, and weep? The child is not dead, but sleepeth. And they laughed him to scorn.

But he, having put them all forth, taketh the father of the child and her mother, and them that were with him, and goeth in where the child was. And taking the child by the hand, he saith unto her, Talitha cumi.¹ And straightway the damsel rose up and walked, for she was twelve years old. And they were amazed straightway with a great amazement.

And he charged them much that no man should know this, and he commanded that something should be given her to eat.

¹Mark later added a translation for non-speakers of Aramaic, "which is, being interpreted, "Damsel, I say unto thee, Arise." Mark gives Jesus' original Aramaic words at moments of special tension, including Jesus' last cry on the cross. Here, it is the word of command to the girl's spirit, which is efficacious only in its original language.

Reflections

Jesus chose five disciples (the Twelve are a later arrangement).² These were the brothers Peter and Andrew, shore fishermen; Jacob and John Zebedee, prosperous boat fishermen; and the tax collector Levi of Alphaeus. Levi seems to have stayed behind as manager in Capernaum. Andrew is scarcely heard of. The other three accompany Jesus as he heals and preaches. So also here.

Some have liked to see in this story an instance of Jesus raising the dead. But we should probably accept Jesus' diagnosis; he was there and we are not. What *was* his diagnosis? It was widely thought in antiquity that in sleep, or in a coma produced by illness, the person's soul leaves their body and goes off on its own. Some societies have elaborate procedures for calling back the soul; the classical Chinese texts preserve several of them. So when Jesus says she is merely in a coma and not dead, he means that she is still within the reach of a summoning formula. By telling her to rise, he is in effect recalling her soul.³

Luke is said to have been a physician. It is easy to show from his writings that, at any rate, he had a sense of medical terminology and medical procedure. In retelling the story of Jairus' daughter he corrects some of the medical details. Here is his version of the last part of Mark's story.

But he, taking her by the hand, called, saying, Maiden, arise. And her spirit returned, and she rose up immediately, and he commanded that something be given her to eat. (Luke 8:54-55)

Jesus does not speak, *he calls*. Then, a detail not in Mark, *her spirit returned*. It may be doubted that Mark himself actually understood charismatic healing, though we may say with some confidence that Luke did.⁴

Jesus tells Jairus, "Fear not, only believe." Jairus is not the patient, but belief, whether of the patient or others involved, is part of the healing process. When that element is missing, not very much can be done.

Jairus knows that Jesus is a healer, one who heals by "laying on of hands." That is, Jesus has an established reputation as a healer. Why then does Jesus ask the parents not to mention the healing? Because accompanying all these healings is a message – the return of God to Israel – which is highly subversive, and Jesus does not want his whereabouts known to the Roman authorities.

The return of God to Israel required the *repentance* of Israel. This was Jesus' higher kind of healing: putting people right with God. Of necessity, he preached that politically dangerous message in a covert way.

²Eduard Meyer first noticed that the "Twelve" passages are exiguous in Mark.

³See the "Summoning the Soul" in the Chǔ Tsz anthology (Hawkes 101-109). Chinese ritual texts contain specific instructions for these summonings.

⁴For more of Luke's medical revisions of Mark, see Harnack **Luke the Physician**.