

## The Social Condition of Lepers in the Gospels

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It has become a common interpretive assumption that the people with leprosy whom Jesus encounters in the gospels would have been shunned by Second Temple Jewish society, which makes Jesus's interactions with them all the more remarkable. In this article, I examine the underpinnings of this assumption by attending carefully to what is said about leprosy in the Hebrew Bible as well as in Second Temple and rabbinic sources. I argue that the evidence for the exclusion of the leprous from first-century Jewish society is much less certain than is generally realized. Without this assumption, the gospel texts themselves do not convey the message that lepers were excluded. Indeed, there is evidence in the gospels that lepers had relatively unhindered social access. Interpretations that see the overcoming of social stigma in Jesus's healings of leprosy stem not so much from consideration of the textual evidence as from a latent tendency to construe Judaism negatively in order to make Jesus appear in a more positive light.

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It is widely held that a man in possession of leprosy in the gospels must be in want of community. When interpreting Jesus's healing of lepers (Matt 8:2–4, Mark 1:40–45, Luke 5:12–15, 17:12–18), commentators and rigorous historical-critical scholars have either argued or assumed that ostracism of lepers and taboos against contact with them constitute the background for interpreting these pericopae.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ezra P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark*, ICC (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1896), 30–32; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, ICC (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1900), 149, 403; Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, trans. Bertram Lee Woolf (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971), 74; Alan Hugh McNeile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 102; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I–IX: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 572–74; Gerd Theissen *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, trans. Francis McDonagh, SNTW (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 146; Joachim Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, 2 vols., HThKNT (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1986), 1:296; W. D. Davies and Dale C.

Although a few scholars have challenged these assumptions, a tacit consensus has developed that Jesus's interactions with the leprous occurred within a purity system that socially isolated lepers.<sup>2</sup> This consensus about the social condition of lepers in Second Temple society has gained traction outside the guild of biblical studies and has found its way into related academic fields and into the life of the church.<sup>3</sup> I challenge this consensus and argue that neither the gospel texts nor the available background information on Second Temple Judaism demands that we read the leprous characters of the gospels as outcasts.<sup>4</sup>

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Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, 3 vols., ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1991), 2:11–12; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, 2 vols., BECNT 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 1:464–65; Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 206–9; François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 174–76; Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 2 vols., rev. and exp. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1:373; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 305; John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 127. Ulrich Luz provides the rare interpretation of the story without any mention of exclusion (*Matthew: A Commentary*, 3 vols., Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001–2007], 2:5–7). Adela Yarbro Collins does not explicitly state that the leper in Mark 1:40–45 was an outcast, but she strongly implies it by noting that the pronouncement of purification enabled his reintegration into society and by citing injunctions on the quarantine of lepers in the Dead Sea Scrolls as background for the pericope (*Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], 178–80). John P. Meier questions the taboo against touching lepers but accepts that lepers were ostracized from social and religious life (*Law and Love*, vol. 4 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, AYBRL [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009], 411–13).

<sup>2</sup>For the rare scholar who has questioned the exclusion of the leprous from Second Temple society, see John J. Pilch, “Understanding Biblical Healing: Selecting the Appropriate Model,” *BTB* 18 (1988): 60–66. Yet more recent work by Pilch assumes exclusion of the leprous and those who touch them from Second Temple society; see his “Improving Bible Translations: The Example of Sickness and Healing,” *BTB* 30 (2000): 129–34, here 131.

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., Mary Ann McColl and Richard S. Ascough, “Jesus and People with Disabilities: Old Stories, New Approaches,” *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 63 (2009): 1–11, here 3; Bruce T. Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 84; Steven J. Sainsbury, “AIDS: The Twentieth-Century Leprosy,” *Dialogue* 25 (1992): 68–77; Chris U. Manus and Bolaji O. Bateye, “The Plight of HIV and AIDS Persons in West Africa: A Contextual Re-reading of Mk 1:40–45 and Parallels,” *AsJT* 20 (2006): 155–69; Bobby Ross, “Modern-Day Lepers: Churches Try to Balance Grace and Accountability Toward Sex Offenders,” *Christianity Today* 53, no. 12 (2009): 16–17, here 16; Maggi Dawn, “The Untouchables,” *The Christian Century* 124, no. 20 (2007): 18.

<sup>4</sup>In modern usage, the term *leprosy* refers to chronic infection with the mycobacterium *M. leprae*, which affects the skin and peripheral nerves, a condition also known as Hansen's disease. “Leprosy” also translates the Hebrew term *טַרְסָרָא* (which entered Greek as *λέπρα*), which refers to a skin ailment that does not neatly correspond to Hansen's disease or to any other single dermatologic condition. In this article, I use the term *leprosy* and its cognates to refer to the condition that the ancient authors called *טַרְסָרָא* or *λέπρα* without any presuppositions concerning how the condition would be classified among modern disease(s). See John J. Pilch, “Leprosy,” *NIDB* 3:635–37.

Questioning the degree of isolation of lepers fits into the current debates about the social significance of impurity in Second Temple Judaism. Students of early Judaism debate whether purity was salient for Jews only when they approached the temple (and so irrelevant for most of the people most of the time) or if there existed a drive to maintain purity in daily life away from the temple.<sup>5</sup> Even positing a widespread and thoroughgoing concern with purity in Jewish daily life does not thereby establish the social condition of bearers of impurity. A spectrum of Jewish attitudes toward interacting with bearers of impurity would have been compatible with a serious concern for purity in day-to-day life. On one end of the spectrum would be complete avoidance of the impurity bearer, and on the other end would be completely unhindered interactions followed by purification if these interactions transmitted impurity. Being impure does not per se imply being a pariah.

The relevant question for this investigation of leprosy is not whether lepers were considered unclean but rather whether their uncleanness brought them social isolation. With reference to Jesus's interactions with lepers, the leading issues are twofold: In the Second Temple period, were lepers shunned in ways that involved exclusion from normal social intercourse? And was there a specific taboo against touching lepers, the act that figures so prominently in Jesus's healing of the single leper (Matt 8:2-4 // Mark 1:40-45 // Luke 5:12-15)? I argue that exegetes need not, and indeed should not, read the stories of Jesus's healings of lepers in light of a general social exclusion of the leprous or a specific taboo against touching them. To demonstrate this larger thesis, I elaborate three subsidiary arguments:

1. Jewish sources outside the New Testament present inconsistent evidence for the exclusion of lepers and taboos against touching them. This evidence does not justify reading such exclusion or taboo into the stories of Jesus's encounters with the leprous.
2. The gospel texts themselves do not provide evidence that lepers suffered from such exclusion or taboos but in some cases offer counterevidence for such treatment of lepers.
3. Reading such exclusion into the gospel stories creates a number of problems, not the least of which is insidious anti-Judaism.

## I. THE MOSAIC LEGISLATION AND ITS APPLICATION

When citing evidence for the stigma attached to people with leprosy in Jesus's time, interpreters most commonly point to the laws in Lev 13-14. John Pilch's explanation is typical:

<sup>5</sup>John C. Poirier, "Purity beyond the Temple in the Second Temple Era," *JBL* 122 (2003): 247-65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3268445>.

When Jesus or anyone touched a so-called “leper” in the Biblical stories, no “mark” transferred from the afflicted person to Jesus. Pollution, however, did transfer. Jesus was viewed as now being unclean as these petitioners were unclean. The consequence of such pollution was obligatory separation from the holy community (Lev 13:45–46).<sup>6</sup>

Leviticus serves as evidence for (1) the exclusion of people with leprosy from Jewish society and (2) the taboo against touching such people since they communicated uncleanness by contact. A close reading of Lev 13–14, however, fails to confirm these two supposed facts of Second Temple Jewish life.

The two chapters in Leviticus devoted to leprosy say little about the social condition of the person with leprosy. Leviticus extensively attends to the procedure for identifying leprosy and its resolution in people (13:1–44), the ritual for cleansing a formerly leprous person (14:1–21), and the identification and management of leprosy in cloth (13:47–59) and buildings (14:22–54). Although the stipulations about how the Israelites treated leprous houses and cloths may have some implications about how they treated leprous people, it is not immediately clear how the handling of these inanimate objects corresponded to behavior toward people. Only two verses speak directly to the lepers’ social condition:

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (Lev 13:45–46 NRSV)

This treatment of lepers is corroborated in Num 5:2: “Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who is leprous, or has a discharge, and everyone who is unclean through contact with a corpse.”

Both Numbers and Exodus stipulate that lepers should be excluded from *the camp* (הַמַּחֲנֶה). The statute presumes the exodus setting, when Israel lived in a camp but says nothing explicitly about what to do with lepers once the Israelites established permanent settlements. The stipulation that the leper “shall live alone” could be interpreted to apply even after the exodus, but how this should be carried out is not specified. Second Temple Jews had several plausible options for interpreting these statutes. A strict reading could take the statutes to have applied only when the Israelites lived in the camp. A more expansive reading might see in the analogy between the tabernacle and the temple a correspondence between the camp and Jerusalem, so that lepers should be excluded from Jerusalem. An even more expansive reading could see any Jewish settlement as the successor to the camp, so that every Jewish city, village, and town would exclude the leprous. The latter option would raise more interpretive questions: How many dwellings constituted a settlement that must exclude the leprous? What determined the boundary of such settlements? How far outside the boundary were the leprous to live? Moreover, were the

<sup>6</sup>Pilch, “Improving Bible Translations,” 131.

restrictions only on where lepers could reside, or were lepers excluded from even entering these restricted zones? The text of Leviticus and Numbers cannot answer these questions, which concern the interpretation of the Torah in Jesus's day.

The statutes also remain silent about how and whether lepers transmit impurity to others. Although the sections of Leviticus on leprous cloths and buildings indicate transmissibility, the text never explicitly states whether and how leprous human beings transmit impurity either to other human beings or to inanimate objects. Statements such as "contact with lepers had to be avoided and lepers had to warn others not to come close to them (Lv 13:45)," imply that Leviticus lays out how the leprous are to interact with other people.<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 13:45, however, simply instructs the leper how to dress (in torn clothes), how to wear his hair (disheveled), and how to behave (to cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!"). The text does not mention anyone whom the leper warns to stay away. Lepers behave like mourners: they wear torn clothing, they have disheveled hair (Gen 37:29, 37:34, Lev 10:6, 21:10, Judg 11:35, 2 Sam 1:11, 1 Kgs 21:27, 2 Kgs 2:12, Job 1:20, Esth 4:1), and they cover the upper lip (Ezek 24:17, 24:22). In this posture of mourning, the cry of "Unclean! Unclean!" directed at no one in particular could just as easily be a lament as it could be a warning to some passerby.<sup>8</sup>

Levitical legislation clearly lays out the ways that humans could contract uncleanness through contact: from animal carcasses (11:27–28, 39–40), from men with an abnormal discharge (15:5–11), from semen (15:18), from menstruating women (15:21–24), and from women with an abnormal discharge (15:25). In all cases the text describes the contact that transmits impurity and how the person who contracts impurity becomes clean again. By contrast, the text is silent with respect to how lepers transmit impurity to other people and has no instructions for how to remove the impurity once contracted. Since priests closely examined people to identify the presence and resolution of leprosy, they logically should have been greatly interested in the process by which they could return to a state of purity if they accidentally touched a leper during their examinations. If Jews dreaded the touch of lepers as much as New Testament exegetes often claim, Leviticus's lack of instructions for managing this impurity is surprising.<sup>9</sup>

These two verses from Leviticus, along with Num 5:2, show those with leprosy adopting behaviors associated with mourning and exclusion from the camp. The

<sup>7</sup> Francois P. Viljoen, "Jesus Healing the Leper and the Purity Law in the Gospel of Matthew," *IDS* 48, no. 2 (2014): art. 1751, pp. 1–7, here 3, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v48i2.1751>.

<sup>8</sup> Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and Its Place in Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 125. Other interpreters recognize the similarities to mourning yet nevertheless posit that the behaviors constitute a warning. See Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus ויקרא : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPSTC (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 82; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 803–4.

<sup>9</sup> Meier, *Law and Love*, 411–12.

text remains silent about the interactions they are to have with other people: how they are to acquire food and clothing, how they are to migrate with the rest of the Israelites when it is time to move the camp, what happens to their children or other dependents. Nor are there instructions for how the nonleprous are to treat them, with the exception of the instructions to priests on examining them and performing their purification rites. Into these silences, interpreters have inserted unsubstantiated claims that Leviticus and Numbers describe the leprous as cut off from their fellow Israelites and socially equivalent to the dead.<sup>10</sup>

In his delineation of the purity system, Jacob Milgrom **attempts** to fill these lacunae in the purity codes. Milgrom explicates the underlying logic of the modes of transmission, the quarantines, and the purification rituals that the Priestly legislation promulgates for the various types of impurity.<sup>11</sup> Based on the extensiveness of the purification rituals assigned to lepers, Milgrom detects a hierarchy of impurities; leprosy, having the most extensive purification ritual, sits atop the hierarchy. The hierarchy of impurities correlates with how these impurities are communicated. Impurities that are lower on the hierarchy are transmitted by touch and by being in an enclosed space. It stands to reason that leprosy, as the highest impurity, would be transmitted in the same ways. Impurity becomes a problem when it contacts the holy (sacred offerings, priests, the sanctuary) because such contact is dangerous to the community. The law thus assigns levels of quarantine or isolation to bearers of impurity based on how their impurity is transmitted to prevent inadvertent contamination of someone or something else that then contacts the holy. The common denominator that Milgrom identifies behind the impurities is death (or at least the absence of life). In his analysis, the purity system reflects an impulse to keep the holy separate from the manifestations of death.<sup>12</sup>

Milgrom's system does not entail the categorical isolation of those with leprosy that other interpreters so often envision. According to Milgrom, only contact between the impure and the holy is dangerous; contact between the impure and the common is a problem only if the resulting contamination is not recognized and the appropriate purification rites are not performed.<sup>13</sup> Israelites could freely interact with leprous people as long as they purified themselves afterwards before contacting a holy thing or person. Although the necessity of subsequent purification makes close contact with lepers inconvenient, the system Milgrom posits does not imply

<sup>10</sup>Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, 296; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 208; Bovon, *Luke 1*, 175; Johnson M. Himuhu, *Leviticus: The Priestly Laws and Prohibitions from the Perspective of Ancient Near East and Africa*, StBibLit 115 (New York: Lang, 2008), 343–44; Felix Chingota, "Leviticus," in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tohunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 150; Samuel E. Ballentine, *Leviticus*, IBD (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 108.

<sup>11</sup>Milgrom's system is set out in detail in his *Leviticus 1–16*, 986–1000, and in a more abbreviated form in his later *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 141–50.

<sup>12</sup>Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1000–1004.

<sup>13</sup>Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book*, 144.

that such contact was forbidden or that the leprous were therefore cut off from all social intercourse.<sup>14</sup>

This system proposed by Milgrom fills the gaps that Leviticus and Numbers leave about regulating contact with leprous people.<sup>15</sup> Milgrom's work presumes that regulations about purity and impurity spring from an intelligible underlying way of thinking. His critical assumption is that an internally consistent system generated the Levitical regulations, an assumption that may or may not be true.<sup>16</sup> Without presupposing this consistency, one cannot use such a system to discover the unstated regulations about those with leprosy.

To discern the degree of social isolation that the leprous experienced in Jesus's day, one must examine evidence closer in time to the setting of the gospels. Like the Pentateuch, however, these later sources do not present a comprehensive picture concerning lepers' exclusion.

Josephus discusses the social situation of lepers in the first century, but his is but one voice in the often fractious ancient debates about what conformed to Jewish law.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Josephus had an obvious concern to cast the Jews, their traditions, and their heroes in a positive light and to counter gentile calumnies about Jews, even if that meant stretching the evidence.<sup>18</sup> This latter caution is salient because much of Josephus's discussion of leprosy comes in the context of refuting pagan historians who claimed that Moses himself had leprosy and that the Israelites originated as lepers and other outcasts from Egyptian society.<sup>19</sup>

When retelling the promulgation of the Mosaic laws in *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus says that Moses "expelled from the city those whose bodies were attacked by leprosy" (*Ant.* 3.261) and adds, "He banished the leprous completely from the city—associating with no one and in no way differing from a corpse" (*Ant.* 3.264).<sup>20</sup> Like Leviticus, Josephus sets the banishment in the context of the exodus, but instead of describing banishment from the camp, Josephus describes banishment from "the city," suggesting that he views Jerusalem as the successor of the camp.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 125.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Klawans, "Ritual Purity, Moral Purity, and Sacrifice in Jacob Milgrom's *Leviticus*," *RelSRev* 29.1 (2003): 20.

<sup>16</sup> For the challenge to Milgrom's and others' recent attempts to systematize the purity constructions of the Hebrew Bible, see T. M. Lemos, "Where There Is Dirt, Is There System? Revisiting Biblical Purity Constructions," *JOT* 37 (2013): 265–94, here 280–81.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel R. Schwartz, *Reading the First Century: On Reading Josephus and Studying Jewish History of the First Century*, WUNT 300 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 167–68; Jonathan Klawans, *Josephus and the Theologies of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 137–79.

<sup>18</sup> Louis H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible*, JSJSup 58 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 546–51, 557–60.

<sup>19</sup> See Josephus, *Ant.* 3.265; *Ag. Ap.* 1.227–251; 1.288–303; 1.304–320; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.3.1.

<sup>20</sup> Translation from Louis H. Feldman, *Flavius Josephus: Judean Antiquities 1–4; Translation and Commentary*, FJTC 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 308.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* For an argument that Josephus here intends all the cities of Israel, see Hannan



Corroborating this reading are Josephus's comments in *Jewish War* that lepers cannot live in Jerusalem or participate in the Passover sacrifice (*J.W.* 5.227, 6.426). Further confirmation comes from *Against Apion*, where Josephus tells of Moses promulgating the purification ritual for the person who recovered from leprosy as a precondition for such a person to "enter the holy city" (*Ag. Ap.* 1.282).<sup>22</sup>

In *Against Apion*, Josephus states that Moses prescribed a high degree of social isolation for the leprous. Having just summarized the gentile historian Manetho's assertion that Moses suffered from leprosy, Josephus writes:

And it is clear from his [Moses's] own statements that he did not suffer any physical misfortune of this sort, for he prohibited the leprous from staying in a city or living in a village requiring that they travel about alone with their clothes torn; and he regards as unclean anyone who touches them or lives under the same roof. (*Ag. Ap.* 1.281)<sup>23</sup>

Josephus has expanded the strictures on social contact with the leprous from what he reports in *Jewish Antiquities* (and from what is in the Pentateuch) to emphasize the incongruity between Moses's supposed leprosy and the harsh laws about leprosy that he promulgated. Of any source examined so far, this passage from *Against Apion* corresponds most closely to the extensive ostracism of the leprous that so many interpreters take to be the background of the gospel stories. Several factors, however, militate against taking Josephus's description at face value: (1) the polemical agenda to maximize the inconsistency between Moses's legislation and his personal affliction with leprosy; (2) the more limited exclusion from "the city" described in *Jewish Antiquities*; (3) the description in *Against Apion* of the purification ritual as enabling the formerly leprous person to enter the holy city without reference to its necessity for reentering villages or otherwise reintegrating with society; and (4) the setting of this prohibition in the context of the exodus without an explicit claim that such prohibitions carried force in Josephus's day.<sup>24</sup> Josephus certainly points toward some level of marginalization of lepers in Second Temple society, but the extent of this marginalization remains uncertain.

The Dead Sea Scrolls also give little reliable evidence concerning the degree of exclusion of the leprous from Second Temple society. The Temple Scroll forbids those with leprosy from entering Jerusalem (11Q19 XLV, 17–18) and also stipulates that there should be a location to the east of Jerusalem where those with leprosy

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Birenboim, "Expelling the Unclean from the Cities of Israel and the Uncleaness of Lepers and Men with a Discharge according to 4Q274 1 i," *DSD* 19 (2012), 28–54, here 37.

<sup>22</sup>Translation from John M. G. Barclay, *Flavius Josephus: Against Apion; Translation and Commentary*, FJTC 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 151.

<sup>23</sup>Translation from *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>Thomas Kazen argues that Josephus must be referring to contemporary practice since his description of the restrictions on leprosy differ from those of Moses (*Jesus and Purity Halakhah: Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity?*, rev. ed., ConBNT 38 [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010], 113).



should be placed (XLVI, 17–18). The scroll goes on to instruct the readers to make places “in every city [בְּכֹל עִיר]” (XLVIII, 14) for those with leprosy so that the leprous “do not enter your cities and defile them [לֹא יָבוֹאוּ לְעָרֵיכֶם וּטְמְאוּם]” (XLVIII, 15).<sup>25</sup> It is not clear whether the author envisions the leprous to be confined in one area of the city or in an area just outside the city. In another document, the author mandates that lepers should reside twelve cubits (about sixteen feet) from any other house and should maintain this distance when speaking with the nonleprous (4Q274 1 I, 1–2).<sup>26</sup> Here the leprous are separated from others, but the stipulated distance is not great and the author clearly envisions leprous people talking to the nonleprous.<sup>27</sup> Like Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls indicate exclusion of the leprous from Jerusalem and some degree of exclusion from other cities, but the extent to which the Dead Sea Scrolls represent actual Second Temple practice is debatable. Although the scrolls witness a tendency to marginalize lepers, they simultaneously envision social intercourse between the leprous and nonleprous.

Looking for evidence of social exclusion in other Second Temple sources adds little to the picture from Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Pseudo-Philo briefly mentions the sacrifices required for the cleansing of lepers but does not comment on lepers’ social status (LAB 13:3). The mention of the law for cleansing lepers is the only gloss by Pseudo-Philo on the purity regulations of Leviticus; thus, leprosy serves as a paradigmatic impurity in the work. Philo himself mentions leprosy in a number of places, but he tends to use the condition as a symbol for impurity and vice rather than comment on how other people treated actual lepers.<sup>28</sup>

Another instance of leprosy’s status as paradigmatic impurity and its suitability for metaphors about sin comes in the Syriac version of the apocryphal Ps 155: “The sins of my childhood remove from me; / and my insolence do not remember against me. / O Lord, cleanse me from the evil leprosy / and do not let it again return to me” (5 Apoc. Syr. Ps. 3:12–13 [trans. Charlesworth and Sanders, *OTP* 2:624]).

<sup>25</sup>The scroll here also stipulates that those with a discharge, menstruating women, and parturients should be thus segregated even though the latter two are not excluded from the camp in the Torah. Hannan Birenboim argues that those with leprosy are excluded from the city while menstruants and parturients are quarantined within it, but the text does not differentiate (“‘The Place Which the Lord Shall Choose,’ the ‘Temple City,’ and the ‘Camp’ in ‘11QT<sup>A</sup>,’” *RevQ* 23 [2008]: 357–69, here 368).

<sup>26</sup>The text is actually somewhat vague and other possible explanations for the referent exist, but the most plausible reading is that it refers to a person with leprosy. See Birenboim, “Expelling the Unclean,” 40.

<sup>27</sup>Thomas Kazen argues that these stipulations refer to the leprous person in the process of purification rather than leprous people in general based on the assumption that 4Q274 and the Temple Scroll reflect a coherent purity system across the Dead Sea Scrolls (“4Q274 Fragment 1 Revisited—or Who Touched Whom? Further Evidence for Graded Impurity and Graded Purifications,” *DSD* 17 [2010]: 68), much as Milgrom assumes for Leviticus.

<sup>28</sup>See Philo, *Alleg. Interp.* 1.49; *Worse* 16; *Posterity* 47; *Unchangeable* 123–131; *Planting* 111; *Sobriety* 49; *Dreams* 1.202; *QG* 2.29.

Here the curing of leprosy symbolizes the extirpation of sinfulness. The Hebrew version of this psalm contained in the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, has the speaker asking God to cure him of the evil “plague” (נגע), and not “leprosy” (צרעת, 11Q5 XXIV, 12). Apparently, the metaphor worked with either leprosy or a less-specific affliction. Philo and Syriac Psalm 155 attest to the power of leprosy as a symbol of impurity and sin but do not provide information about the social condition of the leprous.

The Pentateuch and the Second Temple literature refer to the exclusion of lepers, but they also imply some level of participation in Jewish society. A similar pattern emerges in the early rabbinic regulations for those with leprosy. The Mishnah explicitly lays out a graded system of impurity, much like the one Milgrom posits for Leviticus (m. Kelim 1:1–5). Lepers contaminate others by touch or by being in enclosed spaces together (m. Kelim 1:1, m. Neg. 13:7). However, the Mishnah does not stipulate that lepers be totally excluded from society. They are to be sent out from walled cities, which implies that they could remain in smaller settlements (m. Kelim 1:7). The Mishnah gives special instructions on how lepers might attend the synagogue—a small partition separates the leprous person from the rest of the congregation (m. Neg. 13:12). The Tosefta likewise makes allowance for the leprous person to attend synagogue (t. Neg. 7:11) and also to have sexual intercourse (t. Neg. 8:6).<sup>29</sup> The interpreter of the Tannaitic regulations on leprosy must question how much rabbinic pronouncements reflect practice, rather than the rabbis’ fantasies of their own authority.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of whether these practices existed outside the rabbinic imagination, the system thus envisioned does allow some participation of the leprous in society.<sup>31</sup>

In summary, the available evidence provides an inconsistent picture of the degree of the leper’s social stigma in Jesus’s time. The actual evidence from the Second Temple era is fragmentary, consisting primarily of scattered references in Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Rabbinic literature gives a more detailed description of how leprosy fits into a system of purity and impurity, but the rabbis do not emphasize the exclusion of the leprous. Much like Leviticus itself, the rabbinic literature focuses mostly on how to diagnose leprosy rather than on how to exclude the afflicted from society. In any case, due to its later dating, rabbinic literature cannot reliably illustrate early first-century Jewish practice. Although the sources describe some level of ostracism for the leprous in some places, the weight

<sup>29</sup>Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew* (New York: Ktav, 1977), 166.

<sup>30</sup>Mira Balberg, “Rabbinic Authority, Medical Rhetoric, and Body Hermeneutics in Mishnah Nega’im,” *AJSR* 35 (2011): 323–46, here 336–37.

<sup>31</sup>Kazen argues that these rabbinic stipulations allowing some participation for the leprous represent a relaxing of restrictions that postdates the first century (*Jesus and Purity*, 111–12). These scruples about using Tannaitic data to investigate Second Temple practice do not prevent Kazen from using the Mishnah to provide evidence for the transmissibility of the leper’s impurity in Jesus’s time (*Jesus and Purity*, 112–13).

of the sources does not warrant the assumption that Second Temple Jews made a consistent effort to avoid social and physical contact with lepers.

## II. STORIES OF THE LEPROUS

If Jewish ostracism of the leprous underlies the gospel narratives, one would expect such ostracism to figure prominently in narratives about lepers in the Hebrew Bible as well. Yet social isolation figures only sporadically in these stories, further evidence that the segregation of leprous people varied over time and location.

Moses is the first character mentioned in the Hebrew Bible to experience leprosy. At the burning bush, when Moses asks God for signs to prove to the Israelites that God has sent him, God turns Moses's hand white with leprosy and then removes the leprosy (Exod 4:6–7). Moses never subsequently uses this sign. This brief mention of Moses's leprous hand may have been the source of (or a response to) the claim by historians such as Manetho that Moses himself had leprosy.<sup>32</sup> Whatever the provenance of this story of Moses's leprosy, the text makes no mention of any exclusion or isolation of Moses. The story demonstrates God's power to inflict and remove leprosy.<sup>33</sup>

Moses's sister Miriam is the next biblical character to experience leprosy (Num 12:1–16). She and Aaron grumble against Moses, and, as punishment, God afflicts her with leprosy. Aaron, horrified, asks Moses to pray for Miriam's healing. God responds, "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again" (Num 12:14 NRSV). Here the leprosy serves as divine punishment much as it served as evidence for divine action in Exod 4:6–7.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike Moses's brief affliction, however, Miriam's leprosy does involve exclusion—she must stay out of the camp for seven days. Yet the text relates this exclusion not to uncleanness but to shame. Miriam should be ashamed of her behavior and so should bear her shame for seven days outside the camp. Nor does Miriam's exclusion conform to the pattern laid down in Leviticus. Numbers never states that Miriam's leprosy resolved; the text reports only that Moses prayed for its resolution.

<sup>32</sup>Thomas Römer, "Tracking Some 'Censored' Moses Traditions Inside and Outside the Hebrew Bible," *HBAI* 1 (2012): 64–76, here 69. The LXX, Targum Onkelos, Philo (*Moses* 1.79), and Josephus (*Ant.* 2.273) omit any reference to leprosy in the story. For the argument that such an omission is a response to the charges of Manetho and his ilk, see C. Houtman, "A Note on the LXX Version of Exodus 4,6," *ZAW* 97 (1985): 253–54.

<sup>33</sup>William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 209.

<sup>34</sup>Dirk Schinkel, "Mirjam als Aussätzige? Zwei Bemerkungen zu Num 12," *ZAW* 115 (2003): 94–101.

If one assumes that Moses's prayer was immediately effective, then according to Leviticus Miriam could have entered the camp immediately after sacrificing a bird, bathing, and shaving her head. In the camp she would have had to live outside her tent for seven days until she completed the last part of the cleansing ritual (Lev 14:1–9). Instead, Miriam lives outside the camp for seven days and performs no purification rituals. Although the story of Miriam does connect leprosy with exclusion, it does so not on the basis of the Levitical rules but on the basis of shame.<sup>35</sup> Thus, while Miriam's story provides evidence for leprosy leading to exclusion, its divergence from the Levitical stipulations shows the inconstancy of this exclusion throughout the biblical tradition.

Even more famous than Miriam's case of leprosy is that of Naaman (2 Kgs 5:1–8). There is no indication that Naaman suffers exclusion due to his leprosy. Naaman's leprosy does not prevent him from becoming an accomplished warrior, taking a wife, or accessing the royal courts of Aram and Israel. Commentators noting Naaman's social access have suggested that his disease must have differed from the "true" leprosy that entailed social isolation.<sup>36</sup> The text, however, provides no basis for differentiating Naaman's leprosy from that depicted in Leviticus. Rather than provide evidence for a different type of leprosy, the story of Naaman offers evidence for a nonuniform level of social stigma attaching to leprosy.

Prior to his cleansing, Naaman seemingly has access to whomever he chooses, except for Elisha himself who communicates via his servant (2 Kgs 5:10). Although Elisha meets Naaman face to face after his cleansing (5:15–19), the text does not mention that Elisha eschewed the first meeting to avoid contact with the leprous Naaman. Indeed, the prophet readily exposes his servant to contact with Naaman (5:10). Elisha's servant Gehazi attempts some double-dealing with Naaman after the latter's cure, for which the prophet inflicts leprosy on Gehazi and his descendants forever (5:20–27). Despite this curse, the next time Gehazi appears, he speaks with the king of Israel and enjoys the same ready access to court that Naaman did (2 Kgs 8:4–5).<sup>37</sup> In the story of Naaman, leprosy, through both its remedy and its infliction, manifests Elisha's connection to God. The story contains no evidence of social exclusion attached to the affliction.

The story of Naaman has special relevance for investigating the background of the gospel narratives on leprosy because Luke explicitly mentions it. In Jesus's encounter in the Nazareth synagogue, the story of Naaman becomes part of Jesus's polemic against his fellow Nazarenes that a prophet is not accepted in his hometown (Luke 4:23–29). Incidentally, Jesus's mention that there were "many lepers in

<sup>35</sup>Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers במדבר: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPSTC (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 98.

<sup>36</sup>Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation*, AB 11 (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 63; John Gray, *I and II Kings: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 504.

<sup>37</sup>Nachman Levine, "Twice as Much of Your Spirit: Pattern, Parallel, and Paronomasia in the Miracles of Elijah and Elisha," *JSOT* 24 (1999): 25–46, here 31.

Israel” (4:27) in Elisha’s time suggests his assumption that there was a place for lepers in society. Jesus brings up the healing of Naaman as an illustration of a prophet’s work with gentiles rather than with Jews. For Luke’s purposes, the example develops the theme of gentile inclusion in Jesus’s work.<sup>38</sup> It also illustrates that an evangelist can use a Hebrew Bible story about a leprous person without any reference to social isolation or stigma.

Shortly after the story of Naaman, the Deuteronomistic Historian recounts the siege of Samaria by King Ben-hadad of Aram, an episode in which four lepers play a significant role. Unbeknownst to the people of Samaria, God terrifies the besieging army, causing them to flee in the night. The next morning four lepers sitting outside the gates of the city decide to go that day to surrender to the Arameans. Approaching the camp, they find it deserted and announce to the inhabitants of Samaria that the siege has been lifted (2 Kgs 7:3–10).

In this story, the exclusion of the leprous from the city of Samaria plays a key role. It is because the lepers spend the siege outside the city walls that they are the first to explore the deserted Aramean camp. The text implies, however, that the lepers had access to the city as well. As they formulate their plan to surrender to the Arameans, they say to one another, “Why should we sit here until we die? If we say, ‘Let us enter the city,’ the famine is in the city and we shall die there, but if we sit here, we shall also die” (2 Kgs 7:3–4 NRSV). These leprous men believe that they could gain admittance to the city, but that it would be fruitless to do so since they would starve there.<sup>39</sup> The biblical text presents exclusion from the city as the condition of leprous people, which implies social isolation, but it simultaneously implies that, at least under emergency conditions, the leprous men could enter the city.<sup>40</sup>

The last major character in the Hebrew Bible with leprosy is King Azariah of Judah, also called Uzziah. Second Kings gives only the briefest account of his leprosy and its consequences: “The LORD struck the king, so that he was leprous to the day of his death, and lived in a separate house [בבית החפשיית]. Jotham the king’s son was in charge of the palace, governing the people of the land” (2 Kgs 15:5). The NRSV translates the description of Azariah’s dwelling place as “in a separate house,” but the meaning of the phrase בית החפשיית is far from clear. The word חפשיית occurs only in this verse and in its parallel in 2 Chr 26:21 also describing the leprous king’s dwelling. Its meaning apparently remained obscure to the translators of the LXX, who simply transliterated the word in both verses that tell how the king dwelt ἐν οὐκῶ ἀφφουσωθ.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 156; John C. Poirier, “Jesus as an Elijianic Figure in Luke 4:16–30,” *CBQ* 71 (2009): 349–63, here 361–62.

<sup>39</sup> Gray, *I and II Kings*, 524; Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 124.

<sup>40</sup> The LXX and targumic versions of this story similarly present entry into the city as an option for the leprous men. In his retelling, Josephus explicitly states that there was a law that barred the leprous men from Samaria and that the leprous men spoke about the futility of entering the city even if they were hypothetically admitted (*Ant.* 9.74–75).

<sup>41</sup> For debate about the meaning of the phrase, see Gray, *I and II Kings*, 620; Cogan and

Whatever the nature of this *בית החפשיית*, it seems to be separate from the palace so that Jotham must rule as prince regent in Azariah's place. It is not clear from the text of 2 Kings whether Azariah resides inside or outside Jerusalem. The parallel verse in 2 Chronicles states, "King Uzziah was leprous to the day of his death, and being leprous lived in a separate house [בבית החפשיית], for he was excluded from the house of the LORD. His son Jotham was in charge of the palace of the king, governing the people of the land" (2 Chr 26:21). The Chronicler likewise fails to mention whether Uzziah lived outside Jerusalem, but the note that he was excluded from the house of the LORD seems overspecific if the king was indeed excluded from the whole of the city as well. The LXX of both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles similarly fails to say whether Uzziah dwelled in the city or outside of it. However, in their retellings, both Targum Jonathan (2 Kgs 15:5, 2 Chr 26:21) and Josephus (*Ant.* 9.226–227) have Uzziah banished from Jerusalem.

While the Chronicler does not further specify the degree of Uzziah's exclusion, he does provide much more information about the cause of the leprosy. Uzziah attempted to usurp the priestly prerogative by offering sacrifice in the temple. For this sacrilege God smote the king with leprosy (2 Chr 26:16–20). **Leprosy serves as divine punishment for Uzziah in 2 Chronicles just as it did for Miriam in Numbers and Gehazi in 2 Kings.** Throughout these stories from the Hebrew Bible, leprosy recurs as a divine punishment, and its relief as a divine blessing offered by God or God's agents Moses and Elisha. These stories show that leprosy has a valence beyond social exclusion, a valence connecting leprosy with divine action. When Jesus heals leprosy, he performs an action associated in the Hebrew Bible with God and God's most illustrious prophets irrespective of any purity considerations.<sup>42</sup>

These stories of leprosy from the Hebrew Bible only intermittently illustrate social exclusion associated with the disease. Moses, Naaman, and Gehazi experience no exclusion, while Miriam, Uzziah, and the four Samaritan men do. Even when the leprous characters do experience social isolation, no consistent pattern of ostracism appears. Miriam's exclusion from the camp does not fit the Levitical statutes and is motivated by concerns about shame rather than purity. The four men could enter Samaria if they wish. Uzziah lives outside the palace but not necessarily outside Jerusalem. These stories, taken together with the legal material reviewed in the last section, show a diversity of exclusionary practices across time and space rather than a uniform application of Levitical regulations throughout Israel's history.

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Tadmor, *II Kings*, 166–67; Ralph W. Klein, *2 Chronicles: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 380; Wilhelm Rudolph, "Ussias 'Haus der Freiheit,'" *ZAW* 89 (1977): 418; Pancratius C. Beentjes, "'They Saw That His Forehead Was Leprous' (2 Chr 26:20): The Chronicler's Narrative on Uzziah's Leprosy," in *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus*, ed. M. J. H. M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz, JCS 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 61–72, here 68.

<sup>42</sup>Friedrich Avemarie, "Jesus and Purity," in *New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Reimund Bieringer et al., JSJSup 136 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 255–80, here 263.

My argument in this and the previous sections is not that lepers faced no exclusion or marginalization in Second Temple society. As we have seen in both the narrative and legal materials, some level of exclusion of lepers is apparent across sources and over the centuries. Nevertheless, these exclusionary practices varied over time and space and are counterbalanced by references to lepers' integration within society. This variation suggests that when examining a Second Temple text about a leper (such as a gospel story), one should refrain from assuming a priori that the leper is socially marginalized. One must rely on the texts themselves to speak about the degree of marginalization of their leprous characters.

### III. LEPROSY IN THE GOSPELS

The gospels do not indicate that lepers were outcasts and, indeed, they often provide evidence of their inclusion. This inconsistency in the texts has not stopped interpreters from assuming that all lepers experienced isolation. Such interpretations rely on what might be called “heads I win, tails you lose” exegesis—any hints at isolation are evidence of social constraints for lepers, while any social contact indicates boldness and compassion in disregarding these strictures.

The story of Jesus's healing the single leper (Matt 8:2–4 // Mark 1:40–45 // Luke 5:12–15) illustrates the interpretive acrobatics involved in reading the gospels against the background of presumed social isolation. Although the substance of the story is much the same in all three versions, each evangelist sets it differently. Matthew sets the story immediately after the Sermon on the Mount, when great crowds were following Jesus (8:1). Matthew makes no mention of the crowd reacting to the approach of the leper in 8:2. One might take the crowd's nonreaction as evidence that close contact with a leper did not trouble these Galilean Jews, but if one is determined to read ostracism into the story it can be done: one can assume that the crowd dissipated between verse 1 and verse 2 or that the crowd was stunned by the leper's boldness in approaching.<sup>43</sup> The presence of a crowd does not stand in the way of an interpreter determined to see social isolation.

Luke sets the same story in a city: “And it happened while he was in one of the cities, behold a man full of leprosy, and seeing Jesus and falling upon his face he begged him” (Luke 5:12). My rather wooden translation here reflects the fact that the text does not describe the entrance into the city of either Jesus or the leper—both are simply there, and the man sees Jesus, which precipitates the action. To interpret this story on the assumption of widespread isolation of the leprous, one must read the leper as an intruder in the city, his boldness motivating him to

<sup>43</sup>France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 307; Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 126.



violate social norms in search of Jesus.<sup>44</sup> Yet this element is absent. Although Mark does not explicitly provide a setting for the encounter between Jesus and the leper, he implies that it occurred in a populated area since Jesus was going through Galilee proclaiming his message in the synagogues (Mark 1:39). It is only after his fame from cleansing the leper spreads that Jesus can no longer enter a town but must stay in the countryside (1:45). All three evangelists set the story in ways that challenge the notion that the leprosy were excluded from Galilean society.<sup>45</sup>

The crux of all three versions comes as Jesus touches the man and his leprosy leaves him (Matt 8:3 // Mark 1:41–42 // Luke 5:13). Jesus frequently heals by touch (Matt 8:15 // Mark 1:31; Matt 8:25 // Mark 5:41 // Luke 8:54; Matt 8:20 // Mark 5:29 // Luke 8:44; Mark 7:31–37; 8:22–26). Elijah and Elisha also heal through physical contact (1 Kgs 17:21, 2 Kgs 4:34), as do other healers in the Hellenistic world (Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 4.45; Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.81; Suetonius, *Vesp.* 7.2).<sup>46</sup> This review has shown that no Levitical prohibition about touching a leper existed and that strictures against contact with lepers varied over time and location. It may have been that physical contact with the leprosy was not prohibited in first-century Galilee.<sup>47</sup> The three evangelists present the leprosy man as having ready access to Jesus and note no hesitation on Jesus's part in touching the man and no reaction of shock from any spectators. Nevertheless, many interpreters take Jesus's touching of the leper to be his flouting of Jewish purity concerns in the name of compassion and a demonstration of the ability of his holiness to overcome impurity.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Carroll, *Luke*, 126–27. Kazen provides an alternative by seeing the urban location as the result of Luke's ignorance of Jewish customs of excluding the leprosy from cities (*Jesus and Purity*, 118). When Luke reports later that the ten lepers of 17:12–19 kept their distance, he provides evidence of Jewish practice (119). Details that counter the ostracism of lepers are secondary accretions, while details that confirm their ostracism constitute traces of the original tradition.

<sup>45</sup> Pilch, "Understanding Biblical Healing," 65.

<sup>46</sup> Kazen recognizes all these parallels but still sees in the mention of Jesus's touching a leper an emphasis intended to highlight Jesus's rejection of purity restrictions (*Jesus and Purity*, 106). See also Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 206.

<sup>47</sup> Carl R. Kazmierski, "Evangelist and Leper: A Socio-Cultural Study of Mark 1.40–45," *NTS* 38 (1992): 37–50, here 43–44.

<sup>48</sup> David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel*, Reading the New Testament (New York: Crossroad, 1993; repr., Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 107; Bruner, *Matthew*, 1:376; McNeile, *Gospel according to St. Matthew*, 102; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 284–85; Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 112; Mitch and Sri, *Matthew*, 126; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, SP 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 113; Camille Focant, *The Gospel according to Mark: A Commentary*, trans. Leslie Robert Keylock (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 80; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 206; Bovon, *Luke 1*, 175; Carroll, *Luke*, 127; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, SP 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 95–96; Plummer, *Gospel according to St. Luke*, 149; Gould, *Gospel according to St. Mark*, 30, 32; M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," *NIB* 8:89–505, here 225.

Luke adds a second encounter between Jesus and the leprous in the healing of the ten lepers (17:12–19). Although no physical contact occurs in this story, in contrast to the story of the single leper in 5:12–15, a determined exegete can find exclusion in both stories. With respect to the single leper, John T. Carroll comments, “The man’s boldness in entering the city already suggests that he is willing to press beyond conventional social boundaries”; but about the ten lepers, he says, “Fittingly for persons in a perpetual state of ritual impurity by virtue of their skin lesions, they keep their distance.”<sup>49</sup> Likewise, Darrell L. Bock observes that in the first instance Jesus “touches the leper, an act that makes him unclean, but that visualizes his desire to show compassion, even at a cost,” while in the second encounter, “ten lepers intend to speak with him, but they cannot approach him because of their despised disease.”<sup>50</sup> Contact with the leprous demonstrates a bold rejection of ritual laws, while distance demonstrates these laws’ power to exclude. Heads I win, tails you lose.

Jesus’s supposed flouting of the purity taboos by touching the leper fits awkwardly with his immediate instructions that the man should present himself to the priest and undergo the rites of purification prescribed in the Pentateuch (Matt 8:4 // Mark 1:44 // Luke 5:14). This is the only explicit reference in the gospels to the Mosaic legislation on leprosy. The incongruity of Jesus supposedly violating the law in one moment then immediately ordering conformity to the law can be explained as Jesus’s concern for the social reintegration of the former leper.<sup>51</sup> The operative assumption is that the man can reintegrate into society only if he completes the Mosaic purification.<sup>52</sup> If Jesus’s instruction is motivated by his desire to allow the man to reintegrate into society, then the man’s behavior in Mark is strange. After healing the man, Jesus orders, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing that which Moses commanded as a testimony to them” (1:44 NRSV). The man does not comply with this command: “But [δέ] he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the word” (1:45). The man successfully spreads the word of Jesus even though he fails to follow Jesus’s command and apparently does not immediately go to the priests for his cleansing.<sup>53</sup> The man’s effectiveness in spreading Jesus’s fame would be odd if the ceremony he forgoes were a precondition for his acceptance in society.

The story of this man’s healing has a parallel in the noncanonical Egerton Gospel. Whether this version represents a gloss on one or more of the Synoptics or an independent witness to this tradition, it nevertheless provides further evidence of how early followers of Jesus thought about the social condition of the leprous.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Carroll, *Luke*, 126, 343.

<sup>50</sup> Bock, *Luke*, 1:465, 2:1401.

<sup>51</sup> France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 308; Focant, *Gospel according to Mark*, 81; Carroll, *Luke*, 127.

<sup>52</sup> Kazen, *Jesus and Purity*, 101.

<sup>53</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 210.

<sup>54</sup> For the relationship of the Egerton Gospel to the canonical gospels, see Tobias Nicklas,

In this version, the leper tells Jesus about how he acquired his leprosy: “Teacher Jesus, while traveling with lepers and eating with them in the inn I myself also became leprous” (2.12–15).<sup>55</sup> This version presumes that the leprous and non-leprous travel together and eat together in inns, hardly the outcast state so often taken to be the lot of lepers.<sup>56</sup>

Matthew and Mark narrate one further encounter of Jesus with a leprous character that calls into question the idea that leprosy necessarily entailed exclusion from society. In the last week of his life, Jesus stays in Bethany “at the house of Simon the leper” (Matt 26:6 // Mark 14:3). It is here that Jesus is anointed by the woman with the expensive ointment in the sight of his disciples. Apparently, none of these people has any problem being in a leper’s house. Moreover, Simon the leper is allowed to live within the community of Bethany. To explain how Simon could be described as a leper yet live integrated into society, some scholars assume that he has previously been healed without citing any evidence that *λεπρός* was used to describe a person who was formerly leprous.<sup>57</sup> If one reads the story freed from the assumption that the leprous must have been excluded from Second Temple society, then Simon’s living in a house and hosting a dinner does not require special explanation.

None of these gospel stories demands that we envision the leprous characters as being excluded from any aspect of society. In fact, many of the stories provide indirect evidence for the participation of lepers in the society of Jesus’s time. Without bringing to the gospels the dubious assumption that leprosy in Jesus’s time meant ostracism, interpreters would not find social isolation in the texts themselves.

#### IV. THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

The gospel texts offer no compelling evidence for the social exclusion of the leprous. Other Jewish literature shows varying levels of exclusion across time and

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“The ‘Unknown Gospel’ on *Papyrus Egerton 2*,” in *Gospel Fragments*, ed. Thomas J. Kraus, Michael J. Kruger, and Tobias Nicklas, OECGT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96–100.

<sup>55</sup> Here taking the reconstruction proposed by H. Idris Bell and T. C. Skeat, *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and Other Early Christian Papyri* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1935). This reconstruction has retained the most widespread acceptance; see Nicklas, “‘Unknown Gospel,’” 42; Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 250.

<sup>56</sup> Bothered by the incongruity of this reconstruction with the shunning of lepers, Karl F. W. Schmidt proposed a reconstruction that would render the quoted fragment, “Teacher Jesus, you who visit lepers and eat with tax collectors at the inn, have mercy. I myself am also the same” (“Ein bisher unbekanntes Evangelienfragment: Einblicke in die Arbeitsweise eines alten Evangelisten,” *TBl* 15, no. 2 [1936]: 34–45, here 35). This reconstruction has been widely rejected as being too long to fit the papyrus (Nicklas, “‘Unknown Gospel,’” 50). Kazen, however, prefers this reading so that he can argue that Egerton does not provide evidence against the ostracism of the leprous (*Jesus and Purity*, 125–26).

<sup>57</sup> France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 974; Osborne, *Matthew*, 950; Harrington, *Matthew*, 362.

place. In light of this thin evidential basis, one might wonder how the exclusion of the leprous from Jewish society became such an interpretive commonplace.

One reason might be a scholarly bias toward systemization. The references to the social situation of lepers are few and scattered widely over centuries of Jewish literature. By assuming uniformity over time and space, scholars can allow these disparate materials to inform one another. Assuming a stable system allows extrapolation from one text to another to create a fuller picture than can be gained by looking at each individual text discretely. A system gives the scholar more material about which to talk and write.

Yet this bias toward systemization cannot explain why the social status of the leprous is construed so negatively. Milgrom's interpretation of Leviticus represents the pinnacle of systemization, but his work in no way implies a state of wretched isolation for the leprous. There must be more than a scholarly predilection for systems at work to explain why so many commentators take ostracism to be the implied state of the lepers whom Jesus heals.

The pedigree of this line of interpretation stretches back to John Chrysostom. In his exegesis of Matt 8:2–4, Chrysostom assumes that the law forbade touching lepers and that Jesus healed by touch to demonstrate that he was not subject to the law. He goes on to compare this episode to Elisha's healing of Naaman. Chrysostom ignores all the social contact that Naaman has in the story and seizes upon Elisha's refusal to speak to him face to face as evidence that the law forbade Elisha's contact with the leprous Naaman (*Hom. Matt.* 25.2). The Elisha story serves as the background for Jesus, but Jesus surpasses this background as he ignores the law that held Elisha so rigidly. This contrast between the law-bound Elisha and the law-free Jesus continues to find its way into modern commentaries.<sup>58</sup>

Chrysostom makes clear what is at stake in this line of interpretation as his exegesis continues. He must explain why Jesus, who so readily defies the law by touching the leper, commands the man to show himself to the priest:

Here again, to fulfill the law, for he did not everywhere set it aside nor everywhere keep it, but sometimes did one and sometimes the other. He set it aside to prepare for the coming philosophy, but he kept it to hold back the impudent speech of the Jews for a while and to stoop to their weakness. (*Hom. Matt.* 25.3; my translation)

Chrysostom maintains Jesus's Jewish identity, but he also requires Jesus to transcend the Judaism that Chrysostom so negatively constructs.<sup>59</sup> For Chrysostom, as for so many other Christian interpreters, Judaism serves what Jonathan Z. Smith has identified as a double function: "On the one hand it has provided apologetic scholars with an insulation for early Christianity, guarding it against 'influence' from its 'environment.' On the other hand, it has been presented by the very same

<sup>58</sup> E.g., Focant, *Gospel according to Mark*, 80.

<sup>59</sup> Joshua Garroway, "The Law-Observant Lord: John Chrysostom's Engagement with the Jewishness of Christ," *J ECS* 18 (2010): 591–615.

scholars as an object to be transcended by early Christianity.”<sup>60</sup> By construing Second Temple society as totally isolating the leprous, exegetes can simultaneously locate Jesus firmly within a Jewish milieu and have him transcend his social location by touching and healing the leper.

Making Jesus look good by contrasting him with a negatively constructed Judaism is nothing new for Christian exegetes. For modern interpreters, however, this construction of Judaism has an added advantage. Reading Jesus’s healing work against a supposed background of social isolation allows the modern exegete to move attention from Jesus as a miracle worker toward Jesus as an advocate for inclusivity. Such interpretations make Jesus relevant in a world that cares deeply about inclusion but that has little room for miracles. Whatever the attractions of such a relevant Jesus, he comes at the price of the interpreter abdicating historical-critical responsibility and defaming Jesus’s Jewish contemporaries in the process.

## V. CONCLUSION

Although the tone of this article has been largely critical, it is not meant as a personal criticism of any of the interpreters quoted or cited. Indeed, I imagine the suggestion that their interpretations were implicitly anti-Jewish would dismay all the authors cited, with the exception of Chrysostom. From Sunday school on, Christians are taught that leprosy brought shunning in Jesus’s day, so it is not surprising that academic work in biblical studies reflects this common conception. I intend here to criticize a way of thinking that pervades the church and the academy, not just the specific authors whom I mention.

Nor do I mean to imply that there was no social exclusion of lepers in Second Temple society. Although the evidence is fragmentary and often contradictory, some level of exclusion of the leprous recurs throughout the sources. What I have shown is that the categorical isolation of the leprous does not appear in Jewish texts the way it is so often assumed and that we have very little information on what level of isolation, if any, lepers experienced in first-century Galilee. Moreover, the gospel texts themselves do not presuppose, and in some cases actually refute, the idea that lepers were banished from the society of Jesus’s day. The lack of evidence for readings that presuppose the wholesale exclusion of lepers should be reason enough for exegetes of the gospels to drop this line of interpretation. That such readings involve slandering Judaism for the sake of a relevant Christianity make it all the more imperative that we find better ways to approach these texts.

<sup>60</sup>Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 14 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 83.

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