

# THE IMPLICATION OF THE RAISING OF LAZARUS FROM THE DEAD (JOHN 11: 38-44) FOR COVID-19 RECOVERED PERSONS IN GHANA

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***Abstract:** The world is dealing with the novel COVID-19 pandemic which has claimed many lives. Affected persons are quarantined and isolated from their families and some unfortunately die. Those who recover are discharged to reunite with their families and friends. However, in the Ghanaian context, the recovered often suffer stigmatization and are rejected by society and even by their families. This situation creates a pastoral challenge for Ghanaian Christian communities. Reading the gospel, we find many narratives of sickness and death. One of them is John 11:1-44. The text describes the condition of Lazarus and the helplessness experienced by his family during his sickness. Their hope to see their sick member recover was shattered when Lazarus died and was buried. However, the narrative changed from verse 44b when Lazarus was raised from the dead and reunited with his family. Against this background, the paper analyses the raising of Lazarus from the dead and the reaction of his family through an exegetical study of John 11:38-44 using narrative criticism. It further examines the attitude and behaviour of people towards COVID-19 recovered persons in Ghana. The paper argues that stigmatizing COVID-19 recovered persons can lead to psychological trauma and social alienation. The study concludes that just as Lazarus experienced the healing presence of Jesus and was received warmly by his family after his resuscitation, recovered persons of COVID-19 need the affection of family and community of faith to reintegrate into society.*

**Key Words:** COVID-19; Ghana; John 11: 38-44; Recovered persons; Resuscitation.

## **Introduction**

The narrative of the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-54) is linked to a family context where a sick member needed physical healing, and the family members turned to Jesus for help. It describes not only the sickness of Lazarus and the anguish of Mary and Martha but also reveals Jesus as the source and giver of life.<sup>1</sup> With the death and burial of Lazarus, the hope of the family in his physical healing

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. George Ossom-Batsa, "Leggere la Bibbia in Africa: Voci dal Ghana," in *Giovanni. Nuova traduzione commentata*, ed. Ernesto Borghi (Milano: Terra Santa, 2021), 341-347.

came to an end; however, the scene changed when Jesus raised him from the dead (cf. 44b), and he was, ultimately, reunited with the family (cf. 12:1-2). With Stibbe, we think that this account “resonates with our own experiences; the sickness and death of a loved one, the passion of grief, the mourning of friends, the hope of resurrection.”<sup>2</sup>

The present COVID-19 pandemic, like the sickness of Lazarus of Bethany, threatens human life and existence. It causes death and provokes suffering in various forms, social, economic, psychological, and religious; but there is the hope of new life.

The virus was first detected in December 2019 in Wuhan, in the capital city of Hubei Province in the Peoples’ Republic of China.<sup>3</sup> It has since then become a pandemic, spreading across the globe, and affecting every aspect of human life. Ghana recorded her first COVID-19 case on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, and since then, the numbers of infected and deaths have increased exponentially with some records of death.<sup>4</sup> One of the measures adopted to prevent the spread of infection is to quarantine infected persons at isolation centres, where unfortunately some died. However, because of the mild nature of the diseases in Ghana, many infected persons recover quickly and are discharged. Unfortunately, instead of a warm welcome from family members and their communities, many a time they meet with stigmatisation.

It is against this background that our contribution analyses the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-54) viz-a-viz the attitude of Ghanaians towards COVID-19 recovered persons. It appropriates the Communicative approach to African Biblical hermeneutics developed by Ossom-Batsa as its theoretical framework.<sup>5</sup> The work is, therefore, organised in three sections: an exegesis of the text; exegesis of the reality and engagement between text and reality. The first employs narrative-critical tools to study the Lazarus story; the second discusses the attitude and behaviour of people towards recovered COVID-19 persons, with emphasis on stigmatisation. Finally, the last section

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<sup>2</sup> Mark W.G. Stibbe, “A Tomb with a View: John 11:1-44 in Narrative Critical Perspective,” *NTS* 40 (1994): 38-54.

<sup>3</sup> Mohammad Asadul Habib, “General Overview of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID- 19): A Summary of Evidence,” *Asian Journal of Immunology* 3, no. 3 (2020), 25.

<sup>4</sup> “Ghana Health Service: Update on Coronavirus Disease,” <https://www.ghanhealthservice.org> [Accessed July 18, 2020].

<sup>5</sup> George Ossom-Batsa, “Africa Interpretation of the Bible in Communicative Perspectives,” *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2 (2007): 91-104.

examines the implication of the Lazarus story for contemporary Ghanaian Christians.

### Exegesis of Text

Many scholars consider the Lazarus story as the narrative centre of John's Gospel.<sup>6</sup> Describing the centrality of the narrative, Lang points to the chapter in which the story is found as situated in the middle of the twenty-one chapters composing the Johannine Gospel. The first ten chapters contain an account of Jesus' life; chapter eleven where Lazarus' story is found appears to mark the end of Jesus' public ministry; the following ten chapters (12—21) offer an account of how and why Jesus died and of the outcome of his death: his appearances to his community.<sup>7</sup>

Moloney's view on the schematic organisation of the narrative reveals a well thought out design that underscores the shape and message of John 11 and its relationship with John 12. The story explains how the Word of God accomplished and actualised in Jesus gives life in anticipation of the resurrection from the dead.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the event of raising Lazarus from the dead prepares the reader for the happenings in chapter 12 and the subsequent ones that climax the death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

### Structure of the Text

Scholars propose several structures for the text under study but prominent among them is that by Culpepper, which pays special attention to the narrative features, such as the change in mood, time, place, characterisation, setting.<sup>10</sup> According to Culpepper, chapter 11 may be structured as follows: Narrative introduction (vv. 1-6); Jesus' dialogues with the disciples (vv. 7-16); Jesus dialogues with Martha (vv. 17-27); Jesus dialogue with Mary and the mourners (vv. 28-37);

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesu in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 171-172; Stibbe, "A Tomb with a View," 38.

<sup>7</sup> Lang Bernhard, "The Baptismal Raising of Lazarus: A New Interpretation of John 11," *Novum Testamentum* 58 (2016): 301-317.

<sup>8</sup> Pino di Luccio, "La resurrezione di Lazzaro," *Civiltà Cattolica* 3955 (2015), 17-29.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Moloney, "The Faith of Martha and Mary: A Narrative Approach to John 11:17-40," *Biblica* 75 (1988): 471-493.

<sup>10</sup> Alan R. Culpepper, *The Gospel and the Letters of John. Interpreting Biblical Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 148-49.

Jesus' Miracle of Raising Lazarus from the dead (vv. 38-44); Responses to the miracle (vv. 45-54); Jesus' Passover pilgrimage (vv. 55-57). Together with Zimmerman, we, however, argue that the narrative of Lazarus ends with the reunion with his family in 12:1-2 at the banquet where Jesus was present.<sup>11</sup>

### *Analysis of Text*

#### *Narrative Introduction (vv. 1-6)*

In vv. 1-6, the author introduces the main characters and theme in the story. Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, the main personalities, are described as people loved by Jesus (v. 5). For this reason, when Lazarus was gravely sick (Ὁν δὲ τις ἀσθενῶν – v. 1), Martha and Mary sent to inform Jesus to solicit his help. However, Jesus stayed where he was for two days before setting off (v. 6). When he arrived at Bethany, Lazarus had died and was buried for four days (v. 11). Later, to the surprise of the reader, Jesus interprets his delay as an opportunity for the disciples to believe in him as the giver of life (cf. v. 15).

Besides presenting the main characters of the story, the narrator engages them to introduce the main themes of the chapters: illness, death (v. 1); Jesus as God giver of life (v. 6), and more significantly the glory of God and His Son. (v. 4)<sup>12</sup> By the end of v. 6 the reader is guided to understand that John wants to emphasise the fact that Jesus focused on doing the will of God in God's own time, and not being coerced by external forces to act (cf. John 2:1 ff; 7:3-10).<sup>13</sup>

#### *Jesus Dialogues with His Disciples (vv. 7-16)*

The section presents the first of the three dialogues employed as a narrative device by the author to involve the readers in the development of the story. These verses focus on two related decisions to go to Judea.<sup>14</sup> First, Jesus decides and invites the disciples to join him to Judea four days after receiving the message of the sickness of Lazarus

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<sup>11</sup> Reuben Zimmermann, "The Narrative Hermeneutics of John 11: Learning with Lazarus how to Understand Death, Life and Resurrection," in *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, ed. Craig Koester and Reimund Bieringer (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 81.

<sup>12</sup> Moloney, "Faith of Martha and Mary," 471.

<sup>13</sup> Lean Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Rev.; The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 480.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Francis J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows. Reading John 5-12* (New York: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 159.

(v. 7), but they protest because of their memory of the plot of the Jews to harm him (cf. 10:31, 39; 11:8). Jesus continued the conversation with them by motivating the decision for their journey as “our friend Lazarus fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up” (v.11). When he saw that they failed to understand the metaphor, told them in plain language that Lazarus was dead (v.14) and he rejoices for their sake so that they might come to believe. This information perplexed the disciples and engendered in them many questions: why the delay of Jesus? Where is God in the suffering and sickness of people? Though we find no answers to these questions, the ensuing conversation educates the disciples through the metaphor of ‘darkness and light’ to avoid fear and scandal of the night and walk in the light (cf. 1:5; 8:12, 24; 9:4-5).<sup>15</sup>

As suggested by Moloney, the remarks of Jesus capture his hope that the disciples would come to faith in the events about to happen, namely, the raising of Lazarus from the dead.<sup>16</sup>

Without fully understanding the implications of Jesus’ word, Thomas, however, encourages his fellow disciples with the words, “Let us also go that we may die with him” (v.16). Most probably, Thomas’ proposal was motivated by the danger he envisaged in Jesus return to the territory of Judea, after escaping the attempt of the Jewish leaders to stone (10:31) and capture him (10: 39), and the need of the disciples to be with their master even if it would cost them their lives. Though the disciples went to Bethany in Judea with Jesus, Thomas bold proposal was never realised, because they all forsook Jesus when he was arrested (18:1-6).

#### *Jesus’ Encounter with Martha (vv. 17-27)*

In verse 17, the narrator informs the reader of Jesus’ arrival at Bethany. At that time, Lazarus had been dead for four days, and his entombed body was probably in an advanced state of decay. The reader learns Bethany was close to Jerusalem, and that some Jews have come from Jerusalem to mourn with the deceased family (v. 18). The

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<sup>15</sup> Nicoletta Gatti, “Giovanni 11:1-44,” in *Giovanni. Nuova traduzione commentata*, ed. Ernesto Borghi (Milano: Terra Santa, 2021), 162.

<sup>16</sup> Moloney, *Signs and Shadows*, 159.

proximity of Bethany to the place of Jesus' passion and death also suggests to the reader that the time of Jesus' death was rapidly looming<sup>17</sup>

When Jesus arrived at the outskirts of the village, Martha went to meet him and exclaimed "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (11:21). This greeting expresses Martha's faith in Jesus as Lord of life, which offers her the opportunity to perceive spiritual growth as experiencing the Lord in life situations

Like the Samaritan woman, Martha grows gradually in faith and understanding in her meeting with Jesus, and the raising of her brother from death.<sup>18</sup> In v. 21, Martha confesses faith in Jesus as a healer who would have prevented the brother from dying if he were present.<sup>19</sup> Her faith moves to a higher level when she perceives Jesus as someone more than a healer by saying, 'I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask' (v. 22). She further exclaimed, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day," (v. 24). Jesus' response, "I am the resurrection and the life," (v. 25) prompts Martha to confess "I believe that you are the Son of God," v. 27. By this statement, Martha expresses faith in Jesus who brings life both now and hereafter. Martha's final response to Jesus reveals that she has not come to a complete understanding of faith in Jesus, (vv. 25-26).<sup>20</sup>

After proclaiming her faith in the person of Jesus (v. 27), she goes back to call Mary, so that even her sister can meet with Jesus. For Stibbe, by this act "Martha has moved from confessor to witness. Like the Samaritan woman in 4:28, she begins to prove her discipleship by fetching someone else and encouraging them to go to Jesus - in this case, her sister, Mary."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Zimmermann, "The Narrative Hermeneutics in John 11," 47.

<sup>18</sup> The Samaritan woman (4:4-42), the anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany (12:1-11), Mary Magdalene (20:10-18), all of which depict women fulfilling significant ministerial roles.

<sup>19</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary, 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 838; Moloney, "Faith of Martha and Mary," 474-477.

<sup>20</sup> Moloney, "Faith of Martha and Mary," 474-477; Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 557.

<sup>21</sup> Wendy E.S. North, "Lord, if you had been here... (Jn. 11: 21): The Absence of Jesus and Strategies of Consolation in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 36 (2013), 47.

*Jesus' Dialogue with Mary and the Mourners (vv. 28-37)*

Upon seeing Jesus (v. 32b: ἴδοῦσα αὐτόν), the narrator reported that Mary, unlike Martha, fell at His feet (v.32c: ἐπεσεν αὐτοῦ πρὸς τοὺς πόδας). This context gives the words of Mary a different connotation. According to Moloney “Mary has responded to the call of the Good Shepherd” (vv. 28-29; cf. 10:3) and, while her actions provoke misunderstanding and judgment from ‘the Jews’ (v. 31), she has placed herself in a position of total trust in Jesus (v. 32a). By this, Mary is perceived as one who accepts the full significance of Jesus’ revelation of himself as Ἐγὼ εἰμι (v. 26). After this significant statement, Mary reiterates the words of her sister Martha: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (v. 32b; cf. v. 22). For some scholars, this makes Mary a ‘shadow’ of her sister, but we agree with Moloney that the statement only reflects the pattern of developing faith in Jesus which is explicit in the Johannine corpus.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, Mary who earlier appears to have moved from the world of the Jews to that of Jesus, drifted back when she began to wail with the Jews (v. 33). This consequently triggers Jesus’ emotion, and he wept (v. 35). Some scholars think that the emotional outburst reveals God’s love for the afflicted. It tells the reader, Jesus did care, that God did not have long-term purposes in suffering.<sup>23</sup> But we concur with Moloney, who argues that Jesus’ disappointment is in the fact that even Mary, who previously expressed trust in him as the Good Shepherd (vv. 28-29) and the resurrection and the life (vv. 25-26, 32), is at risk of turning back at the peak of his ministry.<sup>24</sup>

*Jesus' Miracle of Raising Lazarus from the Dead (vv. 38-44)*

The raising of Lazarus from the dead is the climax of the pericope, but to the surprise of the reader, the narrator directs attention rather to Jesus and his actions. For example, in v. 38 the narrator informs the reader about Jesus’ movement (ἐμβριμώμενος) from the outskirts of the town to the tomb where Lazarus was buried. Earlier in v. 33, “Jesus was deeply moved in spirit (ἐνεβριμήσατο τῷ πνεύματι) and troubled.” For Lindars, this statement is problematic. In his opinion, the

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<sup>22</sup> Moloney, “Faith of Martha and Mary,” 473.

<sup>23</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 839.

<sup>24</sup> M.W.G. Stibbe, *John* (Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 124-125.

literal meaning of the Greek syntagm is not “deeply moved in spirit,” but “troubled in the Spirit”<sup>25</sup> The nature of the problem can be seen more clearly when the two competing translations of the verb ἐμβριμάσθαι are placed in the narrative context.<sup>26</sup>

At the tomb, Jesus gave a command for the stone that covered the tomb to be removed (ἄρατε τὸν λίθον). Martha’s response to this request seems to express a ‘limited faith’ in Jesus, as a miracle worker (v. 39; cf. vv. 21-22), and not yet as the resurrection and the life (vv. 25-26). As a result, Jesus reminds her of his invitation to believe that he is the resurrection and the life; this ‘higher’ faith would enable her to see the glory of God (v. 40; cf. 2:11 and Exod. 16:7. 10).<sup>27</sup>

However, Craig objects that the faith of Mary and Martha is central in the Lazarus story since Lazarus is made passive and quiet in the whole narrative leaving Mary and Martha as key characters.<sup>28</sup>

Regardless of Martha’s concern, Jesus insists the stone be rolled away (v. 41a). Jesus prays with eyes lifted (v. 41b), he gives thanks and expresses his absolute trust in the union that exists between himself and the Father (vv. 41c-42), as articulated in various parts of the Gospel (cf. 4:34, 5:19-30, 6: 27, 37-38, 40, 45, 8:38). The prayer is heard by all who were present since Jesus prayed aloud; with this emphasis, the narrator signals to the readers that what happened subsequently is generated by the union that exists between the Father and the Son. Whatever Jesus does, he does following the will of the Father (5:19).<sup>29</sup>

The prayer proposes a Johannine theme that ‘signs’ are in function faith. At this point “the moment has come for Jesus to perform a deed that will show forth the glory of God and set in motion a process through which he will himself be glorified (vv. 4, 49).”<sup>30</sup> Verse 43 is

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<sup>25</sup> Barnabas Lindars, “Rebuking the Spirit: A New Analysis of the Lazarus Story of John 11,” *New Testament Study* 38 (1992): 89-104.

<sup>26</sup> Lindars, “Rebuking the Spirit,” 90.

<sup>27</sup> Moloney, “Faith of Martha and Mary,” 486-488; Stibbe, “A Tomb with a View,” 48; Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 557.

<sup>28</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary* (New York: Baker Academic, 2003), 838.

<sup>29</sup> Although the Fourth Gospel emphasizes Jesus’ deity, it also underlines his obedience to the Father’s will and offers significant prayers of Jesus to the Father: Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary*, 849.

<sup>30</sup> Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina Series, 4; Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998), 333; Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 839.

the final moment, where Jesus cried out with authority, “Lazarus, come out.” The dead man came out, bound in the feet and the hands, wrapped in a σουδάριον and his face covered with face clothes. Jesus then ordered: “Loose him and let him go!” (v. 44). It is important to note, that the narrator presents the ‘resurrection’ of Lazarus as a process of liberation from the bondage of death, which climaxes the book of signs. With the irony that characterised the fourth gospel, however, the liberation of Lazarus from the dead, is presented as the proximate cause for the arrest of Jesus (vv. 47-48).

*Responses to the Miracle (vv. 45-54): Jesus’ Passover Pilgrimage (vv. 55-57)*

The miracle event impacted the Jewish sympathisers who had come to mourn with Mary and Martha. While some came to believe in Jesus on account of the miracle, others reported the event to the Sanhedrin, which increased the animosity between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. Thus, by introducing the Jews into the story, the evangelist links them to other episodes in the Gospel story (cf. chapters 9 and 10) and underlines their role in reporting the miracle of the healing to the religious authorities, and the eventual plot to kill both Lazarus and Jesus (cf. 11:46. 50; 12:10-11).

The rebuke and prophecy of Caiaphas, the High priest at the time, and the image of the pending Passover feast in Jerusalem also provide a basis for linking the miracle event with the death of and resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, the reader of the Gospel of John, unlike the disciples who were present only at certain moments, sees the many hints of the story fulfilled: the hour (cf. 2:5; 7:20; 8:30), the lifting-up on the cross (cf. 3:4; 8:28), the glorification of the son of man (11:4) and that the death of Jesus would gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad (11:52)<sup>31</sup>.

*The Reunion (John 12: 1- 2)*

With the reunion of Lazarus and his family in a meal, where Jesus was present (12:1-2), the Lazarus story comes to an end. As stated by Zimmerman “After Lazarus is called out of the tomb, he is let go. A complete communion is not realised until John 12: 1-2, where Lazarus

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<sup>31</sup> Moloney, *Signs and Shadows*, 176-177.

and Jesus are reclining at the table, sharing supper.”<sup>32</sup> Beasley- Murray further observes that “the introduction of Lazarus into the picture underscores the chief lesson of the story (v. 7): he whom Jesus called from the grave reclines with Jesus, designated for burial and resurrection.”<sup>33</sup>

In conclusion, a journey with the reader through the Lazarus story reveals that the major theological concern is the real meaning of life and death, and the absence or presence of Jesus in one’s life. As noted by Schneiders, “The narrative so maintains the tension between the clarity of theology and the ambiguity of the human experience of death that it creates a horizon within which the reader of any time or place can integrate the human experience of death into his or her faith in Jesus as the resurrection and life”.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, chapter 11 opens a window onto the mystery of the cross and eternal life, where each person’s experience could be interpreted in the light of the Christ event.

### **Exegesis of Reality**

This section examines the emergence of COVID-19 and the attitude of the Ghanaians towards recovered COVID-19 persons as a context for interpreting the Lazarus story. After Ghana recorded its first two cases of COVID-19 on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, several measures were adopted to curb the spread of the deadly disease. For instance, the country’s airport and borders were closed, and travellers caught up in the process were quarantined and tested. Persons that tested positive were isolated for treatment. The isolation centres in Ghana are generally categorised into two— those attached to health facilities where critically ill COVID-19 patients who need emergency treatment are handled, and those detached from hospitals where persons are treated.

Since the emergence of the deadly pandemic, the use of terms such as isolation, self-isolation, quarantine, and self-quarantine, social and physical-distancing, facemask and stigmatisation became common among the Ghanaian people.<sup>35</sup> While some can be considered positive,

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<sup>32</sup> Zimmerman, “The Narrative Hermeneutics of John 11,” 81.

<sup>33</sup> Beasley-Murray, *The Gospel according to John*, 208.

<sup>34</sup> Schneiders, *Written that you May Believe*, 175.

<sup>35</sup> BBC, “BBC: Coronavirus: How Ghana Plan to Fight Covid-19 without Lockdown,” <https://www.bbc.com> [accessed April 20, 2020].

others are not. For instance, because of the deadly nature of the disease and its spread, the general public is encouraged to adopt social distance measures, especially from those tested positive. As a result, persons that test positive are stigmatised even after they have fully recovered.

Until the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, only two cases were recorded, but the numbers increased unexpectedly. By the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2020, records from the Ghana Health Service website indicated that out of the total number of 320,071 persons tested 23,463 were positive, 18,622 recoveries/discharges, 5,129 active cases, with unfortunately 129 deaths.<sup>36</sup> The rise in the numbers of affected persons, the recovery and mortality rates in Ghana have had severe consequences for either the recovered persons, their families, or the government.

### *COVID-19 Recovered Persons and Stigmatisation*

When infected and hospitalised persons began recovering and were discharged to return home, many of such persons experienced rejection from their communities and even their families.<sup>37</sup> Media reports captured and denounced this behaviour as stigmatisation, which caught public attention in the country.<sup>38</sup>

Though stigmatisation is not new in Ghana, the emergence of COVID-19 re-enchanted discourse on it. Stigmatisation is an age-old phenomenon that is associated with human life, but the question which quickly comes to mind is, 'who is the subject of stigma?' In general, stigma can apply to everyone: one's appearance, physique, nature of work, tribe, social groupings, race, colour, ethnic group, health, personal lifestyle (tattoos), etc. Health issues, however, present the worst-case scenario, especially the congenital conditions such

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<sup>36</sup> "Ghana Health Service: Update on Coronavirus Disease," <https://www.ghana-healthservice.org> [Accessed July 10, 2020].

<sup>37</sup> Interview granted the researchers by 4 recovered COVID-19 patients on September 14, 2020. They asked to remain anonymous for fear of stigmatization; cf. The testimony recorder by Isaac Kaledzi, "Ghana: COVID-19 survivors stigmatized," <https://www.dw.com/en/ghana-covid-19-survivors-stigmatized/av-53418720>

<sup>38</sup> The following are some titles of post on the popular blog: Ghanaweb. "Tarkwa-Nsuaem Municipal Assembly members urged to fight coronavirus stigmatization," August 3, 2020; "NAPO's campaign against coronavirus stigmatisation 'extremely impressive' - Dr. Aboagye DaCosta," July 20, 2020; "COVID-19 Anti-stigmatization Campaign: Ghana Psychological Association trains 314 NCCE staff," July 2, 2020; Ahanta Apemeyimheneba Kwofie III, "Coronavirus: How I confronted stigmatization in a banking hall at Madina," July 19, 2020.

as cerebral palsy, albinism, schizophrenia, and physically challenged (PWDs).

In explaining stigma, Ama de-Graft associates the phenomenon with diseases. For her, stigma refers to a “value-based ideology that imposes moral judgement on others to affirm the in-group’s safe and moral identity. Disease stigma constitutes negative social ‘baggage’ associated with a disease that...is not justified by the medical effects of disease on the human body.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, Campbell and Deacon make a distinction between stigma and discrimination. They insist stigma is to be understood as negative ideologies or attitudes while discrimination is negative behaviour.<sup>40</sup> Campbell and Deacon stress that stigma can also be “a blend of affective, cognitive and behavioural responses, with the primacy of each factor resulting from variable interactions between the nature of the stigma, the context in which it is considered and individual differences amongst interactants.”<sup>41</sup>

Considering the definition of Ama de-Grant, we could say that misconception about a disease, therefore, plays a huge role in generating stigma among people, especially when the disease is considered strange and foreign or imported. Dealing with the phenomenon, Campbell and Deacon reveal that more attention is given to the ‘stigmatiser’ than the stigmatised in any intervention that seeks to deal with stigmatisation. Consequently, more effort is directed to providing people with the facts about an illness or stigmatised groups.<sup>42</sup> On the contrary, this intervention instead leaves victims with the burden of handling their adjustment.

### *Effects of Stigmatisation*

According to Goffman, stigma leaves a ‘mark’ of social disgrace, arising within social relations and disqualifying those who bear it from

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<sup>39</sup> Ama de-Graft Aikins, “Reframing applied diseases stigma research: A multilevel analysis of Diabetes stigma in Ghana,” *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 16, no. 428 (2006): 56-63.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine Campbell and Harriet Deacon, “Unravelling the Contexts of Stigma: From internalisation to Resistance to Change,” *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 16, no. 412 (2006): 129- 134.

<sup>41</sup> Campbell and Deacon, “Unravelling the Contexts of Stigma,” 412

<sup>42</sup> Campbell and Deacon, “Unravelling the Contexts of Stigma,” 412.

full social acceptance. This effect is not only limited to the affected persons only but also extends to those closely related to them.<sup>43</sup>

Stigmatisation has many implications for the stigmatised — economic, social, academic, cultural, and religious. In an interview with an HIV patient, Ama de-Graft reports the testimony of a market woman: “When I send food to the school to sell, the children won’t buy, because the teacher told them I have HIV/AIDS.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in an interview granted on a TV 3 program dubbed ‘New Day’, a recovered COVID-19 patient, Frederick Kwaku Dra relates his ordeal to the Host, Berla Mundi. According to him, he lost his job because he suffered from COVID-19. Also, his relationship with friends and some relatives was affected. He further revealed that even his immediate family members discriminated against him, to the extent his wife could not freely visit the market to buy foodstuff.<sup>45</sup>

Commenting on the widespread of this phenomenon, Dr. Emmanuel Amankra at the Lekma Hospital Isolation Centre, who was part of the program stated, “The effect of Stigmatization has been there since Adam, but the COVID-19 dynamics has taken it a notch higher because of its novelty.”<sup>46</sup>

Again, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2020 at 10:30 am, on the same TV3 program dubbed, “Pandemic Today,” Dr. Neumann Arthur, a clinical psychologist, enumerates some of the factors that give rise to the stigmatisation of COVID-19 recovered persons. He decried among others, “the mode and procedure by which the affected persons are picked up from their homes and communities with ambulances amidst blowing of sirens. For him, that kneejerk approach creates more awareness of the person’s status, hence stigmatisation with its associated effects.”<sup>47</sup> Dr. Gilian Borgee, a front line health worker who recovered from COVID-19, remarked in a television interview: “COVID-19 affected and recovered persons need love, care and empathy, otherwise committing suicide will be their only option.”<sup>48</sup> It is evident from the

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<sup>43</sup> Campbell and Deacon, “Unravelling the Contexts of Stigma,” 412.

<sup>44</sup> Ama de-Graft Aikins, “Reframing Applied Disease Stigma Research,” 56-63.

<sup>45</sup> A TV3 interview with COVID-19 Recovered Person, May 21, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> A TV3 interview with COVID-19 Recovered Person, May 21, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> A TV3 interview with COVID-19 Recovered Person, May 21, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> A TV3 interview with COVID-19 Recovered Person, May 21, 2020.

experiences of De-Graft, Frederick Dra and Dr. Gillian that the effect of stigma, among others, can be more deadly than the virus itself.

### **The implication of John 11 for Contemporary Ghanaian Christians**

The story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead by Jesus (11: 1-57) and his subsequent reunion with his family (12:1-2) has several implications for the contemporary Ghanaian Christian, especially in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The seeming absence of God in difficulties and trials has always been at the centre of all religious reflection. Why a loving God would ‘stay away for things to get worse,’ baffles the reader of the Lazarus story. This idea is what Christians question during the outbreak of COVID-19, where people struggle to find and experience God’s presence in their hopeless and helpless situations. In addition to this is stigmatisation, unfair treatment of people, abuse of their rights, because they are isolated or diagnosed or have recovered from the disease.

In the first place, the experience of Martha, Mary, the apostles, the Jews in the Lazarus narrative speak to contemporary Christians. It is so evident in the narrative that sickness, pain and death and the various human reactions towards suffering are central. In the Ghanaian culture, this is where the community shows solidarity: friends, loved ones express their love, condolences, and sympathies to the bereaved family. Though he delayed in arriving, Jesus, like some Jews, visited the home of Martha and Mary to sympathise (cf. vv. 19, 21, 32, 35). In her theological reflection on the Lazarus story, Schneiders explains,

The story of Lazarus and that of the Johannine community are completely fused in a touchingly human narrative that opens onto the experience of any believing Christian who has ever lived through the death of a loved one. The experience of the characters in the narrative is a vehicle for the exposition of the Fourth Gospel’s sublime theology of eternal life. But the narrative so maintains the tension between the clarity of theology and the ambiguity of the human experience of death that it creates a horizon within which the reader of any time or place can integrate the human

experience of death into his or her faith in Jesus as Resurrection and Life.<sup>49</sup>

Secondly, the death and resurrection of Lazarus imply that death is inevitable to human beings, but Jesus' action of raising Lazarus from death demonstrates his power over death and hope of the resurrection for the Christian. Jesus is the resurrection and the life (vv. 25-26), He who believes in him will live even though he dies, and he who lives and believes in him will never die (vv. 24-25). This implies that Jesus is the giver of life, even beyond the grave.

Thirdly, the text stimulates the disciples' faith in Jesus, especially, Martha, who initially doubted that Jesus could raise her dead brother to life despite laying four days in the tomb. From the beginning of the narrative, a lack of faith on the part of the disciples was prominent. This initial doubt in Jesus' power to raise a dead and buried person to life played out prominently in the narrative until the reality dawned on them when Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out (v. 43): "many of the Jews who had come to Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him" (v. 45). The attitude of Martha and the others at the tomb to believe in Jesus' authority is the same as the Ghanaian Christian when faced with a calamity or a tragedy of suffering especially death.

Furthermore, Jesus' reunion with Lazarus, his family, and the disciples interrogates Ghanaian Christians, especially in this COVID-19 pandemic, where affected persons are stigmatised and treated with contempt. In the Lazarus narrative, the text, besides revealing Jesus as the giver of life, also highlights Lazarus' victory over death, and the invitation to share the joy of his resurrection (12:1-2). This reunion is a theological invitation that suggests receiving COVID-19 recovered persons back into their respective communities and celebrating them as a sign of their victory over the virus.

Furthermore, unbinding Lazarus and bringing him back home (John 11:44) reflects the proper attitude needed to overcome stigma: removal of the bandages of stigma, the preconceptions and ignorance that blinds people and make them 'stigmatisers', and their integration into the community. Therefore, Ghanaian Christians are to avoid acts that give rise to stigma and embrace those that express love: receive

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<sup>49</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, "Death in the Community of Eternal Life," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 44-56.

and accept the COVID-19 persons. Above all, they are also to love them and give them emotional and spiritual support that will facilitate their reintegration into their respective communities. Furthermore, they need to advocate against every form of stigmatisation actively.

Additionally, Jesus offers us an example by drawing nearer to what people consider unclean. Drawing nearer to the grave of Lazarus and requesting removal of the obstacle to his encounter with Lazarus amidst protest from Martha (11: 39-40). Such is the character of Jesus who breaks the boundaries of isolation and people who are “quarantined” (cf. Matt. 8:3, Luke 5:12-15, Luke 7:14). One way of dealing with stigma is to deal with the issue of isolation. There must be some form of “closeness” or outreach to areas marked off as isolations centres, to help in the process of integration of victims into their communities.

Finally, as Schneiders observes

Christian readers are invited and enabled to integrate the ever-ambiguous experience of death, that of loved ones and their own, into their faith vision. The death of the beloved, and the absence of the Lord, are real, but they are neither ultimate nor final. Eternal life is unquenched by death and the absence felt is Jesus' way of being present during the time of waiting. We are not asked to weep but only not to despair, for the one in whom we believe is our resurrection, because he is our life.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

The Lazarus story — his resurrection and his reunion with his family — is an invitation to Ghanaian Christians for attitudinal change towards people who have the propensity for stigma, either because of their physical appearances or health conditions. We hope that at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, ‘a new humanity’ would emerge, and there would be a resurrection that gives glory to God. Jesus himself, having experienced stigmatisation, becomes for us an example of how to overcome stigma by first approaching an isolated area (the grave), and reuniting Lazarus with his family and integrating him within the society. By this gesture, Jesus has given us the example by showing love and care to the isolated and stigmatised in his time as depicted in the Lazarus story. Just as Lazarus of Bethany was received

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<sup>50</sup> Schneiders, “Death in the Community of Eternal Life,” 56.

The Implication of the Raising of Lazarus from the Dead warmly by his family after his resurrection, recovered persons of COVID-19 in Ghana should also be shown affection, to enable them to reintegrate comfortably into their communities.

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