

THE HEALING OF THE BLIND MAN IN JOHN

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ABSTRACT

John's healing narratives are all presented as *semeia* or spiritual signs in the Gospel. It therefore always has two levels of meaning: the one level narrates a biological and socio-cultural healing act, and at the same time the narrative functions as a vehicle to illustrate 'divine' truths in John's Gospel – revealing the true identity of Jesus, with the purpose that those who read these signs, will eventually believe that Jesus is the son of God and thereby receive eternal life (John 20:30–31). In this article we will discuss the healing narrative in John 9 where Jesus heals not only the physical blindness of the blind man, but also his spiritual blindness. It will also be illustrated how this narrative functions as a *semeion* or Johannine sign, designed to lead readers to spiritual healing in John's narrative world. Finally the implications of Jesus' engagement with those on the fringes of society will be discussed against the background of the rise of Christianity in Africa.¹

Keywords: healing, restoration, blind man, John 9:1–41.

1 INTRODUCTION: THE RELEVANCE AND NEED FOR READING THE BIBLE IN AFRICA

The gravity of Christianity is shifting southward. By 2050, according to Jenkins², there will be more Christians in Africa than in Europe. According to the World Disability

1 The research done for this article was part of the doctoral research of the author of this article, cf. Jacobus Kok, 'Siekte en Gebrokenheid teenoor Genesing en Restourasie in Johannes' (Ph.D. diss., University of Pretoria, 2008).

2 See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press 2011), 2.

Report of 2011, 80% of the world's 180–220 million youth with some sort of disability are found in Africa, and these people are some of the most vulnerable and at risk to be victims of HIV and AIDS, poverty, unemployment and marginalization.³ This is confirmed by Groce⁴ who postulates that 'individuals with disability are among the most stigmatized, poorest, and least educated of all the world's citizens.' In Africa, disability is not only a medical concern, but relates to social inequality and marginalization. Unfortunately, in Africa we see how people with disabilities and people with HIV and AIDS are marginalized from society, much like the blind and lame and the unclean were marginalized in the first-century Mediterranean world.

The Jesus of the Gospels was a man with a heart for broken, vulnerable and marginalized people (Luk. 14:12–14). The teaching and acts of Jesus challenged the socio-religious system of his day and was aimed at bringing the kingdom of God and restoring wholeness in society. The dynamic relationship between the Church's mission and ethics finds its springboard in a renewed understanding of the Church's role as an agent of healing and restoration. In the future, scholars from Africa will have to face the challenge of reading the Bible in Africa, and to take part in the transformation of the symbolic world of Africa's understanding and handling of illnesses. Therefore, the pendulum will again shift to a fresh reading of the Gospels and hermeneutically applying the principles of scripture in an African context where illnesses like blindness are often still linked to sin and punishment.

2 BEWARE OF ETHNOCENTRISM

African and European readers of the Bible should be sensitive of the danger of anachronism and ethnocentrism,⁵ which could be described as 'the tendency to judge all other groups by one's own group'.⁶ In light hereof, Pilch warns that 'when people of one culture impose their interpretation of reality upon people of another culture, the result is both humorous and pitiful'.⁷

The medical-anthropological discipline developed after World War II (1938–1945), when Western physicians started *realizing* (and becoming *sensitive* to) the *discrepancy*

3 See <http://www.openforum.net/index.php/call-for-proposals/proposals-power/no-money-no-power-no-sex> cited 12 June 2012.

4 Nora E. Groce, 'HIV/AIDS and Individuals with Disability,' *Health and Human Rights* 8/2 (2005): 215–224.

5 The idea of *ethnocentrism* was conceptualized by William Graham Sumner of Yale University during the 1920s.

6 John Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 2.

7 Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, 2.

that exists between *Western* social values and healing practices and systems, and those of *other cultures* they came into contact with.⁸ Medical anthropologists have made us aware of (and sensitive to) the fact that the concepts of sickness and healing and their definition are relative to specific cultures. For this reason it is so important that modern interpreters of ancient documents must: (1) be aware of their own preconceptions, prejudices and social values; (2) understand the preconceptions and social values of other cultures and take this into account in the process of the interpretation of these ancient documents and their healing narratives.⁹

There is naturally a major difference between the modern Western worldview and culture and the worldview and culture of the ancient Mediterranean, the effect in this specific case being that the nature and treatment of the phenomena of sickness and healing differ greatly in many instances.¹⁰ When interpreting the Biblical accounts of healing, we should in other words refrain from interpreting it solely from a modern bio-medical point of view and miss the cultural depth and richness of the text.

8 For example any of the Eastern cultures, who have *very* different medical and cultural systems.

9 According to Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, 21 Western bio-medical practice is dependent upon (and embedded in) *modern scientific and technological infrastructure and instruments* and functions within the philosophical framework of the modern scientific worldview (*Weltanschauung*). If one were to open any standard medical textbook the introduction would already make it clear to you what is meant when talking about sickness from the Western bio-medical perspective: 'Pathology is the study of disease by scientific methods. Disease may, in turn, be defined as an abnormal variation in the structure or function of any part of the body. There must be an explanation of such variations from the normal – in other words, diseases have causes – and pathology includes not only observation of the structural and functional changes throughout the course of a disease, but also elucidation of the factors that cause (*aetiology*) of a disease that logical methods can be sought and developed for its prevention or cure. Pathology may thus be described as the scientific study of the causes and effects of disease.' Cf. Roddie MacSween and Keith Whaley, *Muir's Textbook of Pathology* (London: Arnold, 1992), xiii. Arthur M. Kleinman, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture* (California: University of California Press, 1980), 301 postulates: 'Bio-medicine is as much ideology as science. It is guided by Western cultural assumptions and thoroughly permeated with a particular theoretical and value orientation.' From within this modern Western paradigm questions unique to this scientific worldview (in which the bio-medical system currently functions) are primary.

10 Pieter F. Craffert, *Illness, Health and Healing in the New Testament World: Perspectives on Health Care* (Pretoria: Biblia, 1999), 16 argues that all sickness is in fact a culturally bound phenomenon; remarking that 'in present-day clinical situations between different cultures medical personnel find it extremely difficult to mediate between the patients' cultural version of complaints and their own medical training...the reason is all illnesses are coloured by culture'.

3 CURING OF A DISEASE OR HEALING OF AN ILLNESS?

For this very reason John Pilch¹¹ differentiates between the ‘*curing of a disease*’ and the ‘*healing of an illness*’ from a medical-anthropological perspective.¹² The first phrase traditionally functions within the sphere of the *Western bio-medical ideology*; whilst the second phrase functions within the sphere of *medical and cultural anthropology*.

Usually when the concept of ‘sickness’ is discussed, the Western bio-medical worldview is predominant, in my opinion therefore causing the interpreter seldom to consider the full implications of the idea of sickness and the socio-religious implications thereof. The result is that the healing acts of Jesus, in their cultural perspective, are often thought of in a reductionist way; meaning that the full implications of the healing act are not fully developed.

For example, when the text speaks of Jesus healing lepers, Westerners naturally and automatically think from within their Western bio-medical concept of healing.¹³ In this light it is not strange that conversations about Jesus’ acts of healing were either reduced to miracles that did not really take place, or elevated to the status of literal bio-medical (Western) healings in a fundamentalist way.¹⁴

The problem with this type of interpretation is that neither one of the two really does justice to the ancient Mediterranean concepts of sickness and healing, or fully develops the pregnant dynamic of sickness and healing. Pilch’s alternative concepts stimulated me into thinking differently about Jesus’ acts of healing.¹⁵ As already mentioned above,

11 Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, 21.

12 Craffert, *Illness, Health and Healing*, 2 remarks: ‘The result is that in such a cultural system it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish and separate, say, religion from politics or health care from religion. Such was the world of the New Testament.’ When thinking about the healing narratives in the New Testament, we must keep in mind that the term ‘sickness’ also had socio-religious implications. A biological pathology did not only entail biological and functional implications like it has today – it also affected people’s religious existence and status. The health care system must thus be examined in the context of the cultural matrix and not in isolation thereof.

13 According to Keir J. Howard, *Disease and Healing in the New Testament: An Analysis and Interpretation* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001), 3.

14 According to John Wilkinson, *The Bible and Healing: A Medical and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), Karl Barth (cf. *Church Dogmatics* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961], 369–371) was the first modern theologian to discuss ‘health and healing’. See also in this regard: Paul Tillich, ‘The Meaning of Health,’ in *Perspectives in Biology & Medicine* (Autumn, 1961), 5:92–100; ‘The Healing Power of the Spiritual Presence,’ in *Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (vol. 3 of *Systematic Theology*; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 293–300; and Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 270–275; *The Spirit of Life* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 188–192.

15 See Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, 21

medical anthropological thought on the subject makes a clear semantic differentiation between the ‘curing of a disease’ and the ‘healing of an illness’.¹⁶

Kleinman¹⁷ argues that the cultural system as a whole is involved in the process of healing, and not only the physician actually healing the sick person.¹⁸ For this reason the researcher must do both a macro- and micro-systemic analysis; in order to ascertain in what way small-scale events relate to the larger social structures and processes within the system as a whole (in the aforementioned three sectors). Socio-scientific criticism studies (amongst other things) the forming and conditioning factors and intentional consequences in the communication process; as well as the way in which a certain textual communication is a *reflection on*, and a *response to*, a certain social and cultural context.¹⁹

Through the use of these exegetical and social-scientific study methods on selected texts, it appears that Jesus²⁰ more often than not healed those that were believed to be unholy, impure, unclean and out-of-place in the Jewish temple-orientated system of the first century. What is interesting to note here is that Jesus was thus not necessarily healing those who had a ‘disease’ in the Western sense of the word; but also those who had an ‘illness’ in terms of the Jewish temple-orientated socio-religious system of the day.

16 See Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, and Wilkinson, *The Bible and Healing*, 1–2. According to Wilkinson, *The Bible and Healing*, 1 the term ‘healing’ only recently began appearing in theological textbooks. He also points to the fact that this term ‘healing’ is not regarded highly or used positively in the bio-medical world, as physicians prefer to use the term ‘curing’ instead of ‘healing’ when talking about healing; and when the term ‘healing’ is used by physicians, it usually refers to ‘non-medical methods of treatment. Thus the term “healing” is used to describe therapies which may either replace or supplement orthodox methods’.

17 Arthur M. Kleinman, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture* (California: University of California Press, 1980), 72.

18 Leonard B. Glick, ‘Medicine as Ethnographic Category: The Gimi of the New Guini Highlands,’ *Ethnology* 6/1 (1967) showed that, if one were to identify any culture’s primary source(s) of power – whether it be political, social, mythological, religious, or technological – one would be able to draw conclusions on the causes and cures of ‘illness’.

19 See John H. Elliott, *What is Social Scientific Criticism?* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 1993),

20 In the quest for the historical Jesus, John’s material has been largely excluded. For the relationship between John’s Jesus and the historical Jesus, see Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus* (London: T&T Clark, 2006); *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011). Anderson is one of the founding members of the SBL research group that focuses on the question of history in John’s Gospel, which has been a neglected field hitherto.

The healing of such an illness (or unholy/impure/unclean person) in the ancient Mediterranean context is thus a particular social phenomenon,²¹ which can only be understood within the larger context or constellation of the social, economic, political, religious, and cultural factors. But because these factors form part of a larger social and cultural matrix they do not and cannot stand compartmentalized and in isolation from one another.

In the first-century Mediterranean context sickness was connected to the socio-religious concepts 'holy/pure' or 'unholy/impure', meaning that a bio-medical sickness thus often led to socio-religious marginalization (see e.g. Mark 1:40–45). Lepers had to let their hair grow long and had to stay outside the city whilst shouting 'unholy/impure!' as warning to others. Healing in this context would thus especially be about socio-religious restoration or healing, and not just the 'curing of a disease' as it functions and is meant today within the Western bio-medical paradigm.

In other words, some people who had been classified as 'unholy/impure', for example lepers, were marginalized by being pushed out of the socio-religious system (as seen in Mark 1:40–45). And since ancient society was group-orientated or dyadic, social marginalization was equal to a death sentence.²² Thus some sicknesses in this death-impurity category not only had negative biological implications, but negative socio-religious implications as well.

Pilch²³ calls this type of healing the 'healing of an illness'. Jesus seemed to have restored people and made them whole (healthy) because he always added a sense of purpose and meaning to their lives. Pilch²⁴ remarks that it is in this way that Jesus does the work of the One who sent him (according to John 5:19f.), and that it was these works that could be described as 'life-giving' and 'meaning restoring'.

It is thus of great importance that the Biblical exegete fully extrapolates and understands the socio-religious cartography and social dynamics of the first century. And it is indeed this dimension that will be discussed and worked out in further detail in the rest of this article.

21 Social phenomena here refer to the patterns and recurring human behaviours that develop as a response to social and cultural factors, leading to established social systems. It refers to patterns of behaviour that have become routine; that have been transferred and internalized through either primary or secondary socialization (See Elliott, *What is Social Scientific Criticism?* for more detail).

22 See Jacobus Kok and Ernest Van Eck, eds., *Unlocking the World of Jesus* (Pretoria: Biblaridion, 2011).

23 See Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, 134.

24 *Ibid.*, 134.

4 JOHN 9 AS A TEST CASE

In John 9 Jesus heals a man born blind in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles.²⁵ Here John draws many lines together. The references to the Jewish festivals in John 5–10 serves as a hermeneutical key. In each case, Jesus is held up as the fulfilment of the content being celebrated by that particular festival.²⁶ Certain rituals were performed during the Feast of Tabernacles – rituals for which the symbols of light, water and so on were important.²⁷ As such, Jesus reveals himself in John 7:37–39 as the ‘living water’, and in John 8:12 and 9:5 as the ‘light for the world’, and performs immediately thereafter a healing act where he makes a blind man see (John 9).²⁸ This narrative functions on two levels: On the one hand, from a socio-religious point of view and on the other hand it serves as a Johannine *semeion*, pointing to the greater truths of John’s Gospel that wants to illustrate that Jesus is the Son of God, and that people who come to realize that might receive spiritual life.

5 SENSITIVITY TO THE MARGINALIZED?

The Jesus of the Gospels was sensitive to outsiders and often reached out to the marginalized. One thinks of Luke 15, or Mark 1:40–45. Through his healing acts, Jesus challenged the established socio-religious structures by breaking through socio-religious boundaries. In this way he created an alternative symbolic universe, which then leads to the creation of new social and religious values. Those who were on top are now below, those who were out, like the Samaritan woman, are now those who are in. In his miraculous transformational interaction with marginalized people, Jesus created and shaped new possibilities for life in the ancient Mediterranean world of the first century. Jesus’ way of interacting with marginalized people eventually became a characteristic

25 Thematically speaking, the healing narrative in John 9:5 is joined to the Feast of Tabernacles (John 8:12), see Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991), 359. Furthermore, it takes place against the background of the culminating challenges posed to Jesus by the Jews (John 8:12–59), see Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 324. This interpretation makes it clear that chapter 9 builds on the content of chapters 7–9. Chapter 9, in turn, flows over into the Shepherd motif of chapter 10, where a sharp contrast is sketched between the good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (10:11; See Klaus Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium: Kapitel 1–10* [Stuttgart: Kolhammer, 2000], 384–385) and the Jewish leaders (8:44); see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco, Texas: Word, 1999), 324 and Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 359).

26 William R. G. Loader, *Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 484–485.

27 Loader, *Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law*, 96–97.

28 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1966), 376.

feature of the early Christians who followed the way of Jesus, and continued the *Sache Jesu*.

The question is if John is also implicitly linking to this *Sache Jesu* of this Jesus, who reaches out to the marginalized? Certainly, in John, Jesus reaches out to the socio-religiously marginalized Samaritan woman at the well – he reaches out to the wrong woman, at the wrong time of day in the wrong place (cf. John 4:1–42). In John 5 Jesus heals and touches the life of a friendless man who was sick for 38 years – an absolute lifetime of social marginalization with no-one to even help him to get into the pool when the waters were stirred up. The same goes for the inserted John 8:1ff where Jesus steps in-between the angry mob, who caught a woman who committed adultery. John’s Jesus is sensitive to outsiders and outcasts –to those in a position of liminality. We find John’s Jesus in the margins of society, in those liminal spaces where God’s presence was least expected.

Here in John 9 we meet Jesus again, this time with a blind man. The only question is, is this in any way to be associated with a marginal place, a liminal space, an unclean person, socio-religiously marginalized? Some say yes, and some say no. And this is exactly where most social scientific New Testament and some prolific Old Testament scholarship are divided.

In my research on the topic I have come across basically two schools of thought that I would like to call the ‘Milgrom line of interpretation’ and the ‘early Douglas line of interpretation’.

6 MILGROM VERSUS DOUGLAS

6.1 Blindness and the Question of Holiness and Purity?

6.1.1 *The Douglas School*

Let me begin with the Douglas school of interpretation. According to the latter²⁹ Israel’s God was a God of order, as clearly seen in the creation of the world. The ancient Jews developed concentric maps of people, objects, places, times, etc. The human body was treated as one of the most important maps, ‘for it is a microcosm of the larger social macrocosm’.³⁰ Within the Jewish symbolic universe, everything has its place. Whatever

29 See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

30 Eugene Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrikson, 1991), 283: ‘We are invited, then, to consider a map of the body which replicates the map of society.’ This obviously refers to the concentric circles that move from less holy to more holy. The holiest point on the ‘map’ is in the centre of the concentric system and the least holy point is on the periphery.

is out of place, is deemed unclean. Sick people and sickness in general do not belong in the realm of those who are healthy. This explains why lepers lived outside city walls and had to yell 'Unclean!' whenever people came near.³¹ According to Neyrey,³² this also applied in a certain sense to those who were disabled, blind, deaf and cripple.³³

The concepts 'holy/pure' and 'unholy/impure' are fundamentally important in the context of the healing narratives found in the Biblical context. 'Unholiness/impurity' goes together with the person's experience of illness from a cultural perspective; and, in varying degrees of intensity, implied socio-religious marginalization. Neyrey³⁴ remarks in the same vein as Douglas,³⁵ that 'those with bodily defects such as the lame, the blind, and deaf are lacking wholeness according to Leviticus 21:16–20. Lacking bodily wholeness, they lack holiness/purity. Such may not be priests nor may they bring offerings into the holy temple'. Pilch³⁶ agrees with this, remarking that 'wholeness finds vivid expression in terms of the human body. One aspect of the "holy/pure" body is that it must be bodily whole; blemished, maimed, or defective bodies lack wholeness and are disqualified from the presence of God (Lev. 21:17–20)'.³⁷ Pilch refers to further examples of such cases of 'brokenness': the lame (according to John 5:6–15; and 7:23); and the man with the crippled or deformed hand (Matt. 12:13). Pilch³⁸ then interprets the significance of Jesus' acts of healing as follows: 'His miracles, then, make whole by restoring which was lost...' The implication is that the man born blind in John was an impure person, with the inherent potential to contaminate others, much like the modern-day Dalit in India, those like the blind who are ostracized and marginalized, the untouchables in society. I recall the story of Professor Maake Masango at the University

31 Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, 128.

32 Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 82, 285.

33 In this context, Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 111 also say: 'These people without social standing (we could see them as the 'poorest') lived just outside the city walls or along the hedgerows of adjacent fields.'

34 Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 285.

35 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

36 John Pilch, *Introducing the Cultural Context of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 205.

37 Leviticus 21:17–20: ¹⁶'The LORD spoke to Moses, ¹⁷'Tell Aaron: If any of your descendants (now or in future generations) has a physical defect, he must never bring food to offer to God. ¹⁸Indeed, no one who has a physical defect may ever come near the altar. That means anyone who is blind or lame, who has a disfigured face, a deformity, ¹⁹or a crippled hand or foot, ²⁰who is a hunchback or dwarf, who has defective sight, skin diseases, or crushed testicles.''

38 Pilch, *Cultural Context of the New Testament*, 205.

of Pretoria, who in his contact with the Dalits tell the story of the blind pregnant woman who was led by a young boy. The woman wanted water and the boy took the woman to a tap near a temple. Knowing that she could contaminate the tap, she asked the boy to give her a banana leaf so that she could use that to drink the water. Some men suddenly came up to the Dalit woman and beat her up badly, to such an extent that she eventually lost the baby. The reason is that the woman was out of place, a source of contamination and deserved punishment.

6.1.2 *The Milgrom School*

In contrast to the presuppositions and preconceptions of most contemporary social-scientific New Testament interpretation (following Douglas; Neyrey; Pilch; Kok and Van Eck, Milgrom argues that Douglas had it all wrong, and that all who follow her lead is completely on the wrong path.³⁹ Milgrom makes a strong case for the fact that the ancient Jews did not marginalize individuals socio-religiously on the grounds of physical disabilities, such as being lame or blind (cf. Lev. 19). Milgrom⁴⁰ argues that definite distinctions need to be made between the following two categories: ‘holy’ and ‘common’ over and against ‘unclean’ and ‘clean’. Milgrom⁴¹ refers to Leviticus 21:17–20 when postulating that:

A blemished animal or priest is not impure but common (‘hol’). As for the prohibition against the blemished in the sanctuary, it only applies to priests officiating in the sanctuary and to animals offered on the altar. By contrast, any blemished Israelite – priest and lay person alike – may enter the sacred precincts and offer his sacrifices.

According to Milgrom⁴², the Jews only believed those objects or persons showing signs of so-called ‘death-impurities’ to be ‘unholy/impure’. According to him, the following cases were believed to be (or labelled as) ‘death impurities’: dead objects and the places where they had been, semen, blood, skin diseases, open wounds, etc. So any object that reminded the Jews of the sphere of death, were believed to be ‘unholy/impure’. From this Milgrom argues that neither the blind nor the lame were associated with ‘death-impurities’, and therefore could not be classified as being in an unholy/impure state of being. According to him the lame or the blind would thus not have been labelled as ‘unholy/impure’, but only as ‘common’. From this it becomes clear that, in

39 Jacob Milgrom, ‘Leviticus 1–16,’ *ABD*: 1001–1002. Cf. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*; Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts*; Pilch, *Cultural Context of the New Testament*; Kok and Van Eck, *Unlocking the World of Jesus*.

40 Milgrom, ‘Leviticus 1–16,’ 1001.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 1002.

current research and literature, there are at least two major lines of interpretation that exhibit small nuanced differences. But these small nuanced differences have serious implications when it comes to interpreting the healing narratives in John.

6.2 John's Healing Narratives as Examples of Jesus Restoring Marginalized People

The healing narratives to be found in John have to do with certain realities pertaining to sickness – such as being paralysed (see John 5), and being blind (see John 9) – both examples of the important socio-religious implications that the reality of sickness brought about. It is clear from the literature study that scholars such as Milgrom and others such as Douglas, Neyrey, Pilch and Malina differ from each other when it comes to understanding sickness – such as blindness and paralysis – and their relation to 'holiness/purity' and 'unholiness/impurity' as well as the socio-religious implications thereof.⁴³

43 In this context I maintain the preconception that those that had physical disabilities (such as being paralysed or blind) experienced socio-religious marginalization in some form or another in the context of the first century's temple-orientated Judaism. I am of the opinion that the stories of healing found in John are excellent examples thereof; for example: John refers to a man that has been blind for 38 years who does not even have someone to put him into the water of the fountain. In a group-orientated or dyadic culture he is someone without any family or friends – thus someone on the very edge of society. This man's disability is believed to be because of sin, as sin and unholiness/impurity go hand in hand. But after he has been healed, he is banned by the socio-religious leaders of the day – the ones who embody and instigate the socio-religious process of marginalization. In the same way Lazarus' sickness leads to death – the culminating marginalizing reality. Milgrom 'Leviticus 1–16,' 1001 refers to this as 'death-impurity'. Jesus restores Lazarus' life to him, along with the many possibilities that life brings. In this same context the negative reaction of the socio-religious representatives is described – they plan to have both Lazarus and Jesus killed. Thus it appears as if the reality of socio-religious marginalization plays a decisive role in the Gospel of John. Over and against the negative socio-religious attitude of some Judaistic groups, Jesus comes to create qualitative life-giving possibilities and to overcome all estrangement between man and God through the establishment of his family on earth (according to John 1:12). In John Jesus thus opens the sluices of heaven, building a bridge between man and God and reconciling God and man, gathering God's family on earth. Interesting to note here is that the word for reconciliation is never used in the Gospel of John; the word ἰλασμός (reconciliation) is found in Johannine literature, in 1 John 2:2. The preconceptions that have been described above thus have to be either verified or falsified in the rest of this work.

7 EXEGESIS OF JOHN 9

7.1 Context

In John 9 Jesus heals a man born blind. Thematically speaking, the healing narrative in John 9 (9:5) is joined to the Feast of Tabernacles (John 8:12).⁴⁴ The references to the Jewish festivals in John 5–10 serves as a hermeneutical key to interpret the healing narrative. In each case, Jesus is held up as the fulfilment of the content being celebrated by that particular festival.⁴⁵ Certain rituals were performed during the Feast of Tabernacles – rituals for which the symbols of light, water and so on were important.⁴⁶ As such, Jesus reveals himself in John 7:37–39 as the ‘living water’, and in John 8:12 and 9:5 as the ‘light for the world’, and performs immediately thereafter a healing act where he makes a blind man see (John 9).⁴⁷ This interpretation makes it clear that chapter 9 builds on the content of chapters 7–9.⁴⁸

In John’s Gospel the author creates a particular symbolic world and several networks of associative dimensions that create a web of meaning in which the healing narratives could be interpreted. This will also help us to sail between the Milgrom school and the Douglas school, and try to see what implicit associations John is actually making that would help us in discerning the implicit values and connotations John had with blindness. One such word, that immediately draws our attention to a whole network of other associative terms is ἔργα, which up to this point in the gospel, has been closely related to the term σημεῖον.⁴⁹ In 9:16, the current act of healing is explicitly placed within the framework of the σημεῖα. This is achieved against the background of Jesus’ statement that he must do the works (τὰ ἔργα) of God, or the one who sent him (ἔργα τοῦ πέμψαντός με) while it is still day (cf. 9:4: ἡμᾶς δεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι τὰ ἔργα τοῦ πέμψαντός με ἕως ἡμέρα ἐστίν·

44 Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 359. Furthermore, it takes place against the background of the culminating challenges posed to Jesus by the Jews (John 8:12–59), see Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 324.

45 Loader, *Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law*, 484–485.

46 Mark W.G. Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 96–97.

47 See Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 376. He refers to the pool of Siloam and the role it played during water ceremonies at the feast. The theme of light and darkness is similarly developed in 9: 4–5 – themes that played an important role during the Feast of Tabernacles.

48 Chapter 9, in turn, flows over into the Shepherd motif of chapter 10, where a sharp contrast is sketched between the good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (10:11; See Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 384–385) and the Jewish leaders who not only cling to the lie of their father, the devil, but also, reveal themselves as murderers (8:44), see Beasley-Murray, *John*, 324. Chapter 10 takes place against the background of the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple (10:22), see Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 359).

49 Cf. Willis H. Salier, *The Rhetorical Impact of the Semeia in the Gospel of John* (WUNT 2/186; Tübingen: Mohr, 2004), 111–112.

ἔρχεται νῦν ὅτε οὐδεὶς δύναται ἐργάζεσθαι). In all of the previous healing acts, it is clear that the works of God (ἔργα τοῦ πέμψαντός με) has, up to now, been related to recreation from existential situations associated with ‘death’ and the loss of life potentialities.⁵⁰ The question is whether or not this connection also presently comes to the fore. In the first place, we will have to argue that we are presently dealing with an existential situation indicative of ‘death’, impurity and marginalization; and in the second place, it will have to be illustrated that Jesus created life out of this existential situation and restored the person and the situation to wholeness and recreated life possibilities.

7.2 Blindness as a Result of Sin?

In this healing narrative, it is Jesus who acts as the subject and initiates both the interaction with the blind man and the resultant healing act. As Jesus was walking away or past (παράγων) he saw (εἶδεν) a man (ἄνθρωπον) who had been blind (τυφλόν) since birth (ἐκ γενετῆς).⁵¹ The disciples’ first reaction was to ask: Who sinned?⁵² (τίς ἥμαρτεν [cf. 9:2]). However, Jesus breaks the logical link between illness and sin: The ἵνα construction refers to the purpose or result of the illness: The man was born blind *so that* (ἵνα) the works of God (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ) could be revealed or made visible (φανερωθῆ)⁵³ in him (ἐν αὐτῷ).⁵⁴ The man’s blindness was an ideal opportunity for Jesus to use him in order to illustrate God’s power⁵⁵ and reveal his true identity. In John, God reveals his works to Jesus (5:20; see also 3:21; 5:20, 36; 6:28; 7:3, 21; 10:25, 37), meaning that whatever Jesus does, he has learnt from the Father (8:28). As we saw, these works are defined in John 5:21 as the granting of life,⁵⁶ something he could only have received from the Creator-God.⁵⁷

50 See Jacobus Kok, ‘Siekte en Gebrokenheid teenoor Genesing en Restourasie in Johannes.’

51 Robert Kysar, *John* (ACNT; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 148.

52 Chrysostom (*Hom. Io. 56.1*) opines that the question in 9:2 is bound up with 5:14’s μηκέτι ἡμαρτανε. Conversely, Augustine (*Tract. Ev. Io.44.1*) is of the opinion that the blind man represents the entire sinful world, which has been caught up in spiritual blindness since birth, thanks to Adam’s transgression. He holds that the blind man and his parents probably did sin, seeing as it is human to sin, but argues that their transgressions were not in this case the cause of this man’s blindness (*Tract. Ev. Io.44.3*).

53 Verb: Aorist, Subjunctive, Passive of φανερώω.

54 Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 362.

55 See Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 281 and Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 362.

56 Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995 [1974]), 426.

57 Köstenberger, *John*, 281 is therefore correct in saying: ‘The OT and Second Temple literature concur that raising the dead and giving life are prerogatives of God’ (cf. Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6; 2 Kgs. 5:7; Tob. 13:2). In other words, if Jesus has the ability to grant life, He could only have received it from God.

The disciples' question, however, is asked from the perspective of the Jewish temple-oriented symbolic universe, according to which blindness was connected to sin (cf. the sentence structure ἵνα τυφλὸς γεννηθῆ) (cf. also Šabb. 55a).⁵⁸ Craffert⁵⁹ rightly notes: 'In Jewish culture a close connection between sickness and sin can be seen from the earliest times' (cf. 2 Kgs. 5; Deut. 28:15, 20; Cf. *Cant. Rab.* 1.6 §3; *Ruth Rab.* 6.4; *Tg. Ps.-J.* Deut.21:20).⁶⁰ The rationale behind the connection between illness and sin comes from the preconception that God is holy and whole, the God of life.⁶¹ Illnesses and diseases are often linked to impurity and brokenness and seen as the exact opposite of wholeness and life. Impurity, in turn, is connected to sin. As also quoted above, Neyrey⁶² remarks: 'Those with bodily defects such as the lame, the blind and the deaf are lacking wholeness according to Lev 2:16–20. Lacking bodily wholeness, they lack holiness.'⁶³ If someone occupies an impure state, it serves as a sign that God has in some sense withdrawn from the person. Sick people, like the blind, were socio-religious fringe figures, who usually had to beg in order to survive.⁶⁴

58 See Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 332 and Mark Edwards, *John* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 99.

59 Craffert, *Illness, Health and Healing*, 97.

60 See Kysar, *John*, 148; Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium: Kapitel 1–10* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2005), 457; Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Society, 1980), 299; Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1924), 529; see also Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 456–457 and Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 366; see also Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 529 refer to the commentary from the *Midrash* and *Talmud* that relates physical brokenness ('körperliche Gebrechen') to sin: 'Ganz geläufig aber ist den altjüdischen Gelehrten die andre Vorstellung gewesen, dass körperliche Gebrechen der Kinder auf Versündigungen der Eltern zurückzuführen seien.'

61 Köstenberger, *John*, 30.

62 Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 285.

63 *Ibid.*, 283: 'The human body constitutes one of the most important maps, for it is a microcosm of the larger social macrocosm.'

64 Köstenberger, *John*, 281.

7.3 Blindness as an Associative Category of Death

The link made by Jewish thought between blindness and sin (See Lev. 26:26; Deut. 28:28–29; 28:6; Zeph. 1:17; 12:4; Job 11:20; 17:5; 21:17) was also in ancient times linked⁶⁵ to the category of death.⁶⁶

The chorus of Oedipus reads ‘You are better off dead, than living with blindness’ [my own translation] (Sophocles, *Oed. tyr.* 1367; cf. also Seneca, *Oed.* 949; *Phoen.* 179; and

65 Salier, *Rhetorical Impact of the Semeia*, 115 agrees and states: ‘The blind were usually considered as to be unfortunate, helpless and worthless (Philo, *Ebr.* 155–6; *Fug.* 123; *Mos.* 1.123–26). They could go nowhere without a guide (Sophocles, *Ant.* 989; Apuleius, *Metam.* 8.12) and required the protection of others (Job 29:15). The blind and the lame were almost proverbially related to ineffectual weakness and dependency (2 Sam. 5:6; Jer. 31:8). They are likely to be beggars (Diogenes Laertius, *Vita* 6.56), *as good as corpses* (Philo, *Spec.* 4.202), driven to despair and suicide (Philo, *Sobr.* 4; *Virt.* 11.1).’

66 Philo notes in *Spec.* 4.202: ‘It seems to me that these men would not spare even the dead, in the extravagance of their cruelty, but, according to the proverb so commonly quoted, would even slay the slain over again, since they in a manner think fit to insult and ill-treat those members of them which are already dead; for eyes which do not see are dead, and ears which are devoid of the power of hearing are devoid of life; so that if the man himself to whom these members belong, were to be extinct, they would then show their merciless and implacable nature, doing no humane or compassionate action, such as is shown to the dead, even by their enemies in irreconcilable wars. And this may be enough to say on this subject.’ (Yonge). In *Virt.* 11–12, Philo notes: ‘But the number of such men is small, for virtue is not a thing frequently met within the race of men: (11) but since no perfect antidote or remedy can be found for the mutilation of the outward senses, by which thousands and thousands of persons have died prematurely while still living, prudence, that best of all qualities within us, sets itself against it to prevent it, implanting eyes in our intellect, which, by reason of its sagacious capacity, are altogether and entirely superior in acuteness of vision to the eyes of the body: (12) for these last see only the surfaces of the things presented to them, and require light from without to enable them to do that, but the intellect penetrates into the inmost recesses of bodies, closely surveying and investigating the whole of them, and each separate part, and also the natures of those incorporeal things, which the external senses are unable to contemplate at all.’ (Yonge).

also; Apuleius, *Metam.* 8.12).⁶⁷ Even in Jewish scripture, blindness is often associated with disorientation and ‘death’ (cf. Isa. 59:9–10: עִוְיוֹתָם; Lam.3:1–2, 6⁶⁸ also Tob. 3:6).⁶⁹

In later Rabbinical writings⁷⁰ (cf. *Gen. Rab.* 71.6), we see that certain groups of people (lepers; the blind, the barren and the poor) and their existential situations are explicitly linked to the category of death. Instone-Brewer⁷¹ quotes other Rabbinical writings (cf. *m.Ter.* 1.6 probably after 70 C.E. – cf. *m.Ter.* 1.1) to argue that the mute, drunk, nude, blind and sexually impure were not allowed to bring sacrifices⁷² (cf. also 11Q19 XLIII–XLV under col. XLV(=11Q20 XI–XII)).⁷³ It is clear from the Qumran texts that the blind were, on a religious level, thought of as inferior and were prohibited from entering the temple, the symbol of God’s divine presence. Blindness and paralysis are often referred to in the same contexts, as if they were on the same categorical level (cf. also Matt. 15:30; 21:14; Luk. 14:21). 11Q19 XLIII–XLV under col. XLV(=11Q20 XI–XII) explicitly relates blindness

67 These primary sources were originally cited by Salier, *Rhetorical Impact of the Semeia*, 115. Cf. also Peter G. Bolt, ‘Do you care that we are perishing? Jesus’ Defeat of Death and Mark’s Early Readers’ (Kings College, 1997), 201.

68 Cf. Salier, *Rhetorical Impact of the Semeia*, 115. Contra Ulrich Berges, *Klaaglieder* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 2002), 188–189.

69 Carey A. Moore, *Tobit* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1996), 140. Tobit buried a corpse and, because he was impure, slept against the courtyard wall. According to Tobit 2:10, sparrows’ warm droppings fell into his open eyes while he was lying there. As a result, his eyes were filled with ‘whiteness’ and he became blind. Tobit 3:3–5 gives the impression that Tobit, in his prayer to God, harboured the preconception that blindness and sin are related. In Tobit 3:6, he says that it would be better for him to die than to continue living. The reason for this was that he was the victim of false allegations against him, causing him a fair bit of humiliation. Jan G. Van der Watt and Francois Tolmie, *Apokriewe Ou en Nuwe Testament: Verlore Boeke uit die Bybelse Tyd* (Vereeniging: Christelike Uitgewers Maatskappy, 2005), 42 translate the last portion of Tobit 3:6 as follows: ‘Gee tog opdrag dat ek uit hierdie krisis loskom en laat my na my ewige blyplek gaan.’ Tobit was in all likelihood written between 225 and 175 B.C.E.

70 Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis. A New American Translation* (3 vols.; Brown Judaic Studies 106; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

71 David Instone-Brewer, *Prayer and Agriculture* (vol. 1 of *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 264.

72 The blind were not allowed to bring sacrifices because they did not possess the ability to choose the best sacrifices for God (cf. *m.Ter.* 2.6).

73 Florentino G. Martínez and Eibert J. G. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2000)

directly to socio-religious impurity and contamination.⁷⁴ In other words, blindness was perceived as a socio-religious state of being from which liberation was not possible. These concepts are not alien to the Old Testament.⁷⁵ In 2 Samuel 5:8, for example, we read that the blind were restricted from accessing the temple.

Thus, John here makes use of an extreme situation of existential crisis and death to illustrate that the Son is indeed the source of life. That we have to do here with such an extreme existential situation is strengthened by the fact that ‘The giving of sight to the congenitally blind is almost without precedent.’⁷⁶

7.4 The Spiritual Blindness of the Blind Man

In some sense, sin is radically redefined in John. Those who do not believe in Jesus are the ones who have not yet crossed from an existential state of spiritual death to an existential state of spiritual life (cf. 5:24; cf. also 8:21: καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀμαρτίᾳ ὑμῶν ἀποθανεῖσθε).⁷⁷ Thus, the man is not only blind on a biological level, but by implication also blind on a spiritual level, seeing as he knows neither Jesus nor the Father (8:19: ἐμὲ οἴδατε οὔτε τὸν πατέρα μου· εἰ ἐμὲ ἤδείτε, καὶ τὸν πατέρα μου ἂν ἤδειτε) and occupies

74 In 11Q19 XLIII–XLV under Col. XLV(=11Q20 XI–XII), it says: ‘But they shall not enter my temple with their soiled impurity and defile it. (11). *Blank*. And a man who lies with his wife and has an ejaculation, for three days shall not enter the whole city of (12) the temple in which I shall cause my name to dwell. *Blank*. No blind person (13) shall enter in *all their days*, and they shall not defile the city in whose midst I dwell (14) because I, YHWH, dwell in the midst of the children of Israel for ever and always’ (Martínez and Tigschelaar [Cursive mine]).

75 Nevertheless, the post-exilic 2 Esd. 2:20–23 clearly makes a case for protecting the blind, the fatherless, the poor, the orphans, the widows, etc., possibly because of their frailty:²⁰ ‘Do right to the widow, judge for the fatherless, give to the poor, defend the orphan, clothe the naked,²¹ heal the broken and the weak, laugh not a lame man to scorn, defend the maimed, and let the blind man come into the sight of my clearness.²² Keep the old and young within thy walls.²³ Wheresoever thou findest the dead, take them and bury them, and I will give thee the first place in my resurrection’ (*The Apocrypha King James Version*). Yet, this is not sufficient evidence that the blind were not impure or that blindness did not carry negative socio-religious associations. Many other biblical and extra-biblical texts clearly betray such negative associations, as has been argued. In my view, it was precisely the fragility of these existential situations, the socio-religious problems associated therewith and the horrid treatment of these individuals that prompted the appeal in 2 Esd. 2. Esdras longed to leave Babylon for Jerusalem and work on the restoration of Israel.

76 Salier, *Rhetorical Impact of the Semeia*, 116. See also Felix N. W. Just, ‘From Tobit to Bartimaeus – From Qumran to Siloam: The Social Role of Blind People and Attitudes toward the Blind in New Testament Times’ (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1997), 153 where the role of blind people during New Testament times and the socio-religious attitudes towards them is investigated.

77 Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 345.

a sinful existential state, characterized by spiritual death and blindness.⁷⁸ According to John, Jesus came precisely for this reason: to heal the spiritually blind (9:41; 12:40–41), who are still ruled by sin (8:21, 24, 34–36) and controlled by their father, the devil (8:44). In the course of the narrative and the forensic court case, it becomes clear that the Jews are labelling Jesus as a sinner (9:24). The Jewish opponents in John betray a lack of insight when they fail to comprehend this life-creating act of Jesus. Their conduct – calling the healed man a sinner and casting him out – makes this clear (9:34).

7.5 Agent of Transformation: Jesus Does the Work of God as Sender

From the perspective of the writings of ancient Judaism, it was clearly expected that the Messiah would be the one to (metaphorically⁷⁹) open the eyes of the blind. Salier⁸⁰ is correct when he says that ‘the literal opening of the eyes of a blind person could easily be seen to fulfil the metaphorical sense of the statement in Isaiah 42. A sign of the restoration of Israel in the second exodus as described in Isaiah will be the opening of the eyes of the blind (Isa. 29:18; 35:5)’, an exclusive prerogative of the Creator-God (cf. Isa. 35:5; 29:18; Ps. 146:8). As argued earlier on, there was an expectation that the very same Messiah who would come to save, would also heal people and bring about restoration (cf. Isa. 42:6–7). Thus, if Jesus is able to let the blind see, it inextricably links him to God, in that only God can perform such deeds. This reveals the fact the Jesus must be from God⁸¹.

The doing of God’s works is naturally linked to the sending of Jesus. Van der Watt⁸² sensitizes us for the implication of the Son’s mission: The mission of Jesus correlates to ancient conventions with regard to the sending of an agent by a sender. As the Agent who was sent, the Son represents the Father. He duplicates the works he saw and learnt from God. That is why Jesus says: δεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι τὰ ἔργα τοῦ πέμψαντός με. Jesus says

78 Cf. 5:24; Köstenberger, *John*, 281 agrees and says: ‘Lacking Light, he also lacks life in the Johannine sense.’

79 Cf. Deut. 28:65; Zeph. 1:17; Zech. 12:4; Job 11:20; 17:5; 21:17; Ps. 69:23; Prov. 13:9; 20:20; 24:19–20.

80 Salier, *Rhetorical Impact of the Semeia*, 117.

81 Isaiah 35:5–6 can be translated as follows: ⁵‘Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert’ (NIV). Already in John 3:2, Nicodemus notices: οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας διδάσκαλος· οὐδεὶς γὰρ δύναται ταῦτα τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἢ σὺ ποιεῖς, ἐὰν μὴ ἦ ὁ θεὸς μετ’ αὐτοῦ. Hence, the healing acts of Jesus are prominent signs that illustrate his close relationship with the Father (cf. 1:18; 5:19–21; see Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 191; Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 277). This means that the healings as *semeia* play a crucial role in illustrating who Jesus is (cf. Isa. 35:5–6)

82 Jan G. Van der Watt, *Family of the King* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

that, as long as he is still in the world, he is the Light for the world: ὅταν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ᾧ, φῶς εἰμι τοῦ κόσμου (9:5). Light and life⁸³ are connected to one another in the Gospel.⁸⁴ In other words, Jesus says that while he, as the Light of the world, is still here on earth, the source of life is visible and close to humanity, and that they must grab hold of it. Therefore, it is this light, acting as an agent of transformation and source of life (1:4), who can heal the blindness of humanity holistically.

7.6 The Healing Act as (Re)creation

Directly after Jesus' declaration that he is the light for the world, he spat (ἔπτυσεν) on the ground (χαμαί),⁸⁵ made clay (ἐποίησεν πηλόν) and rubbed (ἐπέχρισεν) it on the blind man's eyes (τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς). He then told the man to go ("Ὑπαγε) wash (νίψαι) himself in the pool (εἰς τὴν κολυμβήθραν) of Siloam (τοῦ Σιλωάμ). In the context of the Feast of Tabernacles, the pool of Siloam played a very important role, since that was the place from where the water to be used in the rituals was sourced (cf. *m. Sukk.* 4.9–10).⁸⁶ The man went (ἀπῆλθεν) in obedience and washed (ἐνίψατο) himself.⁸⁷ With this act of faith, a divine act of transformation, a miracle, occurred:⁸⁸ the man immediately received the restoration or recreation of his sight (ἤλθεν βλέπων).⁸⁹ It is therefore clear that faith plays an important role in this healing narrative and that healing occurs without the man being able to physically see Jesus. The reader is reminded of the statement Jesus made to the nobleman in John 4:48: ἐὰν μὴ σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα ἴδητε, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε. There we saw Jesus speaking life-creating words, and that the man had to return to the deadly crisis situation in faith alone, without immediately having seen the miracle transpire. In the same way, Jesus is here depicted as speaking life-creating words that hold the promise of recreation and restoration. Just like the nobleman, the blind man also had faith in the words of Jesus – words that promise to effect recreation. With this, the author creates the impression with the reader that the words of Jesus contain life-creating power, and that those who believe the words of Jesus will indeed see results. It is the words of Jesus that create life, but also his ability to physically (re)create life that illustrates the truth behind those words (cf. 10:21). As such, the content of what Jesus says must be taken seriously (cf. 8:31, 37, 47, 51; 10:21; 12:47, 48; 14:10, 23, 24).

83 Malina, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 170 says: 'Light is also associated with life. When Jesus is saying he is the "light of the world", he is saying both that he enables Israel to see the way things really are and that he is likewise the source of Israel's life.'

84 Ibid., 170.

85 See Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 335; Malina, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 170; Craffert, *Illness, Health and Healing*, 102–103.

86 Newman, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, 301.

87 Charles K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 359.

88 Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 335.

89 Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 365.

7.7 The Healing as a Sign of Restoration and Recreation

Against the background of the fact that the man was born blind, the healing act can, in my view, be understood within the framework of recreation, seeing as he receives sight and life, which he never had before. Against the backdrop of the fact that blindness was categorically associated with death, Jesus can here be depicted as the true source of life (cf. 8:12). Jesus, as the living light (1:4; 8:12), meets the man in the midst of an existential situation indicative of death, darkness and the loss of life potential. Jesus transforms the crisis situation and heals the man by giving ‘life’ to his ‘dead eyes’. He brings light and sight into existence by, not unlike the Creator-God, speaking a word. In my view, the symbols of light, life (cf. 8:12) and clay in this context calls to mind the creation story. Associatively, light is linked to the first entity created by God (cf. Gen. 1:3), and clay to the creation of man (cf. Gen. 2:6–7; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.15.5). Light, as an essential part of the Son, is already in the prologue connected with the motifs of life and creation, and further strengthened against the background of the meaning of the Tabernacle feast (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.15.5).⁹⁰ In this festival, the image of light also plays an important role. Within the context of the Feast of Tabernacles, it is clear that 9:5 is linked to 8:12.⁹¹ The connection between these verses (9:6–7) and the preceding verses are clear: ailments like blindness are categorically linked to death and inhibits life, as was argued above. The man’s blindness leaves him in physical darkness, with the result that he is unable to see. Because of his inability to see, much of his physical and socio-religious life possibilities are taken away. In ancient times, illness was more than just a biological disfunctionality. Illness had essential implications for social and religious functionality and life potential. Being a blind person, the man was a marginalized, a beggar – a social outcast. By healing the man, Jesus restores his life possibilities and socio-religious potentiality.

Moreover, Jesus heals the blind man on the Sabbath. According to the map of time, Sabbath was the holiest time. During holy times (e.g. the Sabbath), one encounters an intensified application of purity laws or maps of purity. No one was allowed to do (ἐργάζεσθαι) works (τὰ ἔργα) on the Sabbath. Jesus qualifies the healing act as ‘works’ of God and thereby implies that God also works on the Sabbath.⁹² These works are understood as the granting of life (cf. 5:19ff) and Jesus is depicted as simply breaking through all socio-religious boundary markers in order to restore this man.

90 Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 6–7; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 155; Edwards, *John*, 99; Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 336.

91 Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 336; Oscar Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle* (London: SCM, 1976); Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 380–382; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John: Commentary on Chapters 5–12* (trans. Cecily M. Hastings, Francis McDonagh, David Smith and Richard Foley; London: Burns & Oates, 1980), 257; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Schribner, 1955), 33.

92 William Hendrikson, *The Gospel of John* (Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth, 1976), 80–81.

Jesus is the light for the world. As we saw earlier, light was associated with life.⁹³ With the healing act, Jesus illustrates that he is indeed the light for the world and the source of life.⁹⁴ Jesus restores or recreates the man's sight and creates biological and socio-religious life possibilities for him.⁹⁵

8 THE BLIND MAN IS HEALED OF HIS SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

On a spiritual level, in John's narrative world, we know that unbelievers are in a deadly existential state and that they walk in darkness, seeing as they are spiritually blind (cf. 5:24). For all (theological) purposes, the blind man is, during his interaction with Jesus, also an unbeliever and spiritually blind and in a state of spiritual death.⁹⁶

In the course of the forensic court case and in his defence, the blind man's spiritual eyes progressively opens up, indicated chiefly by his answer to the Jews that Jesus is a prophet (προφήτης).⁹⁷ The Jews in John's Gospel (as antagonists) are depicted as the true children of the devil (cf. 8:44), who do not listen to the words of God. In reality, they are the ones who are spiritually blind. The Jews scolded (ἐλοιδόρησαν) the man and then branded him as a disciple of the one (Jesus) who had labelled them as sinners (9:28). From this point onwards, the man not only becomes an active witness to the works of God performed on him (9:30ff), but also develops his character into that of a teacher.⁹⁸ The Jews reacted harshly to this (9:34), declaring that the man was full of sin from birth (ἐν ἀμαρτίαις σὺ ἐγεννήθης ὄλος) and, without any hesitation, casting him out (ἐξέβαλον).

Jesus heard that the man was cast out (ἐξέβαλον), and when he found him (εὐρών), he asked him: 'Do you believe (πιστεύεις) in the Son of man⁹⁹ (εἰς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου) (9:35)? The man answered: Who is he, Lord, so that (ἵνα) I may believe

93 Malina, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 170 says: 'Light is also associated with life. When Jesus says he is the "light of the world" he is saying that he enables Israel to see the way things really are and that he is likewise the source of Israel's life.'

94 See Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 363; Köstenberger, *John*, 282.

95 Later on, we will see that Jesus did not just grant the man biological and socio-religious life possibilities, but also eschatological life possibilities within the family of God (cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 889).

96 Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 335 points out that it was not the man who initiated contact with Jesus. Jesus is the primary acting subject that initiates contact. There is no explicit mention of the role that faith plays in the healing narrative. Faith and confession only enter much later in the course of the narrative.

97 See Malina, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 172; Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 368; Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 345.

98 Köstenberger, *John*, 291.

99 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, 253–254 illuminates our understanding of the term Son of Man in this passage by reading it against the background of 12:31–36. In his view,

(πιστεύσω) in him (9:36)?' According to Schnackenburg,¹⁰⁰ Jesus is here intentionally leading the man to comprehensive faith in him. Jesus is the light for everyone who believes (12:35–36) and '...Jesus intends to give the man not just sight, but also "the light of life"...' ¹⁰¹ Indeed, Jesus himself is the light that gives life (1:4; 8:12). Jesus answers the man by saying: You have seen Him (ἑώρακας); and He who is talking to you, it is Him (9:37)! Jesus here reveals his true identity to the man in a manner that reminds one of Jesus' self-revelation to the Samaritan woman in John 4. With the (καὶ ... καὶ) construction, Jesus enables the man to see him for who he is. The perfect-tense ἑώρακας¹⁰² describes an experience that reaches into the present (cf. 14:7,9; 20:29), but that has been completed.¹⁰³ The man who used to be blind now sees Jesus standing in front of him, upon whom he whole-heartedly declares (ἔφη): 'I believe (πιστεύω), Lord!' And he started worshipping (προσεκύνησεν) Him (9:38).¹⁰⁴ The man here confesses his faith in Jesus. All of a sudden, the man is not only able to see biologically, but also spiritually.¹⁰⁵

Jesus' primary motive behind performing acts of healing in John is therefore not just to offer people biological and socio-religious life possibilities. Rather, Jesus primarily performs acts of healing to offer people eschatological life possibilities within the family of God. In the eyes of the Jews, the man might be a sinner, but in the eyes of Jesus, he is a child of God and part of the family of God (cf. 1:12; 3:3, 16) someone who has crossed over from death to life (5:24). Hence, the man looks different within the framework of the Universal Divine Narrative (UDN) in John. He has not only been restored physically, but especially also spiritually and in the eyes of God. Even if the man is rejected by the socio-religious system, the family of God offers him a new social network, which allows him the soteriological experience of re-socialisation, ultimately resulting in new existential potentialities.¹⁰⁶

Jesus is not in this case alluding to the Jewish expectation of the Son of Man. In Jewish thought, this figure was 'a heavenly bringer of salvation in the future', who was probably only known in certain (apocalyptic) circles (Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, 253). Jesus asks the man about his faith in the *present* Son of Man. John does link the title Son of Man to the One who will judge (9:39; see also 12:31), but this is not the dominant motif. In John, the title's primary function is to draw all people unto himself (12:32).

100 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, 253.

101 Ibid., 253.

102 Verb: Perfect, Indicative, Active of ὁράω. The imperfect indicates a matter that has been completed in the past. This is helpful, since the man had already seen Jesus, but had not yet fully seen Him on a spiritual level. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 349 is therefore correct in remarking that, only later on, the man would see on more than one level, both physically and spiritually.

103 Köstenberger, *John*, 294.

104 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, 254.

105 Ibid., 254.

106 Cf. Kok, 'Siekte en Gebrokenheid.'

9 REPRESENTATION OF REALITY: WHO IS REALLY BLIND?

Just like the other stories of healing in John, this narrative is a *semeion* that points toward a ‘greater’ spiritual truth: that Jesus, as the light of the world, heals the spiritually blind. In this healing narrative the tables are radically turned around. Those who thought they were in, are actually out – those who thought they were well, are actually spiritually ill. In 9:39, Jesus makes a hefty statement (9:39): ‘For judgment (κρίμα) I came into this world, so that those who do not see, may see (οἱ μὴ βλέποντες βλέπωσιν), and those who see (οἱ βλέποντες), may become blind (τυφλοὶ γένωνται). In other words, it is clear that the rhetoric and argumentation of the court case ultimately ends in a negative verdict regarding the unbelieving Jews’ spiritual state of being. The Jews cast the man out, even though he is the one who, in all fairness, argued his case correctly and truthfully (cf. 3:3). In the end, this proves, within the rhetoric of the court case, who is actually blind and who is not. According to John, the Jews argue that they are not blind (cf. 9:40: ἤκουσαν ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων ταῦτα οἱ μετ’ αὐτοῦ ὄντες καὶ εἶπον αὐτῷ· μὴ καὶ ἡμεῖς τυφλοὶ ἐσμεν;), but Jesus’ counterargument illustrates their blindness (cf. 9:41: εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς· εἰ τυφλοὶ ἦτε, οὐκ ἂν εἶχετε ἁμαρτίαν· νῦν δὲ λέγετε ὅτι βλέπομεν, ἡ ἁμαρτία ὑμῶν μένει). In terms of their relationship with God, they are actually the ones who are sick, spiritually blind and dead. Sickness is being reinterpreted in a spiritual way.

This is an important social element that comes to the fore at the end of chapter 9’s rhetoric. In Johannine thought, humans’ relationship with God is spiritually linked to the image of infirmity or, in this case, spiritual blindness. Unbelievers are spiritually sick – they are blind. Those who believe are ‘enlightened’ and have already moved across from a deadly existence to a lively state of being (cf. 5:24).¹⁰⁷ Those who faithlessly reject Jesus, are spiritually blind (9:39–41) and occupy an existential state of death and spiritual brokenness (12:40) and have already been judged (9:39).¹⁰⁸ In John, people who believe are spiritually ‘healed’ in that their spiritual blindness is restored to rightful

107 Malina, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 196 is right in saying: ‘The theme of light and darkness, day and night (vv. 9–10), replicates the larger concern about life and death in this chapter.’ Köstenberger, *John*, 188–189 in his discussion of 5:24, indicates that those who hear must believe, but does not make enough of the existential state of the ‘death’ non-believers occupy and believers’ consequent move toward ‘life’.

108 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, 255 postulates: ‘If anyone rejects the one sent by God, their unbelief becomes a judgement on them through their own guilt (3:18b; 12:48)... The man born blind has not just received the sight of his eyes, but sight in his believing heart, and those who outwardly see; in reality they are blind and are losing their ability to perceive spiritual and divine realities.’ This, however, does not contradict God’s love and justice toward the world (cf. 3:17; 8:15; 12:42). Cf. also Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 150.

sight.¹⁰⁹ Ridderbos¹¹⁰ is therefore correct when he notes: ‘For blindness is not limited to the body. One can gain physical sight and still remain blind (cf. 5:14).’ *This illustrates that the healing acts of Jesus should not only be understood as physical or biological healing. John allows for a broader understanding of the healing acts of Jesus to include also spiritual healing.*¹¹¹ At the end this is the focus of the healing narrative as *semeion*, namely that it wants to point beyond an instance where Jesus cures a disease, and transpose to the truth that Jesus wants to heal one’s spiritual illness – perhaps especially those on the fringes of society.

10 CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, the gravity of Christianity is shifting Southward, to Africa. By estimation, there will be more Christians in Africa than in Europe.¹¹² Unfortunately, the AIDS pandemic will keep on growing in Africa in the years to come. Furthermore, as mentioned above, according to the World Disability Report of 2011, 80% of the world’s 180–220 million youth with some sort of disability is found in Africa, and that these people are some of the most vulnerable and at risk to be victims of HIV and AIDS, poverty, unemployment and marginalization.¹¹³ In Africa, disability is not only a medical concern, but relates to social inequality and marginalization. Regrettably, in Africa we see how people with disabilities and people with HIV and AIDS often experience different forms of marginalization, much like the blind and lame and the unclean were marginalized in the first-century Mediterranean world. Speckman¹¹⁴ correctly points to the fact that in the Graeco-Roman world during the time of Jesus, blind people who were beggars lived on the margins of society, and we have almost no evidence that there were profound attempts to integrate these people

109 See Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, 255.

110 Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 350.

111 According to the Gospel, God’s eschatological judgment (κρίμα) has already realized as a result of the coming of Jesus to the world (3:17–19). The incarnation of Jesus gave rise to a giant magnetic field in the world and people are positioned on either the positive or the negative pole thereof (Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 149). Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, 255 agrees with Hays: ‘This judgment leads to a division among people, and this factor is present here as in 3:19.’ During an interaction of transformation, or meeting with Jesus, judgment already takes place – *believers* are separated from *non-believers*. See also Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 38.

112 See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

113 See <http://www.openforum.net/index.php/call-for-proposals/proposals-power/no-money-no-power-no-sex> cited 12 June 2012.

114 McGlory Speckman, *A Biblical Vision for Africa’s Development* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2007), 188–189.

into society. On the other hand, the radical ethos of Jesus absolutely transformed the way people on the margins of society were seen and treated by Christ-followers. This was an important aspect in the post-Easter Jesus tradition, namely that, as Speckman¹¹⁵ correctly argues, ‘the small Christian communities that emerged at the start of the Early Church would have served, among other functions, that of rehabilitating those who formerly begged and were “transformed” and perhaps the least advantaged joined the community with the meager belongings they might have had’. If there is one thing that would again be important for Christian mission and witness in Africa, it would be to rediscover the meaning of healing and restoration in Africa. There might not be a cure for many diseases like HIV and AIDS, but there might be creative ways to *heal* the *illness*. Healing is something different from curing, as argued above. Healing has to deal with restoration and reconciliation, it relates to giving people new meaning and new life possibilities. This is the challenge of the Church in Africa, and it will become an even stronger challenge in the decades to come.

115 Ibid., 189.

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