

Luke 7:1-17

In chapter 4, Jesus stood up in the synagogue in his hometown and announced that the Spirit of God had called him to bring good news, liberation, and healing. Now in Chapter 7 he's getting down to business, in two interesting healings/resuscitations that echo the deeds of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

The first story, about a Roman centurion whose slave is ill, echoes the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5, well known to us thanks to the dramatic re-enactment a couple years ago by the high school class. Naaman, like the Roman centurion, was a non-Jew of high status. His problem was leprosy, while the centurion's problem is that his slave is sick. In both cases, the prophet never actually makes personal contact with the sufferer, but demonstrates his power to heal remotely.

The second story, about a widow whose only son has died and whose funeral procession happens to intersect with Jesus' route into town, echoes the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17. There, too, the widow has only the one son, and his death will leave her completely bereft. The widow of Zarephath appeals to Elijah and he resuscitates the boy, but Jesus is simply moved by compassion and steps forward to resuscitate her son, without the widow saying a word or expressing any faith at all.

So clearly Luke wants us to see that Jesus has picked up the mantles of the great prophets and is doing once again what had been done so long ago. But there is a troubling anomaly. When Elisha healed Naaman, the Syrian general, it was notable that he was extending help to a non-Israelite who didn't even worship his god. But there was nothing Naaman's social status that bothered Elijah. For him to be a big-time soldier who took a slave

girl as legitimate bounty during looting and pillaging seemed perfectly reasonable to the writer of the story, who lives close to that time himself. But Luke is the gospel writer who pays special attention to social inequalities, to slaves and women and outcasts—yet here he shows Jesus apparently cooperating with a system of patronage that was contrary to the gospel message! The Roman centurion would be a type of non-Jew called a “god-lover,” not a Jew but friendly to Jews, sometimes even attending the synagogue. Most likely he’d been stationed out there in Capernaum and he was cultivating good relations with the natives. The Jewish elders who appeal to Jesus on behalf of the centurion say that he’s been supportive of Jews and even built their synagogue for them. So he’s a patron, and they owe him.

Moreover, he has a slave. Lots of people had slaves, but what is Jesus doing, not speaking up and suggesting that the centurion let him go free? What happened to “liberation for the captive” or the overturning of the hierarchy that Mary had sung about in the Magnificat? He just heals the guy from a distance and goes on his way without a challenge to the centurion. Odd.

One explanation may be that Luke is more interested in making the parallel with the prophet Elisha than in emphasizing social justice here. Or that Jesus is more interested in doing the healing than in interfering with the Roman patronage system and slavery. But Jesus very rarely behaves inconsistently with his fundamental values, so I don’t think either of those is quite right.

Greek scholars point out that the passage contains two words that are translated as “slave” or “servant.” The Greek “doulos” (slave or servant) is used in every verse except verse 7, which contains the words spoken by the centurion, himself. Here he refers to the man as his

“pais” which means child or servant or slave. It’s a more capacious category, with room for intimacy and affection. In fact, the word can be a diminutive, implying affection. An article by Eric Koepnick of the University of Wisconsin does a very long, tedious examination of New Testament vocabulary around slaves, with the payoff for us being that this centurion is pretty clearly in a loving relationship with the so-called slave. It was a well-established pattern for men of status, especially in the military, to have a same-sex lover of lower social status. And while that has sinister overtones to us of exploitation or domination, I have to say that domination is so thoroughly woven into Roman society that you could hardly have a personal relationship without domination being a factor. Eric Koepnick—and he’s not an outlier, just a representative of the scholarship I’ve chosen—says this:

My research has shown that Jesus’ miraculous healing of the centurion’s slave is grounded in historical fact; that the slave was not a son or just a slave of the centurion, but his sexual partner, and that Jesus healed the slave with a full understanding that he was in a physical relationship with his master, the centurion.

So what, finally, are the implications of Jesus’ healing of the centurion’s pais? . . . As revealed by the evidence for the sociocultural context of the first-century Roman Empire, Jesus would have understood that the pais was a slave. Thus, this pericope can be seen as yet another example of Jesus’ empathy toward those on the lowest end of the social order and in positions of servitude, to the extent that their position is especially blessed by Jesus’ ministry.

The sociocultural context also indicates that the historical Jesus probably healed the centurion’s pais with the understanding that the two were involved in a deeply affectionate relationship that likely included sexual relations between the two males, and he gave no commentary—positive or negative, social or theological.<sup>i</sup>

Far from being an implicit acceptance of chattel slavery, Jesus’ healing of the centurion’s pais is as much an act of compassion as his resuscitation of the widow’s only son. It’s a blessing of a same-sex couple with no more hesitation or conditions than the blessing of the mother and

son.

I got into this whole issue of what the words mean because I was troubled by the suggestion that Jesus was implicitly supporting slavery. I don't think anybody here needed to hear that love is love is love; we're pretty clear on that point. But I do think it makes more sense for this to be a situation not of slavery but of intimacy, because Jesus *had* explicitly said that he had come to free the captive, and not to even mention it seems profoundly out of character for him.

Both healings take place within a structure of robust social support. The centurion is well-enough integrated into the community that Jewish elders will intervene on his behalf, and the widow is surrounded by a "large crowd" participating in her son's funeral. That's lovely, and that's what we can do: we can provide social support to one another. What Jesus brings to the story, what Elijah and Elisha had brought to the story, is assurance that our social support is just the tip of the iceberg. Jesus said at the synagogue that he had come to bring good news, healing and release of the captives, and he was serious. Our human compassion is rooted in and drawn from the bottomless well of God's compassion, which is so great that it conquers death.

Healing Lord,

By your goodness you healed many who were ill, even raising the dead to life. Restore us to new life, healing our hearts, minds, and spirits, so that we may proclaim praise and gratitude for your compassion to all who will hear. In the name of the one who is himself new life, Jesus Christ our savior. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/28252/koepnick.pdf?sequence=1>