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3 *"...He Spat on His Eyes and Laid His Hands Upon Him"* (Mk 8:23) A Contextual Reading of Mk 8:22-26 amidst COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy among Christians in Nigeria

Abstract

Mk 8:22-26 remains one of the two micro-narratives in the synoptic gospels where Jesus applied spittle in healing someone. The man, being healed, was blind. Although Jesus had to apply a second level of healing before the blind man could be healed properly, this incident indicates that Jesus could heal diseases and sickness through other means other than words of mouth. This is some form of encouragement for the use of medicine in curing diseases and sicknesses among Christians. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in the world and the subsequent rolling out of its vaccine, it seems that the pandemic has been contained to some point. However, the level of receptiveness of the vaccine among Nigerians has been problematic. This has given rise to what is generally termed COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among Nigerians of which Christians form a large percentage. Using the historical-critical approach to exegesis, with oral interview serving as a means of data collection, this work studied the micro-narrative of Mk 8:22-26 to relate how it can encourage Christians in Nigeria to be more receptive of COVID-19 vaccine. Findings in the study indicate that by healing a blind man with spittle, a well-known medical practice of the time, Jesus accepts medical processes involved in curing diseases. This means that Christians in Nigeria are encouraged to be receptive of COVID-19 vaccine as a means of preventing COVID-19 related health issues and/or COVID-19 related deaths. It also calls for the re-evaluation of Nigerian Christians' stance on Faith (Religion)–COVID-19 vaccine debate.

Keywords: Mk 8:22-26, Healing, COVID-19, Nigerian Christians, Conspiracy Theories, Vaccine Hesitancy,

Introduction

There are two micro-narratives in Mark where Jesus healed using spittle and the touching of hands. While the first of these narratives is recorded in Mk 7:31-37, our interest in this article is in the second narrative recorded in Mk 8:22-26. In this healing narrative, Mark records that a man probably born blind, from the town of Bethsaida, was brought to Jesus to be healed via touching. Jesus took this blind man out of the town through leading him by hand. He then spat on his eyes, while also putting his hands on him. Then Jesus asked the blind man if he could see. The blind man replied that he sees men, as trees, walking. On this response, Jesus had to perform a second level of healing by touching the man's eyes again, and making him look up. At this second-level healing, the blind man's sight was totally restored. The blind man saw clearly. Jesus therefore sent him away to his house with a charge to neither go into the town nor tell anyone what has happened. The involvement of a second level of healing in the narrative is perplexing. As LATOURELLE (1988:179) puts it 'Historians on the lookout (*sic*) difficulties will find all they want here.' According to PILAND (2016:1) 'A cursory glance reveals that Jesus healed the blind man in two phases, almost as if he was not able to heal him on the second attempt. No doubt this passage has left many Christian Bible readers puzzled, wondering why Jesus did not heal the man all at once, as was his custom.' While this healing narrative has a lot of unanswered questions surrounding why Jesus could not heal the blind man with a first trial, it is mostly the belief of scholars that the narrative is significant in Mark's portrayal of Jesus' disciples and their spiritual perceptions. According to GLENNY & NOBLE (2014:71) 'Interpreters of Mk 8:22-26 have long understood that the blind man of Bethsaida is a kind of analogue for the disciples and their spiritual perceptions or misperceptions.' This kind of interpretation, of course, comes from scholars who propose what has been called the discipleship model in understanding the place of the narrative in the overall plan of the gospel of Mark. Scholars with this kind of an understanding of Mk 8:22-26 are TELFORD (1999), MARCUS (2009:599-602), and LARSEN (2004) whose Christological reading of the text is somehow aligned with a discipleship model of the text. In this Christological reading, LARSEN argues that Mark's main concern has to do with an unveiling of the very nature of Christ.

Our concern in this article goes beyond unravelling the reason for the application of a second level of healing by Jesus before the blind man's sight could be perfectly restored to include what the method of the healing of the blind man by Jesus has for Christians in Nigeria amidst COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. By implication, we want to re-read the text of Mk 8:22-26 in the context of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy seen among Christians in Nigeria. That COVID-19 is a reality in Nigeria is not to be doubted. At the height of its ravages in the country in 2020, many lost their lives, and Christians and their churches bore the brunt of COVID-19 in many ways (CHUKWUMA 2021). Churches were closed for a long period in Nigeria, and many Christians were denied the opportunity of worshiping God. Of course, a nation-wide lockdown that lasted for almost three months was invoked by the government of Nigeria at that time. With the massive roll-out of COVID-19 vaccine in Nigeria as from 2021, there were high hopes that a way to contain the devastating effect of the pandemic has been found. However, many Nigerians did not welcome the idea of taking COVID-19 vaccine, including Christians. According to the findings of OLU-ABIODUN, ABIODUN & OKAFOR (2022), the acceptance rate of COVID-19 vaccine in Nigeria is still not encouraging since many Nigerians are unwilling to take the vaccine. Of course, part of the problem, as long as hesitancy for the COVID-19 vaccine by Christians is concerned, is the belief that the pandemic is not real. In May 2020 when the outbreak of COVID-19 was at its zenith in the country, we had an interview with *IP MI-6*, a Catholic Christian, on why she was not observing COVID-19 protocols. Her answer was quite simple: "There is nothing like COVID-19 in Nigeria. The belief in its existence is what the government made up to embezzle money. I do not believe in COVID-19." Thus, the first problem many Christians had in accepting the vaccine was the belief that there was nothing like COVID-19. This kind of belief makes it impossible for many Christians in Nigeria to be receptive of COVID-19 vaccine.

In such a scenario, our aim is to re-read the micro-narrative of Mk 8:22-26 in the context of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among Christians in Nigeria. The methodology we apply to this effect is the historical-critical method of exegesis which GORMAN (2006:15) says 'focuses on the origin and development of a text, employing methods designed to uncover these aspects of it.' According to UWAEGBUTE (2022) this type of methodology helps an exegete to pursue a holistic study of biblical texts in the context of their oral histories, source(s), literary criticism, social context (*Sitz im*

Leben), setting, among other related issues that will aid the understanding of biblical texts. Our primary source of data as regards views on COVID-19 hesitancy among Christians in Nigeria is oral interviews. In this sense, we purposively selected some Christians who were interviewed regarding their views on if Christians should be receptive of COVID-19 vaccine. These interviewees cut across denominations and gender. Their age ranges from 25 years to 60 years. They also included clergy and lay-persons as well. The data we got from this source will be presented descriptively in the work.

Setting the Scene: Source, Social Context (*Sitz im Leben*), Setting and Structure of Mk 8:22-26

Source of Mk 8:22-26

That Mk 8:22-26 follows a sequence of a similarly recorded event in Mk 7:31-37 make some scholars think that there is a relationship between the recorded events in the gospel of Mark. These two episodes depict the healing of two people following the same healing method and sequence. Of course, among the synoptic gospels, it is only in Mark that we come across such narratives where Jesus healed with spittle, including the touching of hand on the healed. MUTHIAH (2005) writes about these two micro-narratives:

> Both the passages have verbal similarities and ritualistic actions of spitting and touching and are not recorded by Mt and Lk. Astonishingly, the words used to introduce the scenes (7:32-33a and 8:22-23) and the concluding commands to silence (explicit in 7:36 and implicit in 8:26) are similar.

By this similarity, it is very much the thought of many scholars that these two narratives are of the same source. The source of these narratives, of course, was oral tradition which was circulated among the first hearers of Jesus and handed down to other later disciples. While it is generally believed that the gospel of Mark was the first to have been written, and was used as a source for Matthew and Luke, we do not want to go into the identity of the author of the gospel of Mark. This belonged to a different discussion altogether. Because of the above similarities we have mentioned, a scholar like GUELICH (1989:435) thinks that both episodes were

very likely to have been circulated together in oral tradition which may have concluded with the acclamation of Isa 25:5. This acclamation depicts Jesus' healing ministry as regards the prophet Isaiah's promise of healing ministry, which included the healing of the blind and the deaf.

For MANN (1986:335-336), the similarities of the two healing episodes in Mark show that these were doublets probably referring to the same incidence. We do not agree with MANN's position notwithstanding the similarities in the two healing episodes. While they may have followed the same ritualistic process, the differences in the identity of the healed persons are clear. While one was a deaf-stammerer in Mk 7:31-37, the other was a blind man in Mk 8:22-26. Hence, we agree with TAYLOR (1952:369) that 'in the two Markan stories the differences are far greater, so great in fact as to belong to different incidences.'

What we can therefore make of these discussions is that Mk 8:22-26 has its source as oral tradition about Jesus probably circulated among his earliest followers in Palestine. It was probably part of those oral tradition about Jesus that were preserved as miracle stories. These miracle stories were probably preserved in forms, and were constantly re-told among the earliest followers of Jesus in Palestine. Since it is mostly believed in modern scholarship that the gospel writer of Mark was an author who made use of many sources to compose his gospel, he probably had access to these miracle stories.[1] It was then Mark's role as an evangelist, writing for a particular community which he belonged, to select miracle stories that served his purpose. This becomes likely since it is believed that the understanding of the person of Jesus may have been a problem to the members of Mark's community. This was why the failure of the disciples to grasp Jesus' personality features prominently in the gospel of Mark (CHINWOKWU 2015). Mk 8:22-26 happened to have been one of the miracle stories preserved by Mark to help him deal with the problem of his community's lack of understanding and perception of the person of Jesus.

[1] For a detailed discussion on this, see BURKETT (2002:156).

Social Context (Sitz im Leben)[2] *of Mk 8:22-26*

What were the reasons and the circumstances surrounding the preservation of this micro-narrative in Mark? This is our concern here when we talk about the social context of Mk 8:22-26. It is a well-known fact that the disciples of Jesus in the gospel of Mark are constantly accused by the author of the gospel of their lack of understanding of the person of Jesus. This, sometimes, extends to their lack of faith and what has been technically referred to as the 'blindness' or lack of 'comprehension' among the disciples in the gospel of Mark (CHINWOKWU 2015, NINEHAM 1964:37, 214, 217, RICHARDSON 2012:84, HUR 2019:41-48, PILAND 2016:1, BORING 2006:1-3, AUNE 1987:55, GARLAND 2015:388-437, VOS 1954:75-76).[3] Examples of these accusations in the gospel of Mark abound.[4] From these passages, we get the impression that there may have been a 'crisis of perception' of Jesus' person in the community that the writer of Mark belonged. As believed by many scholars, the gospel writers did not write out of carelessness or just for the fun of writing the life history of Jesus. Many of what they wrote, as much as they were faith lessons, were borne out of problems that the communities that these gospel writers belonged faced. In this case, the writer of Mark probably had the correction of the poor understanding of the person of Jesus in his community in mind when he recorded instances where Jesus rebuked his disciples for their lack of faith and understanding of his person and mission.[5]

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2 We will use both social context and S*itz im Leben* (situation in life) in this work loosely to mean the same thing. This does not mean that we are not aware of the fact that *Sitz im Leben* is a German term that was originally associated with German scholars who pioneered form criticism in the early part of the 20th century with an effort to understanding the forms the gospel traditions took before they were committed into writing.

3 This blindness of the disciples is usually seen as a literary device through which the identity of Jesus as the messiah is kept hidden until the resurrection of Jesus. Of course, William WREDE first popularised this thesis in 1901.

4 Mk 4:40; Mk 6:51–52; Mk 8:4, Mk 8:14–21; Mk 8:33; Mk 9:2–10 and Mk 14:68–72 are very notable here.

5 Our claim here is not that lack of understanding of the person and role of Jesus was the sole problem that both the author of Mark and his community faced. Certainly, other problems that faced the community were also reflected in the gospel of Mark. Discussing this is, however, beyond the remit of the present work.

In this sense, we can say that the social context of Mk 8:22-26 was the problem of lack of understanding of the person and the ministry of Jesus in the community that Mark belonged. This probably was the prevailing atmosphere that led to the preservation of Mk 8:22-26 which foreshadows the blindness of the disciples and the subsequent gradual progression of the apostles' understanding of Jesus. In this sense, we agree with RICHARDSON (2012:84) that "the progressive character of the story of the healing in Mark 8:22-26 is due to St Mark's desire to symbolise the gradual process of the unstopping of the disciples' ears and the opening of their eyes."

Setting of Mk 8:22-26

Mark records the place that the healing of the blind man took place. According to the narrative, it was at the town of Bethsaida that the healing took place. For MUTHIAH (2005),

> [Bethsaida] is a fishing town on the northeast corner of the sea of Galilee and east of the Jordan river. Etymologically, Bethsaida means house of fishermen. It was raised to the honour of a city by the tetrarch Philip and was renamed Bethsaida Julias in honour of the emperor Augustus daughter.

FRANZ (1995) says that another name for Bethsaida in Hebrew is 'house of hunter.' It was certain that Bethsaida was the capital of Gaulanitis. Bethsaida features very well in the life and mission of Jesus in the New Testament. In Jn 1:44, Bethsaida was the home town of apostles Peter, Andrew and Philip. In Lk 9:10-11, Jesus fed the five thousand at a place near Bethsaida. In the woe formula in the Synoptic gospels, Bethsaida is associated with Chorazin (Mt 11:21, Lk 10:13). Even though Bethsaida is depicted in this narrative as a village, it is certain that the palace was a sizable city (HARE 1996:93, ANDERSON 1981:203). Being located at Gaulanitis, a gentile area, did not make Bethsaida to be gentile as regards its inhabitants. On the contrary, it seems that the city was largely Jewish in makeup (HARE 1996:93). This may be why Jesus and even some of his apostles were associated with the city in the New Testament.

The Text of Mk 8:22-26

	Greek Text	Researchers' Translation
22	Καὶ ἔρχονται εἰς Βηθσαϊδάν. Καὶ φέρουσιν αὐτῷ τυφλὸν, καὶ παρακαλοῦσιν αὐτὸν ἵνα αὐτοῦ ἅψηται.	And they came to Bethsaida. And they brought a blind man to him and implored Him to touch him.
23	καὶ ἐπιλαβόμενος τῆς χειρὸς τοῦ τυφλοῦ ἐξήνεγκεν αὐτὸν ἔξω τῆς κώμης, καὶ πτύσας εἰς τὰ ὄμματα αὐτοῦ, ἐπιθεὶς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῷ, ἐπηρώτα αὐτόν Εἴ τι βλέπεις;	Taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village, and he spat on his eyes and having laid his hands on him, He asked him, 'Do you see anything?'
24	καὶ ἀναβλέψας ἔλεγεν Βλέπω τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ὅτι ὡς δένδρα ὁρῶ περιπατοῦντας.	And looking up he said, I see men as trees, walking.
25	εἶτα πάλιν ἐπέθηκεν τὰς χεῖρας ἐπὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ, καὶ διέβλεψεν καὶ ἀπεκατέστη, καὶ ἐνέβλεπεν τηλαυγῶς ἅπαντα.	Then again He laid His hands on his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly.
26	καὶ ἀπέστειλεν αὐτὸν εἰς οἶκον αὐτοῦ λέγων Μηδὲ εἰς τὴν κώμην εἰσέλθῃς.[6]	And He sent him to his home, saying. Do not even enter the village

[6] There is a textual problem in the Greek original of the text. It has about four variant readings. This one that we adopted in the text seems to have been the earliest variant in circulation, although believed to be of the Alexandria, Eastern, and Egyptian text-types (Metzger 2002:84). The other variants are nothing more than conflated readings probably based on the first variant. In textual criticism, it is common knowledge that shorter readings are mostly preferable since copyists had tendencies of adding to the texts they are recopying than removing from them. Because these other variants are longer, it is probable that they are later additions to the first variant through which later copyists probably tried to explain the import of the first reading. In this context, we chose the reading that we retained in the text based on our belief that it is the most original reading of all the variants.

Structure of Mk 8:22-26

For the purpose of our exegesis, we will structure Mk 8:22-26 thus:

8:22-23: At Bethsaida, a blind man is brought to Jesus to be healed

8:24-25: Jesus restores the blind man's sight using spittle and the touching of hand

8:26: The blind man is sent to his home with a strict warning not to enter the village

Close Reading of Mk 8:22-26

V 22: At Bethsaida, a Blind Man is brought to Jesus to be healed

This verse tells us that a blind man was brought to Jesus at Bethsaida. Mark does not record the identity of those who brought this blind man. All that the reader is told is that they brought (φέρουσιν) a blind man to Jesus to be healed. Certainly, Jesus was in the company of his disciples. This is why Mark uses the verb indicative present middle ἔρχονται (they came) to show that Jesus was in the company of his disciples. The term ἔρχονται is the plural form of ἔρχομαι which means 'to come'. The people who brought the blind man implored (παρακαλοῦσιν), which according to COLE (2006:1210), implied healing. By implication, they begged Jesus to heal the blind man. This shows that Jesus' fame as a healer had spread to Bethsaida. This was why those who brought the blind man had faith that Jesus could heal him. By using the word ἅψηται (to touch), Mark wanted to show that Jesus' healing methods also included the act of touching of hand. We can see this word being used to mean healing in Mt 9:21, 29, 17:7 and Mk 10:13.

Vv. 24-25: Jesus Restores the Blind Man's Sight Using Spittle and Hand Touching

When they had implored Jesus to heal the blind man, Jesus agreed. He therefore took him by the hand (ἐπιλαβόμενος τῆς χειρὸς) out of the village. While Jesus and his disciples probably were together when Jesus agreed to heal the blind man, it is certain that Jesus alone took the blind man out of the village. Hence, Mark used the aorist middle verb ἐπιλαβόμενος to describe this action. The term ἐπιλαβόμενος is the aorist form of the verb ἐπιλαμβανόμαι which means to grasp, to catch or to take hold of. Why Jesus would take the blind man out of the village before healing him is

linked to his desire to keep his identity secret (CHINWOKWU 2015:63). This is linked with the theory of messianic secret which WREDE (1901) first called attention to. The healing of the blind man when Jesus had taken him out of the village follows the ritualistic process of spitting and the laying of hands probably on the man's eyes. This is the second time Mark would record this ritualistic process. The first of these episodes is seen in Mk 7:31-37 and as we had noted earlier, there seems to have been a relationship between these two healing episodes. According to SABIN (2009:142):

> Like the healing of the deaf-mute at the end of chapter 7, the healing of the blind man here has symbolic significance. Particular elements of that earlier healing are repeated here. In both instances, Mark tell that us that that Jesus took the person aside (7:33; 8:23); in both, Mark indicates a laying of hands (7:32; 8:25); in both Mark says that Jesus used spittle as a means of healing (7:33; 8:23).

As seen in Mark's narrative here, Jesus used two methods of healing: The first was the use of spittle while the second was the laying of hand (on the blind man). It was through these two healing methods that Jesus firstly attempted the healing of the blind man. The laying of hand was Jesus' common means of healing. However, quite unlike Jesus, was the application of spittle as a means of healing the eyes of the blind man. The use of spittle as a healing method was not new in Jewish or Mediterranean medical process of healing. Neither was it a new method of exorcism at the time of Jesus. CHINWOKWU (2015:194) says this on Jesus' healing methods, especially about the use of spittle and the laying of hands:

> The other method used by Jesus was performing a cure by a normal medical means, but with an extra power and authority, which might achieve success where the ordinary doctors had failed. It was not always easy to distinguish in practice between medical and magical or exorcistical techniques: the use of spittle by Jesus, for example, is both a well-attested practice in primitive medicine and also part of the exorcist's ritual when attacking an evil spirit. However, both touching with their hands and applying spittle, which the evangelist recorded were part of Jesus' healing techniques and they were normal medical procedures.

Equally, as COLE (2006:1210) argued, 'In those days saliva was thought to have therapeutic effects.' What we make of this is that at the time of Jesus, the use of saliva to heal was an accepted medical practice. Hence, when Jesus spat on the blind man's eyes, he was making use of a known medical

procedure in curing diseases during his time. It also shows that Jesus believed in medical procedure and encouraged it while curing infirmities. COLE (2006:1210) says further that 'this incidence further suggests that the Lord does sometimes use physical means in the process of divine healing, even though he can also heal without them.'

However, the combination of spittle and the laying of hands on the blind man, seemed not to have been effective at first application. Hence, when Jesus asked him if he could see anything, he looked up and said he saw men, as trees, walking. This shows that the first healing attempt by Jesus was not successful totally. The meaning of the verb ἀναβλέψας (looking up) as it applies to the case of the blind man has been contended by scholars. KLOSTERMANN (1950:77), LOHMEYER (1937:158) and TAYLOR (1952:371) think that the verb simply means 'to look up, or 'to lift one's eyes.' As MUTHIAH (2005) argues, ἀναβλέψας is used in three senses in the New Testament. Firstly, it simply refers to the act of looking up as can be seen in Mk 16:4, Lk 19:5, Lk 21:1). Secondly, it refers to the act of looking up in prayer as seen in Mk 6:41 and Mk 7:34. Thirdly, it is used to refer to the act of regaining of sight, especially when it is used in the context of blindness (cf. Mk 10:51, Mt 11:5, Mt 20:34, Lk 7:22, Lk 18:41-43, Jn 9:11 among others). As the verb is used here, it certainly refers to the act of regaining one's sight. Hence, LAGRANGE (1942:213) is right in saying that the word ἀναβλέψας was used here to refer to the moment the blind man regained his sight.

While we can agree that Mark used ἀναβλέψας to refer to the moment the blind man received his sight, we believe that his sense of recognition and perception was not restored at this point. Hence, DERRETT (1981:36) is right in saying:

> A person who recovers sight after a long interval, and who first sees object inverted, takes time to recover the interpretative power. The interval between darkness and the correct interpretation of an erect image, complete with distance and perspective, is a period of mental confusion with its own frustrations.

The lack of interpretative power, as DERRETT puts it above, leads the blind man to see men walking as trees. Certainly, having not been able to see for a long time, the perceptive and recognitive power of the blind man, had not set in properly. In this case, confusion had to set in, and he saw men as trees, walking. Jesus probably understood this and had to lay his

hands on the eyes of the blind man again. This time, Mark uses the verb διέβλεψεν which means to 'look intently' to described the blind man's action after Jesus had touched his eyes the second time. This time, after he had looked intently, his power of perception and recognition was totally restored; his blindness was gone. He was now able to see things clearly. This two-stage healing, as much as it is perplexing regarding why the man's sight was not restored at first attempt by Jesus, therefore has something to do with optical and cognitive restoration processes. This is not uncommon with the process of sight recovery in modern understanding. In fact, as GLENNY & NOBLE (2014:72) argue correctly,

> By making use of cognitive sciences, we find that the blind man's multiphased restoration of sight is not inconsistent with a modern understanding of the physiological process in question. In fact, if we can assume that this pericope reflects Mark's acquaintance with anecdotal accounts of sight recovery, then the two phases of healing are best interpreted in terms of optical and cognitive restoration, respectively.

V 26:

The Blind Man is sent to His Home with a Strict Warning not to enter the Village

At the restoration of his sight, Jesus sent the blind man home with a strict warning not to enter into the village. According to HARRINGTON (2014:614) "[i]t is another command to silence after a miraculous action on Jesus' part (1:44, 5:43, 7:36)." The act of sending the man home quietly shows that he was not from Bethsaida. He may have come to Bethsaida from his village probably as a blind bagger. Blind beggars were common in Palestine at the time of Jesus, and Jesus had numerous encounters with them. This blind man, probably resided in Bethsaida as a beggar. This was why Jesus sent him home with an instruction not to enter into the village. SHORT (1986:1166) thinks that Jesus did not want others to see the man when he was healed before his family. So, according to SHORT 'Desirous, probably, that the man's relations should know of his cure before other people, Jesus told him to go home, rather than near-by village.' Many scholars think the action of Jesus is linked to his desire to keep his identity secret. This, as we have shown, is called the messianic secret in Mark. While we share this view, we also believe that part of why Jesus sent the man home with a warning not to enter the village may be linked to the fact the He(Jesus) wanted the blind man's family to be able to see the good work God has done for him firstly, before other people. Besides, Jesus

may also be thinking of the distraction such a miraculous healing may generate in the life of the blind man and those who may have witnessed the healing. At least, it seems Jesus was not yet ready for such interruptions to his ministry.[7]

Conclusion of Exegesis

From our reading of the text, we see that Mk 8:22-26 involved a two-stage healing of a blind man. Equally, Jesus made use of some methods of healing which are somehow unconventional to his method of healing. Although unconventional to Jesus' healing method, our exegesis reveals that these healing methods were, in fact, well-known in the medical practice of Jesus' day. By implication, Jesus made use of well-known medical procedure in the process of restoring the blind man's sight. This, therefore, means that Jesus was not antagonistic of the application of medicine in healing diseases. In fact, he encouraged it in our reading of Mk 8:22-26. This shows that Christians are not to reject the uses of medicine in the cure of diseases, as much as faith-healing is also upheld.

The Hermeneutics of Mk 8:22-26 in the Context of COVID-19 Hesitancy among Christians in Nigeria

COVID-19 became a reality in Nigeria in the year 2020. By February of 2020, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was recorded in the country (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control 2020). Hence, a somewhat distant disease believed to have been a 'white man's' disease became a reality in Nigeria. Amidst the confusion and fear for the diseases, the government of Nigeria imposed a nation-wide lockdown in order to contain the disease. It was still in the same year 2020 that the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic as it had at that time affected almost all countries of the world, leaving behind a huge death toll. The nationwide lockdown meant that religious activities had to cease. By implication, all worship centres were closed down in a bid to try to contain the spread of the virus by the government. As CHUKWUMA (2021) has shown, the church in Nigeria was affected in different capacities. This does not however mean that there were no positive effects of the pandemic on the

[7] For more on this, see CHINWOKWU (2015:67-72).

church in Nigeria. For one, the pandemic and the lockdown in Nigeria, taught Christians that the church can be moved online without a need for physical gathering to worship God. It was still in the year 2020 that scientists developed a vaccine for COVID-19 but there became a mass rollout of different types of COVID-19 vaccine all over the world by 2021 (Olu-Abiodun, Abiodun & Okafor 2022:2). All this was in a bid to mitigate the spread of the virus. As it is, Nigeria keyed into the provision of the vaccine for its citizens. According to Olu-Abiodun, Abiodun & Okafor (2022) as of November 2021, about 6,000,000 people had taken the initial dose of the vaccine while about 3,369,628 had taken the second dose; this brings the number of unvaccinated people in the country as of then to about 200,000,000. As of 2022, a review of the acceptance rate of COVID-19 vaccine based on available studies in Nigeria stood between 20.0% and 58.2% (Olu-Abiodun, Abiodun & Okafor 2022).[8] This tells the fact that acceptance of the vaccine is still a problem among Nigerians.

The main problem, as regards hesitancy in accepting COVID-19 vaccines among Nigerians, is linked to the belief that COVID-19 is a myth. Or, as many Christians saw it, COVID-19 is the anti-Christ. Among many Christians in Nigeria, there was a belief that the outbreak of COVID-19 was a sign of end time. As the findings of Ossai (2021) showed, many Christians interviewed about their perceptions of the pandemic, believed it to be the anti-Christ. Our findings corroborate Ossai's findings and go further to show that Christians, who do not see COVID-19 as the anti-Christ, believe it to be a myth. This was the genesis of the problem as regards why many Christians in Nigeria have come to reject both COVID-19 as a reality, including its vaccine.

During the field work for this study, our findings showed that many Christians have varied views regarding the need for Christians to accept COVID-19 vaccine. Many of the views we sampled on COVID-19 vaccine and why Christians should accept or reject it, were based on conspiracy theories. According to *IP CO-1* (2022 oral interview), there is a view among many Christians in Nigeria that COVID-19 and its vaccine has a link to the anti-Christ. As such, many Christians in the country, believe that taking the vaccine means being part of the anti-Christ. In this regard, many Christians in the country do not want to take the vaccine for the fear

[8] For a breakdown of COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rate based on geo-political zones of Nigeria between 2020 and 2021, see Olu-Abiodun, Abiodun & Okafor (2022:5).

of being part of the anti-Christ. A similar view by *IP EO-2* (2022 oral interview) shows that COVID-19 is a myth in Nigeria. Absurdly, he links COVID-19 to a ploy to overthrow the former president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, since he was a Christian fighting for Christian values. For him, God can heal COVID-19 and in as much as the vaccine does not cure the disease, there is no need for Christians to take it. This relates to the view of *IP NO-8* (2022 oral interview) that COVID-19 is a biological war by China to reduce the population of the world. For him, it was one of the tools the white people used to reduce the population of the blacks all over the world. This tool did not work, according to *IP NO-8*, and they had to resort to COVID-19 vaccine to achieve their aim. Christians in Nigeria, therefore, understood this and decided to reject the vaccine. *IP NO-8* thinks that this accounts for the hesitancy seen among Christians in Nigeria for COVID-19 vaccine. This is similar to the view of *IP AE-3* (2022 oral interview) that there was nothing like COVID-19 in the first place. It was (and still is) a scam. It was a means through which the white people wanted to reduce the population of blacks by deceiving them into accepting COVID-19 vaccine so that they will die *en masse*. In a related view, *IP FE-7* (2022 oral interview) believes that COVID-19 exists but it is not meant to kill Christians. She even cites Exod 15:16 where God promises the people of Israel that he will not visit them with the diseases he afflicted the Egyptians with since he is the Lord that heals. In this sense, Christians are not meant for COVID-19 and COVID-19 is not meant for Christians. In fact in her words "Christians have immunity against COVID-19." For her, this is the reason for vaccination hesitancy among Christians in Nigeria.

Some of those we interviewed, believed in the reality of COVID-19. However, they were on the minority. For example, the view of *IP AO-4* (2022 oral interview) indicates that why there is vaccine hesitancy among Christians in the country is because Church leaders are not promoting the need for the vaccine. According to her, many church leaders in Nigeria discourage Christians from being vaccinated against COVID-19. In this sense, as long as they do not encourage it, many Christians in the country will be hesitant to being vaccinated against COVID-19. This relates to the view of *IP CO-5* (2022 oral interview) that part of the problem is a lack of sensitisation on the need for the vaccine among Christians. He argues that since many of the Christian leaders are not part of the sensitisation

process, many Christians in the country are not properly sensitised about the need to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

What we make of these views is that there is COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among Christians in Nigeria. While there may be reasons different from the ones we sampled here on why Christians are hesitant in being vaccinated against COVID-19 in Nigeria, the fact remains that Christians in the country are accepting COVID-19 vaccine at a very low rate. In this regard, we will discuss below how our exegesis of Mk 8:22-26 encourages Christians in the country to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Firstly, the text of Mk 8:22-26 shows that Jesus did not reject the reality of diseases such as blindness that existed in his world. In this text and beyond, where encounters of Jesus with people with infirmities and their subsequent healings are mentioned in Mark, Jesus never doubted the reality of the existence of diseases in Palestine. His acceptance of this fact is to be underscored for a mature approach to acceptance of COVID-19 vaccine by Christians in Nigeria. When, for example, Jesus met the blind man at Bethsaida, he did not ascertain, firstly, if the blind man was truly blind or not. Alternatively, even what was the cause of his blindness was not Jesus' concern. Rather, his concern was how to cure the blind man since he was certain that the man was blind. This is a contrary attitude to that of Nigerian Christians as regards the reality of COVID-19. As we have shown, the denial of the reality of COVID-19 in Nigeria by Christians, is linked to their rejection of its vaccine. Even when there are facts on ground, proven medically, that COVID-19 kills (many Nigerian Christians watched on television how people died of the pandemic in droves in other countries of the world), they still dismissed the reality of the pandemic. Some even went as far as interpreting it to be the anti-Christ. The text of Mk 8:22-26 therefore calls Christians in Nigeria to re-evaluate their faith as regards the religion – health (COVID-19) debate.

Secondly, by making use of a well-known medical procedure of healing diseases in his world, Jesus encourages Christians to accept medical process of curing diseases. If Jesus, with all his healing power as God, could apply spittle in healing a blind man, it means he sanctioned the use of medicine to cure diseases. In fact, it means he supports medical process of curing diseases. This means that in the context of our application of the text, there is a need for Christians in Nigeria to accept medical prescriptions as regards COVID-19. Of course, as of today, there is no known and

acceptable cure for COVID-19; only its prevention method exists. This preventive method is the vaccine which, as we have shown, is being rejected by many Nigerian Christians. In this regard, Mk 8:22-26 teaches Christians in Nigeria that while faith-healing is part of the Christian belief, the application of medicine in curing diseases is equally accepted. The text therefore encourages Nigerian Christians to understand this fact as far as COVID-19 pandemic and its vaccine is concerned.

Thirdly, and in alignment with the above point, our text of study encourages Christians to have themselves vaccinated against COVID-19 since there is nothing wrong for a believing Christian to do so. Our logic here is that since Jesus, in the text of Mk 8:22-26 sanctioned the application of medicine in curing diseases, Jesus sanctioned the acceptance of vaccine as well, which is part of the medical process of combating the pandemic. In this regard, what many Christians should be concerned about is if there are medically proven side effects of having oneself vaccinated against COVID-19. Equally, Christians in Nigeria should also ask if such side effects of the vaccine, even if they exist, are the higher evil as long as being vaccinated against COVID-19 is concerned. As it stands, whatever side effects that Christians in Nigeria claim COVID-19 vaccine has, is based more on 'conspiracy theories' which, in most cases, have not been proven medically. Many of their reasons for rejecting the reality of COVID-19 and its vaccine, as we have seen in our interviews, are based on 'conspiracy theories' and poorly-constructed faith-based reasons rather than medical facts. This is to be discouraged by our exegesis of Mk 8:22-26.

Conclusion

The text of Mk 8:22-26 is very puzzling to many Christians. The application of a two-stage healing process by Jesus, which even included the use of spittle, is even more puzzling to many Christians. The present study 'looked' beyond the nitty-gritty of this two-stage healing to show what the text means for Christians in Nigeria as regards COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. The study showed that the process of the healing of the bind man at Bethsaida by Jesus followed well-known medical processes of Jesus' time, particularly the use of spittle to cure diseases. This means that Jesus encourages medical process of curing diseases. This therefore should be

an encouragement for Christians in Nigeria in accepting COVID-19 vaccine since all available facts show that the pandemic is real in Nigeria. The text also calls for the re-evaluation of Nigerian Christians' stance on faith (religion) – COVID-19 vaccine debate.

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List of interview partners (IP)

S/N	IP Code	Gender	Denomination/ position
1.	*IP CO-1*	male	Anglican/ clergy
2.	*IP EO-2*	male	Anglican/ clergy
3.	*IP AE-3*	female	Pentecostal/ member
4.	*IP AO-4*	female	Pentecostal / member
5.	*IP CO-5*	male	Roman Catholic/ member
6.	*IP MI-6*	female	Roman Catholic/ member
7.	*IP FE-7*	female	Pentecostal/ member
8.	*IP NO-8*	male	Roman Catholic/ member