

## The Current Debate on the Relationship between Sin and Sickness in John 5:14

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**ABSTRACT:** The article focuses on the understanding of sin in John 5:14, as well as the relationship between sin and sickness presented in this verse. It provides a thorough *status quaestionis* on both of these issues. After examining various hypotheses regarding the meaning of sin in John 5:14, the Johannine notion of sin as unbelief is expounded as the most convincing. This sin encompasses the past, present, and future life of the healed man. Thus, contrary to the exegetical *opinio communis*, the cause-and-effect relationship between sin and sickness does not apply to John 5:14. In light of this explanation, the messages of John 5:14 and 9:2–3 do not contradict each other. Jesus' words in 5:14, intentionally pronounced in the temple, should be understood as an invitation to follow him in faith.

**KEYWORDS:** sin, sickness, John 5:14, the Gospel of John

### 1. The Problem and Hypothesis

Referring to the seemingly hopeless attempts made by many authors to explain the function of John 5:14 in its context, Ernst Haenchen confessed that “[e]xegetes have expended a great deal of effort on this saying.”<sup>1</sup> The main problematic issue in this verse concerns the unexpected introduction of the topic of sin. The Johannine narrative in 5:1–9 presents the healing of a paralyzed man performed by Jesus. Following Jesus' command to stand up, pick up his mat and walk (5:8–9), the cured man disappeared into the throngs that filled Jerusalem during the feast (5:1). Jesus also withdrew from the scene, mixing with the festive crowd, and the healed man was left with no information whatsoever about the identity of his healer (5:13). After an undetermined period of time, Jesus found this previously lame man in the temple and said to him: “You have become whole. Sin no more, lest anything worse happen to you” (5:14). The reference to sin comes as a surprise to the reader, since in the rest of the narrative there is no mention of any sinful condition regarding this man. It is

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The article was prepared as part of research project No. Dec-2018/02/X/HS1/00025 funded by the National Science Center.

<sup>1</sup> E. Haenchen, *John 1. A Commentary on the Gospel of John. Chapters 1–6* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress 1984) 247.

in fact the first occurrence of the verb ἀμαρτάνω (“to sin”) in the Fourth Gospel (8:11; 9:2.3), and only the second Johannine mention of the concept of sin at all, after the use of the noun ἀμαρτία (“sin”) in 1:29, where Jesus was described as the one who would take away the “sin of the world.” There are other intriguing issues connected with Jesus’ utterance in John 5:14, e.g., the use of the verb “found,” or the temple as the place of the encounter.<sup>2</sup> But, for our present purposes, two aspects seem vital: first, the nature of the man’s sin and second, the relationship between sin and sickness.<sup>3</sup>

Jeffrey L. Staley expressed the first puzzling issue well: “The suddenness of Jesus’ warning, his failure to flesh out the specifics of the man’s ‘sin,’ and the narrator’s disinterest in illuminating the reader, all have the effect of forcing the reader to fill this new gap by attempting to explain the healed man’s character flaw.”<sup>4</sup> The pressing question then is: what wrong or sin was the cured man guilty of? The second issue – in my opinion intrinsically connected with the understanding of sin in 5:14 – is the relationship between sin and sickness in this passage. In 1995, John Christopher Thomas argued that despite a good deal of

2 C. Karakolis, “«Afterwards, Jesus found him in the Temple». Looking for Implicit Motifs in John 5:14a,” *LS 42* (2019) 175–189.

3 Ernst Haenchen (*John I*, 247) himself argued that the evangelist has carried over Jesus’ saying in 5:14 from his source, damaging the original form of the composition: “the original form of the story ended with the word to the man who was cured to return to his home [v. 9a], and an editor decided to insert a moralistic ending.” The existing narrative does not answer the following questions, however: “Of what did the sin that struck the lame man 38 years earlier and laid him low for so long consist, and how young must he have been at that time?” This source- or redaction-critical explanation is shared by a few other commentators. Without denying the attractiveness of this hypothesis, our task consists in explaining the available form of the text, assuming that there is a logical coherence of the narrative produced by its final redactor. Rudolf Schnackenburg (*The Gospel According to St John. II. Commentary on Chapters 5–12* [New York: Crossroad 1990] 92–93) argues that vv. 9c–15 should be regarded as “the evangelist’s commentary” to the account of the healing itself (vv. 1–9b). In turn, Antoine Duprez (*Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs. À propos de Jean V* [CahRB 12; Paris: Gabalda 1970] 146, 169) claims that v. 14 is a later insertion into the Johannine text. It was understood as advice or a warning given to newly baptized persons, which reflected the conviction that all falls after baptism result in spiritual death. Marie-Émile Boismard and Arnaud Lamouille (*L’Évangile de Jean* [Synopse des Quatre Évangiles en français 3; Paris: Cerf 1987] 156) opt for the existence of three different strata in John 5:1–18 (Jean II-A, Jean II-B and Jean III), and that vv. 9c–16a.c belong to the second stage (Jean II-B). Urban C. von Wahlde (*The Gospel and Letters of John. I. Introduction, Analysis, and Reference* [ECC; Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans 2010] 570) deems 5:14 to be part of 5:9b–19, which comes from the second stage of the Gospel’s composition, added to 9:1–9a, stemming from the first stage. Within the framework of source-critical analysis, Leonard T. Witkamp (“The Use of Traditions in John 5.1–18,” *JNT* 25 [1985] 27) argued that John 5:14 belonged to the source and constituted the ending of the original story (vv. 1–9a + 14). According to his argument, John could not have used this verse in vv. 2–9 “because he was heading for the sabbath conflict. The theme of v. 14b would have led him away from that purpose, so he had either to cut it away or to postpone it. Obviously, he chose the latter possibility, presumably since he did not want to drop such an important feature of his traditional narrative, the more so since the theme of ζῴωσις (5.21!) is already prepared, even present, in the combination of healing and forgiveness of sins.” Haenchen was aware that his solution “does not explain everything,” because it does not do justice to the present text, namely the author’s capacity for building a logically coherent narrative. Nevertheless, Witkamp gave some persuasive reasons for the inclusion of this verse in the Johannine narrative.

4 J.L. Staley, “Stumbling in the Dark, Reaching for the Light: Reading Character in John 5 and 9,” *Semeia* 53 (1991) 62.

scholarly attention devoted to the pericope of John 5 generally, this aspect of the narrative has not received enough consideration. His contribution was aimed at moving the discussion forward, and it indeed helped fill the gap in the scholarly literature regarding the relationship between the man's infirmity and sin.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, in his four-page exposition of this verse, he did focus on this relationship, but did not discuss the nature of this sin, which, in my assessment, is the key to solving the mystery of John 5:14.

According to the majority of commentators, including John Christopher Thomas, John 5:14 implies that the paralytic's sickness resulted from his previous sin(s). Jesus' words "sin no more," referring to this man's future actions, assume that there was a sin or sins related to this man's past actions.<sup>6</sup> The Fourth Gospel itself, however, seems to give contradictory evidence regarding the connection between sin and sickness. On the one hand, it was widely held in ancient times that any ailment, suffering, or even death constituted divine punishment for sin, a view reflected elsewhere within the biblical tradition (Job 5:17–19; Sir 38:15; Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor 11:29–30; Jas 5:14–16). The passage, John 5:14, could simply be viewed as another illustration of this concept. On the other hand, in John 9:3 Jesus denies the interpretation that illness is retribution for sin, a view that is already found in the Book of Job. This blatant contradiction, evidenced by comparing John 5:14 and 9:3, begs for explanation. Is then any way of reconciling these two texts, actually two pronouncements of the Johannine Jesus? Both were written by the same author and, even assuming the multi-stage evolution of this Gospel, its final redactor would not have left unnoticed such a contradiction. A widely embraced solution to this problem is the view that there is, on the one hand, suffering or sickness not as the result of any sin (as illustrated in 9:3) and, at the same time, suffering or sickness that does stem from human guilt (as exemplified by 5:14).<sup>7</sup> Already Thomas Aquinas, commenting on John 5:14, noted: "Christ mentioned

5 J.C. Thomas, "«Stop Sinning Lest Something Worse Come Upon You»: The Man at the Pool in John 5," *JSNT* 59 (1995) 3–20.

6 To give only a few examples from the last hundred years of scholarship: B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John. Introduction and Notes on the Authorized Version* (London: Murray 1908) 83 ("the connection is implied"); M.C. Merrill, *John. The Gospel of Belief. An Analytic Study of the Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1976) 105 ("«Sin no more» implied that his former state was a direct result of sin"); D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1990) 246 ("The unavoidable implication is that the bad thing that has already happened was occasioned by the sin which the person must not repeat."); Thomas, "Stop Sinning," 16 ("Jesus implies that the man had been ill because he has personally sinned"); C.S. Keener, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2003) 643 ("this man's malady apparently stemmed from sin"); G.R. Osborne, *The Gospel of John* (Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 13; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House 2007) 78; U.C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John. II. Commentary on the Gospel of John* (ECC; Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans 2010) 220 ("Here Jesus articulates the opinion, common in Judaism, that the man's physical illness was caused by sinning."); W.F. Cook, *John. Jesus Christ is God* (The Focus on the Bible Commentary Series; Fearn, U.K.: Christian Focus Publications 2016) 94 ("Jesus' words imply that the man's condition had been the result of sin").

7 For instance, L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John. Revised Edition* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1995) 272 ("Jesus repudiates the idea that disasters like blindness are inevitably caused by sin. But he does not say that they are never caused by sin."); R.A. Whitacre, *John* (The IVP New Testament Commentary Series 4; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 1999) 122 ("We should [...] avoid the view that illness is always

sin only to some he cured and not to all, for not all infirmities are due to previous sins: some come from one's natural disposition, and some are permitted as a trial, as with Job."<sup>8</sup> Here Aquinas himself acknowledged the cause-and-effect logic, meaning that man's illness came to him as a result of his previous sin(s). Besides those modern commentators who fully endorse this causal relationship in John 5:14, there are also those authors who deem it possible,<sup>9</sup> dubious,<sup>10</sup> or reject it altogether,<sup>11</sup> arguing that this text is not addressing this issue directly (e.g. stating that "evidently the man had been lame since birth").<sup>12</sup> This study offers a different take on the relationship between sin and sickness in John 5:14. It is based on the assumption that the understanding of sin in 5:14 has a direct bearing on the existence or non-existence of a causal relationship between sin (guilt) and sickness (suffering). If one understands sin as referring to the primordial fall from the Book of Genesis, then any sickness and suffering is the direct result of sin.<sup>13</sup> If, however, one focuses on the Johannine understanding of sin as unbelief, then it is possible that the very nature of sin, as understood in John 5:14, has nothing to do with the lame man's sickness. The same logic lies behind Jesus' words about the Galileans who suffered a terrible fate at Pilate's hands, and those on whom the tower of Siloam fell (Luke 13:1–5). In our opinion, John 5:14 does not focus on the past sins of the crippled man, but on the past, present and future sin of unbelief in Jesus. As a consequence, the causal relationship between sin and sickness is not implied in 5:14.

In this article, we will present a detailed exegesis of the crucial phrase in John 5:14, concentrating on its three components: (1) becoming whole; (2) sinning no more; and

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connected to some particular sin [...]. We should also reject the idea that there is never such a connection.”); K. Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium. I. Kapitel 1–10*, 2 ed. (TKNT 4; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2004) 201 (“Es gibt unverschuldetes Leiden. Aber es gibt auch verschuldetes Leiden.”); A.T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (BNTC 4; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 2005) 196 (“A connection between particular sins and a disease is not accepted as a general rule but it is not excluded in specific cases.”).

- 8 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Thomas Aquinas in Translation; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America 2010) I, 266–267.
- 9 J.H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St John* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark 1928) I, 235 (“quite possibly”); J.R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2010) 298 (“a distinct possibility”).
- 10 R. Kysar, *John* (ACNT; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg 1986) 78 (“Jesus’ words [...] are not necessarily an indication that Jesus or John embraced the view that illness results from wrongdoing”). David A. Croteau (“Repentance Found? The Concept of Repentance in the Fourth Gospel,” *MSJ* 24/1 [2013] 115) notes that the connection between the sin and the disease in 5:14 is “unclear.”
- 11 C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John. An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text. Second Edition* (London: SPCK 1978) 255 (“It is neither said nor implied that the man’s illness was the consequence of sin”); G.L. Borchert, *John 1–11* (NAC 25A; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman 1996) 235 (“These words are not meant to be a cause-and-effect statement related to his sickness or paralysis.”); G.R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” R.A. Culpepper – G.R. O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1995) IX, 579 (“it seems wrong to read Jesus’ words in v. 14 as embracing the traditional linkage of sin and illness”).
- 12 B.M. Newman – E.A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies 1980) 150.
- 13 Donald Carson (*John*, 246) noted: “It is a commonplace in many strands of Jewish and Christian theology that suffering and tragedy are the effluent of the fall, the corollary of life lived in a fallen and rebellious universe. In that sense, all sickness is the result of sin, but not necessarily of some specific, individual sin.”

(3) the idea that there is something worse than sickness which can happen to the cured man. Having rendered different opinions and interpretations of these three elements, we will focus on the understanding of sin reflected in this passage and also the relationship between sin and sickness. Our presentation is aimed at describing an up-to-date *status quaestionis* on both pressing issues, indicating the most convincing solutions.

## 2. “You have become whole”

The adjective ὑγιής occurs seven times in the Fourth Gospel and refers exclusively to a healed paralytic (5:4.6.9.11.14.15; 7:23). Marie-Émile Boismard and Arnaud Lamouille argue that the number seven is intentionally devised by a second redactor of this textual stratum (Jean II-B).<sup>14</sup> The number seven in antiquity symbolized totality, thus its deliberate use pointed out the wholeness of the healing. In their interpretation, the man was cured “totalement,” “tout entire,” i.e. “dans son corps and dans son âme.”<sup>15</sup> Leaving aside the somehow dubious numerological argument, the five uses of the same word ὑγιής in the same pericope clearly demonstrates an emphasis. In the last occurrence of ὑγιής (7:23), it is said that Jesus made “an entire man whole” (ὅλον ἄνθρωπον ὑγιή). The wholeness of healing might also be argued by referring to the semantics. The basic meaning of ὑγιής with regard to persons is “healthy, in good health,” although this adjective might be translated as “whole,” “intact,” as in Lysias’ *Against Andocides* (6,12; LCL 244, 121–122) with reference to Hermes, who “was sound and entire” (ὕγιᾶ τε καὶ ὅλον εἶναι).<sup>16</sup> The use of the adjective ὑγιής thus suggests an integral restoration of this man.

14 Verse 4 is included in this counting, although, according to Bruce M. Metzger (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2 ed. [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 2002] 179), this verse is “a gloss whose secondary character is clear from (1) its absence from the earliest and best witnesses [...], (2) the presence of asterisks or obeli to mark the words as spurious in more than twenty Greek witnesses [...], (3) the presence of non-Johannine words or expressions [...], and (4) the rather wide diversity of variant forms in which the verse was transmitted.” Nevertheless, Boismard and Lamouille (*L’Évangile de Jean*, 157) argue that v. 4 belonged to the original text written by Jean II-B, and its unusual linguistic style (seven non-Johannine words in one sentence) might be influenced by “une certaine façon de parler en usage à propos des sanctuaires païens d’Asie Mineure.”

15 Boismard – Lamouille, *L’Évangile de Jean*, 153 and 162–163. In their opinion, this “total healing” alludes to baptism, because Jean II-B was highly interested in sacraments. Interestingly, in the Curetonian Syriac version of John 5:2, the text runs: “there was in Jerusalem a baptistery.” It might suggest that “the Bethesda pools was used as a place of Christian baptism, a fact likely enough in and of itself in view of the paucity of places of abundant water in Jerusalem” (J. Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament. The Life of Jesus and the Beginning of the Early Church. Revised Edition* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1992] 232). Already Tertulian (d. 240) (*De Baptismo* 5,5–6) created a link between John 5 and baptism: angels are present in baptism, which achieves spiritual healing, just as the angel was present at the Bethesda pool, bringing about physical healing. This baptismal interpretation is followed by a substantial number of commentators from antiquity until today, although some authors “find the basis for baptismal interpretation «fragile» or see an antibaptismal motif reflected in the fact that the water was not efficacious” (Keener, *John*, 638).

16 Cf. F. Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden – Boston, MA: Brill 2015) s.v. ὑγιής.

According to some commentators, the emphatic use of the term ὅλης might imply that the healed man is not only cured, but also forgiven of his sins.<sup>17</sup> There are two arguments in favor of this interpretation. (1) In the context of 7:23, where the phrase “an entire man whole” occurs, Jesus compares the practice of performing circumcisions on the Sabbath with his own act of healing the paralytic man on the Sabbath – both, strictly speaking, potential Sabbath violations. John Christopher Thomas asks, “It is, of course, possible that Jesus is contrasting the Jewish action of circumcision, which affects one part of the body, with his healing that affected the entire body. But is it not possible that the use of ὅλον ἄνθρωπον ὅλην signifies more [...]?”<sup>18</sup> In fact, circumcision was not a reality affecting exclusively the physical dimension of man. On the contrary, it was an external sign of a dramatic and fundamental change on the spiritual level as the circumcised person entered into a covenant relationship with God and Israel, God’s chosen people. (2) It has been noted that Jesus’ utterance in 5:14 has a particular structure, described long ago by Michel de Goedt and named “revelatory scheme.”<sup>19</sup> It starts with ἴδε after which follows the description of the person, which reveals something new about his status, dignity, identity, or mission (cf. 1:19–34; 1:35–39; 1:47–51; 19:24–27). As John Christopher Thomas noted, “In this case Jesus finds the person, says ἴδε, and pronounces that he has been made whole. Perhaps this formula is used intentionally to draw attention to the nature of his wholeness.”<sup>20</sup> The use of the perfect tense of the verb γίνομαι (“to become”) should also be noted. The phrase thus means: “you have become whole and so you *are* whole.”<sup>21</sup> The perfect form of the verb indicates that the cure was permanent. The use of this tense might be intentional. As noted by Leon Morris: “No doubt some of the «cures» that were reported from the pool did not last very long. Jesus’ healing of the man was not in such a category.”<sup>22</sup>

### 3. “Sin no more”

It has been suggested that the sin linked with the cured man “must be a significant infraction, for Jesus takes the trouble to find him and warn him of a worse fate which could befall him.”<sup>23</sup> This conclusion is not self-evident, however, as εὕρσκει (“he finds”) could indeed imply inquiry or search (cf. 6:25; 7:34), but it might also simply mean “came upon him” (cf. 2:14).<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, εὕρσκω is employed elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel to designate an intentional searching in order to call someone to become a follower of

17 Boismard – Lamouille, *L’Évangile de Jean*, 162.

18 Thomas, “Stop Sinning,” 15.

19 M. de Goedt, “Un schème de révélation dans le quatrième évangile,” *NTS* 8 (1961–1962) 142–150.

20 Thomas, “Stop Sinning,” 15.

21 W.C. Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1* (ConcC; St. Louis, MO: Concordia 2015) 556.

22 Morris, *John*, 272.

23 Staley, “Stumbling in the Dark,” 62.

24 M.J. Harris, *John* (EGGNT; Nashville, TN: B&H Academic 2015) 107.

the Messiah, which is also done by Jesus himself: Andrew “found” Simon Peter (1:43), Philip “found” Nathanael (1:45), and Jesus “found” Philip (1:43). In the parallel text (9:35), Jesus similarly “found” the man born blind, at some point after the healing, and the question with which he addressed this man: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” was not a trivial conversation. The similarly essential words, pregnant with theological meaning, occurs in 5:14, when the healed man is later “found” by Jesus. In what follows below, we will first deal with the meaning of the present imperative of the verb ἀμάρτανε in the phrase “sin no more” and then consider the various explanations regarding the nature of this sin.

### 3.1. The Imperative: “stop sinning” or “don’t sin”

Jesus addressed the cured man with a short statement: μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε. The adverb μηκέτι (“no longer,” “no more,” “not for any longer,” “not from now on”) refers back to the past, “to the previous pattern of sinning or some particular sin that led to the man’s illness.”<sup>25</sup> Morphologically, the verb ἀμάρτανε is a present imperative. The whole construction μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε expresses a prohibition of something that one is already doing, an urging to discontinue an ongoing action.<sup>26</sup> For this reason, the expression μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε is translated as “stop sinning,” “cease your sinning,” “do not continue to sin,” “no longer continue to sin,” or “do not continue sinning any longer.” The corollary is that the cured man has sinned and continues to sin, i.e. at the time of the man’s second meeting with Jesus, after the healing, he was still living in sin.

Jeffrey L. Staley argues that the present imperative suggests that the cured man is still living in sin and “perhaps” he has not experienced the forgiveness of sins.<sup>27</sup> The same assumption is fostered by Martin Asiedu-Peprah: the present imperative suggests that “at the time of the second encounter, the man is seen as still living in sin. The initial healing would thus not be related to any forgiveness of sin.”<sup>28</sup> As to the issue of forgiveness, I do not concur with this view, because the cured man could be forgiven by Jesus at the moment of his miraculous

<sup>25</sup> Harris, *John*, 107.

<sup>26</sup> Ernest De Witt Burton (*Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, 3 ed. [Edinburgh: Clark 1898] § 165), illustrating his exposition with μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε (John 5:14), argues that the present imperative “forbids the continuance of the action, most frequently when it is already in progress; in this case, it is a demand to desist from the action.” In the same vein, Archibald T. Robertson (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 3 ed. [London: Hodder & Stoughton 1919] 890) sets a general rule that the present imperative is used with μή “to forbid what one is already doing” and illustrates it with μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε in John 5:14. On the force of the present imperative, see also J.H. Moulton – W.F. Howard – N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: Clark 1909) I, 122–126.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey L. Staley (“Stumbling in the Dark,” 62, n. 31) noted: “An aorist imperative would have meant, ‘Don’t start sinning (again), or something worse will happen to you,’ implying that the act of healing was also an act of forgiving sins and that there was a causal connection between the illness and sin. But the present imperative would seem to imply that the man is still living in sin (‘You’ve been sinning, now don’t do it any more’), and thus perhaps that the initial healing was not related to any forgiveness of sins.”

<sup>28</sup> M. Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts as Juridical Controversy. An Exegetical Study of John 5 and 9:1–10:21* (WUNT 2/132; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2001) 72.

healing – he was indeed made “whole” – and yet the previously lame man could still be sinning in some way after the miracle. The nature of his sin is, in fact, not specified.

It must be noted, however, that some authors favor the translation of *μηκέτι ἁμάρτανε* in an aoristic sense as “don’t sin [again]” or in the more general sense “don’t sin any more” (NET). In the first case, as argued by Donald Carson, the translation implies that the cured man “had not committed this particular sin since the fateful rebellion that had earned him the illness.”<sup>29</sup> The NET translators maintained that the translation “stop sinning” is unlikely, “since the present tense is normally used in prohibitions involving a general condition (as here), while the aorist tense is normally used in specific instances. Only when used opposite the normal usage (the present tense in a specific instance, for example) would the meaning ‘stop doing what you are doing’ be appropriate.”

Daniel Wallace noted that almost all instances of the imperative with *μή* (or a cognate) in the NT involve the present tense, and there are only eight instances of the aorist imperative in prohibitions.<sup>30</sup> The present imperative, as is more common, seems to express a whole range of possible prohibitions. Wallace also observed that “[t]he present imperative looks at the action from an internal viewpoint. It is used for the most part for general precepts – i.e., for habits that should characterize one’s attitudes and behavior – rather than in specific situations. The action may or may not have already begun.”<sup>31</sup> That being so, perhaps one should be more cautious in drawing too precise exegetical or theological conclusions and argue instead for a general understanding of the prohibition.<sup>32</sup> For instance, Colin G. Kruse embraces this very solution: “The grammatical evidence for always rendering a negated present imperative as a command to stop doing something is far from conclusive. Jesus’ words could be translated just as well as a general command not to do something—that is, ‘Do not sin or something worse may happen to you.’ In the context of 5:14, where no particular sinful activity of the man is mentioned, Jesus’ prohibition is best construed in this general way.”<sup>33</sup>

### 3.2. Various Explanations of the Man’s Sin

As to the nature of the man’s sin, there is an impressive plethora of scholarly suggestions, which can be grouped into three categories: (1) a general reference to sin, (2) a sin referring specifically to the healed man’s life, and (3) sin understood, in light of John’s theology, as

29 Carson, *John*, 246, n. 1.

30 D.B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics. An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1996) 487.

31 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 721.

32 Donald Carson (*John*, 246, n. 1) noted that the translation “stop sinning” in 5:14 “may be a correct interpretation in this instance, but there are too many exceptions to this grammatical ‘rule’ to base the interpretation on the present sense. It has been shown that the present imperative, the more highly ‘marked’ tense, regularly stresses urgency.”

33 C.G. Kruse, *John. An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 4; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 2017) 170. The same view E.W. Klink, *John* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2016) 274.

unbelief.<sup>34</sup> The authors working within the first category, already hinted at above, argue that the reader is unable to pinpoint a precise meaning of “sin” in 5:14. Therefore, the only logical solution is to accept a general understanding of sin in this passage, with no reference to any action (past, present, or future) on the part of the invalid and then cured man.<sup>35</sup> For instance, John Chrysostom dedicated a whole passage of his homily (*Paralyt.* 3) precisely to the fact that Jesus did not make a public exposure of the paralytic’s sin or sins.<sup>36</sup> The most numerous suggestions are those identifying sin with the disabled man’s life. These interpretations can be further categorized according to the narrative chronology: (a) a sin committed in the past, i.e. before his healing, (b) a sin committed after his healing, and continued at the time of his second meeting with Jesus, and (c) a sin lurking on the horizon of an imminent future at the time of the second meeting. In the discussion that follows, we will also introduce a third category, i.e. sin as unbelief, as it is intrinsically connected with the life experience of the now-healed lame man.

#### a) Past Sin

As Charles Kingsley Barrett rightly observed, “the command to sin *no more* suggests that sins up to this point have already been dealt with.”<sup>37</sup>

(1) *Unspecified sin(s)*. John Chrysostom, at many places in his works, suggested that the paralytic was punished with his sickness for his past sins (*Laz.* 3; *Paralyt.* 2; *Hom. Jo.* 38; 56.1; *Diab.* 1.8; *Hom. Matt.* 43.5). At the same time, however, “by the length of his illness he had also put away his sins” (*Laz.* 3). Chrysostom leaves no room for any doubt that the paralytic committed sins in the past which resulted in his long paralyzing illness. Long illness, as well as healing itself – intrinsically connected with forgiveness elsewhere in the Synoptic gospels (Mark 2:5) – cleansed the bedridden man from his past sins. This interpretation reflects a prominent Jewish concept of retribution, which arises from the Old Testament.

(2) *False doctrine of God*. Kenneth Grayston interprets Jesus’ words “Sin no more” as “Give up your appalling doctrine of God.” This false doctrine required this man to wait at the pool so long for his healing.<sup>38</sup> One cannot say exactly what the nature of his twisted image of God was, but it could be the image of God who somehow *wanted* this man’s sickness and suffering.

34 Similarly, Jeffrey L. Staley (“Stumbling in the Dark,” 62, n. 33) classified the variety of scholarly attempts to explain Jesus’ words in three categories: (1) Jesus’ own understanding of sin; (2) the author’s theology; (3) the healed man’s life.

35 Kruse, *John*, 151.

36 John Chrysostom states that Jesus “did not publicly expose his sins. For just as we ourselves desire to draw a veil over our sins even so does God much more than we: on this account He wrought the cure in the presence of all, but He gives the exhortation or the advice privately [see 5:14]. For He never makes a public display of our sins, except at any time He sees men insensible to them. [...] This also is what takes place in the case of baptism: for He conducts the man to the pool of water without disclosing his sins to any one; yet He publicly presents the boon and makes it manifest to all, while the sins of the man are known to no one save God Himself and him who receives the forgiveness of them” (*NPNCC IX*, 213–214).

37 Barrett, *John*, 255.

38 K. Grayston, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International 1990) 48.

(3) *Dual loyalty*. The disabled man was sitting or lying at the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. The evangelist is very careful in describing the place of his healing (5:2).<sup>39</sup> Because some votive objects were found in various locations on the St Anne's complex, identified nowadays as the site of the Pool of Bethesda, some authors claim that this area should be identified as an Asclepion or even Asclepion-Serapeum, a sanctuary dedicated to the cult of Asclepius-Serapis.<sup>40</sup> The proximity of the Antonia Fortress might corroborate this assumption, because Asclepius was worshiped at many Roman military sites. It is a point of contention whether this pool functioned as an Asclepion already at the time of Jesus or only sometime after AD 70, or even starting in the second century AD, after the year 135 when the second Jewish revolt was put down.<sup>41</sup> Anthony Giambrone advanced an interesting thesis that Jesus performed the healing "at what was then simply a large *miqueh* near the Temple," but later Christian and pagan memory of this healing "would itself have helped fuel that site's subsequent transformation into a Roman shrine." In this way, the site was rescued from *damnatio memoriae* at the time of Hadrian's recreating Jerusalem as the pagan Aelia Capitolina (after AD 135).<sup>42</sup> Regardless of the precise dating of the Asclepion on this site, John's description of this pool must have triggered among his readers and hearers (among them both unbelieving and believing Gentiles) associations with the sanctuaries of Asclepius found elsewhere in the Roman Empire, including one of the most famous located in Pergamum, a one-day journey from Ephesus, where the Gospel of John was written. As Robin Thompson noted,

John specifically focuses on the location of this miracle because it challenges his readers to consider just who Jesus is. The Greco-Roman god Asclepius was known for healing people, and his healing was done

39 More on this pool, including the history of its discovery, its subsequent archaeological excavations and the pressing issue of its location and identification, see J. Jeremias, *The Rediscovery of Bethesda. John 5:2* (New Testament Archaeology Monograph 1; Louisville, KY: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary 1966); S. Gibson, "The Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem and Jewish Purification Practices of the Second Temple Period," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 55/3-4 (2005) 270-293; U.C. von Wahlde, "The Pool(s) of Bethesda and the Healing in John 5: A Reappraisal of Research and of the Johannine Text," *RB* 116 (2009) 111-136; U.C. von Wahlde, "The Pool of Siloam: The Importance of the New Discoveries for Our Understanding of Ritual Immersion in Late Second Temple Judaism and the Gospel of John," *John, Jesus, and History. II. Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel* (eds. P.N. Anderson - F. Just - T. Thatcher) (ECL 2; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature 2009) 155-173; S. Gibson, "The Excavations at the Bethesda Pool in Jerusalem: Preliminary Report on a Project of Stratigraphic and Structural Analysis (1999-2009)," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* Numéro Spécial (2011) 17-44; J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Saint Anne of Jerusalem. La Piscine Probatique de Jésus à Saladin. Le Projet Bethesda (1994-2010)," *RB* 119 (2012) 429-431; U.C. von Wahlde, "The Great Public *Miquaot* at Bethesda and Siloam, the Development of Jewish Attitudes Toward Ritual Purity in Late Second Temple Judaism, and Their Implications for the Gospel of John," *Rediscovering John. Essays on the Fourth Gospel in Honour of Frédéric Manns* (ed. L.D. Chrupcala) (Milano: Terra Sacta 2013) 167-272.

40 S.M. Bryan, "Power in the Pool: The Healing of the Man at Bethesda and Jesus' Violation of the Sabbath (Jn. 5:1-18)," *TynBul* 54/2 (2003) 12; Lincoln, *John*, 193; A. Giambrone, "Jesus and the Paralytics. Memorializing Miracles in the Greco-Roman World of the Gospels," *BibAn* 10/3 (2020) 395-397.

41 See the discussion and bibliographic references in R. Thompson, "Healing at the Pool of Bethesda: A Challenge to Asclepius?," *BBR* 27/1 (2017) 79-80 and Giambrone, "Jesus and the Paralytics," 396-397.

42 Giambrone, "Jesus and the Paralytics," 397.

for no other purpose than simply to restore people to health. John portrays Jesus as healing people, but healing people is not the focus of his mission. When Jesus heals people in John's Gospel, it is always for the purpose of revealing his true identity: the Son, sent by the Father, to do the Father's work (5:36). In fact, the Jewish leaders seek to kill Jesus not just because he was breaking the Sabbath, but also because "he was calling God his own father, making himself equal with God" (5:18). [...] The Gentiles that are a part of John's audience would not have seen a problem with multiple deities – their world was full of deities. [...] While Asclepius could heal people, and he was even said to have raised someone from the dead, he could not permanently circumvent death for those who came to him. But here [5:24] Jesus is promising eternal life, and not just to a few, to but all who believe.<sup>43</sup>

Coming back to the question of the disabled man's sin, his infraction could be identified as his past act of praying to, trusting in, and expecting help from a false god (here, most naturally, Asclepius would come to mind for John's audience).<sup>44</sup> While this invalid man was expecting healing from Asclepius, and by this committing sin, after the miracle he was still committing a similar sin because he still did not believe in Jesus. Craig R. Koester describes the situation of the invalid man as the impossibility of living in "dual loyalties." For the cured man, as well as for John's audience, it was impossible to be loyal toward the Jewish authorities and Jesus at the same time (see 5:10–18). It was also impossible to be loyal simultaneously toward the pagan deities and Jesus. Koester argues,

The story of the invalid showed that lack of commitment meant betrayal. At the same time, even readers who were not familiar with Bethzatha would have been able to detect the similarities between a place like Bethzatha and the healing shrines scattered across the ancient Mediterranean world. The deities associated with these shrines did not demand exclusive allegiance from worshipers, who could move from one religious cult to another with relative ease. Yet those who assumed that loyalty to Jesus was optional remained in sin and under the threat of judgment (5:14).<sup>45</sup>

Somehow countering the above interpretation, John Chrysostom (*Adv. Jud.* 8.6.4) praises the paralytic for not using magical means to recover his health: "he did not run to soothsayers, he did not go to the charm-users, he did not tie an amulet around his neck but he waited for God to help him. That is why he finally found a wonderful and unexpected cure" (FC 68, 226). Obviously, Chrysostom's view disregards the historical context, unknown to him. Thus, he interprets the passage theologically in light of the angelic intervention suggested by a gloss in 5:4.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, "Healing," 83.

<sup>44</sup> Edward W. Klink (*John*, 274) argues that the lame man was looking for healing "in the depersonalized magical waters rooted in superstition and folklore."

<sup>45</sup> C.R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel. Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2 ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2003) 54. Similarly, B. Witherington, *John's Wisdom. A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 1995) 146: "the Johannine Christian was not content to have Jesus sit on Mount Olympus as one among many gods and lords."

## b) Present Sin

(1) *Unspecified sin*. As the narrative is rather mysterious about the nature of the man's sin, one can argue, as R. Alan Culpepper does, in a very general way: "Jesus may [...] be using the man's release from his infirmity as an occasion to warn him that he needs release from the power of sin even more."<sup>46</sup> The implication is that he was in sin before the healing and still is afterwards. Although, one cannot say anything about its nature.

(2) *Ungratefulness*. Any reader of the narrative easily notices the disabled man's apparent lack of gratitude. I personally wonder whether, in the mind of John's Gentile audience, the cured man's lack of gratitude was not seen as something not both surprising and abominable, or even as sinful. As noted by Craig S. Keener, "ancient ethics despised ingratitude."<sup>47</sup> Seneca (*On Benefits* 3.1.1.) noted that "not to return gratitude for benefits is a disgrace, and the whole world counts it as such" (LCL 310, 127).<sup>48</sup> Not surprisingly, then, certain exegetes like Robert Kysar argued, with reference to the bedridden man: "It is clear that, while he is healed of his illness, he still suffers an illness of the spirit which is reflected in his lack of gratitude."<sup>49</sup>

(3) *The betrayal of Jesus*. Some exegetes maintain that the sin has something to do with the man's previous conversation with the Jews,<sup>50</sup> and more precisely, with the betrayal of Jesus to the authorities.<sup>51</sup> Louis J. Martyn points out the unstable character of the crippled man. When he feels threatened (5:10), he protects himself by informing against his healer.<sup>52</sup> Already Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428), in his *Commentary on John* (2.5.12–15), reasoned that, before his second meeting with Jesus, the cured man demonstrated his inclination to sin by betraying his own benefactor to the Jews. The healed man did not know the identity of his healer at this point (5:12–13), but he was willing to reveal the identity of Jesus anyway, and to cast the blame for breaking the Sabbath on Jesus (5:11): "When he pointed Jesus out to such an enraged and furious people, he did not act as a friend. Rather, in order to comply with the rules of the Jews, he betrayed his own benefactor" (ACT, 47).

This interpretation was alluded to by John Chrysostom (347–407), who in fact rejects such a view: "I know that some slander this paralytic, asserting that he was an accuser of

46 R.A. Culpepper, "John 5.1–18: A Sample of Narrative-Critical Commentary," *The Gospel of John as Literature. An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives* (ed. M.W.G. Stibbe) (NTTS 17; Leiden: Brill 1993) 203.

47 Keener, *John*, 644, n. 87.

48 Here I am inspired by Robin Thompson's footnote, "Healing," 83, n. 133.

49 Kysar, *John*, 78. Cf. Borchert, *John 1–11*, 235 ("Not everyone accepts merciful acts with gratitude"); A.J. Köstenberger, *The Signs of the Messiah. An Introduction to John's Gospel* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press 2021) ("it's an inexplicable lack of gratitude").

50 Staley, "Stumbling in the Dark," 63.

51 Kysar, *John*, 78; D.A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel. The Interplay of Form and Meaning* (JSNTSup 95; Sheffield: JSOT 1994) 109 ("the man reveals himself as a character who is timid to the point of betrayal"); J.-A. Brant, *John* (Paideia; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2011) 104–105. Cf. also Borchert, *John 1–11*, 235.

52 L.J. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3 ed. (NTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2003) 74–75.

Christ and that therefore this speech was addressed to him.” Chrysostom (*Hom. Jo.* 38) draws attention to the paralytic’s actual words to the Jews:

He did not say: ‘He is the one who said, “Take up thy pallet.”’ Indeed, when they kept bringing forward continually the ostensible charge, he repeatedly came to His defense by once more acknowledging Him as his healer and striving eagerly to attract and win over the others to Him. He was not so unfeeling as to betray his benefactor, after such a favor and encouraging advice, and to say what he did with malicious intent. Even if he were a beast, or some inhuman and stony-hearted monster, the favor done him, and his fear, were sufficient to hold him in check. [...] Rather, if he had wished to slander Him, keeping silence about his restoration to health, he would have spoken of the transgression of the Law and accused Him. This, however, is not so; it is not so. On the contrary, his words reveal great courage and honesty, and proclaim his benefactor no less than those of the blind man did. What did the latter say? ‘He made clay and anointed my eyes.’ [Jn 9:11] So this man also said: ‘It is Jesus who healed me’ (FC 33, 372).

Consequently, Chrysostom did not see the paralytic’s words as a sign of his betrayal, but, on the contrary, as almost fulfilling an apostolic mission of proclaiming the faith in Jesus. In another place (*De incomp.* 12,41), he commented: “Why did the cured man go off and show himself to the Jews? It was because he wished them to share in the true teaching of Christ” (FC 72, 301). This view is followed by some modern commentators. William C. Weinrich, for instance, argued: “The man is not betraying Jesus. He is announcing (ἀναγγεῖλεν) to them the identity of the one who has the power of creation and the forgiveness of sin. In this manner he sets the authority of Jesus over that of the Law of Moses.”<sup>53</sup> One can advance a few arguments in favor of this view: (1) Referring to ἀναγγέλλω used in 5:15, it must be noted that this verb, in all four of its occurrences in the Gospel of John, has a positive connotation (4:25; 16:13.14.15; cf. 1 John 1:5).<sup>54</sup> (2) The basic meaning of this verb is “proclaim” and not “denounce.”<sup>55</sup> Charles Kingsley Barrett also rejected the interpretation of the crippled man’s sin as betrayal, arguing that (3) the text does not identify this sin as such; that (4) this sin of betrayal has already been partly committed (cf. 5:11); and (5) when it is eventually completed (5:15) “no dire consequence is seen to follow.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, as noted by John Christopher Thomas, (6) “when interrogated the man places the emphasis upon the fact of his healing, not upon the command of Jesus to ‘break the Sabbath.’”<sup>57</sup> He thus focuses on positive side of Jesus’ act, not the controversial one. Finally, as observed by Johannes Beutler, (7) the positive interpretation of the healed man’s action “fits in with the fact that the paralytic plays a role in the baptismal cycles of early

53 Weinrich, *John*, 569. W.M. Swartley, *John* (BCBC; Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press 2013) 149 (“The man’s disclosure of Jesus’ identity to the Jews is a desire to witness, even at some risk; he is not a traitor.”).

54 For the more thorough analysis of this verb and its cognates, see P. Bruce, “John 5:1–18 the Healing at the Pool: Some Narrative, Socio-Historical and Ethical Issues,” *Neot* 39/1 (2005) 45–46.

55 J. Beutler, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2017) 152. Cf. Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary*, s.v. ἀναγγέλλω (“to bring news,” “announce”; “to teach,” “make known”; “to proclaim,” “to confess”; in the passive voice, which is not the case in John 5:15: “to be reported” or “announced,” “to be proclaimed”).

56 Barrett, *John*, 255.

57 Thomas, “Stop Sinning,” 19.

Christian frescoes, as is shown by the examples in the Cappella Greca in the Catacombs of Priscilla or the Chapel of the Sacraments in the Catacombs of Callistus, both in Rome.”<sup>58</sup>

(4) *Not revealing the full identity of Jesus.* The Johannine narrator noted that the cured man did not know the identity of his healer (5:13). Reflecting upon the meaning of Jesus’ utterance in 5:14, Jeffrey L. Staley wonders: “Could Jesus’ warning have been precipitated somehow by the healed man’s previous response to ‘the Jews’? Perhaps he was ‘sinning’ in not fully revealing the identity of his benefactor.”<sup>59</sup> Jeffrey L. Staley also observes that right after Jesus’ words “Do not sin,” the healed man immediately returned to the authorities with the new information: “It was Jesus (not just anybody) who made me well.” Taking into consideration the preceding literary context, where many of the people in Jerusalem are coming to faith in Jesus precisely because of his signs (2:23; 3:1–2; 4:45), it seems that the healed man’s intentions were positive.<sup>60</sup> He wanted to inform his interlocutors about the full identity of Jesus.

(5) *Breaking the Sabbath.* Some commentators note that the only sin truly and explicitly mentioned in the narrative is the infringement of the sabbatical regulations by carrying the mat. So Jesus would warn the healed man not to continue his sinful action, namely that he should not carry his mat any longer. Otherwise he might be condemned to death as punishment for breaking the Torah. According to Sief van Tilborg, Jesus’ words would express his protection of the healed man from his attackers: “It is a protection which fits in with the need Jesus has to find the man after he has been interrogated by the Judeans. What Jesus says is not about a general link between sin and sickness, but is an expression of his concern. Jesus has included this man in his love.”<sup>61</sup> In the same vein, Colin G. Kruse, regarding this as a possible interpretation, states that the healed man “was flaunting his new-found freedom by carrying his mat around Jerusalem without any regard for the Sabbath law.”<sup>62</sup> One cannot exclude that the crippled man was ready to break sabbath regulations, giving priority to Jesus’ command. He was then setting Jesus’ authority above the Jewish *halakhic* rules.<sup>63</sup> As Willard M. Swartley observed: “the man is a risk taker, obeying Jesus’ Sabbath-breaking command.”<sup>64</sup> This interpretation is not ultimately convincing, however. First, the healed man, knowing the sabbath regulations and being reproached by the Jews (5:10), could immediately have abandoned his mat. So, even if he were walking with it initially, after the first meeting with Jewish authorities (5:10), he should correct his behavior. Second, it was Jesus who told the man to carry the mat (5:8). It seems strange then that Jesus in 5:14 would contradict himself by forbidding this man from carrying his mat. In Jeffrey L. Staley’s

58 Beutler, *John*, 152.

59 Staley, “Stumbling in the Dark,” 62.

60 Staley, “Stumbling in the Dark,” 63.

61 S. van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love in John* (BibInt 2; Leiden: Brill 1993) 217–218.

62 Kruse, *John*, 170. Cf. also Staley, “Stumbling in the Dark,” 62: “Perhaps the healed man has been sinning somehow by flaunting his new found freedom from Torah in ways that the narrator fails to disclose—perhaps by parading with his mat around the temple courtyard.”

63 This view is expressed in Bruce, “John 5:1–18,” 45; Swartley, *John*, 149.

64 Swartley, *John*, 149.

words: “Could Jesus be telling the healed man that he is indeed ‘sinning’ by continuing to do what he had previously asked him to do? Has Jesus gone back on his word?”<sup>65</sup>

(6) *The wrong choice of going to the temple.* In John’s Gospel, the sin *par excellence* is connected with the failure to recognize the true identity of Jesus and to believe in him. The narrator indicates that Jesus finds the healed man in the temple. So, according to some commentators, by going to the temple (5:14) the healed man is making the wrong choice: instead of choosing Jesus, the real temple (2:19–21), he is looking for an old and “empty” temple (see 4:21–24). Patricia Bruce states, “I am of the opinion that the sin of which the man is guilty has been to go the temple (v. 14), with all that this choice implied for the original readers of John’s Gospel.”<sup>66</sup> In the same vein, Jeffrey L. Staley noted: “Maybe the healed man could be sinning simply by being in the temple—a religious site about which the reader already knows Jesus has expressed negative feelings (2:13–22; 4:21–24).”<sup>67</sup>

It must be remembered that the healing took place in a large *miqveh*, just north of the temple, designed for ritual purifications that enabled people to enter the sacred precincts. After the healing, the previously lame man was now able to enter the temple and participate in its daily rites, after 38 years of exclusion from any cultic activities. His presence within the temple precincts can also be seen in connection with the feast mentioned in 5:1. In fact, the temple was the place of sacrifice for sin<sup>68</sup> as well as the place for bringing a thank-offering to God for a recovery (cf. Mark 1:44; Luke 17:14). As John Christopher Thomas noted: “He has, no doubt, gone to celebrate the feast with a special thanksgiving and praise upon his heart.”<sup>69</sup> The previously crippled man was finally fully reintegrated into the Jewish social and religious community.<sup>70</sup> From the perspective of the historical reliability of this narrative, his choice of going to the temple would then seem natural and understandable. Edward Klink notes, “The temple is also a logical place for the healed man to be drawn toward, especially after he had just been divinely healed!”<sup>71</sup> From the narratological perspective, the man’s choice is also understandable. As Jeffrey L. Staley observed, “the narrator had also said that the healed man didn’t know who Jesus was (5:13).”<sup>72</sup> If he did

65 Staley, “Stumbling in the Dark,” 62.

66 Bruce, “John 5:1–18,” 45.

67 Staley, “Stumbling in the Dark,” 62.

68 Craig S. Keener (*John*, 643, n. 83) observed: “That he went to offer a sin offering for the sin from which his malady stemmed is unlikely; if he acknowledged that sin before Jesus’ reproof (5:14), he probably would have made the offering long before, despite his condition.”

69 Thomas, “Stop Sinning,” 14.

70 Karakolis, “Afterwards, Jesus found him in the Temple,” 179: “Based on the Jewish perception of disease, a patient so long and so heavily ill is practically a living dead person, someone who has been abandoned by God and, thus, devoid of his grace and his divine life-giving acts, probably due to a heavy sin committed either by himself or even by his parents (cf. John 9:2–3). In the socio-historical context of our text, the idea that God has abandoned a human being leads unavoidably to social and religious marginalization and, therefore, even to the lack of social interaction with other people, as expressed by the lame man’s statement *ἄνθρωπον οὐκ ἔγω* (5:7).”

71 Klink, *John*, 274.

72 Staley, “Stumbling in the Dark,” 62.

not know the true identity of Jesus, he could not pay any religious reverence to him. However, from the theological perspective, also integrated within the narrator's point of view, after the parting of the ways between the Church and synagogue, and already after the destruction of the temple in AD 70 (so reading the Gospel of John as a "two-level drama"<sup>73</sup>), the man's logical choice would rather consist in professing faith in Jesus and in following him. As already mentioned, the very use of the verb εὑρίσκω ("to find") would suggest the same idea, namely to become Jesus' follower.

Anthony Giambrone draws attention to one interesting detail connected with the "cultic" interpretation of the man's behavior and sin:

Jesus' calculated decision not to let the liberated man leave his mat behind [...] ensures that credit for the wonder (or blame, as it happens) is ultimately directed to Jesus himself. For were an empty mat simply to lay there where the paralyzed man used to be—an ex-voto trophy in a known site of healing—the abandoned mat would have redounded to the waters' glory. At the same time, the ostentatious portage of the *krabattos* resembles the showy healing of Gorgias and Euhippos. That the man's mattress relic successfully occasioned the recounting of his incredible story is the very premise of John's continued narrative as it develops. In this way, John's account accomplishes for Jesus something similar to what the *Iamata* accomplish for their own institutional interests, forging a memory that magnifies the *doxa* of the divine source of healing (John 5:23; cf. 2:11). Jesus himself has in this way rhetorically displaced the epoch's wonderworking shrines and personally become the locus of healing: beneficiary of the beneficiary's ex-voto souvenir.<sup>74</sup>

The interpretation that the previously lame man seriously erred by being in the temple was already countered by John Chrysostom (*Hom. Jo.* 38), who argued that the man's presence in the temple "is evidence of very great piety, for he did not withdraw to forums and clubs or give himself to luxury and licence, but stayed in the Temple, even though he expected to undergo such an attack and to be driven from there by all. None of these considerations, however, persuaded him to stay away from the Temple." More importantly, however, Jesus never accused this man of being in a wrong place:

When Christ, then, had found him, even after his conversation with the Jews, He hinted at no such thing [as that he had been His accuser]. If He had desired to make this charge, He would have said to him: "Are you doing the same things again, and have you become no better because of your cure?" However, He said nothing of this, but only reassured him with regard to the future (FC 33, 370).

It must also be noted that Jesus himself encouraged people healed from leprosy to go to the temple to show themselves to the priest and offer for their cleansing what Moses commanded (Mark 1:44; Luke 17:14).

<sup>73</sup> See the famous paradigm in reading John's Gospel advanced by Martyn, *History and Theology*.

<sup>74</sup> Giambrone, "Jesus and the Paralytics," 399. In other words, "John promotes a memory of Jesus as the sole true and personalized sacred locus" (*ibidem*, 402).

Christos Karakolis likewise claimed that the man's decision to go to the temple is not only understandable but also well founded from a narratological and theological point of view:

The implied readers could assume that the healed man does not just want to thank God for his unexpected cure, but also that he expects to find answers to the questions that bother him; mainly the identity of his benefactor, as well as the relationship between Torah-observance and his carrying around his bed on a Sabbath. It would seem that he has nowhere else to turn for answers due, on the one hand, to his long-term social marginalization and, on the other hand, to the prejudice of the "Jews" who tend to focus on the violation of the Sabbath-rest while at the same time ignoring the reality of the miraculous cure.<sup>75</sup>

The pious Jew would always direct his steps to the temple in order to hear God's answers to his questions. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is the center and focal point of Jewish cult. He renews and reinterprets the temple's worship. As noted by Karakolis, in all events taking place in the Jerusalem temple, Jesus is the protagonist. Interestingly enough, the hope of the previously lame man was fulfilled: he met and heard God in the person of Jesus. Karakolis argued that the implied reader of the Gospel should interpret this meeting as "a divine revelation along the lines of the Old Testament Temple-theophanies."<sup>76</sup>

(7) *Unbelief*. Some authors have stated that the only real meaning of sin in the Gospel of John is unbelief. In 8:24 and 16:9, sin is explicitly defined as the lack of faith in Jesus. According to 15:24, sin consists in the rejection of the fact that God, the Father, reveals himself and works through Jesus. The immediately following context of 5:14, the ensuing discourse of Jesus in 5:17–47, focuses on the same claim: Jesus is one with his Father and through him the Father is manifested and working.<sup>77</sup> Steven Bryan aptly described the Johannine concept of sin as "the unwillingness to believe that Jesus is the one in whom God – the Father – is revealed and through whom God's power works," and again, "The essence of sin is to see the power of God at work through Jesus and yet refuse to acknowledge that power as evidence of the self-revealing action of God in Jesus."<sup>78</sup> Therefore, it seems that the crippled man after the healing did not achieve the more important cure, namely coming to faith in Christ.<sup>79</sup> David A. Croteau notes, "As the pericope closes, the reader is left viewing the lame man as unbelieving. Jesus confronts one who does not believe with

<sup>75</sup> Karakolis, "Afterwards, Jesus found him in the Temple," 181.

<sup>76</sup> Karakolis, "Afterwards, Jesus found him in the Temple," 188. He (*ibidem*) states: "some important characteristics of an Old Testament epiphany are implicitly present: the initiative that belongs to God (in our case Jesus), the Temple as the place par excellence of God's (in our case of Jesus') presence, and the manifestation of his glory, the epiphany itself (in our case Christophany) as God's (in our case Jesus') response to the doubts and prayers of his chosen people (in our case the healed man)."

<sup>77</sup> An interesting study on Jesus' intitulation of God as *Abba* and its impact on the idea of God's fatherhood in the New Testament writings is S. Szymik, "Jesus' Intitulation of God as *Abba*: Its Sources and Impact on the Idea of the Fatherhood of God in the New Testament," *VV* 38/2 (2020) 485–502.

<sup>78</sup> Bryan, "Power in the Pool," 16.

<sup>79</sup> Kysar, *John*, 78.

these words: ‘stop sinning.’ The context is salvific, not of progressive sanctification.”<sup>80</sup> Edward Klink is even more precise in defining the healed man’s sin of unbelief: “in this case it manifests itself by regarding God’s power as operating in impersonal independence from the working of God, a problem for both the healed man and the Jews.”<sup>81</sup> Klink calls it “idolatrous God confusion.” Both the healed man and the Jews see divine agency at work in the healing, but they fail to acknowledge its identification with the person of Jesus.<sup>82</sup> Martin Asiedu-Pepurah claims that the mention of sin in 5:14 should be interpreted in light of the unique previous reference to sin in the Johannine narrative, namely 1:29. The testimony about Jesus, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (1:29), is connected with two of the Baptist’s disciples choosing to follow Jesus (1:37), “who were thus enabled to come to initial faith in Jesus.”<sup>83</sup> Martin Asiedu-Pepurah explains:

The narrator may therefore be suggesting to the reader, in a very subtle way, that there is a relationship between Jesus’ mission as the one who takes away the sin of the world and the act of coming to faith in him. In other words, the sin *par excellence* which Jesus has come to take away is the sin of unbelief. Those who, like the two disciples, come to faith in him have eternal life while those who persist in their unbelief condemn themselves to death (3:16–18). The context of 1:29–39 may therefore offer a clue to the reader as to how to understand Jesus’ admonition in 5:14b. Jesus would be reproaching the healed man for his inability to come to faith in him and would be warning him against the risk he faces if he should continue to sin (i.e., if he should persist in his unbelief).<sup>84</sup>

Against the above interpretation one may hold that the narrative about the healing of the bedridden man would be the first instance in which absolutely nobody comes to faith in Jesus following a sign performed by him (cf. 2:11; 4:46–54). For this reason, it seems unlikely that the man’s sin should be defined as his lack of faith. The healing itself may imply forgiveness and belief. Moreover, the use of the phrase “You have become whole” (5:14) might also imply the same meaning of experiencing salvation, which is activated by someone’s faith.

### c) Future Sin

Already John Chrysostom asserted that Jesus, while not disclosing the nature of the past sins which provoked suffering and sickness, but by his recollection of these past sins (“no more”), put the cured man on alert against future sins (“something worse”) (*Paralyt.* 2–3).

80 Croteau, “Repentance Found?” 115. In his opinion (*ibidem*, 121) John 5:14, after Isa 6:9–10 in John 12:40, contains the second strongest connection to repentance in the entire Gospel of John.

81 Klink, *John*, 275.

82 M.M. Thompson, *John. A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2015) 123 (“In John, since sin is nearly defined as unbelief, Jesus may be warning the man regarding the judgment that follows sin, while inviting him to confess faith in Jesus (8:24)”). Essentially the same interpretation, but in different words, is expressed by William Hendricksen (*The Gospel According to John* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House 1953] I, 195), who defines man’s sin as “a state of being unreconciled with God.”

83 Asiedu-Pepurah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts*, 72.

84 Asiedu-Pepurah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts*, 72–73.

Barnabas Lindars notes in this connection: “There is no word of blame for the past, but only a concern for the future.”<sup>85</sup> That being so, some exegetes have proposed an interpretation in which Jesus’ warning about committing sin refers to the future.

(1) *Post-conversion sins*. Cyprian of Carthage (200–258) quotes or alludes to John 5:14 a total of six times.<sup>86</sup> In general, he links healing with baptism, in which one is cleansed from his sins and “made whole,” meaning saved. In a few passages, Cyprian illustrates with Jesus’ words from John 5:14 the lingering danger of sin after baptism. For instance, he uses this verse to support the view “that even the baptised lose the grace that they have attained, unless they maintain their innocence” (*Ad Quirinum* 3.27; CCSL 3, 122). In another writing (*Hab. virg.* 2), Cyprian quotes John 5:14 and continues,

He gives the fear [necessary for] life, he gives the law of innocence after he has conferred health, nor permits that one afterwards to wander with free and loosed reins, but more severely threatens him who is again enslaved by those same things of which he had been healed, because it is certainly a smaller fault to have sinned before, when you did not yet know God’s discipline; but there is no further pardon for sinning after you have begun to know God (CCSL 3F, 286).

Edwina Murphy, who analyzed all of the six Cyprian’s uses of John 5:14, argued that “Cyprian employs the verse to warn against the dangers of taking for granted what one has received. What has been initiated must be fulfilled, and the evangelical precepts upheld, in maintaining the grace of both baptism and confession.”<sup>87</sup> The main idea behind Cyprian’s use of John 5:14 is that once someone becomes a Christian, he/she should no longer sin, and if he/she does sin, repentance is needed. Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390) also employed this verse to urge the baptized not to sin again: “Do not again be thrown upon your bed by sinning, in the evil rest of a body paralyzed by its pleasures” (*Oratio* 40.33).<sup>88</sup> If we assume that the crippled man, along with the healing, also received forgiveness of his sins, then Jesus’ warning in 5:14 might allude to the issue of post-conversion sin.<sup>89</sup> This idea of post-conversion sin, or the second penance (confession), is not so extraneous to John’s Gospel, since it might be alluded to in the subsequent narrative about the foot-washing.<sup>90</sup> If we

<sup>85</sup> B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (NCB; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans – London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott 1972) 217.

<sup>86</sup> *Ad Quirinum* 3.27; *De habitu virginum* 2; *De dominica oratione* 12; *De opere et elemosynis* 1; *Epistula* 13.2.2 (to Rogatianus); *Epistula* 55,26,1 (to Antonianus).

<sup>87</sup> E. Murphy, “Sin no more: Healing, Wholeness, and the Absent Adulteress in Cyprian’s Use of John,” *REAug* 64 (2018) 5.

<sup>88</sup> See also Augustine, *De fide et operibus* 20.36.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas, “Stop Sinning,” 16.

<sup>90</sup> P. Grelot, “L’interprétation pénitentielle du lavement des pieds: examen critique,” *L’homme devant Dieu. Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac. I. Exégèse et patristique* (Théologie 56; Paris: Aubier 1963) 75–91; J.C. Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (JSNTSup 61; Sheffield: JSOT Press 1991) *passim*; A. Kubiś, “Interpretacja pokutna Janowego opisu obmycia stóp uczniom przez Jezusa. Cz. 1: Interpretacje sakramentalne na tle współczesnych wyjaśnień J 13,1–20,” *BibAn* 8/3 (2018) 379–420; A. Kubiś, “Interpretacja pokutna Janowego opisu obmycia stóp uczniom przez Jezusa. Cz. 2: Argument odwołujący się do antropologii kulturowej,” *BibAn* 8/4 (2018) 567–586.

also accept the presence of baptismal overtones in John 5:1–15, it must be remembered that in the early Church the forgiveness of sins gained in baptism “includes the demand to sin no more.”<sup>91</sup> Moreover, “early Christianity held that to continue to sin after Baptism, and particularly apostasy, has worse consequences, namely, the fearful prospect of fiery judgment on the Last Day (see Heb 6:4–8; 10:26–27).”<sup>92</sup> It seems then that this interpretation syncs well with the immediate literary context dealing with the future fate of this man (“anything worse” – 5:14) and the future judgment (κρίσις – 5:22.24.27.29.30).

(2) *Unbelief*. According to Silvana Fuzinato, Jesus’ warning “sin no more” in 5:14 refers to the future. Here the verb “to sin” is defined as unbelief. Jesus’ words in 5:14 should then be interpreted by his words in 5:24: “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” The bedridden man heard Jesus’ healing words: “Stand up, pick up your mat and walk” (5:14), and not only heard them but believed in these words. Now, in 5:14, the healed man is invited to continue in his faith in Jesus’ salvific words and, most importantly, to recognize God acting through Jesus’ works.<sup>93</sup> Eventually, a continuing attitude of believing in Jesus’ words, i.e. having faith in Jesus, will gain for this man eternal life. He will be saved from judgment and pass from death to life.<sup>94</sup> The Italian exegete argues that Jesus’ words encourage the previously lame man to stop looking back into the past and to start to look toward the future. For this reason, Jesus refers not to the sins committed in the past, but to the sin of unbelief which can be committed in the future. This understanding of sin does not refer to individual evil acts, but rather to the rejection of Jesus, to unbelief. Such a definition of sin in this passage can be corroborated by the fact that the Johannine Jesus does not exercise any power over sin in the entire Gospel, contrary to the synoptic healing stories (Matt 9:2; Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20). Instead it always hinges on an action of man, who rejects sin by embracing faith in Jesus. Moreover, there is an implicit contrast in the narrative: The healed man is encouraged by Jesus to continue his life of faith, placing him in clear juxtaposition to the Jews, who are characterized by their unbelief.<sup>95</sup>

91 O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (SBT 10; London: SCM 1953) 87.

92 Weinrich, *John*, 567.

93 S. Fuzinato, *Tra fede e incredulità. Studio esegetico-teologico di Gv 5 in chiave comunicativa* (TGTS 212; Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana 2014) 137: “Il paralitico che credeva nella forza risanatrice dell’acqua della piscina e che invece è stato guarito da Gesù – fonte dell’acqua viva – grazie alla fede nella sua parola vivificatrice è invitato a non peccare più, cioè a continuare a riconoscere l’azione di Dio nell’operare di Gesù, credendo nella forza salvifica della sua parola.”

94 Silvia Fuzinato (*Tra fede e incredulità*, 266) argues that Jesus’ words in 5:14 “è un invito a continuare a camminare sulla via della fede che gli dà vita e non su quella dell’incredulità e del giudizio che lo condurrebbe alla morte.”

95 Fuzinato, *Tra fede e incredulità*, 135–137.

#### 4. “Something worse”

Craig S. Keener observed that “in the ancient world the disobedience of a suppliant for healing could lead to greater suffering than one had experienced before.”<sup>96</sup> It is hard to imagine something worse than the thirty-eight years of paralyzing illness, but still Jesus is warning the previously lame man that indeed something really bad can happen to him. What did Jesus mean by “something worse” (χείρόν τι)? Even though Jesus’ saying might be intentionally vague (and “this indefiniteness heightens the warning”<sup>97</sup>), throughout the centuries commentators have devised at least six possible answers. (1) “Something worse” could be an even more devastating physical ailment. (2) The χείρόν τι could be physical death or (3) spiritual death, understood as the lack of faith resulting ultimately in not attaining eternal life. The expression in question might also convey (4) some sort of eternal consequences of sin, (5) eternal condemnation, or finally (6) judgment. Some exegetes avoid giving any precise answer, saying, for instance, that we should speak here of “consequences of sin in a general sense.”<sup>98</sup>

*Physical illness.* Already John Chrysostom contended that Jesus’ warning could be understood as invoking the fear of future ills. In *Paralyt.* 2, he states: “the expression ‘lest some worse thing happen unto thee’ is the utterance of one who would check coming evils beforehand. He put an end to the disease, but did not put an end to the struggle: He expelled the infirmity but did not expel the dread of it, so that the benefit which had been wrought might remain unmoved” (*NPNC* IX, 213). The identification of “something worse” with physical ailment is shared by some modern commentators as well. For instance, Colin G. Kruse noted: “Jesus might have meant he would suffer a worse physical affliction than the one from which he had just been delivered.”<sup>99</sup> This solution has some difficulties. First, it implies the connection between sin and sickness, which does not have to be the case in John 5:1–14. Second, as rightly pointed out by Andrew T. Lincoln: “It does not seem likely that the man is being threatened with a worse physical disease, something more debilitating than thirty-eight years of immobility.”<sup>100</sup> It is indeed difficult to imagine a worse physical illness than thirty-eight years of paralysis. Third, as Francis J. Moloney observed, the man’s physical sickness is over, therefore χείρόν τι “must be of a different order.”<sup>101</sup>

*Physical death.* Some commentators argue that “something worse” should be identified with physical death, seen as a punishment for the man’s sins.<sup>102</sup> In support of this view, one

<sup>96</sup> Keener, *John*, 644.

<sup>97</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg 1961) 372.

<sup>98</sup> Lindars, *John*, 217.

<sup>99</sup> Kruse, *John*, 170. Cf. also G.H.C. MacGregor, *The Gospel of John* (MNTC; London: Hodder & Stoughton 1928) 171; R.N. Wilkin, “The Gospel According to John,” *The Grace New Testament Commentary. I. Matthew–Acts* (ed. R.N. Wilkin) (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society 2010) 386 (“Temporal well being is clearly in view”). As one out of many possibilities: Morris, *John*, 272.

<sup>100</sup> Lincoln, *John*, 196.

<sup>101</sup> F.J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1998) 173.

<sup>102</sup> Dods, *John*, 137. As one possibility: Schnackenburg, *John*, 98; Lincoln, *John*, 196.

might refer to 1 John 5:16, which mentions a “sin unto death,” and 1 Cor 11:30, which declares that many had fallen asleep (κοιμῶνται), i.e. had died, because they abused the Eucharist. Given the rather obvious focus of the Fourth Gospel on spiritual realities (and precisely “eternal life” as its main point of interest), and on the larger goal of proclaiming the Gospel (20:31) – to limit the meaning of Jesus’ words here to physical death simply does not do justice to John’s theology.

Interestingly enough, Sjef van Tilborg asks: “Can we not suppose that Jesus says to the man that he should not continue to sin (μὴκέτι), because otherwise worse might happen to him; that the man should not carry his bed any longer, because otherwise he might be condemned to death as punishment for his offence against the law? In such an interpretation Jesus protects the man against his attackers.”<sup>103</sup> Physical death, in this view, would be a penalty meted out by the Jewish authorities as punishment for breaking the rules of Sabbath observance. But we have already rejected the explanation of “sin no more” in 5:14 as referring to the offence of breaking the Sabbath. The same argumentation might therefore be applied here, thus Tilborg’s suggestion is not convincing.

*Spiritual death.* The χεῖρόν τι can alternatively be understood as the lack of faith that can deprive the healed man of something much more important, namely eternal life.<sup>104</sup> This meaning is suggested by the immediate literary context focusing on faith in God and eternal life: “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (5:24). Obviously, faith in God implies here faith in Jesus (10:30.38; 14:11; 17:21). It is explicitly said on many occasions that faith in Jesus guarantees eternal life (11:25.26; 20:31). Martin Asiedu-Peprah points out that, taking into account 3:16–18, the reader of the Fourth Gospel is aware of the strict correlation between faith and salvation (eternal life) and, conversely, between unbelief and condemnation (eternal death). The “worst thing” might be then only “a reference to the loss of eternal life (3:16–18) which is the fate reserved for all who refuse to come to faith in Jesus.”<sup>105</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg might be right that “something worse” (5:14), by way of a contrast, might point to “greater works” (5:20). The greater things are to be understood as transmitting eternal life, while “something worse” conveys the loss of this life.<sup>106</sup> Ramsey Michaels draws attention to the analogy between sin and sickness, as they both can lead to death. In 4:49, it is the sickness of a little child, and in 11:4 – the illness of Lazarus. Debating with the Jews, Jesus warns them that they will die in their sin (8:21.24). Thus, “death (whether physical or spiritual) is presumably” intended as “something worse.”<sup>107</sup> In Jewish

103 Van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love*, 217–218.

104 This view is shared by many exegetes. Cf. Fuzinato, *Tra fede e incredulità*, 137 (“La cosa più grave che gli possa capitare non è una malattia peggiore, ma è l’incredulità che lo priverebbe della vita eterna come verrà messo alla luce nella disputa con i Giudei.”); F.J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows. Reading John 5–12* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1996) 7.

105 Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts*, 73.

106 Schnackenburg, *John*, 98.

107 Michaels, *John*, 299.

theology, reflected in the Old Testament, sin meant death. If the cured man should commit sin, then he will experience something more dreadful than sickness, namely death. Within Johannine theology, it is not physical death, however, but spiritual, eternal death.<sup>108</sup>

*Eternal consequences of sin.* A few commentators suggest that Jesus' expression *χείρόν τι* most likely refers to the eternal consequences of man's sin,<sup>109</sup> and there are few arguments actually offered in favor of this view. First, a physical handicap is temporally limited, and "something worse" could only be "worse" because of its eternity, its unlimited duration. Second, in the immediately ensuing discourse Jesus is presented as raising the dead, thus giving them "eternal life" and exercising judgment (5:21–24).

*Eternal punishment.* A few authors are more precise in describing "something worse" and suggest an eternal punishment, understood as eternal damnation, condemnation, and hell. Already John Chrysostom (*Hom. Jo.* 38.1) argued that a reader learns from Jesus' words in John 5:14 that, first, "the doctrine of hell is to be believed" and second, "the long and unending punishment is an actuality" (FC 33, 368). Among modern authors, Rudolf Schnackenburg argues that "eternal damnation" is meant here, "either, in accordance with the Jewish view, in Gehenna (cf. Mt 10:28) or in Hades (Lk 16:23ff)."<sup>110</sup> In the same vein, George R. Beasley-Murray stated that "the 'something worse' that could happen to the man would be to finish up in Gehenna."<sup>111</sup>

*Judgment.* Following 5:14, in the immediately ensuing discourse Jesus is described as exercising the divine prerogative of judging: "the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son" (5:22). The Father gave Jesus "authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man" (5:27). Whoever hears Jesus' words (i.e. believes in Jesus) and believes in God (the Father), "he does not come into judgment" (5:24). The judgment will affect those who practiced evil things; they will come out "to the resurrection of judgment" (5:29). Jesus says about himself: "Just as I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just" (5:30). The concentration of the judgment vocabulary corroborates Charles Kingsley Barrett's conclusion: "The *χείρόν τι* can hardly be anything other than the Judgment."<sup>112</sup> This view is shared by a significant number of commentators.<sup>113</sup> Henri van den Bussche noted that Jesus' interlocutors, "the Jews," have to choose between faith and judgment. He refers to a parallel text in 9:35 and 39, where the themes of faith (v. 35) and judgment (v. 39) are explicitly

108 With reference to John 5:14, Raymond E. Brown (*The Gospel According to John (I–XIII). Introduction, Translation and Notes* [AB 29; New York: Doubleday 1966] 218) noted: "To those who are in the realm of death which is sin the Son has the power to grant life, and the only threat to the life that he grants is further sin."

109 Morris, *John*, 272; Lincoln, *John*, 196.

110 Schnackenburg, *John*, 98.

111 G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2 ed. (WBC 36; Dallas, TX: Word Books 1999) 74. See also Whitacre, *John*, 123.

112 Barrett, *John*, 255.

113 E.C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. F.N. Davey) (London: Faber & Faber 1947) 253; Lindars, *John*, 217 ("the eschatological judgment"); Carson, *John*, 246; Borchert, *John 1–11*, 235 ("the eschatological correlation between sin and judgment"); Von Wahlde, *John*, 221.

present. In our text, 5:14, they are implicit.<sup>114</sup> Interestingly, Pino di Luccio argued that John 5 reflects a hermeneutic debate regarding the meaning of Lev 19 and 21 and concerning the eschatological priesthood, in this case Jesus' priesthood. Pino di Luccio noted the similarity between the future eschatology as described in John 5:28–29 and the content of 11QMelch (=11Q13). In the latter, Melchizedek, a priest, “will carry out the vengeance of God's judgments” (11QMelch 2:13) according to “all the works of men” (2:8). His judgment will be connected with “freedom from [the debt of] all iniquities” (2:6), understood as a remission, or release, from sins. In John 5, Jesus' words on judgment (5:22–30) follow close upon his injunction about the avoidance of sin (5:14).<sup>115</sup>

Finally yet importantly, regarding the “something worse” of 5:14, we really have no need to choose one interpretive option over the others. The spiritual condition of rejecting faith in Jesus, as the immediate literary context amply demonstrates, results in spiritual “death” (5:24), the loss of “eternal life” (5:24; cf. 5:25), “judgment” (κρίσις – 5:24), and “the resurrection of judgment” (ἀνάστασιν κρίσεως – 5:29). This reality might also be cast in non-Johannine words, like condemnation, damnation, Hades, and Gehenna.<sup>116</sup> The essential truth is the same: Jesus, as the one giving life and exercising judgment, is presented as equal with God (cf. 5:18).<sup>117</sup>

## Conclusion

The conducted analyses have allowed me to reach the following conclusions:

(1) The use of the verb εὑρίσκω (“found”) in 5:14 suggests that the meeting between Jesus and the healed man was not a chance encounter. It shows Jesus' initiative and designates the invitation to follow Jesus. The proposal of following Jesus implies the man's belief in him.

(2) A comparison with the healing of the man born blind in John 9 indicates that in both cases, Jesus “finds” the healed person again in order to press the conversation further, so that the healed men would understand and believe in Jesus's true identity. Both of Jesus' utterances, in 5:14 and 9:35 (“Do you believe in the Son of Man?”), turn upon the issue of faith in Jesus.

114 H. van den Bussche, “Guérison d'un paralytique à Jérusalem le jour du sabbat: Jean 5,1–18,” *BVC* 61 (1965) 24: “Ici [5:14] l'idée de jugement reste provisoirement mystérieuse, mais elle est certainement présente.”

115 P. Di Luccio, “Priestly Traditions in the Gospel,” *RB* 122 (2015) 94–95.

116 Cf., e.g., S. Szkredka, “Postmortem Punishment in the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19–31): Between Coherence and Indeterminacy of Luke's Eschatology,” *VV* 36 (2019) 109–132.

117 D.F. Ford, *The Gospel of John. A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2021) 127: “These are the two activities that Jews of the time generally saw God continuing on the Sabbath, despite resting. On the Sabbath life continues to be sustained by God, and babies are born; and God continues to judge the quality of worship, love, truth seeking, goodness, and of each of our lives, including those who die on the Sabbath.”

(3) The place of the meeting, the temple and its temporal setting (during the Jewish festival) combine to suggest a revelatory moment of God's epiphany toward the healed man and God's communication with him. The revelation and communication focus on (a) revealing Jesus' true identity, (b) inviting man to enter into covenant with God acting through Jesus, and (c) responding spontaneously to this invitation: faith in Jesus.

(4) The temple, as the locus of this revelatory and covenantal meeting, also brings to the reader's mind the concept of Jesus as the true, real temple (2:21) and the legitimate focus of worship (4:21.23).

(5) The phrase "you have become whole" designates the healing of the entire man, including his spiritual component. It might imply the "spiritual resurrection" of this man,<sup>118</sup> which is irrevocable (perfect tense).

(6) The present imperative in the expression "sin no more" reflects a general command against committing any sin. It discourages the reader from searching for a specific disease-causing sin in the life of the healed man.

(7) Jesus's warning "sin no more," regarding its reference to time, is very general, almost timeless. It immediately relates to the past, present, and future. The last component of Jesus' warning, "something worse may happen," refers to the future, yet showing that sin extends from the past *into* the future. The only reasonable identification of the man's sin, from this temporal perspective, is unbelief. This conclusion can be corroborated by the fact that the crippled and subsequently healed man, throughout the entire episode, did not confess his faith in Jesus. Thus, in Jesus' words there is no implicit connection between sin and sickness, understood as a cause-and-effect linkage by which the man's former illness was caused by his past personal sin(s). The very definition of sin in the Fourth Gospel consists in unbelief in Jesus and in his mission as entrusted to him by the Father. This sin is, in fact, present in the whole life of the protagonist of the story. Nor does the narrator focus on the relationship between sin and sickness, but rather on the continuous presence of this sin in the man's life, and on its consequences.

(8) "Something worse" might also be understood through the lens of sin. If sin is defined as unbelief leading to spiritual death (contrary to faith, which gives eternal life), "something worse" should be understood as spiritual death, the lack of eternal life, which might be expressed in several different ways (e.g., damnation, hell, condemnation, Gehenna, Hades). Using the Johannine vocabulary from the immediate literary context, spiritual death might be defined as "judgment" (5:24) and "the resurrection of judgment" (5:29).

(9) The bedridden man was obedient in following Jesus' command to stand up, pick up his mat and walk. This obedience demonstrated his goodwill. Jesus' second intervention, in 5:14, potentially marks another critical stage in the man's life: he is invited to continue following Jesus' words and to make a next step, from unbelief to belief. The healed man stands before a crucial choice: faith vs unbelief. Jesus gives him the freedom to choose and

118 Donatien Mollat (*L'Évangile et les Épîtres de Saint Jean* [La Sainte Bible 34; Paris: Cerf 1953] *ad loc.* John 5:14) argues: "Le miracle est donc le 'signe' d'une resurrection spirituelle."

then disappears from this man's eyes once again. It is these two distinct stages in the man's life, integral to Jesus' invitation – to hear and to believe – that are reflected in 5:24. This verse indeed can serve as an implicit commentary upon our text: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever *hears* my word and *believes* him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”

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