

LEPROSY

By Mark Moore, PhD

I. Biblical Description of Leprosy

A. Names:

1. Hebrew: Zaraath
2. Greek: Lepra
3. Both words basically describe a scaling or peeling condition of the skin.

B. Identification (Leviticus 13):

1. A swelling, eruption, a scab, or a bright spot (2)
2. Hair on the sore turns white (3)
3. It appears to be deeper than the skin (3)
4. It can spread (3; cf. 14:39)
5. Sometimes it leaves raw flesh, it is then unclean (14)
6. Sometimes it is attended by boils (18-20)
7. It can affect the head or beard; indicated by thin yellow hair, baldness of the head or forehead, itching, or a mealy white rash (29-31)
8. Reddish-white sores (42-43)
9. Commanded to cry out, "Unclean, Unclean" (45)
10. Must dwell alone outside the camp as long as he is unclean (46)
11. Garments and walls may become leprous (47ff)
12. It can infect material or leather. It appears as greenish or reddish infection (48-49)
13. It could be life-long (2 Chron. 26:21)

C. Cleansing (Leviticus 14):

1. Ritual restoration of the "one dead" (cf. Num. 12:12) into the living community (2-8)
2. Ritual restoration of the individual to God through the consecration of a priest (9-20)
3. The offerings of a poor man cleansed the individual (21-32)
4. Houses sometimes needed cleansing (33-53)

D. Individuals with Leprosy:

1. Miriam (Num. 12:9-14)
2. Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-27)
3. Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:17-23)
4. Unnamed individual (Mark 1:40-44)
5. Ten unnamed lepers including one thankful Samaritan (Luke 17:12-19).
[Note: Luke 17:15 is the only place in the N.T. where the word "heal" is used for cleansing Leprosy and that in connection with a Samaritan who would not necessarily be bound by Jewish law].

II. Why Biblical Leprosy cannot be Hansen's disease or Elephantitis:

A. Three opinions:

1. Zaraath and Hansen's disease are identical.
2. Zaraath covers a number of skin conditions including Hansen's disease.
3. Zaraath and Hansen's disease are different.

B. Descriptions:

1. Diagnosis of leprosy was early, sometimes within a few days (Lev. 13:5).
2. Zaraath originally meant a defiling condition. It appears to be connected with God's punishment for sin, not merely a normal disease. Thus those afflicted with it are sent out of the camp.
3. There is no mention of Leprosy after the death and resurrection of Jesus (cf. Heb. 13:13-14).
4. There is no mention in the Bible of anesthesia of the extremities of the body affected by leprosy. This is one of the most notable symptoms of Hansen's disease.
5. The Bible also does not mention other notable symptoms of Hansen's disease such as swellings on the face, hoarse voice, disfigurement and pareses.

III. Conclusions

- A. Biblical Leprosy was a real disease which covered a number of skin conditions (cf. 2 Sam. 3:29; Mt. 10:8; 11:5). It was sometimes a serious condition (Num. 12:11-12; 2 Kings 5:7; Mt. 10:8; 11:5).
- B. It appears to have been a curse from God; sometimes by divine intervention (cf. Ex. 4:6). Separation may not have been merely for sanitation but punishment (Num. 12:11-12; Lev. 14:34). For instance, Naaman was not excluded from his non-Israelite community.
- C. Because of #1 and #2 above, cleansing was both ritualistic and medical.
- D. Because of the implications of Biblical leprosy, it would be wise to differentiate between it and Hansen's Disease so that those who suffer from the latter do not have to also bear the stigma of the former. Several solutions have been offered:
 1. Stop using Leprosy to describe Hansen's disease.
 2. Use zaraath instead of leprosy to translate the Bible.
 3. Find another descriptive word or phrase for zaraath (Heb) and lepra (Gk), such as "the white disease," "the spreading disease," or "the unclean disease."

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