

BIBLICAL "LEPROSY"
and its relationship to modern leprosy / Hansen's disease
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"Leprosy" in the Bible - why should you be concerned about it? What does it matter?

- Everything in the Bible is important. It is God's communication to us.
- There is a grave error to correct
- This error causes severe injury and suffering to millions today.

Interestingly, more is said about "leprosy" in the Bible than about any other condition. Note that it was not called a disease, and was "cleansed", not "healed".

Biblical "leprosy is NOT the same as modern leprosy or Hansen's Disease.

The NIV footnote by Dr. Dillard to Leviticus 13:2 says, "The Hebrew word *sara'at* was used for various diseases affecting the skin, not necessarily leprosy. Also the symptoms described, and the fact that they may rapidly change, show that the disease was not true leprosy/ Hansen's Disease."

We need to go farther than that, and leave out the word "necessarily".

The Hebrew word in question is *sara'at*. In Arabic the root meaning is "stricken, smitten of God." *Sara'at* is a ritualistic term, denoting **defilement or uncleanness.** "The ceremonially defiled person or object is not so defined on grounds of modern ideas of infectiousness, or hygiene, or of morality. The **person, or wall, or garment is unclean.**" (S. G. Browne) He continues: "Some of the conditions included in *sara'at* are infections, which may have included boils, carbuncles, fungus infections, infections complicating a burn, impetigo, favus. are infestations, such as scabies. and some are not: such as patchy eczema, phagedenic ulcer, and impetigo/ vitiligo."

However, *sara'at* referred not only to **skin**, but also to **clothes, hides, leather**. Here the problem was probably fungus, mold, or mildew. Also *sara'at* affected **walls of houses**, being fungus, mold, lichen, dry rot..

In a way the mystery deepens. Why did **unclean** matter so much to God - why does it mean so little to us? Here are a few points on the importance of uncleanness. The government was a theocracy: God was teaching His people to be holy, separate, and obedient. It was the time of law, not of grace. We may note that we are not called to explain God, but to proclaim Him.

Sara'at does not speak to the Gentile as it did to the Jew. *Sara'at* meant ceremonial defilement, separation from God and from society. To the Jew this was an extremely serious matter.

If "leprosy" is an incorrect translation of *sara'at*, which means defilement, and is, therefore, a word which should not occur in the Old Testament, how did it come to be there?

Jerome, in 383 AD, was responsible for translating the Old Testament Hebrew word *sara'at*, and the New Testament Greek word *lepra* as "leprosy" when he translated the whole Bible into the common, or vulgar, Latin tongue, probably under the aegis of Constantine, the Roman emperor. The translation is known as the Vulgate. Under the influence of this Vulgate translation, the word "leprosy" subsequently entered versions of the languages of Western Europe. Jerome was born in 342 AD and lived in Aquilea and Rome.

How do we know that *sara'at* was not the same as modern leprosy?

1. The history of modern leprosy / Hansen's Disease.

Dr. Robert G. Cochran states in his textbook, p 15: "The specific disease known today as leprosy or Hansen's disease did not exist in the lands of the Bible at the time of Moses or the patriarchs, or

even in the exilic or post-exilic period. Modern leprosy seems to have burst on the western world with apparent suddenness about three centuries before Christ.” (p17) Leprosy had been known and described in China for centuries earlier than that. There may be a connection with the campaigns of Alexander the Great. Also to be considered is the trade that had developed between China, India, and the Middle East.

Therefore, Moses did not have leprosy. He had sara’at. It was a sign from God. Miriam did not have leprosy. She had sara’at. It was a punishment for speaking against Moses. Naaman did not have leprosy. He had sara’at. It may have been a really troublesome disease. Being Syrian, not Hebrew, he would not have been greatly concerned about ceremonial defilement before the Hebrew God. King Uzziah did not have leprosy. He had sara’at. It was a punishment from God.

Modern leprosy did exist in Israel by the time our Lord was on earth, R.G. Cochrane declares. The laws of sara’at still applied. It was a time of transition from law to grace. It is not known whether the “leper” cleansed by Jesus in the first miracle Matthew describes, nor the ten “lepers” had modern leprosy. As far as sara’at or lepra were concerned, our Lord fulfilled the law of Moses.

After the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) there is no further mention of “leprosy” in the Bible.

In New Testament times in Israel, modern leprosy was known, but it was not called lepra, which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew sara’at. Rather it was called elephas or elephantiasis. This must not be confused with the filarial disease now called elephantiasis.

Luke, a physician, does not use the medical term elephas, then in common use for true leprosy, Browne states. No description is given of the ten so-called “lepers”, so we cannot tell whether any of them had modern leprosy.

In the New Testament, the Greek word lepra is the equivalent of the Old Testament Hebrew word sara’at. In Attic Greek the word lepra means scaly or scabbed.

The word leper denotes a defiled person, a ritually unclean person who is to be stigmatized. The word leper comes from the Greek word meaning a scale or parchment, The word for book has the same origin, liber.

2. The second means by which we can know that sara’at or lepra is not the same as modern leprosy is by a description of the disease Remember, sara’at was not a single disease, but included many kinds of conditions, and affected not only people, but also walls and garments. Hansen’s disease is a single disease and does not affect walls nor clothing.

Nothing whatsoever re sara’at is true of modern leprosy.

None of the description in Leviticus 13 and 14 is true of modern leprosy.

As Dr. Robert G. Cochrane often said, “You cannot learn anything about leprosy from the Bible.

What has been the effect of this misunderstanding and confusion? Most people think the two are the same. **This results in the wholesale transfer of taboos and stigmata.** Leprosy sufferers / Hansen’s Disease sufferers think they are cursed by God, and defiled, unclean. The general population, and especially Bible readers, think so too!

Preachers still preach that leprosy is a type or word picture of sin.

What can be done about this sad situation?

Some say, change the name to Hansen’s Disease. This is a misnomer. Dr. Gerhard Armauer Hansen described the bacillus, not the disease. The disease had been described in China about twenty-five centuries earlier. However, HD does not connote the same stigmata and is therefore some comfort to innocent sufferers.

Cochrane said, “Disinfect the term ‘leprosy’”. This is not easy to do.

There is no publication available in the USA to explain this serious mistake. The internet also spreads confusion.

Practical applications:

- For "leprosy" in the Old Testament read defilement, ceremonial defilement, or transliterate sara'at.
- For "leprosy" in the New Testament read defilement, ceremonial defilement, or transliterate lepra.
- Ban the word **leper** concerning a person with the disease of modern leprosy. Say 'leprosy sufferer', or 'leprosy patient'. but do not say 'leprosy victim'. **Leper is a dirty word.** Never use it.
- Please do not preach that leprosy is a type or picture of sin. You wouldn't do that with cancer/ arthritis!
- We should not say that all disease is a punishment from God. Our Lord did not do so, and this would result in a misinterpretation of suffering.
- Remember **Biblical "leprosy" is NOT modern leprosy / Hansen's Disease.**
- The word "leprosy" should not appear in the Bible. Don't say it!

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