

The Gospel
according to Mark

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The Gospel according to Mark



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

Julie M. Smith

BYU Studies
Provo, Utah

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JOHN A. WIDTSOE Significant support from the John A. Widtsoe Foundation in Los Angeles, California, as the Publication Sponsor for this Commentary Series is gratefully acknowledged.
FOUNDATION <http://www.widtsoefoundation.org/>

This Commentary Series is made possible by a generous gift from John S. and Unitá W. Welch.

Published by BYU Studies. To contact any member of the board of editors or BYU Studies, write to 1063 JFSB, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 84602, or visit <http://byustudies.byu.edu> or <http://www.byunewtestamentcommentary.com>.



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First time in print. Substantive corrections, additions, questions, or comments may be sent to byu_studies@byu.edu.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Smith, Julie M., author.

Title: The Gospel according to Mark / Julie M. Smith.

Description: Provo, Utah : BYU Studies, 2018. | Series: Brigham Young University New

Testament commentary series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017053522 | ISBN 9781942161530 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781942161547 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Mark--Commentaries. | Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints--Doctrines. | Mormon Church--Doctrines.

Classification: LCC BS2585.53 .S65 2018 | DDC 226.3/077--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017053522>

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

About the Brigham Young University New Testament Commentary Series

Welcome to the BYU New Testament Commentary, a project by a group of Latter-day Saint specialists offering to readers a careful, new look at the biblical records that witness the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and the first generation of his church. The commentary series seeks to make the New Testament more accessible to Latter-day Saint general readers and scholars by employing much of current biblical scholarship while reflecting important LDS insights. At the same time, this effort may also be helpful to interested readers of other faiths who want to learn how a group of Latter-day Saint scholars understands the Bible. A fundamental article of faith for Latter-day Saints (Mormons) affirms the Bible “to be the word of God” while adding, understandably, that it needs to be “translated correctly” in order for it to be accurately comprehensible to modern language speakers.

These objectives have helped shape the purposes and parameters of this commentary series. Serious LDS readers of the Bible search the scriptures, looking for depth and breadth in passages whose meanings and mandates may ultimately be plain but not shallow. Such readers and interpreters are served by treatments that unite faith and research, reason and revelation, in prayerfully confronting profound and difficult issues that arise in the texts and affect one’s path of progression. The New Testament has served as an influential guide to western civilization for centuries. As such, its records have long been studied by lay people and scholars alike, resulting in a rich reservoir of information that illuminates the New Testament era culturally, historically, and linguistically. Selectively, the BYUNTC builds upon this vast body of knowledge, resting on the Greek texts of the New Testament and connecting helpful elements of linguistic, literary, historical, and cultural research and traditional scholarship together with LDS scriptures and doctrinal perspectives. The combination of all these features distinguishes the BYUNTC from other commentaries, which are readily

available elsewhere and which readers may also want to consult for more encyclopedic or specialized discussions.

The tone of the BYUNTC aims to be informative rather than hortatory, and suggestive rather than definitive in its interpretation. The opinions expressed in this series are the views of its contributors and should not necessarily be attributed to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Brigham Young University, where many of those involved here are headquartered; or anyone else, though these works have benefitted from input and guidance from a number of colleagues, advisors, editors, and peer reviewers.

Each volume in this series sets in two parallel columns the King James Version (KJV) and a new working translation of the New Testament. Calling this a new “rendition” clarifies that it does not seek to replace the authorized KJV adopted by the LDS Church as its official English text. Rather, it aims to enhance readers’ understanding conceptually and spiritually by rendering the Greek texts into modern English with LDS sensitivities in mind. Comparing and explaining the New Rendition in light of the KJV then serves as one important purpose for each volume’s notes, comments, analyses, and summaries. This effort responds in modest ways to the desire President J. Reuben Clark Jr. expressed in his diary in 1956 that someday “qualified scholars [would provide] . . . a translation of the New Testament that will give us an accurate translation that shall be pregnant with the great principles of the Restored Gospel.”

Depending on their personal skills and interests, the authors of these volumes approach their scholarly sources and LDS materials differently but always with careful exposition and engaging perspectives. In several ways, they employ various interpretive tools, including semantic considerations of Greek vocabulary; cultural, historical, critical, literary, and structural analyses; and intertextual comparisons with other biblical passages, the Book of Mormon, and other scriptural works including the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. Observations are also proffered about the doctrinal and spiritual reception of New Testament teachings and practices in the broad LDS religious tradition.

The format also varies moderately from volume to volume regarding introductory materials and the style of commentary. Throughout, Greek and Hebrew terms appear in transliterated form in conformity with standards adopted by the Society of Biblical Literature. In some cases, a volume reproduces the Greek New Testament text based on the Greek text published by the Society of Biblical Literature (2010) or draws upon the twenty-eighth edition of the Nestle-Aland text in *Novum Testamentum Graece* (2012).

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their homes. Jesus explains that this is not the plan, creating the moment when the disciples have to decide if they really will leave everything to follow Jesus. In this sense, this becomes a second call story that invites the audience to a more profound level of discipleship. If the better understanding of the first call story is that they had no previous association with Jesus but followed only based on his command, now that they have seen him teach and perform miracles, they are being called to sacrifice more to follow him, in step with their increasing understanding of his work. One way to understand the first call story is that it is relatively easy to follow Jesus if he asks the disciples to take a break from work to watch him perform miracles. It is harder to follow Jesus when that requires getting out of bed at 3 am, going against the will of the crowd (which wants Jesus to stick around and which likely includes friends and family members), and traveling away from home and family. Fortunately, it is possible to understand the healing and ministering of Simon's mother-in-law as a sign to the disciples that all matters—physical and spiritual—at home will be tended to in their absence.

JESUS HEALS A LEPER (1:40–45)

Greek Text

40 Καὶ ἔρχεται πρὸς αὐτὸν λεπρὸς παρακαλῶν αὐτὸν καὶ γονυπετῶν λέγων αὐτῷ ὅτι Ἐὰν θέλῃς δύνασαί με καθαρίσαι. 41 καὶ ὀργισθεὶς ἐκτείνας τὴν χεῖρα αὐτοῦ ἤψατο καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· Θέλω, καθαρίσθητι· 42 καὶ εὐθὺς ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἡ λέπρα, καὶ ἐκαθαρίσθη. 43 καὶ ἐμβριμησάμενος αὐτῷ εὐθὺς ἐξέβαλεν αὐτόν, 44 καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· Ὅρα μηδενὶ μηδὲν εἴπῃς, ἀλλὰ ὕπαγε σεαυτὸν δεῖξον τῷ ἱερεῖ καὶ προσένεγκε περὶ τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ σου ἃ προσέταξεν Μωϋσῆς εἰς μαρτύριον αὐτοῖς. 45 ὁ δὲ ἐξελθὼν ἤρξατο κηρύσσειν πολλὰ καὶ διαφημίζειν τὸν λόγον, ὥστε μηκέτι αὐτὸν δύνασθαι φανερῶς εἰς πόλιν εἰσελθεῖν, ἀλλὰ ἔξω ἐπ' ἐρήμοις τόποις ἦν· καὶ ἤρχοντο πρὸς αὐτὸν πάντοθεν. [SBLGNT]

King James Version

40 And there came a leper to him, beseeching him, and kneeling down to him, and saying unto him, If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. 41 And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto

New Rendition

40 And a leper comes to him, begging and kneeling and saying to him, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." 41 And having become angry, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and he says to him, "I am willing.

him, I will; be thou clean. 42 And as soon as he had spoken, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was cleansed. 43 And he straitly charged him, and forthwith sent him away; 44 And saith unto him, See thou say nothing to any man: but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing those things which Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them. 45 But he went out, and began to publish it much, and to blaze abroad the matter, insomuch that Jesus could no more openly enter into the city, but was without in desert places: and they came to him from every quarter.

Be made clean.” 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was clean. 43 And having sternly warned him, he immediately drove him away. 44 And he says to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer, because of your cleaning, what Moses commanded for a testimony to them.” 45 And having gone out, he began to preach much and to spread the word, so that he was no longer able to enter a town openly, but he was out in deserted places and they were coming to him from everywhere.

Notes

1:40 *And there came a leper to him:* It is debated whether leprosy (now known as Hansen’s disease) existed in first-century Palestine; if it did, it was likely only one of many skin conditions included in the biblical term “leprosy.” Regardless of precisely which medical conditions are pictured here, leprosy was associated with sin.¹⁷⁶ Under the law of Moses, a leper was considered ritually unclean, and there was quite a social stigma surrounding it as well. Lepers were supposed to keep their distance and warn others of their presence.

beseeking him, and kneeling down to him: Some manuscripts omit “and kneeling.”¹⁷⁷ Determining whether it was originally present is difficult:

1. It may have been there originally and was omitted accidentally because a scribe’s eye skipped between similar word endings.
2. It may not have been there originally but was added in order to make the account parallel to Matthew 8:2 and Luke 5:12 (but those verses use different verbs for “kneeling”). The fact that Matthew and Luke have “kneeling” but with different verbs suggests that the copies of Mark that they had contained a reference to kneeling, but for some reason they found the verb unacceptable and so replaced it; this unacceptability may explain why later scribes

176. Hence the need to make a sin offering (Lev. 14:10–32) and leprosy as a punishment for sins (Num. 12:4–12).

177. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 65.

removed the phrase from Mark. But one can only speculate as to what they would have found unpalatable about Mark's verb choice.

and saying unto him, If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean: The verb used here for “wilt” indicates that the leper is wondering about Jesus' willingness, not his ability, to make him clean.

The meaning of “make clean” is disputed:

1. It could refer to physically healing the man's skin condition.
2. It could mean to declare the man clean under the law of Moses (without curing the man's skin condition). The verb here is the one used in LXX Leviticus 14:2, 4 for “proclaiming clean.”¹⁷⁸
3. It might be ambiguous: the verb could carry either meaning, so there is no way to determine what precisely the leper was seeking.

It is difficult to determine which meaning is best here, and its meaning impacts how one thinks about other aspects of the story. Unfortunately, this is the first in a long line of interpretive conundrums in 1:40–45.

1:41 And Jesus, moved with compassion: Some of the Greek manuscripts read “being angry” instead of “moved with compassion” here;¹⁷⁹ this is one of the more significant textual variants in the Gospel of Mark.

One of the main—although admittedly counterintuitive—principles used to determine which reading was earlier is that the reading that makes *less* sense is likely to have been earlier: one can imagine a scribe changing a less-likely reading to a more-likely reading, but it is harder to imagine a scribe changing a more-likely reading to a less-likely reading.¹⁸⁰ Using that principle, “being angry” is likely to have been the earlier wording because one can imagine a scribe's confusion leading to a change to “moved with compassion” far more easily than one can imagine confusion over “moved with compassion” leading a scribe to change the text to “being angry.” In fact, there is a very plausible reason why scribes would have wanted to change “being angry” to “compassion”: fear that “pagan opponents of Christianity, like Celsus, who were known to be perusing the Gospels for incriminating evidence against the divine founder of the faith, might find here ammunition for their charges”¹⁸¹ if Jesus were thought to have been angry.

178. Collins, *Mark*, 179.

179. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 65.

180. The technical term for this principle is *lectio difficilior*, Latin for “the harder reading.”

181. Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 292.

Further evidence for preferring “being angry” comes from how Matthew and Luke write about this story: both of them omit any reference to anger or compassion (Matt. 8:3; Luke 5:13), likely because they were uncomfortable with Jesus’ anger and therefore omitted the reference entirely. It is much more difficult to explain why they both would have omitted a reference to Jesus’ compassion; another instance in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus feels angry (3:5) is omitted by Matthew and Luke as well, but there is no other time in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus is said to feel compassion and Matthew or Luke omit the reference.

Why, then, might the text originally have referred to Jesus’ anger? There are various theories:

1. The strict warning that Jesus gives in 1:43–44 is tied to Jesus’ anger as it reflects his strong emotions about the importance of keeping the matter private.
2. The doubt that the man expressed in 1:40 about Jesus’ ability or willingness to heal the leper caused Jesus to be angry (but compare 9:24–25: in that passage, Jesus is not angered by a supplicant’s doubt, but see also the variant reading on 9:23). Jesus is angry that anyone would doubt his willingness to decrease human suffering.
3. The story may imply that the man has already been to the priests, but they were unwilling or unable to cleanse the man.¹⁸² Thus, Jesus’ anger is addressed not at the man but at the priests who had not healed him.
4. Jesus was angry with Satan’s power to cause suffering.
5. Mark 3:5 might shine light on this text: in that story, a healing is preceded with reference to Jesus’ anger, which is due to the reaction of those who were watching Jesus to see if he would violate the Sabbath by performing a healing. Perhaps a similar dynamic is implied here (although this is not the Sabbath, and no opponents are present).
6. If the leper were requesting that Jesus pronounce him pure, perhaps Jesus’ anger is directed at the man
 - a. because he should have asked for a physical healing.
 - b. because he is asking Jesus to assume the rights of a priest.
 - c. because he is just asking for a shortcut—a pronouncement from Jesus that saves the trouble and expense of a trip to the temple. (This would make sense of Jesus’ statement after the healing asking the leper to go to the priest and make the offering.)

However, this theory doesn’t mesh well with the fact that Jesus accedes to the man’s request.

¹⁸² Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 153.

7. Jesus' anger is related to the previous story, where he decided to leave Capernaum to preach after he became very popular there. Perhaps Jesus feels that this healing will interfere with his ability to preach. (Again, it is hard to understand why Jesus would have agreed to heal the man.)
8. Jesus is angry that the leper violated the law of Moses in approaching him. (Although, again, this does not explain why Jesus would have healed the man.)
9. It is possible to interpret the anger more generically as a strong emotion; it was common for miracle workers to become physically worked up before performing miracles.¹⁸³
10. Jesus is angry that the leper has made him unclean. (But Jesus is made unclean many times in Mark without becoming angry.)
11. It is grammatically possible that the one who is angry is the leper and not Jesus, leading to the following possibilities:
 - a. The anger might be at his condition or the response of others to his condition.
 - b. The leper is not angry but just strongly emotional (see #9 above).
 - c. His emotional state is mentioned to justify his unclean touch.¹⁸⁴
12. When Jesus performs the cleansing, he uses the divine passive ("be clean"; see the Notes on 1:42), which assumes that God is the actor. Perhaps Jesus does not support the leper's assumption that Jesus himself could heal when in fact it was God who was performing the healing. (Again, it is hard to explain why Jesus would have healed the man without correcting him if this were the case.)
13. Because only God could heal lepers, the leper is, in effect, recognizing Jesus' divinity. Jesus may therefore be angry at this inappropriate revelation of his identity.

While compassion is the most frequently mentioned emotion that Jesus feels in the Gospels, he does experience a range of feelings, including anger.¹⁸⁵ (See also the Notes on 1:43.)

It is also possible that "moved with compassion" is the better reading here; this may explain why, despite many possible explanations for Jesus' anger, none has commanded a consensus, and all have shortcomings. Supporters of reading "moved with compassion" note that "being angry" appears in only a few ancient manuscripts and that copyists did not feel the

183. See 3:5; 6:34; 7:34; and 8:2 for possible parallels.

184. Kirsopp Lake, "Ἐμβριψόμενος and Ὀργισθεῖς, Mark 1, 40–43," *Harvard Theological Review* 16, no. 2 (1923): 197–98.

185. Restoration scripture includes references to the Lord's anger in Alma 8:29; D&C 63:32; 59:21; all three of those passages tie the Lord's anger to disobedience.

need to correct the text when Jesus is described as being angry in 3:5 and 10:14. It is also possible that the confusion came about because in Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke), the words for “pity” and “rage” are very similar.¹⁸⁶ It is therefore difficult to determine whether a reference to “anger” or “compassion” is more likely to have been original.

put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; be thou clean: Given that the next phrase is “and touched him,” “put forth his hand” is not strictly necessary. Its presence heightens the drama of the physical contact between Jesus and the leper.

Touching the leper would, under the law of Moses, have made Jesus unclean.¹⁸⁷ Because Jesus could heal people without touching them, the act of touch here is all the more significant. It also contrasts sharply with 2 Kings 5:1–14, where a prophet heals a leper at a distance.

In the HB, leprosy was like death, and so cleansing a leper was roughly the equivalent of raising someone from the dead.

There are two ways to understand who actually performs the healing: First, “be clean” is a divine passive, indicating that it is God who is doing the actual healing, but the name of God is not mentioned out of reverence. It was thought that only God could heal leprosy.¹⁸⁸ Second, Jesus uses God’s power to heal the man.

1:42 *And as soon as he had spoken, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was cleansed:* “As soon as he had spoken” is not present in most of the ancient manuscripts.¹⁸⁹ The inclusion of Mark’s favorite word (“immediately”) emphasizes Jesus’ power; the immediate healing of the leper would have been most miraculous. It also links Jesus’ words to his act of healing, pointing to the power manifest in his words.

This would have been an incredible spectacle for anyone who saw it since leprosy had an obvious visible component (whether it was Hansen’s disease or some other skin condition).

When Jesus touched the leper, he should have been made unclean under the law of Moses. Instead, Jesus’ touch does not make Jesus unclean but makes the leper clean.

1:43 *And he straitly charged him, and forthwith sent him away:* Jesus did not literally send him away immediately—he still has more to say to him in the next verse!

186. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 65.

187. Compare 2 Kgs. 5:1–14, where the absence of physical contact is conspicuous.

188. Dowd, *Reading Mark*, 19.

189. Bratcher and Nida, *Translator’s Handbook*, 67.

“Sent” is the word used for casting out demons (for example 1:34, 39; 3:15; 7:26).

“Straitly charged” is somewhat difficult to translate. Its root means “to snort like a horse,” and it suggests not only an emotion but also its expression. In its only other usage in Mark (14:5), it is a statement of disapproval (KJV: “murmur”); in the only other NT usage,¹⁹⁰ it is an expression of deep emotion (KJV: “groan”) that is not necessarily negative. It could be defined as “to express indignation by an explosive expulsion of breath.”¹⁹¹ It could be translated as “growling at him”¹⁹² or “being enraged.”¹⁹³

It is difficult to determine the motive behind Jesus’ apparently strong emotional expression here; any of the theories offered to explain Jesus’ anger in 1:41 (see the list above) could be marshaled here as well, but all will suffer from the same problem: they cannot explain how Jesus transitions from anger at the leper, to a willingness to heal the leper, and then back to a negative emotion in the space of a few words and without any explanation. While the verb can be interpreted as forceful but not negative, it is still difficult to explain Jesus’ forcefulness here.

1:44 *And saith unto him, See thou say nothing to any man:* There is a double negative¹⁹⁴ here (“say nothing to no one”), emphasizing the prohibition. At the same time, this command isn’t absolute—the next phrase will present an exception to the rule.

It is difficult to know what to make of this prohibition. There are comparable restrictions in 5:43 and 7:36, both after spectacular healings; in all three situations, however, the audience is left to wonder how Jesus thinks it would have been possible for the news not to spread: Wouldn’t the neighbors have noticed the healed leper or the girl raised from the dead? Would they not have figured out what had happened? Oddly, the demons and disciples stay quiet, but the healed people don’t follow the injunction to silence. Further, in the very next story, Jesus will heal a lame man and pronounce his sins forgiven in front of a hostile crowd, making it difficult to imagine that, in this story, Jesus intended to keep his healing ability private. One way to resolve this problem (at least in this story, if not the others) is to see the command to silence as temporary: the leper is not to tell anyone

190. Aside from the parallel story in Matthew; see John 11:33, 38.

191. Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 206.

192. Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 205.

193. Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 99.

194. Double negatives are not considered errors in Greek usage as they would be in English; rather, they are used for emphasis.

about the healing until he has spoken to the priest and, presumably, had the priest declare him ritually clean. Perhaps the concern is that the priest will withhold the declaration of cleanness if he hears rumors that the man was healed by Jesus; maybe Jesus wants the priest's declaration to affirm the validity of his miracle.

go thy way, shew thyself to the priest: This may be a local priest or a priest at the temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus conforms to the law of Moses by sending the man to the priest to be pronounced clean. Because the next section of the text (2:1–3:6) will include controversies over Jesus' adherence to the law of Moses, this story may be a bit of scene-setting on Mark's part to show an instance when Jesus supported the requirements of the law. At the same time, it is hard to reconcile the idea that Jesus would want to conform to the law of Moses with the fact that he has just touched a leper. Perhaps the point of this saying is to emphasize, by way of contrast, that Jesus did not need to visit the priest to be pronounced clean.

Leprosy would have destroyed the man's ability to interact normally with family and friends, so Jesus is here telling him how to restore those relationships; thus Jesus is providing both physical and social/emotional healing.

offer for thy cleansing those things which Moses commanded: These offerings are explained in Leviticus 14:1–32.

for a testimony unto them: This phrase presents several interpretive challenges. First, who is "them": the priests or the people in general? Second, what does "a testimony unto them" mean?

1. Parallel language in 6:11 and 13:9 suggests the translation "a testimony against them," which could imply that:
 - a. Jesus wants to showcase the priests' unwillingness to accept him, despite his confirmed ability to perform miracles.
 - b. Jesus wants to point out the limitations of the sacrificial system, which is unable to provide healing and only able to provide declarations after healing has occurred naturally.
 - c. In light of the controversies in 2:1–3:6 related to Jesus' observance of the law, Mark wanted to establish that not only did Jesus keep the law but also encouraged others to do so as well.
 - d. Malachi 3:3–5 (which should be on the minds of Mark's audience since the text immediately before it was quoted in the prologue) explains that the Lord will "purify the sons of Levi" and will witness against the corruption of the temple leadership. Jesus' actions here might be understood as a fulfillment of that scripture.

- e. Perhaps the text is designed to explain why no objective observers from Jesus' time could confirm his miraculous powers: this text would show that Jesus made an effort to have independent witnesses but was thwarted by the actions of the healed ones.
2. This is a positive testimony, designed to encourage the temple priests (and those who later hear about the miracle and the priest's de facto ratification of it) to have a testimony of Jesus' healing powers.

Left unnarrated is whether the leper actually goes to the priest or whether he disobeys Jesus (but see below for how the first word of the next verse might hint at the answer to this question).

1:45 But he: There are two different ways to translate “but”:

1. It can have an adversarial force (“however”), which would imply that the leper did not obey Jesus' command from the previous verse.
2. It can have a sense of continuance (“and” or “now”), which would imply that the leper's actions in this verse harmonize with and follow naturally from the command in the previous verse.

Does “he” refer to the leper or to Jesus?

1. The more common interpretation is that it refers to the leper, who disobeys Jesus' command to say nothing, which complicates Jesus' plans. Support for this reading comes from the fact that the language here is always used to indicate a new subject,¹⁹⁵ so that would make the first “he” in this verse a reference to the leper (unless the pattern were being violated). It is also possible that one should assume that the leper went to the priest, was pronounced clean, and then became a disciple, preaching the gospel. This would see the leper as keeping the command that Jesus made (if that command were understood to be temporary).
2. It is possible that “he” refers to Jesus, so this verse refers to Jesus' going out and preaching now that the story of the leper is over. Support for this reading includes:
 - a. The word “word” (Greek: *logos*) normally means “the [whole] message” (for example, 2:2; 4:14–20) of the gospel and not just one incident.
 - b. “Publish” (Greek: *kēryssō*) is often translated as “preach” or “proclaim,” which is Jesus' mission.
 - c. If the “but” at the beginning of the verse had an adversarial force, then it makes sense of the contrast: the *leper* wasn't supposed to say anything to anyone, but *Jesus'* ministry is to preach the gospel.

195. Bratcher and Nida, *Translator's Handbook*, 70.

went out, and began to publish it much: It is not clear whether “went out” refers to leaving a house or a town.

“Publish” is normally translated as “preach.” It is even possible to translate it as “spread the word.” This would suggest that the topic of the preaching was not the healing of the leper but, more broadly, the entire gospel message. In other uses, “preaching” is always positive, and so perhaps it should be viewed that way here as well.

If the leper is the subject, he is either being shown as a model disciple, or the account drips with irony as words normally used for the spread of the gospel are used for an act of disobedience. If the latter is the case, there is more to Mark’s irony: as a leper, he was not permitted to approach people, but because Jesus healed him, he is now able to interact with them—and violate Jesus’ command to him. In that reading, there is an interesting comparison between this story and the last one: both show Jesus going to extraordinary lengths (to be alone, to get the leper to stay quiet) that are not successful. This surprising parallel indicates Jesus’ respect for human autonomy: he’ll do everything (within typical mortal powers) to encourage compliance, but he won’t force it.

and to blaze abroad the matter: if the leper is the subject, then perhaps he thought that this local preaching might have been an adequate substitute for the lengthy journey to the temple and costly offering.

insomuch that Jesus could no more openly enter into the city but was without in desert places: and they came to him from every quarter: While this turn of events might seem negative, it is important to remember that it is a fairly standard response to Jesus’ ministry.

The fact that 2:1 presents Jesus in Capernaum presents an apparent conflict; there are several ways that it might be resolved:

1. This phrase is to be understood symbolically: Jesus, now unable to enter cities, has in effect traded places with the leper (who would not have been allowed to be near people), and thus the factual difference with 2:1 would not be a problem.
2. This phrase is hyperbole, a hallmark of Mark’s writing style.
3. The disjunction is evidence that Mark’s Gospel was not written in order; perhaps the healing of the leper occurred at a different point in Jesus’ ministry.
4. Enough time passes between the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2 for the situation to change.
5. The operative word here is “openly”; 2:1 can be read to say that Jesus did not “openly” enter the city, but did so quietly or privately, and it was only after some days that people became aware that he was there.

Did the leper obey Jesus? This question is difficult to answer:

1. It depends on whether Jesus or the leper is the subject of the beginning of 1:45.
2. It depends on whether the command to “say nothing to anyone” was temporary or permanent.
3. It depends on whether the leper did or did not go to the priest.

Another option is to call the leper’s actions “laudable disobedience”;¹⁹⁶ he is technically disobedient, but only out of an overabundance of enthusiasm for the gospel message.

Analysis

The story of the leper is rather difficult to interpret due to the textual variant (was Jesus compassionate or angry?) and the ambiguity of some key terms. Nonetheless, the story showcases Jesus’ miraculous healing ability and his unexpected relationship to the law of Moses.

There are several layers of irony in this story: touching a leper should make Jesus unclean, but instead it cleanses the leper. And yet the result is that Jesus, like a leper, cannot enter into any cities. And yet the people come out to him in the wilderness.

Jesus’ spreading fame, despite his efforts to forestall it, is a theme throughout chapter 1. Perhaps Mark emphasized this idea in order to set the stage for 2:1–3:6, where controversies surround Jesus; chapter 1 would then contain not just healing miracles but veritable double-edged swords for Jesus since each act of healing increases the threat against his ministry and, ultimately, his life. There seems to be some ambiguity in how Mark presents miracles: on the one hand, they are evidence of Jesus’ powers and often teach symbolically. On the other hand, they generate crowds that interfere with Jesus’ ministry and perhaps encourage people to follow him for the wrong reasons. Depending on how the healing of the leper is interpreted, the leper’s reaction to Jesus can be seen as an example of the negative outcomes of healing miracles. Regardless, there is a very real sense in which the healings that Jesus performs in chapter 1 represent an exchange of his own physical safety for that of the people he heals.

While only specifically articulated during the exorcism, Jesus’ authority is a theme that undergirds all of chapter 1. From the HB prophecies of his coming, to the visionary experience after his baptism, to the calling of the

196. Guelich, *Mark 1–8*:26, 79.

disciples and their instant response, to the exorcism, to the two healing miracles, Jesus is presented in chapter 1 as someone with the power/authority to do extraordinary things. Jesus is someone greater than the audience could possibly have anticipated and yet in many ways more humble and unremarkable. In this rushing narrative, one thing is clear: the heavens have opened for Jesus.

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