

COMMON ERRORS ABOUT LEPERS IN THE GOSPELS

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Interpretations of the Gospels 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. The evidence for the exclusion of the leprosy 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.

Misrepresentation	Correction
“The Greek <i>lepra</i> in biblical literature denotes a disfiguring skin condition which was believed to be contagious “ ¹	The modern disease we call “leprosy” (also known as Hansen’s disease) is a contagious infection that causes damage to the skin, face, and digits and can result in disfigurement. However, archaeological evidence shows this disease was not present in the Middle East until the first century AD, so it cannot be what the Old Testament calls “leprosy” and is unlikely to be the “leprosy” of the New Testament. Biblical leprosy probably corresponded to several skin conditions that cause loss of pigmentation, like psoriasis or vitiligo. No biblical text states or implies leprosy is contagious, and it is not clear whether ancient Jews considered it disfiguring.
People with leprosy “were segregated from the community” ² and “were the most ostracized.” ³	Leviticus 13:45-46 and Numbers 5:2 state that people with leprosy must live outside the camp of the Israelites during the Exodus. The Torah does not say how people with leprosy were to be segregated once the land of Israel was settled, and we do not know to what extent people with leprosy were excluded from society in Jesus’ day. There are biblical stories of people with leprosy interacting with the rest of their society normally without any

¹ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. 305

² John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 127.

³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1.373.

	obvious ostracism or exclusion (e.g. Naaman and Gehazi in 2 Kings 5, Simon in Mark 14:3).
“Touching a leper was believed to make the one who touched him unclean” ⁴	The Torah states that people with leprosy are ritually unclean (Leviticus 13:3). However, there is no statement in the Bible that touching someone with leprosy transfers impurity. This silence stands in contrast to many other types of impurity that the Torah explicitly states are transferred by touching (Leviticus 11:27-40; 15:5-25).
“Jesus’ concern for people so outweighed legal prescriptions (such as touching a leper rendering one unclean) that he ignored them in order to meet the need.” ⁵	Jesus does not break or ignore any Jewish law in the stories of healing people with leprosy (Matthew 8:2-4, Mark 1:40-45, Luke 5:12-15, 17:12-19). The only mention of Jewish law in these stories is Jesus’ insistence that the man healed of leprosy comply with the law by presenting himself to a priest so that he can undergo the rites of purification prescribed by the Torah (Matthew 8:4, Mark 1:44, Luke 5:14).

⁴ Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010. 112.

⁵ Grant R. Osborne *Matthew: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. 285.