

Commentary Resource
Matthew 9:18-26
The New American Commentary
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9:18–19 Jesus next encounters a “ruler.” Mark and Luke add his name (Jairus) and explain that he is a ruler of the synagogue (Mark 5:22; Luke 8:41), i.e., a layman who is responsible for the order and progress of worship. Substantial ruins of a second-century synagogue built on the foundations of the one from Jesus’ day still stand on the ancient site of Capernaum. Excavations have unearthed a large house adjacent to it, quite possibly the “parsonage,” which could therefore have been Jairus’s home. Only Matthew describes how Jairus “knelt”—his characteristic word for worship. As consistently throughout his Gospel (and esp. with miracle stories), Matthew abbreviates Mark, this time to such an extent that he seems to contradict the parallel accounts (Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:40–56). Instead of coming to plead with Jesus while his daughter is still alive, Jairus apparently arrives only after her death. Yet to call this a contradiction is anachronistically to impose on an ancient text modern standards of precision in story telling.⁶⁷ What is more, in a world without modern medical monitors to establish the precise moment of expiry, there is not nearly so much difference between Matthew’s *arti eteleutēsen* in v. 18 (which could fairly be translated “just came to the point of death”; cf. Heb 11:22) and *eschatos echei* in Mark 5:23 (which could also be rendered “is dying”).⁶⁸ What is important is not the precise moment of death but Jairus’s astonishing faith. On any interpretation, this influential religious leader believes that Jesus can miraculously reclaim his daughter’s life. The faith to which Jesus will explicitly point in v. 22 is implicitly present here already. As before (8:7), Jesus and his troupe go at once to help.

9:20–21 This time, however, an obstacle intrudes in their path—another needy person. A woman has been “bleeding” for twelve years, i.e., hemorrhaging in between her normal menstrual flows. To have survived that length of time shows that her life is probably not threatened at this particular moment but also points to the incorrigibility of the illness. Like the girl who is dying, this woman would be viewed as ritually unclean, an even greater stigma than her physical problem (cf. Lev 15:19–33 and the entire Mishnaic tractate *Zabim*). The reader wonders if Jesus deliberately delays his journey to Jairus’s home so as to be able to perform not just a healing but a restoration of life (as with Lazarus in John 11:6), but Matthew leaves no clues. Instead he shifts his focus immediately to this second woman, who also believes in Jesus’ power to heal. Her faith seems mixed with superstition because she believes that she merely needs to touch the edge of Jesus’ garment (literally, the *fringe* or *tassel* of his prayer shawl; cf. Num 15:38–39; Deut 22:12).⁶⁹ Matthew eliminates the events of Mark 5:30–33 which seem to reinforce this magical element.

9:22 All three Synoptic Gospels make it plain that even if Jesus did accommodate the woman’s superstitious beliefs in some way, her faith alone brought about the conditions that made healing possible. “Take heart” parallels Jesus’ words in 9:2 and calms the woman’s fears (which are explained more completely in Mark 5:33). Verse 21 represents a third-class conditional clause (one that introduces a measure of doubt into the woman’s statement). Praiseworthy faith does not doubt God’s ability to act, but it does not presume to know how he will choose to act. The word for “healed” in vv. 21–22 is more literally *saved*. The NIV rendering fits the situation in the life of Jesus, but Matthew’s church undoubtedly

⁶⁷ Cf. Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 134–36, and the literature there cited.

⁶⁸ See B. M. Newman, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971), s.v. τελευτάω (180) and ἐσχάτως (74).

⁶⁹ But cf. M. Hutter, “Ein altorientalischer Bittgestus in Mt 9, 20–22,” *ZNW* 75 (1984): 133–35, who argues that the woman’s gesture was an established manner of asking for help.

could see implications for the woman's spiritual state as well. "From that moment" suggests an instantaneous cure and that the woman remained healthy for a considerable time afterwards.

9:23–26 Jesus may now complete his trip to Jairus's home. The "flute players" and "noisy" (literally, *in an uproar*) crowd prove that at least by now the girl is definitely believed to be dead. Loud mourning and wailing characterized Jewish wakes. Even the poorest people were required to hire at least two flute players and one wailing woman to perform these services (*m. Ketub.* 4:4). The crowd views Jesus' claim that the girl was not dead as ludicrous; death was seen as every bit as irreversible then as now. "Sleep" implies that Jesus views the girl's death as not permanent. Elsewhere in Scripture sleep is often a euphemism for death (e.g., Matt 27:52; Acts 13:36; 1 Cor 11:30; 15:20, 51; 1 Thess 4:14), but that of course would make no sense here.

Nevertheless, Jesus succeeds in getting the crowd to leave the young girl's house. "Put outside" seems too mild a term for *ekballō*, which can be translated *throw out* or even *exorcise!* Jesus evicts the mourners probably to regain some calm and decorum inside. Mark 5:40 indicates that he brings the girl's family into her room, possibly restricting onlookers to those who had faith.⁷⁰ Jesus takes the girl's hand and lifts her up, bringing her to life again. *Korasion* may refer to a "girl" near the age of puberty; Mark 5:42 says she was twelve years old. *Egeirō* ("got up") means *to raise up*, both in the sense of getting out of bed and coming back to life. This "reawakening" is arguably Jesus' greatest miracle to date, though he will perform two more revivifications, one with Lazarus, after four days of death (John 11; cf. the son of the Nain widow in Luke 7:11–17). Old Testament precedent for such miracles appears in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha (see 1 Kgs 17:20–24; 2 Kgs 4:17–37).⁷¹ The news understandably spreads like wildfire. Matthew omits Jesus' injunction to silence (Mark 5:43), though it will reappear shortly (v. 30). As the blind men did in vv. 30–31, the astonished crowd pays no attention to his command; one could scarcely expect them to heed it.¹

⁷⁰ Or with Bruner (*Christbook*, 346): "As often as possible Jesus wants healing to be unpublic."

⁷¹ We cannot yet speak of full-fledged "resurrections" here, i.e., being raised to live forever. Presumably all these individuals did die normal deaths again at a later date. Cf. esp. M. J. Harris, "The Dead Are Restored to Life: Miracles of Revivification in the Gospels," in *Gospel Perspectives*, 6:295–326.

¹ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 159–162.