

## An Exegesis of Matthew 8:14-15 The Cure Of Peter's Mother-In-Law

Mt 8:14     *"Jesus entered the house of Peter, and saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever.*

Mt 8:15     *He touched her hand, the fever left her, and she rose and waited on him."*

### Introduction

Matthew 8:14-15 describes a miracle cure of the Mother-in-law of Peter. It is the third of a series of nine miracles, described in chapters eight and nine, that Jesus performed in Galilee following His sermon on the mount. This miracle is also described by Mark and Luke. Minor differences occur between the corresponding passages. Though curtly written, this miracle shows not only the compassion of Christ, but also our proper response to the work of Christ in our lives and the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of Isaiah. The intent of this exegesis is to examine the writing of Matthew. A brief intercomparison between the other gospel accounts is included.

### Background Information

The Gospel of Matthew is the first of the four gospels, originally thought to be the first written, but now believed to be written after the Gospel of Mark (1). Matthew's gospel, in general, was written for the Jews. Because of this emphasis, Matthew draws his picture of Jesus

in the light of the old testament, in this section, particularly the prophecies of Isaiah. The primary message of Matthew's Jesus is the coming of the kingdom and the need for repentance. After the infancy narratives, which describe the activities surrounding the birth of Jesus, Matthew begins the gospel of the adult Jesus by introducing John the Baptist and his proclamation to "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:2) (Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotes will be from the New American Bible, Revised New Testament 1991). Matthew also states that John the Baptist is the prophet "spoken of" by Isaiah, who is to "prepare the way of the Lord" (Is 40:3; Mt 3:3). The reference to Isaiah will be critical to understanding the messianic aspect of miracles in Jesus' ministry. Prior to Jesus performing His series of miracles, Jesus will be baptized, select His disciples, give His sermon on the mount, then come down from the mountain into Galilee.

The actual site of the miracle cure of Peter's mother-in-law is at the home of Peter, which many believe to be in Capernaum. In recent times, archaeologists unearthed a house, which they proposed to be the home of Peter (2). Markings were found on the wall referencing both Peter and Jesus. The front portico of the home is large enough to allow a multitude of people to assemble there the evening after the cure of Peter's mother-in-law, as stated in Mt 8:16. Mt 4:13 indicates that after Jesus heard that John the Baptist was arrested, he withdrew to Capernaum. Did he come to live at Peter's house? Many believe that Jesus stayed at Peter's during His first two years of ministry. Some also believe that Peter's home is the site through which the paralytic was lowered through the roof. The site was revered by Christians during the first few centuries after the death of Christ.

### Analysis of Context

After His baptism, Jesus prepares for His earthly ministry, through prayer and fasting in the desert. After forty days in the desert, he begins to preach, through his words and his deeds, the gospel of God. Jesus ascends up the mountain and explains His Father's will through the teachings of the Beatitudes and His reinterpretation of the Law. Jesus, in effect, becomes the New Moses. His disciples become the New Israel. Jesus then comes down the mountain. Matthew describes a series of 9 miracles, which took place in Galilee. The miracles are described in groups of three, interspersed by a discussion of discipleship. The first three miracles are healings. The healing of Peter's mother-in-law is placed third. This is significant because Matthew's order of miracles is different from that of Mark and Luke. This signifies that the order may have had special meaning to Matthew. Matthew also mentions that the miracle took place in the house of Peter, not the house of Simon as indicated by Mark and Luke. A practical explanation is that by the time Matthew describes the mother-in-law healing, he has already introduced Simon as Peter (Mt 4:18)

### Structural Analysis

I have placed the miracle of Peter's mother-in-law into a larger unit which I call "Jesus Initial proclamation of the Gospel of God". This unit covers chapters 5:1 through 9:38. The first subunit is the teaching on the mountain. This covers 5:1 through 7:29. The second subunit is the ministry in Galilee. This covers 8:1 through 9:37. Mt 9:38 serves as a transition to the mission of the 12 apostles. The stories of three healings (Mt 8:1-15) form a subunit within the ministry of Galilee, with Mt 8:16-17 serving as a transition from the miracles of the first day to the next

day. Within the subunit of the three healings, we have the healing of the leper (those cast off by society) (Mt 8:1-4), the healing of the Centurion's daughter (representing the gentiles) (Mt 8:5-13), and finally the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (representing the church) (Mt 8:14-15).

In outline form this becomes:

- I Jesus Initial Proclamation of the Gospel
  - A. The Teaching on the Mountain
    - 1. Beatitudes
    - 2. Etc.
  - B. The ministry in Galilee
    - 1. Three Miracles of Healing
      - a. Leper
      - b. Centurion's daughter
      - c. Peter's Mother-in law
    - 2. Followers of Jesus
    - 3. Three Miracle showing Authority of Jesus.
      - a. Calming of the storm
      - b. Exorcism of the Gadarene demoniacs
      - c. Forgiveness of sin – Healing of the paralytic
    - 4. Call of Matthew / Discussion of Fasting
    - 5. Three Miracles showing Faith in Jesus
      - a. Official's Daughter / Woman with a Hemmorriage
      - b. Two Blind Men

c. Mute

The Intent of the Earthly Writer

The account of the cure of Peter's mother-in-law in Matthew's gospel, is very short, only 2 verses long without even an adjective to embellish the account. The account certainly makes use of the economy of style and could be summarized by the Latin words spoken by Julius Caesar, "Veni, vidi, vici" - "I came, I saw, I conquered". Matthew's intent in this series of nine miracles is to give witness to the miracles of Christ, thereby proclaiming His divinity, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. "He took away our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Is 53:4, Mt 8:17) and as stated through the messengers to John the Baptist, "the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Mt 11:5, Is 26:19, Is 29:18-19, Is 35:5-6, Is 61:1). Matthew presents the essence of the miracle. He states the location (Peter's house), the problem (fever-ridden mother-in-law, the event (removes the fever), and the proof (mother-in-law acts as if she had never been ill). Matthew has grouped the miracles into three sets of three. The fact that the miracle healing of Peter's mother-in-law is positioned as the third miracle healing., gives the miracle special emphasis.

Verse by verse analysis.

Mt 8:14        "Jesus entered the house of Peter, and saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever"

It is *Jesus* who enters the house of Peter, not a physician, concerned friend, or other individual or deity. Jesus is the protagonist. He does not share the limelight with others. He is the sole source of the miracle.

Jesus *enters* the house of His own volition. He is not forced to enter. He comes of His own accord. He desires to be there.

Jesus enters the *house of Peter*. It is of interest that Matthew refers to the “house of Peter”, not the house of Simon. Simon refers to the fisherman, Peter refers to the fisher of men – the man chosen by Jesus to lead His church on earth in His absence. According to Matthew’s own gospel, Simon was not given the name Peter, until a later time. Perhaps it is just a matter of familiarity, a clear identification that the house is the house of the fisherman, the future leader of the church. It certainly is an example that the Gospel is not about history; it contains history, but is about meaning. This phrase “house of Peter” can signify the Church. Spiritual healing by Christ occurs within the house of Peter, within the Church founded by Christ, headed by Peter as the vicar of Christ.

Jesus “*saw his mother-in law*”. Jesus sees all, knows all. No one had to point her out to him.

“and saw *his mother-in-law*”. This comment is for all those who choose to read verses out of context. Thank goodness there are the other synoptic gospels which substitute the word “Peter’s” in for “his”. Otherwise there would be those who claim Jesus was married (after all Jewish men married typically in there 20’s), and that Jesus’ mother-in-law was visiting at Peter’s house!

“and saw his *mother-in-law*”. Did Jesus already know Peter’s mother-in-law? This passage may give credance to those who believe Jesus stayed at Peter’s house while in Capernaum. This also indicates that Peter was married. Some believe that Peter’s wife was deceased. Others believe this is not the case, and that Peter brought his wife on his travels. This viewpoint is bolstered by Paul in 1 Cor 9:5 (“Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a

wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?") where Paul refers to his and Barnabus' right to bring a wife on their travels, such as Cephas did (Cephas being the Aramaic name for Peter), but which Paul chose not to do.

"*lying in bed with a fever*". No one likes to be sick. "lying in bed" shows the degree of the illness. This implies an incapacitation of the mother-in-law. This information is provided to show the contrast of the the mother-in-law before and after the healing of Christ.

"*lying in bed with a fever*". Fevers are but a outward sign of the disease process. As the practice of medicine was barely developed in the time of Jesus, we have no knowledge of what the illness of the mother-in-law was, only that it involved infection in one way or another. We do know, however, that it is the nature of fevers to cloud our minds. How true it is of sin in our life that our minds are clouded, and we can only think clearly through the healing of Jesus Christ.

Mt 8:15        "*He touched her hand, the fever left her, and she rose and waited on him.*"

"*He touched her hand,*". Again, as stated above, it is Jesus who heals us

"*He touched her hand,*" Touching is far different from speaking, grasping, sticking with a needle, etc. Jesus chose to touch her, as He chooses to touch us in our lives. There is an element of compassion understood in the act of touching.

"*He touched her hand,*" It is a personal interaction between God and an individual. God is not some all powerful, unreachable entity, but a personal God.

"*He touched her hand,*" The hand is significant. Jesus could have touched her on the shoulder, or upon the head. He could have touched the body part causing the fever. He did not. He chose to touch the hand. The hand, more than any other body part, is how we touch with the outside world. But there is more than that. When someone grasps your hand, if you like the

person, there is a mutual grasping back of the other hand. There is an interaction not possible with other body parts. Everyone has felt the difference between the handshake of someone who likes you, and someone who couldn't care less. I believe the mother-in-law responded to the touch of Christ, and He responded with His healing.

“*the fever left her*” The response is instantaneous. She didn't get well because over a period of a few days. There can be no other reason, than Jesus taking upon himself our infirmities.

“and she *rose*”. The Greek word used here is *egeiro* (3). This is the same word used by Paul in reference to Christ's resurrection. (“that he rose again the third day” 1 Cor 15:4, “... preached that he rose again from the dead” 1 Cor 15:12, “which died for them, and rose again 2 Cor 5:15. This tie-in to the resurrection is extremely important to the Christian, as we believe in the resurrection of the body on the day of judgment. If we are spiritually healed by Christ, the implication is that we too will rise with Him. Again, the act of touching her hand is significant in this regard. One can easily visualize the hand of Christ grasping the hand of the mother-in-law raising her up body and soul, as we all hope we shall be raised on the last day.

“ and *waited* on him.” Not only is the fever gone, but the healing is so complete that the mother-in-law acts as if she had never been ill. This further demonstrates the miraculous nature of the healing. The response of the step-mother, the Church, of Jesus healing, of Jesus entering into one's life, is to serve Christ. “and waited on *him*.” Older versions of this text use the word “them” rather than “him”. While I do not know the reason that the translator's chose to insert him rather than them, I suspect it is because Matthew writing indicates no other presence than Jesus and the mother-in-law. We know from Mark and Luke and common sense that there would be other people present. The true Christian response of the Church is to minister to Christ



not only by praise and worship but through the actions of our lives as indicated by Christ in the Beatitudes.

### A Brief Comparison to the other Gospel accounts.

The story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law is also found in both Mark and Luke. A verse by verse tabulation is found at the end of this exegesis. Matthew's is the shortest account, Luke's is the longest. There are many differences in the account, differences which are meaningful, but which do not change the meaning of the story.

Mark's account states that the mother-in-law is at the home of Simon and Andrew apparently they lived together. Mark's account also indicates that it is Simon and Andrew who interceded for Simon's mother-in-law. So too will they and all the saints intercede for us. In Mark, Jesus does more than touch, He helps her up. He does not force her up, but she acts of her own free will to get up.

Luke's account has the miracle occurring before Jesus sermon on the "plain", even before the calling of Simon. Luke's account is much more dramatic. The account is embellished, but the meaning is not changed. The fever is a "severe" fever. They "intercede" with Jesus, not just tell. Luke paints a more detailed picture as Jesus stands "over" the woman, then personifies the disease by "rebuking the fever". The woman did not just get up, but she got up "immediately. The differences in writing style may be due to personal differences and/or it may be due to different audiences. Luke is writing to an audience that may have never been to Israel, who do not know the customs. Thus he must paint a more vivid picture of what is going on. Matthew's goal is simply to present this miracle of Christ, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, "He took away our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Is 53:4).

### The Words of the Early Church Fathers / Doctors of the Church

St. Augustine of Hippo examined the time line for the story of the miracle healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Matthew records the event in a different sequence than Mark and Luke. Augustine points out that Matthew "appears to have introduced the story of Peter's mother-in-law not according to the order in which the incident itself took place, but simply in the succession in which he had it suggested in his mind after a previous omission" (4) In other words, Matthew wasn't concerned about chronology as much as he was concerned to spread the good news about Jesus. Augustine then points out another incident where the chronology differs from Mark and Luke. In this case Jesus after seeing a multitude of people departs to the other side of the lake (Mt 8:18). Here Augustine states "we ought simply to understand that he has introduced here another fact which he has had brought to his mind at this point". Our 21<sup>st</sup> century minds, with our word processing, keyboards, copiers, cheap paper, etc., needs to be reminded that for Matthew, parchment/sheep skin was a premium. Writing was difficult and time consuming. Rather than write and re-write the story, as we would do, Matthew had to get the story straight the first time, and if he didn't, he probably just moved it to another section. But the point remains that he wrote all his words with the intent of spreading the good news about Jesus. Often we see the hand of God taking over and giving additional spiritual meaning to verses by virtue of their placement in the text, e.g. Peter's mother-in-law becomes the third miracle of healing.

St. Thomas Aquinas used this passage to illustrate an example where God removes all remnants of sin. (5) St. Thomas Aquinas also references these verses to demonstrate Peter was married. Therefore, it is not necessary to maintain perpetual continence in order to approach

religious perfection. (6) Likewise Jerome acknowledges that this verse indicates that Peter was married, during an apologetic against Jovianus, defending the higher state of virginity. (7)

Finally, Origen uses the story of Peter's mother-in-law to not only show the importance of Capernaum, but also uses the differing texts to show that "Scripture contains many contradictions, and many statements which are not literally true, but must be read spiritually and mystically". (8) (The more things change, the more they stay the same.)

### Ramifications in Our Lives

We see from this passage on Peter's mother-in-law that Jesus is a personal God. He is not some far-off god who lives on the mountain. He comes to us. He has compassion. He has taken upon himself our infirmities. He reaches out His hand to us, but we must return His grasp. His healing will rid us of all vestiges of spiritual disease, sin, in our lives, but we have to respond. From the story of Peter's mother-in-law we see that the proper response to Jesus' works of mercy in our lives is to serve him. Some manuscripts state that Peter's mother-in-law served "them" rather than "him". Both fit equally well. We must serve Jesus. We must also serve Christ's Church. In serving others, we serve Christ. That service could be in many forms and will be different depending upon your vocation in life and the gifts God has given you.

### Works Cited

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Peter's Mother-in-Law in the Gospels

<p>Mt 8:14</p> <p>Jesus entered the house of Peter</p> <p>And saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever</p>	<p>Mk 1:29</p> <p>On leaving the synagogue he entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John.</p> <p>Mk 1:30</p> <p>Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with fever. They immediately told Him about her.</p>	<p>Luke 4:38</p> <p>After he left the synagogue. He entered the house of Simon.</p> <p>Simon's mother-in-law was afflicted with a severe fever, and they interceded with him about her.</p>
<p>Mt 8:15</p> <p>He touched her hand</p> <p>The fever left her, and she rose and waited on him.</p>	<p>Mk 1:31</p> <p>He approached, grasped her hand, And helped her up.</p> <p>Then the fever left her.</p> <p>and she waited on them</p>	<p>Lk 4:39</p> <p>He stood over her, rebuked the fever, and it left her.</p> <p>She got up immediately and waited on them.</p>

Assignment #1

Worksheet #1 - Narrative Analysis

Who	What	When	Where	Questions
Mt 8:14 <i>Jesus,</i>	Entered the house, Saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever	After coming down from the mountain, post healing a leper and the centurion's servant	Galilee	1) Why did Jesus go to Peter's house? Did Jesus already know the mother-in-law was sick? 2) Did Peter ask Jesus to go there to perform a miracle?
<i>His (Peter's) Mother-in-law</i>	Sick in bed	Presumably for some time (not in the last half hour)	Her home	3) Why use the name Peter and not Simon? 4) Did Peter have a wife? 5) Did Peter's mother-in-law live with him or was she there just because she was sick? 6) Did Jesus already know the mother-in-law 7) Did Peter have a father-in-law? 8) Who took care of Peter's mother-in-law while Peter was out and about with Jesus? 9) Did Peter's mother-in-law/relatives (if any were there) expect him? 10) How sick was she? What was her illness? 11) Was she in the main room or back in a bedroom? 12) Who else accompanied Jesus?

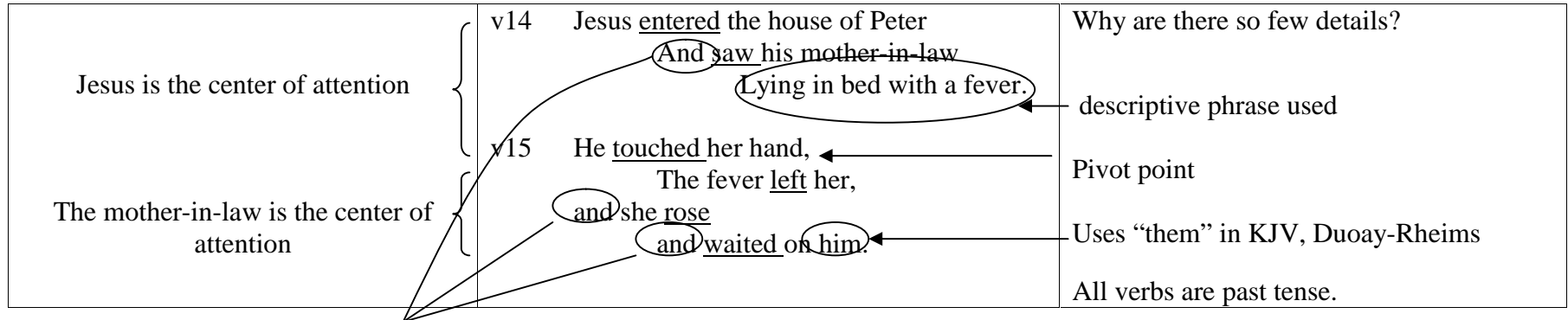
Mt 8:15 <i>He</i> (Jesus)	Touch her hand,	Immediately after entry	At her bed	1) Why touch instead of speak the word? 2) Why touch the hand? 3) Why didn't she still feel "zapped"? 4) Why didn't Peter say "Mom, you had better rest a while longer"? 5) Why does the NAB version say "him" when the KJV and Duoay-Rheims versions say "them"?
<i>Her</i> (mother-in-law)	She got well, She rose She waited on him	Immediately after being touched	Her home	

Worksheet #2 – Observations and Questions

Observations	Scripture Passage	Questions for Understanding
<p><i>Jesus</i> – center of the action  <i>Entered</i> – implies independent action as compared to being brought  <i>House of Peter</i> – indicates at least a minimal level of income and social status for Peter.  <i>and</i> – conjunction, ties the two actions together, occurring at the same time  <i>saw</i> – implies recognition  <i>his</i> – implies Peter was with him.  <i>lying</i> – indicates severity of sickness  <i>fever</i> – indicates a diminishing of cognitive ability</p>	<p>Mt 8:14                      Jesus entered the house of Peter                       And saw his mother-in-law                       Lying in bed with a fever</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Was Jesus led to the mother-in-law or did he go to her on his own?</li> <li>2) Is there a papal connotation?</li> <li>3) Did he know her?</li> <li>4) Was the mother-in-law too sick to recognize who had come to see her?</li> </ol>
<p><i>Touched</i> – touching is a personal action. Touching invades one’s space. Different than grasping. Could imply a gentleness.  <i>hand</i> – implies a mutual reciprocal action from the mother-in-law – as compared to touching the head.   <i>left-</i> implies an immediate action  <i>rose</i> – implies a self-generated action                      waited                      him – contrasted to them</p>	<p>Mt 8:15                      He touched her hand                       The fever left her,                      And she rose                      And waited on him.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Why not just speak the words and cure her?</li> <li>2) Why the hand?</li> <li>3) Did she now recognize Jesus?</li> <li>4) Was she healthy as if she never had been sick?</li> <li>5) Did she rise on her own, or was she helped up?</li> <li>6) Did she even thank Jesus? Was waiting on him a custom or an expression of gratitude?</li> <li>7) Did she wait on others?</li> </ol>



Worksheet #3 – Structure Diagram



And conjunctions tie actions with immediate effects: enters -> sees, left her -> rose and waited.

No negation is used. The curtness of the narrative is striking. Little ancillary details are presented.

**Worksheet #4**  
**Summary Chart**  
 Jesus proclaims the Gospel  
 Words and deeds

Through Words			Through Deeds Miracles
<p>Chapter 5                      The New Law                      Sermon on the mount                      “What to do”                      Beatitudes (5:3-12)                      “How to act”                      Light and Salt (5:13-16)</p>	<p>Chapter 6                      “Traits of a good                      Disciple”                      Almsgiving (6:1-4)                      Prayer (6:5-15)                      Fasting (6:16-18)                      Treasure/Money (6:19-21,                      24)                      Dependence (6:25-34)</p>	<p>Chapter 7                      “How to treat others”                      Judging Others(7:1-5)                      Prophets/Disciples (7:15-23)</p>	<p>Chapters 8 &amp; 9                      Miraculous Healings                      Leper (8:1-4)                      Centurion’s Servant (Gentile)                      (8:5-13)                      Peter’s Mother-In-Law (8:14-                      15)                      Paralytic (9:1-8)                      Woman with a hemorrhage                      (9:20-22)                      Two blind men (9:27-31)                      Mute (9:32-33)</p>

<p>“What not to do”                  Jesus Reinterprets The Law                  (5:17-48)                  Against Cafeteria                  Discipleship                  (5:17-20)                  Anger (5:21-26)                  Adultery (5:27-30)                  Divorce (5:31-32)                  Oaths (5:33-37)                  Retaliation (5:38-42)                  Enemies (5:43-48)</p>			<p>Miraculous Demonstration of Authority                  Calming of the Sea (8:23-27)                  Raising of the dead daughter                  (9:18-19, 23-25)</p>
			<p>Exorcisms                  Demoniacs at Peters’s house                  (8:16)                  Demoniacs at Gadarene                  (8:28-34)</p>
			<p>Statements on discipleship                  After each group of 3                  miracles</p>