

# FACT SHEET ON LEPERS AND LEPROSY

Interpretations of Jesus' healing of leprosy as the overcoming of social stigma are not supported by textual evidence and represent a tendency to construe Judaism negatively in order to make Jesus appear in a more positive light. The evidence for the exclusion of the leprous from first-century Jewish society is much less certain than is generally realized. 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.

MISREPRESENTATIONS	CORRECTIONS
<b>MISREPRESENTATION 1:</b> "The Greek <i>lepra</i> in biblical literature denotes a disfiguring skin condition which was believed to be contagious."	<b>CORRECTION:</b> 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.
<b>MISREPRESENTATION 2:</b> People with leprosy "were segregated from the community" and "were the most ostracized."	<b>CORRECTION:</b> Lev 13:45-46 and Num 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 obvious ostracism or exclusion (e.g. Naaman and Gehazi in 2 Kgs 5, Simon in Mk 14:3).
<b>MISREPRESENTATION 3:</b> "Touching a leper was believed to make the one who touched him unclean."	<b>CORRECTION:</b> The Torah states that people with leprosy are ritually unclean (Lev 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 (Lev 11:27-40; 15:5-25).
<b>MISREPRESENTATION 4:</b> "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."	<b>CORRECTION:</b> Jesus does not break or ignore any Jewish law in the stories of healing people with leprosy (Mt 8:2-4, Mk 1:40-45, Lk 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 (Mt 8:4, Mk 1:44, Lk 5:14).

## MISREPRESENTATION 1 NOTES:

- For a full discussion of what disease(s) the Bible calls "leprosy," see the entry on "Leprosy" by D.P. Wright and R.N. Jones in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary: K-N*, p. 277-282.

## MISREPRESENTATION 2 NOTES:

- The evidence from Biblical and non-Biblical Jewish sources paints an inconsistent picture of the degree of social exclusion people with leprosy experienced. In some sources, people with leprosy are clearly excluded from certain places, such as the people with leprosy outside the city of Samaria in 2 Kgs 7. In other stories, such as the ones mentioned above from 2 Kgs 5 and Mk 14:3, people with leprosy participate in normal social interactions. The degree of social exclusion probably varied over time and from place to place. We do not have enough evidence to say with certainty to what extent (if any) people with leprosy would have been excluded from normal day to day life in Jesus' time. For a fuller discussion of this uncertainty, see Myrick C. Shinall "The Social Condition of Lepers in the Gospels," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 2018;137(4): 915-934.

## MISREPRESENTATION 3 NOTES:

- Certainly, by the time of the codification of Mishnah (Rabbinic law) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, people with leprosy were considered to transmit uncleanness by touch, but we do not have enough evidence to say for certain whether this view held in Jesus' day.

**MISREPRESENTATION 4 NOTES:**

- It is worth noting that in Mark's version of the story, after Jesus commands the man to present himself to the priests, the man instead goes out and starts telling the people what Jesus has done (Mk 1:45). Skipping the purification rites would be very odd behavior if the man's leprosy had excluded him from society and he needed purification to reintegrate.