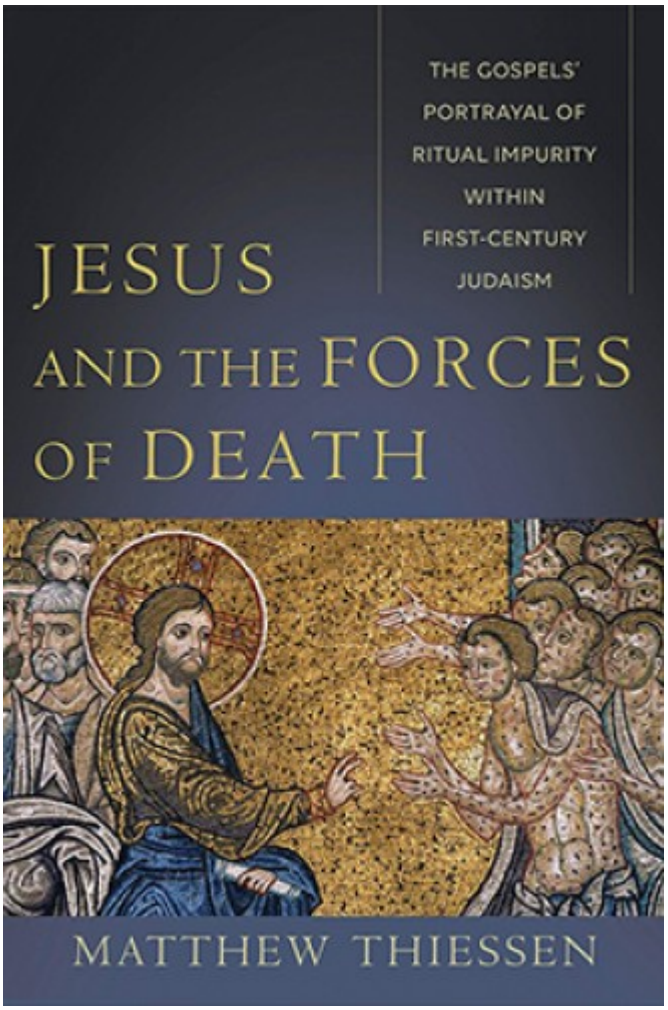
Interpreting Jesus’ healings as a conflict with purity laws is dead wrong

Jesus’ conflict, Matthew Thiessen argues, was with the forces of death.

by Greg Carey in the July 29, 2020 issue

In Review



Jesus and the Forces of Death

The Gospels’ Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism

By Matthew Thiessen
Baker Academic

The Gospels portray Jesus cleansing lepers, healing a hemorrhaging woman, giving life to the dead, casting out unclean spirits, and healing on the sabbath. A long tradition of interpretation reads these stories as evidence that Jesus disregarded the Torah, particularly its purity laws, to set people free from their ailments and from a religious system that held them down. Matthew Thiessen demonstrates that this interpretive tradition is dead wrong.

According to Thiessen, the Gospels present Jesus as a Torah-observant Jew who honors the purity laws and observes the sabbath. Jesus does not undermine the purity laws; instead, he overcomes the powers of death. People with skin diseases, hemorrhaging women, corpses, and unclean spirits are in a state of impurity. Rather than disregarding their impurity, Jesus overcomes it with the holy power of life.

Christians who misconstrue Jesus' conflict with the forces of death as a conflict with impurity laws tend to slander ancient Judaism, inflicting continuing injustice upon contemporary Jews and diminishing Christian theology in the process. Far too much Christian scholarship, Thiessen argues, amounts to "religious apologetics masquerading as historical research."

Thiessen begins by unpacking the logic and implications of Israel's purity system, a controversial topic in biblical scholarship. He distinguishes between the categories of *holy* and *profane*, on the one hand, and *pure* and *impure*, on the other. Holiness involves people, places, and things set apart for special observance. Everything else is profane. There's nothing wrong with being profane; it just means ordinary. Sometimes an impure (or unclean) state is also perfectly natural and without stigma. Other times impurity results from sinful behavior.

These distinctions carry fundamental importance. A leper, a woman with genital bleeding, and a corpse are impure, but that does not mean they are in a state of sin. Nor are the people who contact them. The purity system primarily protects the temple's holiness: "Once holy space reaches its impurity threshold, God must abandon the polluted sacred space."

Thiessen follows the influential scholarship of Jacob Milgrom. The primary sources of impurity—genital discharges of blood or semen, skin conditions known as leprosy, and corpses—all bear association with death. Thiessen adopts Milgrom's proposal

without discussing alternatives. Nevertheless, a great strength of this book is that Thiessen demonstrates, chapter by chapter, that other ancient Mediterranean cultures interpreted these same realities in much the same way.

The logic of Thiessen's book flows inductively. The Gospels present Jesus and his family as faithful observers of the Torah. This is especially true of Jesus' origin stories. His baptism reflects Judaism's ritual bathing practices. Luke places Jesus in a priestly extended family and narrates Jesus' circumcision, the purification of Mary, and Jesus' presentation in the temple—all that "was customary under the law" (2:27). Thiessen might have added that Acts depicts the Jerusalem believers as Torah observant, presumably following Jesus' example.

Thiessen discusses Jesus' encounters with lepers, the hemorrhaging woman, corpses, and demons, and finally he discusses the Gospel sabbath controversies. In each case, he shows how ancient Jews and their neighbors related to the issue at hand. Then he interprets the relevant Gospel passages according to a recurring framework: "Jesus is involved in a broadscale purification mission." Jesus is neither circumventing nor abrogating the purity laws; instead, he is overcoming the power of death with life, health, and holiness.

Biblical authors are not concerned with leprosy as we understand it but with various skin disorders that led to flaky, peeling skin, a reminder of death and decay. Thiessen uses the Greek word *lepra* to indicate the condition and *lepros* for a man who bears its symptoms. Jesus routinely directs cleansed lepers to present themselves to the priests, just as the law commands.

Mark's presentation of Jesus' encounter with the *lepros* presents a notorious problem based in textual variants. In 1:41, does Jesus respond to the man with compassion? Or with anger? And if it's anger, what provokes him? Thiessen attributes Jesus' anger to the caveat the man adds to his request for healing in the prior verse: "If you choose." (*Of course* Jesus is willing to combat the forces of death!)

The hemorrhaging woman's condition inflicts profound consequences, including an inability to bear children. Although Jesus does not reach out to her, Mark shows how Jesus' power heals both the condition and the impurity.

In response to those who say Jesus' contact with Jairus's dead daughter violates the purity laws, Thiessen reminds readers that no one accuses Elijah or Elisha of violating them. But Jesus' power over death extends beyond his ability to restore the

dead to life. Thiessen offers Matthew's bizarre account of risen saints who, at the moment of Jesus' death, rise from their tombs and wander around Jerusalem. Even in the "abode of death," Jesus bears the power of life.

Jesus' sabbath healings are controversial because ancient Jews debated whether lifesaving work was permitted on the holy day. When Jesus is accused of violating the sabbath, Thiessen shows, he always defends himself not by demeaning the sabbath but by explaining his actions. This illustrates a larger point about Jesus' relationship to the law: in some of the cases that interpreters advance as examples of Jesus breaking the law, in fact no one in the story raises that accusation. In the rest of them, Jesus defends himself—because ancient Jews, like modern Christians, interpreted their tradition in diverse ways.

Thiessen relegates one problematic Gospel passage to an appendix. Narrating a controversy concerning washing hands before eating, Mark comments, "Thus he declared all food clean" (7:19). Thiessen argues that Mark's comment pertains only to the controversy at hand, food eaten without washing one's hands, and not to the question of food in general. Maybe, but I'm not convinced. Matthew omits that verse, while Luke skips the whole story. In other words, Matthew and Luke apparently find Mark's comment problematic, too.

While the book is impressively researched, Thiessen overlooks scholars who have anticipated some of his insights. David Rhoads has articulated Jesus' power over impurity. Others, including me, have noted that case studies such as the ones treated in this book generally present Jesus as responding to the initiatives of others.

Nevertheless, this important and rewarding book is filled with fresh insights. Academics will appreciate Thiessen's scholarship. Preachers will experience it as both corrective and empowering.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Jesus and the purity laws."