

## **What Might the Bible Have to Say about Covid-19?**

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An outbreak of a new form of coronavirus, initially called SARS-CoV-2, but later renamed ‘coronavirus disease 2019’ (Covid<sup>1</sup> 19 for short) was identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and, on January 30th 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern. By March 11th, the WHO had formally recognised Covid 19 as a pandemic. By May 2nd 2020, more than 3.38 million cases had been reported in 187 countries and territories, more than 239,000 people had died as a consequence and more than 1.06 million had recovered. By January 8th 2021, a little over eight months later, by which time a number of effective vaccines had been developed and mass vaccinations had been begun, these figures had seen a dramatic rise, with more than 88.2 million cases reported in 218 countries and territories, more than 1.9 million people having died as a consequence and more than 49.2 million having recovered.<sup>2</sup>

The virus is most contagious during the first three days after the onset of symptoms but the disease can also be spread in the typically five-day, but ranging from two- to fourteen-day, period between infection and the onset of such common symptoms of fever, cough, fatigue, shortness of breath and loss of smell. Analysis indicates that this virus is primarily spread during close contact between people, often by the small droplets of saliva that are produced during coughing, sneezing, or talking. The principal recommended preventative measures are hand-washing, covering one’s mouth when coughing, maintaining distance from other people and wearing a face-mask in public settings. Many countries worldwide have enforced travel restrictions, quarantines, curfews and stay-at-home orders as well as the closure of facilities of various kinds and controls on workplace situations that might contribute to the spread of the disease. The Covid 19 pandemic has caused severe global socio-economic disruption and is now recognised as the largest economic recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Many sporting, religious, political and cultural events have been cancelled. In response to the pandemic, many

churches and Religious communities have broadcast their Masses, Prayer of the Church or other special services on the worldwide web, while ensuring that all those participating maintain appropriate social distancing and the other norms that apply in the limited group activity permitted in the present circumstances.

Covid 19 is a recently identified virus and there was no exact equivalent in Biblical times. Epidemics of different kinds were known in those times, however, and parallels can be drawn between some of the symptoms, effects and short- or long-term consequences of those epidemics and the current situation resulting from Covid 19. In the Hebrew Bible, the word of an infectious disease, or affliction, is *nega'*, which was translated into Latin as *'plaga'*, plague (see 1 Kings 8:37), and the best-known of these infectious diseases was the group of contagious diseases of the skin (including fungal infections, scabies<sup>3</sup> and eczema) associated with leukoderma, which constituted such a threat to the community of the people of Israel that those affected were formally excluded from the liturgical life of the community by being designated *'ritually unclean'*, *tsara'at* in Hebrew or *'lepra'* in Latin, which became *'leprous'* in the early English translations of the Hebrew texts. The highly-contagious and rapidly-developing disease of the skin that is involved should not be confused with *'leprosy'* in the technical sense, now known as Hansen's disease, which is caused by slow-growing bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae* that are normally spread from person to person only after prolonged and extensive contact between them. Over the course of one to twenty years, Hansen's disease<sup>4</sup> leads to serious nerve damage and insensitivity to pain in 5% of those infected. The protective *'social distancing'* that was imposed on those who had become *'ritually impure'* because of the various forms of the highly-contagious leukoderma is described in the Book of Leviticus, 13:2-3:

A person for whom there is a swelling, whether a scab or a white patch, on the skin of his flesh, when it becomes according to the affliction of leprosy on the skin of his flesh, shall then be brought to Aaron the priest, or to one of his sons, the priests, and the priest shall look on the affliction on the skin of the flesh and, if the hair in

the affliction be turned white and the appearance of the affliction be deeper than the skin of the flesh, it is the affliction of lepra, and the priest shall look on him and pronounce him [ritually] unclean.

Being formally recognised as ‘unclean’ by the priest meant that the individual concerned was deemed unfit to attend the religious ceremonies of the community because the highly contagious nature of leukoderma made it likely that they would infect the other members of the community. Those deemed ritually unclean in this sense were expected to protect the community by socially isolating themselves and calling out ‘unclean, unclean’ should somebody approach them. Prolonged leukoderma was commonly regarded as medically incurable but those recognised as the prophets of the Lord were regarded as being able to mediate the healing power of God in such cases. Chapter five of the second book of Kings describes the healing of the Assyrian, Naaman, after he had washed himself seven times in the river Jordan as instructed by the prophet Elisha. Recognising that the word ‘lepra’ implied ritual uncleanness, St Augustine pointed out that those who were healed from that disease were described as having been ‘cleansed (mundati)’ from their ritual uncleanness, and from the resulting imposition of social isolation, rather than as having been ‘healed (sanati)’ in the sense of having recovered from the condition, which was the required pre-condition for being cleansed.<sup>5</sup>

In the New Testament, Jesus is described as ‘cleansing’ – the verb is *katharizo* - those suffering from social and ritual uncleanness because of leukoderma (see Mk 1:40-46; Mt. 8:1-4; Lk. 5:12-16) and, in doing so, he recognised the role of the Jewish priests of that time in determining whether or not somebody suffering from leukoderma had been ‘cleansed’ or not (see Mk 1:44; Mt. 8:4; Lk. 5:14). When he commissioned the Twelve Apostles to continue his own healing ministry, Jesus also told them that they were to ‘cleanse’, or to overcome the ritually ‘unclean’ social status, of the ‘leprous’ (*lepros*), those suffering from leukoderma (see Mt. 10:8):

Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the ‘leprous’, cast out demons. You received as a free gift, give as a free gift.

St Gregory the Great interprets these signs as no longer normative, ‘The Holy Church daily does spiritually, what it then did materially by the Apostles ... inasmuch as she raises and cures souls and not bodies’.<sup>6</sup> St Hilary of Poitiers, on the other hand, interprets such signs as implying the power to heal and cleanse as, in some sense, normative for the Apostles and, implicitly, for their successors:

The exercise of the Lord’s power is wholly entrusted to the Apostles, that they who were formed in the image of Adam, and the likeness of God, should now obtain the perfect image of Christ; and whatever evil Satan had introduced into the body of Adam, this they should now repair by communion with the Lord’s power.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to leukoderma, the Bible also refers to a more sudden and short-term affliction or plague affecting human beings that is described as a pestilence or epidemic,<sup>8</sup> *deber* in Hebrew (see Exod. 9:15; Lev. 26:25; Num. 14:12; Deut. 28:21; 2 Sam. 24:13; 1 Kings 8:37). It may be that Psalm 91:6 describes pestilence as walking or stalking in darkness because of its sudden onset, without warning, like the attack of an enemy whose approach is hidden by darkness. Epidemics seem to be linked to famine in some cases (see 1 Kings 8:37; Ezek. 6:11; 7:15) and, in the New Testament, ‘famines and pestilences’ are among the signs of the coming fall of the Temple in Jerusalem (see Lk 21:11). Although the threat posed by pestilences or epidemics of this kind is real, indeed, the promise of Psalm 91, verse 6, that we who regard the Lord God as our refuge and fortress do not need to fear ‘the pestilence that stalks in darkness’, the cleansing of leprosy by the prophet Elisha and the later demonstration by Jesus that he is willing to do the same, and the command to the Twelve to do the same in Matthew 10:8, all reassure us that God is both able, and willing, to deliver us from every ‘deadly pestilence’ (Ps 91:3), including Covid 19.

Despite the popular misconception, the Bible does not refer explicitly to ten infectious diseases when it describes the strange events by which God persuaded the Egyptian Pharaoh to release the Israelites. Although ten distinguishable events are described in chapters seven to

eleven of Exodus, the book of Deuteronomy indicates no number when it refers to the events concerned as the ‘diseases of Egypt’ (see Deut. 7:15; 28:60). The word translated as ‘disease’ is *madveh* in Hebrew, meaning sickness or disease, translated into Latin as *infirmities*, weaknesses or sicknesses, in the Vulgate text of Deut. 7:15, and as *afflictiones*, sufferings or torments, in the Vulgate text of Deut. 28:60. Only two of these ‘diseases’ affected human beings directly, the festering boils described in Exodus 9:8-12, which may, or may not, have been transmitted by human to human contact, and the death of the first born described in Exodus 11:4-5, which is unlikely to have been something that had been transmitted by human to human contact. The other eight ‘diseases’ with which the land was struck affected the Egyptians only indirectly: the water turning to blood making it undrinkable (see Exod. 7:18), the infestations of frogs (see Exod. 8:2) and of lice or gnats (see Exod. 8:16-17), the ‘swarms’ of horseflies (see Exod. 8:17), the severe pestilence, *deber*, affecting the livestock (see Exod. 9:3), the thunderstorms of hail and fire that killed the people and livestock that could not find shelter (see Exod. 9:19), the swarms of locusts that destroyed whatever was growing in the fields (see Exod. 10:15) and the three days of darkness during which the people could not see anyone else or move about (see Exod. 10:22).

The sequential nature of the ‘diseases of Egypt’ in what was, presumably, a relatively short space of time, and the apparent immediacy with which their effects followed on the actions that the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had commanded Moses to do, suggest that these were supernatural wonders that God had brought about. As such, therefore, and, given that they were to happen, or not, depending on what Pharaoh would, or would not, do, they invite reflection on how we are to understand God’s power in relation to diseases of these kinds. Since the Lord is also described as punishing the sins of Miriam (see Num. 12:9), and of King Uzziah (see 2 Chron. 26:20), with leukoderma and as punishing the whole nation of Israel with pestilence because of its complicity in David’s sin of relying too much on human resources by undertaking a census of the people (see 2 Sam 24:10-17), similar theological questions arise in relation to epidemics and other illnesses that

can be transmitted from person to person. The account of the origins of the Samaritans in 2 Kings 17:24-40 describes the ‘Most High God’ as sending an incurable pestilence on the Assyrian migrants who had settled in the Northern Kingdom but who worshipped other gods. Having been told by an oracle that the only remedy was to worship the true God of Judaism, and having received the permission of the King of Assyria to do so, the pestilence ended when the settlers worshipped as Jews did.<sup>9</sup> The apparent use of pestilence to defend the exclusive worship of the Lord in the land that the true God had bestowed on the descendants of those brought there following the exodus from Egypt suggests that the ‘diseases of Egypt’ and the punishment of Miriam, King Uzziah and the people, mentioned earlier, should be interpreted in the same light. The book of Genesis recognises that everything God has created is, not only ‘good’, but ‘very good’ (see Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), with the consequence that all that is not good, but evil, derives ultimately from human sin (see Gen. 3), but not, apparently, in the sense that each one suffers as the consequence of their own personal, or their ancestors’, sins (see Jn 9:3). This same text (Jn 9:3) also implies that even what is not good can, in some mysterious manner, contribute to the revelation of the works of God. God’s plan, as the Catechism (no. 310) puts it, involves ... the existence of the more perfect alongside the less perfect, both constructive and destructive forces of nature. With physical good there exists also physical evil as long as creation has not reached perfection.

Noting that, although ‘evil never becomes a good’, the Catechism (no. 311-312) reminds us that ‘We know that in everything God works for good for those who love him’ (Rom. 8:28), and it quotes St Augustine of Hippo, who pointed out that: almighty God, because he is supremely good, would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in his works if he were not so all-powerful and good as to cause good to emerge from evil itself.

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<sup>1</sup> CoV and COVID are abbreviations of the Latin word ‘coronaviridae’, translated as coronavirus disease in English.

<sup>2</sup> See “Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID 19),” issued by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on February 11th 2020, accessed on December 4th 2020: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>

- <sup>3</sup> See St Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* 4:8 n. 10 in PL 82:191.
- <sup>4</sup> The causative agent of leprosy, *M. leprae*, was discovered by Gerhard Henrik Armauer Hansen, working in Norway in 1873, and, as a result, the disease is now formally known as Hansen's disease, and the first effective treatment, called promin, became available in the 1940s.
- <sup>5</sup> See St Augustine of Hippo, *Quaestiones evangeliorum*, 2, n. 40 in PL 35:1354.
- <sup>6</sup> See St Gregory the Great, *Homilias XL in Evangelia*, 29, 4 in PL 76:1216.
- <sup>7</sup> See St Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentarius in Evangelium Matthaei*, 10,4 in PL 9:967.
- <sup>8</sup> The word 'epidemic' (the word comes from the Greek words *epi*, upon or over, and *demos*, people) is used to describe the rapid spread of a disease to a large number of people in a given population within a short space of time. If an epidemic spreads to other countries or continents and affects a substantial number of people, it may be termed a 'pandemic' (the word comes from the Greek *pan*, all, and *demos*, people).
- <sup>9</sup> See also Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 9:288-290.