

Jesus and the Leper in Mark 1:40-45: A Biblical Theology Index for the Management of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Summary: *Jesus' response to the leper's request in Mark 1:40-45 tempers the harsh reality of laid down protocols for the management of leprosy. Against the physical distance of the time, Jesus takes the risk of touching the leper. He restores his battered dignity, heals him, and shows solidarity. The COVID-19 pandemic has stigmatized the human person as a weapon of infection. This situation has questioned the nature of man as a social being and impeded inter-human relationships. Using the synchronic approach of the historical critical method for the study of this text of Mark, this work compares the challenges of the leper in the ministry of Jesus with the threats posed by COVID-19. It concludes that both situations stereotype the human person and affect interpersonal relationships. It proposes Jesus' compassionate disposition and sense of solidarity as indices for the management of the COVID-19 crisis.*

Keywords: *Biblical Theology, Compassion, Coronavirus, Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Love, Human Person, Leprosy, Health-care, Solidarity.*

Introduction

Biblical Theology or biblical-theological index refers in this work to the possible guides or resources that derive from the hermeneutics of a biblical text. These findings are often proposed as models for applications to readers in their unique circumstances. It is an exercise at the service

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of contextualization in biblical studies. Thus, in the interpretation of Mark 1:40-45, the author seeks to derive possible indicators, especially from the disposition of Jesus towards the leper. These pointers are then brought to the attention of today's readers of the text in light of their management of the present crisis provoked by the COVID-19 disease. The approach to the text is synchronic and literary or linguistic analysis; it views a text as a systematic whole capable in its organizational pattern to provide meaning. This is undertaken with a view to appreciating the plot and character development of the text as a narrative of the life and significance of Jesus. As a narrative analysis, the work presupposes the available text as the primary object of investigation. But at the same time, it takes into consideration the importance of the text's historical background for its interpretation.

This pericope of Mark has enjoyed wider scholarly attention arising especially from the textual difficulty in v. 41. Majority of witnesses with chronological and geographical spread have *σπλαγχνισθεῖς* *splanchnistheis* (moved by compassion). Some putative witnesses rather have *ὀργισθεῖς* *orgistheis* (moved by anger). These putative witnesses include Codex Bezae and a part of the Old Latin version. In their attempts to resolve this textual critical issue scholars have highlighted the function of the sentiments of anger and compassion in the ministry of Jesus in Mark. The Markan Jesus uses anger as an expression of righteous indignation at the damage sin, diseases, and death have caused the human person (Lane 86) and at Satan's disfigurement of God's creatures (Cranfield 92). It is an indication of Jesus' disapproval of the indifference and antihuman sentiments that sometimes surround the social conventions of his time (Anderson 5). Jesus sometimes expresses contemporaneously the mixed emotions of anger and compassion in the face of human suffering (Mark 3:5). Anger at the insensitivity of humans to the plights of their folks, and compassion over against human indifference towards the afflicted in their midst. Through these emotions, the impassioned Jesus accomplishes acts of restoration in the Gospel of Mark (Johnson 186, 188, 202). His healing powers are manifested as compassion for those whose existence is interrupted by diseases, demon possession, and unjust structures. Compassion is recorded in the Synoptic Gospels as a manifestation of an intensifying character trait that often motivates Jesus to provide help for the suffering (Mark 6:34; Luke 7:13). It enhances the feeling of tenderness and understanding that inspires the willingness to help those in difficulties.

This work explores and underscores the audacity of the compassion that moves Jesus to touch and heal a leper considered to be unclean and infectious. It compares the situation of the biblical leper to the situations of those infected today with the coronavirus. The objective is to offer the audacity of Jesus' compassion towards this leper as the recommended approach the society must adopt in its relationship

with coronavirus patients. The biblical term translated as leprosy refers to various forms of chronic skin infections that appear on the human body. By the legislations of the Mosaic ceremonial laws, leprosy is a ravaging disease that attracts cultic impurity and renders the victim socially and religiously unfit for the community (Lev 13:45f). It brings physical and mental anguish to the victims, their dear ones, and the community. It is at the heart of this desperate situation of the leper that Jesus, against the isolationism of social conventions, steps in to touch, heal, and reintegrate the leper. Touching is communication that, in the context of human relationships and emotions, transmits sentiments of affection, solidarity, and acceptance. By touching the leper, Jesus identifies with him and acknowledges the primacy of the leper's humanity over his infirmity. His empathy towards the isolated leper brings out the best of the leper by transforming him into a witness for his people of God's eschatological deeds in Christ. The work acknowledges the necessity in the OT public healthcare to sometimes employ drastic measures for the containment and prevention of infectious diseases like leprosy. However, it notes from the impassioned activities of Jesus the suspicion (in these measures) of inherent risks of evaluating the victims of these diseases more as pathogens than as humans. This unfortunate but expected outcome often tinkers physically and psychologically with the wellbeing of the victims and brings them unimaginable miseries.

The novel SARS-related coronavirus disease that attacks the respiratory system places the human person in a similar position today. People with the virus are quarantined, and the protocol for its containment presumes every person is a carrier. It thus calls for the restriction of contacts and movements, the wearing of facemasks, and social distancing. It frightens and stereotypes the human person and globally interrupts interpersonal relationships. In the early stage of its discovery, it led to the desertion of infected persons by their dear ones and even by some terrified medical personnel.

These situations are comparable to the challenges leprosy posed during the time of Jesus. Jesus' approach to the challenge has become the norm for Christians today. By empathetically touching the leper and healing him, he acts against religious-legal prescriptions and relieves the suffering of the afflicted around him. He uses love to counter the isolationism of legalism and challenges his admirers to do the same. This reading of Mark 1:40-45 calls for a Christ-centred interpretation and implementation of existing protocols for the containment of COVID-19, above a dehumanizing legalism. The former is liberating while the latter brings anxiety and suffering to persons. The first creates community while the other isolates. It calls for a profound sense of humanity and utmost sensitivity toward preserving the dignity of infected persons and the sanity of all.

1. Organization and Exegetical Study of Mark 1:40-45

Mark 1:40-45 constitutes a new pericope; it is an account of a separate and unique event within the Galilean ministry, which flows from the prologue of v. 39. V. 39 is actually a transitional verse that closes the preceding pericope of 1:35-38 and introduces 1:40-45. The geographical markers in vv. 39 and 2:1 provide indices for delineating the pericope. There is a change of location from Capernaum in v. 21 to the region of Galilee in v. 39. There is a change of location too from Galilee in v. 39 back to Capernaum in 2:1. This change indicates the end of the pericope in 45 and the beginning of 2:1-6. 1:40-45 is joined to the preceding pericope of 1:35-39, and the following pericope of 2:1-6 by a simple *καί* and serves as a link between the two pericopae. It begins with a leper coming to Jesus in v. 40 and ends with people coming to Jesus in v. 45. Thus vv. 40-45 constitute an independent, complete, and coherent unit identified as a pericope with new plots and characters that are bound together by »contrasts or oppositions« (Focant 79). It is thus subdivided into the following units:

A 40-42

⁴⁰ a And a leper came to him beseeching him,

b and kneeling said to him, »If you will, you can make me clean.«

⁴¹ a Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him,

b and said to him, »I will; be clean.«

⁴² And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

B 43-45

⁴³ And he sternly charged him, and sent him away at once,

⁴⁴ a and said to him, »See that you say nothing to any one;

b but go, show yourself to the priest,

c and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to people.«

⁴⁵ a But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news,

b so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country;

c and people came to him from every quarter (RSV).

The text is divided principally into two units; A (40-42), the healing encounter between Jesus and the leper, and B (43-45), the unheeded charge to secrecy regarding the healing. Within vv. 40-42, there is a noticeable parallelism between the leper's request to be healed λέγων αὐτῷ ὅτι ἐάν θέλης δύνασαι με καθαρίσαι in v. 40b, and the response of Jesus λέγει αὐτῷ θέλω, καθαρίσθητι in v. 42b (see Légasse 125). Within vv. 43-44 there is an adversative relationship between the instruction of Jesus ὄρα μηδενὶ μηδὲν εἶπης (44a) and the subsequent action of the leper ἤρξατο κηρῦσσειν πολλὰ και διαφημίζειν τὸν λόγον (45a). For the purpose of this study, the pericope is, therefore, examined under the following headings: The Encounter of Compassion and Solidarity between Jesus and the Leper (40-42), The Charge to Secrecy and Testimony for the Priests and People (43-44), and The 'Witnessing' of the Restored Leper (45).

1.1. THE ENCOUNTER OF COMPASSION AND SOLIDARITY BETWEEN JESUS AND THE LEPER (40-42)

λεπρός: Leprosy at the Time of Jesus

The adjective λεπρός *lepros* refers to a person with a serious skin disease or disorder. It is derived from λέπρα *lepra*, which loosely translates the Hebrew נַשְׂרָף *šāra'at* (Lev 13-15). Among ancient Greek medical writers and in the OT, *lepra* or *šāra'at* refers to a variety of serious skin diseases that possibly include what is commonly known today as leprosy. Leprosy refers to a human disease, otherwise called Hansen's disease, caused by *bacillus Mycobacterium leprae*. The use of *lepra* in the NT is therefore reflective of the OT notion of various forms of human skin diseases (Wright and Jones 277).

λέπρα in LXX and NT may at times refer to what is generally termed leprosy, but probability extends to such skin diseases as psoriasis, lupus, ringworm, and favus, and in the absence of more precise data it is best to use the more general term serious skin disease Mt 8:3; Mk 1:42; Lk 5:12f... (Bauer et al. 592).

Therefore, it is likely that the use of the term by Mark in v. 42 may refer to one of these skin diseases rather than specifically leprosy as understood today. And the *lepros* referred to in v. 40 could be described as a man with serious skin disease.

Leprosy is a defiling disease (Num 5:2) that renders its victims physically and ceremonially unclean and capable of defiling others. It is a physically ravaging and dreadful disease that constitutes a stigma. It is considered as evil as death and those infected are described as living dead (Num 12:12; Job 18:13). Lepers are considered as suffering the consequences of their sins (cf. 2 Kings 5; 2 Chr 26:16-21; Num 12:10-15) and by rabbinic standards, their healing is as difficult as raising

someone from death (Viljoen 2). From the Levitical legislations on purity found in Lev 13-15, people suffering from all forms of skin conditions described as *šāra'at* and certified to be unclean are demanded by law to wear torn clothes and keep away from people. They are prohibited from entering or approaching residential areas and are to live outside the camp. They are to let their hair hang loose, cover their upper lips, and shout 'unclean, unclean' to alert approaching persons of their own contagious presence (Lev 13:45-46). In general, people in the society are prohibited, under the pains of contracting uncleanness, from making contact with lepers. In real life situations, it is not very likely that these regulations were faithfully observed, especially in the villages, outside the holy city (Pesch 241).

These regulations on purity were meant as a guide for life among the Israelites, but later Judaism and its Pharisaism surrounded them with »a multitude of casuistic and sometimes grotesque prohibitions and commands, which made the regulations into a law which was hard to fulfil« (Link and Schattenmann 105). In the *Mishnah*, the Pharisees insist on the impurity and un-holiness of lepers, their violation of God's call to be holy in Lev 11:44-45, and the danger of them polluting the community (Chilton 877). The Rabbinic interpretations of the Levitical regulations on matters of cultic impurity heighten the burden of the lepers and render them socially dead. In *M. Nega'im* leprosy makes lepers capable of rendering unclean even those who encounter them by chance (Lane 85). The danger of this notion of holiness is the exclusion of those who do not qualify. Thus, at the time of Jesus, they had become a heavy burden to bear, stigmatizing and isolating as it were, the lepers. Josephus (37-ca 100 AD) acknowledges the contaminating conditions of lepers and their exclusion from the community at the time of Christ (*Contra Apionem* 1.281; *Antiquitates Judaicae* 9:74).

Thus lepers suffer both the physical and mental anguish occasioned by the ailment as well as the physical, religious, and social exclusions implicit in the isolationist measures put forward to contain the disease. They are not only physically ill but are prevented from normal human relationships; they are socially ostracized. It is a socially degrading condition with destabilizing social consequences. The condition psychologically stresses the victims and members of their families who have to endure separations from their dear ones. There are, however, no provisions in the regulations for the medical care of the lepers. This could probably be due to the unacceptable and contagious nature of the disease. The healing of Naaman by Elisha in 2 Kings 5:1-15, however, marks the prophetic sign of victory over the death occasioned by leprosy and anticipates the messianic age. Another instance of healing a leper is the case of Miriam in Numbers 12. In the Synoptic representation of the healing of lepers Jesus thus fulfils the messianic expectations of the prophets (Davies and Allison 11).

γονυπετών: On Bended Knee

Assaulted by these debilitating circumstances, the leper in Mark, therefore, sees his encounter with Jesus as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be liberated from his pitiable condition of inexistence. His ignominy is expressed in his anonymity; he is not named but exclusively identified by the assaulting disease. His exasperation is expressed in the phrase *καὶ γονυπετῶν αὐτόν* *kai gonypethōn auton*. This is however omitted by the witnesses **B D W al it^p sa**, but strongly attested among others by **ⲛ L Θ fl, pm it^p vg bo**. It is supported by the parallels in **Matthew 8:2**; **προσεκύνει αὐτῷ** and in **Luke 5:13**; **πεσὼν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον**. The reading is therefore considered in this work as the closest to the original and to be read.

The verb *γονυπετέω* *gonypetheō* means falling on one's knees or kneeling before. It was an oriental practice borrowed by the Greeks and the Israelites as a gesture of slaves before their masters, and suppliants before their gods. It is a sign of submission and homage in the OT through which humility and awe are expressed before Yahweh (Psalm 95:6). It is a posture of entreaty before a man of God (2 Kings 1:13). Isaiah also depicts it as a gesture of the messianic age of salvation (45:23). While *gony* is paired in the NT with verbs of bend to accentuate the sovereignty of a king (Mark 15:19), and the adoration and veneration due to God alone (Rom 11:4), *gonypetheō* is used »especially to intensify the urgency of a request or question (to ask on bended knee), e.g. Matt. 17:14; Mark 1:40 (cf. the parallel use of *proskyneō* in Matt. 8:2); 10:17« (Shönweiss 850-60).

The leper in his exasperation is here conscious of the urgency of being freed from his 'indignity'. He blatantly breaks the preventive health regulations. He asks almost aggressively on bended knees as a gesture of faith in the sovereignty and might of Jesus. The gesture profoundly signifies an affirmation as well as a confession of faith in the absolute power biblically reserved for God, who is deemed to be the only one with the power to do whatever he wills (Eccl 8:3) and create all by his will (Ps 115:3). The leper acknowledges his depressingly frustrating condition and the totally gratuitous nature of the gift he expects of Jesus. Based on the OT tradition, he equally recognizes his sinfulness; it is because of this sinfulness that Satan has afflicted him with the illness. He, therefore, anticipates the messianic salvation guaranteed by the Holy One of God (Mark 1:24) and Good Teacher (10:17-18). Faced with the possibility of getting healed, he expresses his most cordial homage and self-emptying as a prize worth paying to get healed. He asks to be given an opportunity of readmission into a normal human relationship in the community. He depicts precisely the Markan description of what it feels like to be in pains (Kotroits and Taussig 42).

ἐὰν θέλῃς: The Will to Heal

The phrase ἐὰν θέλῃς δύνασαι με καθάρσαι *ean thelēs dynasai me katharissai* expresses the leper's appreciation of the power of Jesus to heal him as well as his understanding of Jesus' freedom to exercise that power at his discretion. The emphasis is more on the *dynasai* (to be able) than on the *thelēs* (you have the power to heal me if you really wish to). When the leper uses the expression »if you will, you can make me clean«, he is attributing to Jesus a divine power greater than that possessed by an ordinary ancient miracle worker (Légasse 126). It is an acknowledgment of the OT and Jewish understanding that God alone can heal from leprosy, which is equivalent to death. Jesus, therefore, acts with the power of God. The leper appeals to the willingness of Jesus to use the great power he has over diseases and demons (1:34; 39) and heal him. His is an entreaty that underscores his readiness to let the decision be Jesus'; he submits himself to Jesus' will. This is affirmed by the *thelō katharisthēti* of v. 41, where Jesus expresses his willingness and his decision to exercise that power. He confirms this power and will by his words and action. It is also the leper's acknowledgement of his unworthiness by law to come close to Jesus. Jesus, therefore, has the choice to attend to him or not, to choose to be on the side of the institution that has kept him ostracized or to restore his humanity.

Καθαρίζειν *katharizein* is used only in this passage (1:40, 41, 42) and in 7:19, where Jesus pronounces all foods clean. In this context, the verb means 'to make clean' in terms of 'to make well', or 'to heal' someone of a disease (especially leprosy) that renders one ceremonially unclean (Matt 8:2; 10:8; Mk 1:40; Luke 5:12) and to cleanse the person from cultic impurity (Bauer et al. 488). The sense of healing is implied in Jesus' pronouncement in v. 41 and evident in the outcome of that pronouncement on the leper *ekatharisthē* in v. 42. The same sense is implied in the use of *katharisthēti* in 2 Kings 5:13 (LXX). The leper was therefore considered physically ill and ceremonially unclean or impure, and anything he came into contact with was rendered impure or unclean as the woman in Mark 5:25-34 (Lev 15:25-30). By cleansing the leper of his leprosy, Jesus provides him with the indispensable condition for his ceremonial cleansing and reinstatement by the priest.

σπλαγχνισθεῖς or ὀργισθεῖς: The Impassioned Jesus

Witnesses **D, a d f² r¹*** **Tatian** read ὀργισθεῖς *orgistheis* (angered) instead of σπλαγχνισθεῖς *splanchnistheis* (moved by compassion) supported by many other manuscripts. The rule of *lectio difficilior* renders this variant of reading more likely. It is more probable for *orgistheis* to be changed to *splanchnistheis* rather than the reverse because it is expected that Christ shows compassion rather than be angry (Bock 137). Again, Matthew and Luke, who seem to have copied from Mark, do not have any of these verbs. This would likely mean that *orgistheis* may have been

in the original of Mark, and based on the difficulty of the reading, the two evangelists decided to make no reference to Jesus' emotion (Cranfield 92). Scholars who support this view also hold that anger is an emotion common to Jesus in Mark (3:5; 8:12) (Ehrman 125, 129). The use of ἐμβριμησάμενος *embrimēsamenos* and ἐξέβαλεν *exebalen* in v. 43 is said to also corroborate the reading of *orgistheis*. Lorenz has a review of the various criticisms by authors of this position (202-8).

The scholarly explanation for Jesus' negative emotion of anger is equally notable. At the time of Jesus, illnesses and sufferings were understood primarily as the consequences of sin (Luke 13:16) and the works of Satan and his evil forces. Jesus is, therefore, expressing his displeasure at the evil forces that have so dehumanized the leper (Lane 86). He is equally frowning at the society's management of people with skin diseases and at the oppressive interpretations of the legislation regarding lepers that have made them outcasts rather than objects of compassion (Anderson 5). He is especially angry at Satan's disfigurement of God's creature (Cranfield 92).

In this context of the healing of the leper by Jesus, both *orgistheis* and *splanchnistheis* are positive emotions that have led to the cleansing of the leper. Both are the immediate mixed reactions that one can contemporaneously express in the face of the suffering of a dear one. Behind the expression of compassion is the anger or displeasure at the circumstances that motivate the compassion and vice versa. This even explains the expression of both sentiments in Mark 3:5 by Jesus in the context of healing a man with a withered hand. However, diverse authoritative witnesses support the reading of *splanchnistheis* and the context as noted above also encourages it (Metzger 10; Lorenz 211). It is also found in Mark 9:22 and in other verb forms in 6:34 and 8:2. The synonyms ἐλεέω *eleēō* (5:19; 10:47, 48) and συλλυπέω *syllypeō* (Mark 3:5) are also used by Mark to express Jesus' emotion. The verb and its synonyms are common dispositions used by Mark to describe Jesus in his exercise of deeds of power (Johnson 186, 188, 202). This work, therefore, supports the reading of *splanchnistheis* and prefers to work with it.

The aorist passive participle *splanchnistheis* is of the verb σπλαγχνίζομαι *splanchnizomai* and means 'being moved to pity' in the innermost and affectionate portion of one's being called σπλάγχνα *splanchna* (Zerwick and Grosvenor 104). *Splanchna* is the inner organ understood physically as the heart (Acts 1:18) and constitutes the seat of emotions. It is the LXX translation for *rahemim* »which when paired with *hessed* indicates a genuine emotional state which predisposes one in favour of those who suffer misfortune or are helpless« (Naseri 149). It is an instinctive attachment, which generates feelings of tenderness, patience, and understanding (Köster 554-5). These generated feelings often translate into action as compassion in the event of the misfortune of a neighbour. In Psalm 103:3, Yahweh's *rahemim*/

splanchnon is likened to that of parents towards their children. It is the manifestation of God's saving eschatological appearance to redeem Israel in Luke 1:78; a sign of the messianic presence and the motivating force behind the healing activities of Jesus. It is a conduct expected of the followers of Christ who wish to inherit eternal life (Luke 10:33,37).

Therefore, the verb *splanchnizomai* means to be moved by compassion, be touched by the difficult situation of the other, and be enthused to act with a view to improving their condition. It denotes being involved in the passion or pains of the other to the point of taking the step to act. It is a characteristic passion that often drives Jesus in the synoptic Gospels to come to the aid of people in need (Mark 6:34; Luke 7:13). Aorist participles generally denote actions prior to the main verb. In this passage, the main verbs are 'stretched out' and 'touched' in 41b. *Splanchnistheis* is therefore the emotion that precedes and prompts Jesus' main act of touching the leper to heal him.

ἥψατο αὐτοῦ: The Touch of Reversal

The verb ἥψατο *hēpsyato* is the aorist of ἅπτομαι *haptomai*. *Haptomai* is the middle form of the verb ἅπτω *haptō* and is often used to refer to the act of touching. In the LXX it is used to refer to the touching of things that have been declared sacred (Exod 19:12) or of things that cause one to become unclean ceremonially (Lev 11:8). It is used frequently in the Synoptic Gospels to designate the acts of healing by Jesus. He is depicted as touching the sick and demon-possessed persons with his hand and restoring them to good health (Mark 1:34; 3:10f; 6:56; 7:33f; 8:23). It is often a gesture that is followed by a pronouncement. The sick also seek to touch Jesus (Mark 3:10) or his garment (Mark 5:27-30, 6:56; Matt 14:36) because they realize that power comes from him (Luke 6:19). Touching with the hand or the touching of Jesus by the sick is an avenue through which power flows from Jesus to grant healing and restore wholeness to the unwell. »He whom Jesus touches of his own volition shares in his divine power (Mark 9:26) and God himself turns to him« (Grob 861). Jesus touches the dead daughter of Jairus and brings her back to life in Mark 5:41. The touching of the leper by Jesus, therefore, has essentially a therapeutic scope; by it, power flows from Jesus and brings healing and cleansing to the leper (Légasse 128).

Mark's description of the healing of the leper as »the leprosy left him« (1:42) likens the disease to demonic possession. Demons are said to depart from their victims after being cast out by Jesus (5:13). Moved emotionally by the crippling condition of the leper, Jesus is inspired to act by physically touching the untouchable leper with his hand. His touch of reversal and sovereign pronouncement »I will, be clean« in v. 41 instantaneously transmits Jesus' healing power. It sends away the leprosy and radically restores the entire complex of the leper's once battered physi-

cal and emotional wellbeing (v. 42). »He stretches out his hand; note the dramatic description, and touches the untouchable man. He touches the raw, puss-seeping, putrefying flesh of a shell of a desperate man« (Anderson 2). He ignores the fifty-paces rule expected of lepers and risks touching his contagious skin. Rather than render Jesus unclean, the touch brings healing to the leper. This is because impurity is incapable of soiling Jesus and his holiness is contagious and healing (Focant 80). By touching the leper, Jesus trades space with him to show his affection and his appreciation of the leper's humanity and his disapproval of the ills of the ravaging disease. Elisha did not touch Naaman to heal him, nor did Moses touch Miriam. Only Jesus touches a leper against the medical and religious prohibitions regarding persons with skin diseases in Lev 14-15 (see Lev 5:3, 8). Jesus' decision and action are here described as a manifestation of his unique omnipotence (Schrenk 48f).

While the Mosaic ceremonial law with its emphasis on ritual purification dramatically excludes rather than heals the leper of his disease, Jesus instantaneously heals and reintegrates the leper with his law of love and compassion. Jesus uses the gospel of love to counter the isolationism of legalism. He bridges the chasm between the clean and the unclean and identifies with all the ritually and socially unclean and isolated. He breaks the high wall of prejudice that excludes the sick and the marginalized from the common space (Mascilongo 191). He shows defiance in the face of the social conventions and religious institutions that have turned those sick of leprosy into outcasts in their very own society (Broadhead 73). It is the hermeneutics of love, which permits one to act even against legal prescriptions and taboos and relieve the sufferings of others (Osborne 285). In the Markan community of Jesus, healing and preservation of the sanity and sanctity of the community come not by dissociating from the ceremonially and socially impure but by solidarity and compassion towards them. It is about living the love-centred gospel of Christ, who unites rather than separates (Okure, »Paul's Gospel« 7).

1.2. THE CHARGE TO SECRECY AND TESTIMONY FOR THE PRIESTS AND PEOPLE (43-44)

The aorist participle *embrimēsamenos* of the verb *βριμάομαι brimaomai* denotes 'inward rage' and indignation. It stresses the text's dominant theme of profound emotion within Jesus. It is used of Jesus as the subject and the person healed by him as the indirect object (see Matt. 9:30). The verb is used along with the double negatives *μηδενὶ μηδέν mēdeni mēden* in vv. 44 to express emphatically the sternness with which Jesus wishes the leper to keep the healing private. This is further heightened by the fact that Jesus hurriedly sends the leper away (*ἐυθὺς ἐξέβαλεν αὐτὸν euthus exebalen auton* v.43). At this juncture, the Markan Jesus intends to at least temporarily restrict (see Mark 9:9) an expected attempt by the leper to

publicise the healing (Mark 1:32; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:30). This invitation, which is a peculiarity in Mark, is often described as ‘Messianic Secret’ (see William Wrede). The imperative ὄρα *hora* which precedes a subjunctive with μή *mē* denotes an invitation »to pay close attention; the healed leper must avoid the step, however normal, to share his happiness« (Focant 78 note 22). The Markan Jesus and the narrator know that it will be almost impossible for the healed leper to heed this command. In reality, the command to be silent about the healing naturally and inevitably prompts those healed to proclaim it publicly (1:45; see 5:20) and leads to an accentuation of the public acclamation (Pesch 249). The aim of the secrecy command is to draw attention to the Markan description of the revelation of Jesus in the Gospel. It is an emphatic expression of the process of the revelation of Jesus and his activities in Mark (Pesch 250). Thus Mascilongo interprets this charge to secrecy as the narrator’s motif for gradually but penetratingly revealing the identity of Jesus as the Messiah (189-90).

In the same atmosphere of strong feeling for the leper and intending to complete the leper’s restoration process, Jesus quickly sends him away to go and show himself to the priest as prescribed in the Mosaic statutes. This is in line with the Law in Lev 13:16-17. In the OT, ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’ are understood primarily in a cultic context of religious loyalty and identity. Since Yahweh is believed to have no dealings with what is impure, impurity therefore separates a person from Yahweh, from the worship of him, and from Yahweh’s people. It is an abomination on the side of Yahweh (Lev 7:19f) and must always be removed. The people require regular purifications by the ritual of atonement (Lev 16) to approach the temple and altar of Yahweh. Thus diseases, especially leprosy, render a person unclean and those who come in contact with the leper. Therefore, one of the duties of the priests is to pronounce a person with leprosy clean or unclean following the declaratory formulae in Lev 13: 9-17, 44 (Link and Schattenmann 104). The declaratory formulae also require the priests to assess the health status of the lepers, declare them clean when they are healed of the infections and make them undergo the rite of cleansing outlined in Lev 14. This is because the person who contracts leprosy is identified in the faith of Israel as having committed a sin. It is this ritual cleansing that is intended in the use of the verb καθαρισμοῦ *katharismou* in v. 44. Therefore, it must not be understood as the cleansing made possible by Jesus in v. 41 or requested by the leper in v. 40; these ones imply healing. By sending him to the priest, Jesus thus acts within the limits of the Law. Mark often represents Jesus as a respecter of the Law (10:1-12; 19-21).

μαρτύριον: The Testimony

The εἰς μαρτύριον αὐτοῖς *eis martyrion autois* in Mark indicates that the cleansing rite serves as proof or testimony for the priests and the people of the cure (see

Mark 13:9). The noun *martyrion* means ‘testimony, evidence or proof’; it is the evidence to others of that which has been experienced, a testimony for or against. It is the piece of evidence that calls to mind a particular event or deed as well as an observance of the Law in the context of the OT (Trites 1038, 1040). The invitation to meet the priest is to provide the priests and the people with »documentary evidence of his cure and of compliance with the Law« (Zerwick and Grosvenor 104). This evidence can also be incriminating. According to Strathmann, ‘testimony’ or ‘witness’ is employed here and in many other passages to denote ‘incriminating evidence’ that can be used for prosecution in the court. Mark also uses *martyrion* in 6:11 and 13:9 as a testimony against those who reject Jesus and his message. On the other hand, μαρτυρία and μάρτυς are used in Mark 14:55, 56, 59, 63 to describe the false testimony brought against Jesus. Thus, given these Markan instances in 6:11 and 13:9, Jesus intends here (1:44) a testimony that can be used against the priests and the people if, after having observed the total healing of the leper, they fail to acknowledge the person and power through whom healing has taken place (Strathmann 502-3). It is a testimony to the authority of Jesus against the upcoming unbelieving religious leaders in the Gospel (Williams 97). It is a testimony to the healing power of God made manifest in Jesus. Thus »according to Mark 1:44 par. Matt 8:4 and Luke 5:14, the sacrifice of the healed man is offered *eis martyrion*, for a testimony, i.e. in recognition and as proof that the healing had taken place (according to Moses’ regulations, Lev. 13:49; 14:2-32) ... « (Trites 1043).

It is on the basis of the declaration of being cleansed that the leper will be readmitted into the community to resume his rightful human relationship with others. Going to the priest for a proof of his healing would also alert the priest, and consequently the people, of Jesus as the source of the healing. This implies that despite the preceding command to secrecy in v. 44a, there is an underpinned scenario for proclamation to the priest and the people of the wonderful thing God has done in Jesus. The invitation to meet the priest is, therefore, not just a command to observe the laid down Mosaic regulations but a coded missionary design aimed at drawing people to faith in Jesus.

1.3. THE ‘WITNESSING’ OF THE RESTORED LEPER (v. 45)

The infinitive κηρύσσειν *kēryssein* denotes ‘to proclaim’, a verb often used in the context of preaching the good news of Christ by his apostles. Fundamentally *kēryssein* is the declaration of an event, a dynamic proclaiming. From this verb come the nouns κηρύγμα *kērygma* ‘proclamation or declaration’ and κήρυξ *kēryx* ‘herald’: »one who makes public declarations especially of a transcendent nature« (Bauer et al. 543). It is accompanied in the text by another verb of proclamation that intensifies it; διαφημίξειν (*dia-* throughout + *phēmizein-* spread verbally) meaning

‘to spread abroad’. The leper should be taken as the subject rather than Jesus. τὸν λόγον *ton logon* would mean ‘the word’ or ‘the matter’ and refers to the good news of the leper’s cure. Against Jesus’ instruction to say nothing to anyone, the leper as earlier suspected announces the healing and thus thwarts Jesus’ desire for secrecy (see Mark 7:36). ‘To proclaim’ *kēryssein* and ‘to spread the word’ *diaphēmizein ton logon* are vocabularies used of the Christian mission in Acts (8:4-5; 9:20; 10:42) and in 2 Tim 4:2. So, upon discovering he has been healed, the leper decides to declare as good news his healing and consequently the salvation made possible by Jesus. He thus assumes the status of a missionary; he bears testimony extensively to what Jesus has done and draws people to Jesus as a true disciple. He becomes the herald of God’s gracious salvific presence in Christ who ushers in a new age of the kingdom that involves radical conversion and renewal, and the reversal of fortunes (Friedrich 381).

His ability to go public and into the community he was barred from entering marks a return of his self-confidence and a restoration of his dignity once battered by leprosy. He fulfils his long-time quest for a community of which leprosy had robbed him. He feels himself once more a human person with the audacity to associate and even congregate. He is transformed from being the lonely leper whose only communication with others was to scare people away from his contagious presence. He now takes up the role of a messenger who summons people to listen to his story; he becomes the way to Jesus and his ambassador. Rather than scare and dispel people, he now attracts them from everywhere to Jesus. In other words, this leper had the potential of being a true disciple and a herald but was limited by his health impediment. Jesus sets him free, and his best is manifested as an ideal messenger (1:31). Jesus has given him back what was rightly his; his humanity with equal right and dignity as any other son and daughter of Abraham (Luke 13:16). In healing him, Jesus has proven that in the quest for solutions to human afflictions, the good of every person must be taken into consideration because »God’s project and agenda for humanity excludes no one« (Okure, »A Keynote Address«).

In the context of the LXX use of the verb *kēryssein*, the leper announces Jesus’ fulfilment of Is 60:1 in an efficacious and eschatological event of liberating him from captivity due to sin and illness (see Luke 4:18). He corroborates the fulfilled time of the breaking in of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus in 1:15. Interestingly, in Hosea 5:8 the verb denotes ‘to sound an alarm’ in the face of an approaching enemy. The Markan use of the verb thus recalls the leper who needed to sound an alarm to alert people of his infectious presence, now inviting them to come and hear the good news he has experienced. As in the rabbinic writings, the leper’s proclamation clears the way for Jesus. He draws people to Jesus and awakens their faith in Jesus, thus serving as a model for discipleship. Friedrich suggests that since the leper is

not commissioned, his action in relation to the use of *kēryssein* is witness rather than proclamation in the true NT sense of the verb. The authority to proclaim is only given to those healed when the miracle is opposed, as in Mark 5:17-20. He thus understands the prohibition imposed by Jesus as intended »to prevent astonishment at the miracle taking the place of faith« (383).

The healing of the leper is the last of the three major healings performed by Jesus at the end of the first chapter of Mark (1:21-28; 29-31; 40-45). These healings reveal the Markan Jesus as the true Son of Man whose supernatural power is unleashed against the forces that oppress God's creatures. This story of Jesus is now being told by one who experiences this power; the leper (see Mark 7:36). The proclamation by the leper thus forms part of Mark's narratives of the messianic presence and portents of Jesus evident at the end of each of these miracles. The leper is participating in the role of John the Baptist (1:5-8) by preparing the way for Jesus. By transforming the healing act of Jesus into the act of witnessing, the leper makes effective Mark's theological motif of identifying Jesus by his portents (1:27-28; 2:12). But Jesus could no longer openly enter the town to preach (1:38) because of the leper's decision to speak out. Focant suggests that because the leper acted against the explicit will of Jesus by announcing the healing and saturating the listening space, to the disadvantage of Jesus himself, he should not be considered a missionary (81). Nevertheless, the leper's witness substitutes for Jesus' withdrawal by drawing the people to Jesus in the country area; he should therefore be acknowledged as a missionary, and Pesch rightly suggests that Mark makes him the first missionary of Jesus (238). A notable trading of space and role has taken place between the two protagonists. Jesus is now the one restricted who can no longer enter the city. The healed leper now moves freely and announces the good news of his experience of the extraordinary healing from Jesus. Jesus now bears the repercussion of healing the leper (Mascilongo 187-8). When the leper was restricted, people were not allowed to approach him, and only Jesus gave him the privilege of sharing his space. But the contrast on which the Markan emphasis must be drawn is that in Jesus' restricted condition, the leper now draws people to Jesus. Mark may be drawing attention to the role of the leper as the prototype of the Christian convert who is called to draw people to Christ.

2. The Challenge of COVID-19

The term COVID-19 is an acronym used by the World Health Organization (WHO) to designate the novel Coronavirus disease that was first identified in Wuhan city, Hubei province of China, in 2019 (WHO, 2019 *Novel Corona Virus 1*). It is an infectious disease that belongs to the class of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome SARS. The SARS-CoV-2 virus attacks the respiratory system and causes

respiratory illness. The symptoms include severe headache, fever, dry cough, tiredness, and shortness of breath. Those infected may be symptomatic or asymptomatic. The asymptomatic patients are considered as infectious as the symptomatic patients and are therefore active in transmitting the virus. The virus is easily spread from person to person through contact with droplets of saliva or discharge from the mouth or nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also be transmitted through contact with contaminated surfaces and objects. By the estimation of the WHO, as of 12th May 2021, 6:00 pm CEST, the virus has infected about 159.319,384 and killed as many as 3.311,780 persons globally in 219 countries (WHO, »Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic«). Other than the management of its symptoms, no effective cure has been found for it yet. Vaccines have been produced in record time, and according to the WHO, a total of 1,264.164,553 vaccine doses have so far been administered.

Because of the highly contagious nature of the virus, stringent public health measures have been employed globally to contain and prevent its transmission. These include total lockdowns of countries, movement restrictions, closures of schools and businesses, international travel restrictions, a social distancing of one meter between persons, use of face masks to cover the mouth and nose when in public or with non-members of one's household, suspension of social activities and conventional social gestures like shaking of hands and hugging. People are advised to wash their hands regularly with soap or use an alcohol-based rub and not touch their faces and limit contact with others. They are to practice respiratory etiquette like coughing into a flexed elbow (WHO, »Considerations for Public Health« 2).

Those sick or suspected of the virus are quarantined and cared for in isolation under strict non-contact protocols (WHO, »Infection and Prevention Control« 2). They are prevented from contact with people till they are confirmed virus negative in two consecutive tests. Those who have been in contact with infected persons are traced and equally quarantined for fourteen days and declared socially fit only after testing negative (WHO, »Considerations for Quarantine of Contacts« 2). The deceased are buried under very restrictive COVID-19 regulations that sometimes deny access to family members. The infected feel stigmatized and are sometimes reluctant to reveal their status. Overall, the virus has affected and changed the social regime globally. It has made interpersonal relationships suspect and difficult. People have become more restraining towards others; sometimes, those identified as infected feel excluded or abandoned. Some non-confirmed patients in Nigerian hospitals have lamented the scornful manner in which some medical workers have suspiciously handled them. Understandably, these health personnel are advised to be clinically suspicious of every patient for fear of being infected. These fears have equally been fuelled among citizens by the 'infodemic' of myths from social media

(WHO, 2019 *Novel Coronavirus* 7) exaggerating the risk category of those infected and stigmatizing them as health hazards to be terribly discriminated against and avoided. The consequences of these on the victims, especially during the early days of the virus outbreak, have been traumatic. The recommended containment and management strategies themselves hurt and call for sacrifices on the part of patients and their dear ones.

3. Mark 1:40-45 and the Challenges of COVID-19

The circumstances surrounding the novel coronavirus pandemic have much in common with the OT management of leprosy disease at the time of the Markan Jesus. Both diseases stereotype the human person and highlight the unfortunate role of the infected as pathogens in their communities. Even the protocol for handling the deceased COVID-19 victims recalls the OT consideration of a dead body as highly unclean and infectious. It is deemed capable of infecting all persons and open vessels in its vicinity (Num 19:14f). Both diseases have exposed their victims to the unfortunate circumstances of enduring the trauma of being maltreated or abandoned. The Galilean religious-legal strategy for confronting leprosy at the time of Jesus was to report symptoms, isolate, quarantine, and construct leprosaria (Lev 14:46). In Lev 13:4-6, 26 suspected lepers are quarantined for seven days, and another seven days if not cleared. Confirmed lepers are required to wear torn clothes, let their hair hang loose, cover their upper lips, and live alone outside the camp (Lev 13:45-46). These measures compare to the famous fourteen-day quarantine and the use of facemasks currently prescribed for managing coronavirus patients. Some countries actually use seven days intervals for the COVID-19 quarantine. These containment strategies for both diseases have given rise to the alienation and confinement of the diseased and affected inter-human relationships. Home confinement, especially in the developing world, does not address the serious basic issues of poverty and lack of access to healthcare for early intervention. The invitation to self-isolate does not take into consideration those who lack a home to isolate in, or families with just a room for two or more persons to live in. How does the system provide for those who, for fear of quarantine and stigmatization, might avoid diagnoses or, like the leper, break confinement and end up sporadically transmitting the disease?

The camaraderie of Jesus towards the leper calls for an increase in global solidarity and fraternity in the management of the COVID-19 crisis. This expected solidarity especially calls to question the hoarding of vaccines by some developed nations at the expense of underdeveloped or developing nations. Restoration of the leper by Jesus demands deliberate effort on the part of those responsible for making and implementing policies to address these basic issues. The urgency with which Jesus

heals the leper without minding his contagious state demands the availability of prompt healthcare for all. It implies not just the prevention of the spread of diseases but the obligation in conscience to make affordable healthcare services available to all, both the rich and the poor, the touchable and the untouchable. Every human being has a right to a decent life that good healthcare service provides.

Conclusion

The healing of the leper in Mark 1:40-45 is the last of the three major healings performed by Jesus in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. The author uses these healings to define the *modus operandi* of the Markan Jesus. Along with the other two healings, therefore, Mark 1:40-45 sets the stage for Jesus' relationship with all those the society represents as sinners, sick and unclean. It signals especially the series of controversies that will mark the Markan Jesus' relationship with the Mosaic prescriptions. These controversies occur in the context of the transition from the old way of understanding and interpreting the Mosaic prescriptions to the new way that is unique to Jesus (Mark 11:27-33; 12:13-17; 18-23). The text underscores the surpassing nature of the salvation Jesus inaugurates over and above the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic ceremonial Law concentrated on preventing the leper from contaminating the community and religious space of the people without actually purging the leper of the ravaging ailment. Over and against the rabbinic conviction of the impossibility of healing a leper, Jesus performs the impossible and heals him. He does this by embracing rather than excluding a human person considered and treated as a dangerous pathogen of cultic impurity. He teaches that between the ceremonial law and the law of love, the latter must take precedence. The salvation Jesus brings is founded on humanity that transcends cultic and ritual regulations and places the good of the human person at the centre of every human regulation. It indicates the nearness of God who bridges the chasm between the human and the divine, and the impure and the pure in the incarnation of his Son. It emphasizes kind-heartedness and communion as avenues for healing divisions in society. This representation of Jesus' relationship with the sick and sinners and his reinterpretation of the Mosaic Law on what is 'clean and unclean', especially from the standpoint of love, compassion, solidarity, and human dignity, is the core message of the New Testament. The theme is also underscored in: Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matt 15:21-28; the healing of the blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52; the sinful woman who wiped Jesus' feet in Luke 7:36-52; the cleansing of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11-19; the meeting of Jesus with Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10; the woman caught in adultery in John 7:58-8:1-11; Peter's trance in Acts 10:9-16 etc.

Jesus thus invites all to act against stereotypes, the manner in which people are being measured and discounted, and to stand against debasement and aloneness.

People must not allow social conventions to deprive them of the opportunity to show compassion, especially to the sick in their society. It is a call from Jesus, as it was to Peter and the early Christian community at Jerusalem, to see beyond the putrefying flesh of the desperate leper and not consider unclean or common what God has created or made clean (Acts 10:15). With his touch and words, Jesus mediates the purity of the leper. It is a call to a love that issues from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith (1 Tim 1:5; 1 Peter 1:22). It is a call to an evangelical doctrine of purity that looks to the heart for what is clean rather than to the external (Mark 7:21-23). It is a moral challenge that arrogates impurity to the heart or conscience that decides to ignore the plea of a desperate leper for help for fear of being infected or rendered impure by the leper. The encounter between Jesus and the leper marks the struggle between the law (of what is clean and unclean) and the gospel of love. It promotes a Christ-centred interpretation of the law that is liberating rather than a dehumanizing legalism that brings anxiety and suffering to people. The healed leper, once ostracized by his community, represents the members of the Markan community who already know what it means to be excluded as outcasts from the synagogue for standing on the side of Jesus against their religious institutions.

Sometimes public health concerns require stricter and even anti-social measures to prevent the spreading of infectious diseases. However, in the implementation of these measures, it is always necessary to approach them with kindness to avoid conceding to »a view of the world that envisions healthcare in terms of medical apartheid« (Jackson 6; Washington 146-56). Though physical distancing is demanded in relation to COVID-19 patients, they still deserve care and attention from society; they are not to be discarded but attended to. Hence an encouragement to the health workers, caregivers, and pastoral agents to invoke the courage, passion, and compassion of Christ and make themselves available to attend to those sick of COVID-19. It is equally an invitation to policy decision-makers to always stonewall human dignity in every health policy decision they make. Those who implement health policies must seek to provide »health care that is service oriented« (Harmer 113) rather than mere adherence to idealistic rules put together by groups far removed from the reality on the frontline.

Like the leper, patients of COVID-19 should not give up because of the stigmatization they may suffer or the pains and trauma of the disease. They should put their hope in Christ by praying unceasingly and grabbing every opportunity the illness presents as an opportunity to experience the best side of humanity and the compassionate touch, words, and willingness of Christ to heal them. Let them take advantage of the provided therapeutic channels and see them as avenues made available by Christ to experience his miraculous healing touch.

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ISUS I GUBAVAC U EVANĐELJU PO MARKU 1, 40–45: BIBLIJSKI TEOLOŠKI INDEKS ZA UPRAVLJANJE PANDEMIJOM BOLESTI COVID-19

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Sažetak: *Isusov odgovor na zahtjev gubavca u Evanđelju po Marku 1, 40–45 ublažava surovu stvarnost propisanih protokola za upravljanje gubom. Unatoč fizičkoj udaljenosti koja se održavala u to vrijeme, Isus preuzima rizik i dotiče gubavca. Vraća mu narušeno dostojanstvo, liječi ga i iskazuje solidarnost. Pandemija bolesti COVID-19 stigmatizirala je ljudsku osobu kao oružje infekcije. Situacija je dovela u pitanje prirodu čovjeka kao društvenoga bića i omela međuljudske odnose. Koristeći se sinkronijskim pristupom povijesno-kritičke metode za proučavanje toga Markova teksta, ovaj rad uspoređuje izazove gubavca u Isusovoj službi s prijetnjama koje donosi bolest COVID-19. Zaključuje se da obje situacije stvaraju stereotipe ljudske osobe i utječu na međuljudske odnose. Predlažu se Isusov stav suosjećajnosti i osjećaj solidarnosti kao pokazatelji za upravljanje koronakrizom.*

Ključne riječi: *biblijska teologija, suosjećanje, koronavirus, Evanđelje po Marku, evanđelje ljubavi, ljudska osoba, guba, zdravstvena skrb, solidarnost.*

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