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HEALTH AND POLITICS IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS FROM A NEW TESTAMENT HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis and on the basis of New Testament text examples (Mark 3:1-6; 2:23-28; 1 Cor. 8), the article reflects the relationships between health/healing and eschatology, theology of creation, law, and politics. It is argued that the experience of the global crisis of 2020 is forcing the global community to reconsider its modes of living, with alternative visions required. New Testament hermeneutics can contribute impulses to the global and crosscultural discourse about change regarding, for example, the perception of health and healing, the ethics of human kindness, the design and application of laws, the limits of freedom, the role of the notion of “God”, and the First Commandment in secular societies or the role of often absolutised principles such as maximisation of profit and efficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Several months into the COVID-19 crisis, it is dawning on us that, after the pandemic, our global community will not be able to carry on as it did previously. Many of us are ready to reconsider our modes of living on this globe. Alternative designs are in demand. Can the New Testament contribute to this discourse?

The pandemic has helped us view our pre-existing problems more clearly. During the low tide of the corona crisis, cliffs, wrecks and dumped barrels of toxic waste were uncovered, which the high-tide waters had hidden. They are testimonies of our self-made problems, our failures. In this time of crisis, they are revealed more clearly, and the public's awareness is raised: cliffs such as crowded poverty-stricken residential housing where the virus rages, while wealthier people ride out the infection risk in their beach homes. We are confronted with the gap between low- and higher income people. The risk of infection is not the same for everyone, with many having to continue working in factories and grocery stores, while others have the privilege of home office. On the low-tide ocean floor we see the inhumane working conditions in the meat industry, partially caused by our preference for cheap steaks on the grill. We are forced to reconsider our consumer behaviour; the school and health systems; our vulnerability to further pandemics caused by our destructive approach to nature, and our worldwide trading leading to absurd dependencies. Suddenly, the average Joe or Jane realises that his/her blood pressure pills are no longer available because we have preferred cheap and, in many instances, environmentally damaging pharmaceutical production processes outsourced to other continents. With workers in India falling ill, Jane's and Joe's blood pressure rises. Cliffs such as sexism and racism come to light, with predominantly women being burdened with home schooling and, in the USA, for example, a disproportionate number of African-Americans falling ill – while simultaneously suffering from police violence, which boosts the Black Lives Matter movement in the middle of the pandemic. COVID-19 unmasks the incompetence of populist loudmouths among governing politicians. It brings to light the hitherto slow and often stealthy expansion of totalitarian systems, yet the world, scrambling to get a grip on the disease, has hardly any capacity to hinder it.

Alternative designs are in demand. Can we add New Testament impulses to the discussion? I will take a text in the Gospel of Mark (3:1-6) as a starting point, the healing of a withered hand. Mark tells a story about health, law and politics as well as about healing and physical integrity as foretaste of eschatological health and well-being in the presence of God.

2. HEALING ON THE SABBATH

It starts with conflict. The migrant preacher and healer from Nazareth, with his crowd of followers, is a thorn in the side of the Pharisees and Herodians. On a Sabbath in the synagogue, they lie in wait for him to heal a man with a withered hand. They have good reason to be suspicious. In the immediately preceding pericope, Jesus had encouraged his followers to pluck heads of grain to satisfy their hunger, even though harvesting was not allowed on a

Sabbath. Jesus, however, proclaimed that the Sabbath was made for the people and not vice versa.

Jewish law also precluded healing on a Sabbath, except when a patient's life was in danger. Jesus, however, heals the man on the seventh day, which intrinsically is connected with the climax of God's creation (Gen. 2:2). In this way, Jesus' healing on a Sabbath is associated with divine creating and can itself be considered a powerful creative act, a re-creation. The biblical context also calls up a second frame of reference for the motif of Jesus' Sabbath healing, the eschatological arrival of God's kingdom (e.g. Mark 1:15) and, as a creative act, contributes to this arrival.

The Book of Jubilees (50:9) encourages Jews to perceive the Sabbath as a day on which they may have a faint foretaste of how God's eschatological kingdom will be.¹ Thus, seeing Jesus' Sabbath healings, people are given hope that, in the imminent kingdom of God, they will be whole, without pain, refreshed, revived, and recreated. With each powerful healing, Jesus brings God and God's final salvation closer to the people.

What does the foretaste of the "kingdom" resemble in Mark 3? Jesus notices the man with the withered hand and asks him to stand up and come forward. He recognises the man's suffering. A "withered" hand was very painful, a severe algodystrophy with skeletal osteoporosis, as we most likely would diagnose it nowadays.² Jesus puts the spotlight on this hand, on the pain. God's healing begins with recognising and acknowledging. There is no denying, no downplaying, no labelling of medical data as fake news. For Jesus, the man's condition is urgent enough to start acting. Taking the problem seriously, looking the pain in the face, is the first step toward healing.

3. HEALTH AND THE LAW

The opponents hold their breath. Will he defy the law, mitigating the pain? He does, getting angry at the ossified opponents who insist that the letter of the law is more important than a person's well-being. Jesus does not suspend the Sabbath law. On the contrary, he brings it to its full potential, which is letting people find rest, be refreshed and re-created, thereby letting them receive a glimpse of God's creating power.

In Germany, as we face the COVID-19 situation, we are experiencing the conflict between law and health in a slightly different way. For example, on 1 August 2020, the fundamental rights to speak freely and demonstrate

1 Jubilees 50:9: "a day of the holy kingdom for all Israel". See Roose (2010:§ 4.2.1).

2 Schmidt (2018:A-344/B-292/C-292).

collided with the equally fundamental right to physical integrity. Twenty thousand demonstrators, mostly conspiracy storytellers opposing the safeguards against COVID-19, crowded Berlin without social distancing and masks, and loudly berated the allegedly “fake media” journalists. They did not acknowledge that their behaviour jeopardised their own and thousands of other people’s right to physical integrity and health. However, the virus does not care about opinions. It feasts when safeguards are dropped, filling hospital beds as well as coffins and plaguing many “recovered” patients with long-term effects. The fundamental right to freedom to demonstrate and shout opinions is not unlimited; it ends where the health and the freedom of others are violated.³ In other words, the law needs to be used in a humane and kind way – as Jesus does in Mark 2:23-3:6. Those who insist on their rights, while being ready to sacrifice the health of their own grandmother, stand outside of what the law intends.

4. HEALTH AND POLITICS

Health, law – and politics. As everyday life has shown, the virus has closely tied health to politics. Under peer review, the sciences generate data and interpretations. They offer well-founded advice; yet they cannot decide in which school areas masks need to be worn, how many people can meet as a group or who has to be quarantined. The elected politicians make decisions, considering not only the epidemiological, but also other factors. Although the implementation of their decisions is often cumbersome, on the whole Germany has been fortunate to have politicians who have genuinely strived to achieve the moral “good”, thus stabilising trust in democracy.⁴ Unlike politicians in other parts of the world, the people’s health was placed above economic concerns, because the opposite would be even more devastating.

The healing story in Mark 3:1-16 also contains a political dimension. The Markian Jesus asks the disconcerting question: “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” (3:4). Who kills on a Sabbath? The riddle is solved when recalling that, in the Jewish War (66-70 CE), on a Sabbath, Jewish zealots murdered Romans and inversely a non-Jewish mob in Caesarea Maritima slaughtered Jews.⁵ The side swipe in Mark 3:4 alluding

3 For the limits of an individual’s freedom, see 1 Corinthians 8: It ends where others are hurt.

4 A survey by Follmer *et al.* (2020) shows that, before the pandemic, in February/March 2020, only 19% of the German respondents had trust in the federal government (37% in local and regional governments), which increased to 45% (47%) by the end of May/mid-June 2020.

5 Josephus, *Bellum* 2.449-457; cf. 1.147-149; *Ant.* 14.66; Strabo 16.40; Cassius Dio 37.16; 1 Macc. 2:29-41.

to contemporary events indicates that Mark considered the military actions of the Jewish War brutal and murderous.

Mark also offers a critical antipole to the political situation around the year 70 when shaping two miracle stories about Jesus in such a way that they remind the contemporary reader of two miracles the Emperor Vespasian allegedly performed according to the imperial propaganda. Vespasian had been proclaimed emperor in July 69 by the troops in the East. However, as he was a social climber, a banker's son, the imperial propaganda at the beginning of his reign endeavoured to bestow a legitimising religious aureole to him by disseminating miracle stories about the new emperor who allegedly had performed healings in Alexandria in the name of the god Sarapis. Mark's gospel mirrors these stories. In Mark 8:22-26, Jesus in Bethsaida cures a blind man with sputum in the same way as Vespasian restored a man's vision, and Jesus heals the withered hand like Vespasian cured a withered limb using the power of Sarapis.⁶ The message of the two antipole Jesus stories is that the Nazarene alone is the authentic healer who, with his healings, breaks the ground for the arrival of the reign of the one true God.

Other passages also show Mark's critical attitude toward the politically powerful of his time. For example,⁷ Vespasian usurped the Jewish expectation of a Messiah and claimed that in him and his son Titus the messianic prophecies of Israel were fulfilled. The *Pax Romana*, restored after the Jewish War, seemed to validate this claim so that even Jews were convinced by this propaganda.⁸ Mark reacts to this. He puts Peter on stage near Caesarea Philippi where a monumental marble temple for Augustus and Nero⁹ had been erected and lets him confess: "You are the Messiah" (8:29), not the emperor, as the political environment suggests. In Caesarea Philippi, in the year 67, Vespasian had been splendidly hosted by King Agrippa II. His son Titus, having defeated the Jewish rebellion, threw a triumphal party in Caesarea Philippi in 70 CE. The "Imperial Philippi" with its Agrippa Palace, its imperial cult, and its connection to the Flavians Vespasian and Titus offered contemporary readers of Mark 8:27-30 sufficient starting points for mental associations. Moreover, Mark 13:21-22 warns against pseudo-Messiahs (plural), which has been a

6 Tacitus *Hist.* 4.81f; Suetonius *Vesp.* 7; Cassius Dio 66.8.1.

7 For the additional ample material, see, for example, Lampe (2012:5-18, esp. 14-17).

8 After having switched sides in the Jewish War, Josephus supported Vespasian's Messiah claim (*Bellum* 6.312). Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.13) and Sueton (*Vesp.* 4.5) also report this claim.

9 For the temple, see, for example, Jos. *Bellum* 1.404-406. If the Augusteum was the Omrit Temple southwest of Caesarea Philippi (Wilson 2004:11-16), then it was situated at the Roman street from Bethsaida to Caesarea Philippi. If it rather was the structure excavated by Netzer (2006:222), 100 m west of the Cave of Pan, then it was situated on a terrace visible from afar.

puzzle for exegetes for a long time. The riddle is solved when considering that both¹⁰ Vespasian and Titus were propagated as Messiahs.

Accordingly, it is easy to imagine what it meant to readers at the beginning of Vespasian's reign that, under the cross, a Roman centurion confessed: "Truly, this man was [a]¹¹ god's son" (Mark 15:39). Contemporary readers knew that not only the emperors Augustus, Tiberius and Nero were considered sons of a god (because of the apotheoses of their deceased legal fathers), but also Vespasian, a son of the god Ammon.¹²

The politically critical Markian Gospel is not protest literature like Revelation.¹³ However, Mark subtly designs a societal alternative in which only God and God's son Jesus are entitled to religious reference, not emperors, and in which serving one another is supposed to be emphasised, not selfish striving for overrated societal and institutional ranks (Mark 9:33-37; 10:35-45). Whereas in the world, the rulers abuse their power, as 10:42 criticises, Jesus' followers should act differently (Mark 10:43; 8:34-36, see below).

5. *METANOIA*: CORONA AS TRIGGER TO REORIENTATION

The COVID-19 crisis is forcing us to reconsider our course. Alternative paths are demanded. Mark 3 illustrated that the first step to reorientation and re-creation is to look into the face of ailment and pain, to stop the denial. Taking this step means seeing the opportunities for change embedded in the crisis. The European Union, at least rudimentarily, has understood this, not spending corona emergency money unconditionally, but tying financial emergency

10 Thus Tacitus *Hist.* 5.13.

11 Although a translation with an indefinite article before the predicate noun is usually not used, philologically it is the more likely one. Without an article, as in 15:39, the predicate noun denotes an abstract attribute ("a son of a god", not a specific one). By contrast, if the author wants to say: "This human was the (known and already mentioned [in Mark 1:11; 9:7; 14:61]) Son of God (who alone deserves this title)", the predicate noun usually has a definite article both in classical and Koine Greek (also in Mark 1:11; 9:7; John 1:49, for example). See further Blass *et al.* (1976:§ 273). Either way, Mark plays with the different viewpoints. From the perspective of the literary figure of the centurion, who cannot be assumed to be a monotheist or a pagan *sebomenos* sympathising with Jewish monotheism, Jesus was one of the numerous sons of gods. However, for the Christian reader, a crucifying Roman centurion of all people comes close to the truth: He was the son of the one true God.

12 Vespasian as son of Ammon: Papyrus Fouad 8 (towards the end of the 1st century). Later, after Vespasian's apotheosis, his sons Titus and Domitian were also considered sons of a god.

13 For the political protest in, above all, Revelation 13 and 17-18, see, for example, Lampe (2020:161-170; 2006:52-57; 1982:94-113).

packages to, for example, sustainable, climate-friendly investments and – albeit too hesitantly – to the safeguarding of democratic-constitutional principles. That the latter is necessary shows that, even within the European Union, we need to work hard to maintain our common values to be equipped to face global problems.

Alternative ways of thinking are in demand, for example, those that Mark and others indicate.

1. Avoidance of the apotheosis of the immanent, no “divine emperors”, that is, no absolutising of principles such as the maximisation of profit and efficiency. This absolutising has widened the huge gap between morals, on the one hand, and economy and technology, on the other. We are already suffering the consequences: accelerating global heating and unbridled capitalism frequently coupled with societal burnout, as in the USA, where social nets are coarse-meshed and frayed. Innumerable people who have lost their jobs because of the disease are falling out of the net: jobs and health insurance are lost, mortgage payments not covered, and eventually people end up sleeping in their cars. Digital technology, as a third example, enables profit-oriented enterprises such as the social media which, without many morals, only occasionally contribute to the search for truth. They whip up emotions and non-proportionately magnify crude opinions of small groups.
2. A second aspect of Mark’s alternative design is worth taking to heart: Make kindness and humanity the undercurrent of all acting, all law-making and, as in Mark 2:23-3:6, all applications of the law. For Mark (9:33-37; 10:35-45; 8:34-36), kind humanity means to counteract selfish striving to be the best and have the highest rank. It means to be ready to serve others, to exercise tolerance instead of poisoning the world with hatred. It means to “love”, which always entails an element of self-surrender and self-sacrifice (Mark 10:45; 8:34-36), so that those who are being “loved” are given space to unfold.
3. And God? Is God still needed in secular societies? One positive potential of the First Commandment, the insistence on monotheism, is that it *excludes* the mentioned absolutising (“apotheosis”) of immanent entities. If only one absolute is considered, other entities can be challenged and scrutinised, even the primacy of economic concerns. When the god of the markets tries to dominate and regulate everything, chaos breaks loose in crises, as COVID-19 shows. Then, absurd scenarios emerge such as USA governors competing against one another when trying to buy test reagents or masks on the free market, driving up the prices and leaving some regions undersupplied.

To Christ followers, moreover, recovering from a severe illness and healing mean experiencing the creative power of God, a new creation or re-creation. It gives a foretaste of what human beings may hope for in the ultimate, the eschaton: to rest, become whole and healed, refreshed and recreated by God. May we all pray and work for this healing of a struggling world in the present and the ultimate.

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