REPRINTED ARTICLE

LEPROSY: THE CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE[1]

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To judge from questions put to me on many occasions during recent years there is widespread puzzlement among thoughtful Christian people concerning the attitude they should adopt toward those suffering from leprosy. Is leprosy a disease apart? Is it a punishment for sin, and have its victims in some unique way incurred the Divine wrath? Is leprosy a type of sin? And if so, why is it so regarded? What is the meaning of those little-read chapters in Leviticus concerning leprosy of human beings, or houses, of clothing? Can they refer to the disease known today as leprosy? And do the better-known New Testament passages also refer to true leprosy?

These questions are of no mere academic or theoretical interest. They are of tremendous concern to many of the more than ten million sufferers from leprosy in the world, who have to bear not only the discomfort and distress of a chronic and progressive disease, but also the opprobrium of their fellows and the stigma of being punished for sin—their own, or their parents'. The word "leper" in modern English usage is heavily charged emotionally, and conjures up pictures of a hideous and repulsive disease, together with moral turpitude and a fully justified ostracism. Its figurative use is even more pejorative: for example, "a moral leper," "to treat someone as if he were a leper"; and a hymn referring to "the leper with his tainted life."

It may be affirmed categorically that few misidentifications and mistranslations in the history of literature can have had such unwarranted and far-reaching and unfortunate effects as those of the words appearing as "leper" and "leprosy" in the English Bible from Wyclif onwards, and in versions in many other languages. No disease, not excepting the unidentified condition responsible for Herod's dreadful end, recorded in Acts 12:23, has been described by commentators in such highly-coloured and inaccurate detail.

The widespread dread of leprosy has a composite origin: the apparent capriciousness of attack, the mysteriously long incubation period, the insidious and inexorable progress of the symptoms, and espe-

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cially the final stages comprising leonine facies and ulcerations and mutilations of the extremities. It must be remembered, however, that the majority of those attacked suffer from the non-infectious and self-healing forms of the disease, that the serious and contagious leprosy often passes unrecognized by the layman, and that the signs most feared (for example, the ulcerations and deformities) are but seldom infectious.

While in some countries where leprosy is highly endemic, social prejudice against the disease is minimal or nonexistent, it is generally true that leprosy is regarded with an inordinate fear and loathing accorded to no other disease. Infantile paralysis and sleeping sickness evoke no such deep emotional reaction, though they may have certain signs in common with leprosy. In primitive countries, victims may be driven to the bush to die: they are thought to have been singled out for punishment by the spirits. In India, it is considered that the individual (either in the present or in a previous incarnation) or his parents have sinned. In China, the disease is seen as Divine punishment for wrong-doing.

It is a distressing fact that when translations of the Bible become available, the apparent Scriptural confirmation of pre-Christian attitudes to the disease is accepted as providing a reasonable basis for long-held beliefs. Where such prejudice did not exist, it may even be engendered by Christian preachers who derive their ideas from Biblical references to "leprosy" and "lepers." A serious corollary is the conception of an arbitrary and capricious Deity inflicting on mortals a dreaded disease.

The fundamentally unchristian attitude to perfectly innocent victims of a chronic mycobacterial infection of skin and nerves (which is what leprosy really is) has in the providence of God been somewhat counterbalanced by charitable concern for leprosy sufferers. Christian Missions have been the pioneers in showing Christ-like compassion and genuine sympathy for those afflicted with leprosy. Nowadays, the emotional sentimentalism of a former generation is being replaced by practical help in curing the disease, in preventing the deformities it leads to, and in mitigating its physiological and social consequences.

Because of its connotation of "unclean" and "stricken of God," the word "leper" is no longer used by official bodies such as the World Health Organization. Some would go further and seek an alternative name for leprosy, which they call "Hansen's disease" after the Norwegian doctor who first demonstrated the mycobacterial cause.

If, then, the Old Testament references to "leprosy" are not to the disease we know by that name today, why the specific instructions of our Lord to the Twelve: "Cleanse the lepers" (Matthew 10:8)? Though Luke (the doctor) does not include the command "cleanse the lepers," he does record our Lord's vindication of His ministry to the

Baptist's emissaries (Luke 7:22; see also Matthew 11:8). The disciples were specially directed to those who were regarded by themselves and by society and (in their own and in society's eyes) by God, as outcast by reason of a chronic skin condition. Why should they be so regarded?

The Mosaic code makes frequent mention of *tsara'ath* (*zaraath*) in Leviticus 13 and 14. The word seems to have a root meaning of a scaly condition of human skin, of clothing, or of walls. It is a generic and comprehensive nonscientific term, not precisely defined or constant, and of course not bacteriologically delimited. *Tsara'ath* is in common use today in Israel, and its precise range of meaning depends on the speaker, lay or medical; it connotes a terrible and dreaded uncleanness (cf. "measles" and "typhus" in comparatively recent times were generic terms including several diseases; cf. also the words "plague" and "pest" with their different meanings, wide and restricted). It may be mentioned that, up to recent times, the English word "leprosy" occurs with the definite or indefinite article; it was commonly used either in the singular or in the plural; it could refer to plague and smallpox in man, and to diseases of animals and plants.

The subject is complicated also by the difficulty of determining the exact denotation of the terms employed: rising, scab, bright spot, scall, quick raw flesh, etc. It is an interesting philological reflection that the ancient root associated with the idea of scaliness in "lepra" and similar words, resembles the root of the words referring to reeds, the bark of trees, and similar "scaly" materials used for writing (hence, liber, library, libel, papyrus, paper, etc.).

In Leviticus 13, the word "leprosy" may be used for a localized infection of the skin (v. 3), or for an erysipeloid condition arising near a boil (v. 18), or resulting from a burn (v. 24); it may include a ringworm or sycosis of the scalp or beard area (v. 29), a pustular dermatitis (v. 38), a ringworm or favus, or desert sore affecting hairless skin (v. 40), as well as a mildew of garments or leather (v. 47), and a fungus growing on walls (14:34).

While these conditions may have been important in respect of their infectivity in a community living in a hot arid climate or in settled camps (cf. walls of *houses*), the ceremonial significance is deeper—"leprosy" implies religious uncleanness and is associated with ceremonial exclusion from the community.

Descriptive details in these passages, which at first sight appear to give definition and precision to "leprosy," actually produce a composite picture that is quite unlike the disease known as leprosy today. Thus, the depression of the centre of the lesion, the whiteness of skin and hair, the scaliness, the affection of the hairy scalp—these features are not characteristic of true leprosy. Leprosy is a disease confined to human beings; it does not occur on clothing or on walls.

Only rarely is leprosy characterized by "scaliness" of the lesions; desquamation is a feature rather of ringworm (fungus infections of the skin). Insufficient details are given for incontrovertible diagnoses, and the possibility of rapid spontaneous cure is entertained, which again rules out true leprosy. Since there is no mention of anaesthesia of the affected skin or of the extremities with consequent ulceration—a hallmark of leprosy—it is most unlikely that the regulations are specifically directed towards the disease we know as leprosy. The priest was the medicine-man (as in many primitive communities), and while capable of recognizing some signs of infectious disease he could not be expected to differentiate leprosy from the diseases that simulate it.

Other early Old Testament references to "leprosy" are equally vague and indefinite.

In Exodus 4:6, when the hand of Moses was withdrawn from his bosom, it was "leprous [white] as snow," and in Numbers 2:10 "Miriam became leprous [white] as snow"; and was brought back cured to the camp after seven days. Leprosy is never "[white] as snow"; the lesions show various degrees of hypopigmentation, but are never completely achromic.

The references in Numbers 12:12 to a victim of leprosy as "one dead," whose "flesh is half consumed," seem to nullify the suggestion that leprosy might be a form of vitiligo, the "white leprosy" of mediaeval days and of modern India, which is symptomless, harmless, noninfectious, and has no sequelae; or the leucoderma that may follow nonvenereal syphilis.

In Numbers 5:2 the instruction "to put out of the camp every leper," and in Deuteronomy 24:8 to "observe diligently, and do according to all that the priests the Levites shall teach you," seem to have reference mainly to the *tsara'ath* that might be contagious.

In II Samuel 3:29, one "that is a leper" is a person suffering from *tsara'ath,* a scaly skin condition.

Insufficient clinical details are given concerning Naaman (II Kings 5:1-14). He may have been suffering from scabies, for which the sulfur-containing springs of the Jordan have been a reputed cure down to modern times; but the similar condition that affilicted Gehazi (v. 27), making the latter's skin "[white] as snow," suggests a leucoderma of acute onset which would be transmissible to his descendants. Altogether, a most confusing clinical picture, with tantalizing incomplete details.

The "four leprous men" of II Kings 7:3 had certainly been living outside the city, but no hint is given of the kind of *tsara'ath* they were suffering from; they apparently had no anaesthesia or ulceration of the extremities that prevented walking.

Uzziah (II Chronicles 26:19, and II Kings 15:5) may possibly have

had a true leprosy lesion in the forehead, especially since he was "a leper unto the day of his death"; but a non-leprous condition like severe seborrhoea could be referred to with equal cogency. Many conditions of the skin might become prominent and noticeable by reason of the suffusion of blood occurring during anger.

Ancient non-Scriptural references to leprosy in the near East are indefinite and uncertain. No mummies or drawings have been discovered with indubitable leprosy lesions, and the suggestion that Egyptian records, dating from 1550 B.C. (the Ebers papyrus), and 1350 B.C., refer to leprosy is probably without foundation. The earliest undoubted descriptions of the disease are found in ancient Indian literature (c. 600 B.C.), where Nubian slaves may have brought the disease from the Sudan and further south. Authentic references to true leprosy appear in Aristotle (345 B.C.), though not in Hippocrates (c. 400 B.C.), whose "lepra" may refer to an irritating blotchy summer prurigo. It was not till later that Alexandria became famous for its studies of true leprosy, including descriptions of the thick corrugated skin, the facies, and the nerve involvement. This disease, which we know today as leprosy, they called elephantiasis; Galen (A.D. 133-201) designated it elephantiasis Graecorum. (Both diseases, of course, are quite different from the conditions included under the term "elephantiasis" today.)

The New Testament references to "leprosy" reflect the prevailing meaning given to the term; they may have included true leprosy, for Pompey's returning troops (62 B.C.) had brought more leprosy from Egypt to the Mediterranean world and hence probably to Palestine.

Early in our Lord's ministry (Mark 1:40) we read that "there came a leper to him," defying the social ban that kept him in places away from the towns. Luke's references to "a man full of leprosy" (5:12), and to the "ten lepers" (17:11-19), may possibly indicate true leprosy. The fact that a Samaritan was found in company with nine Jews is noteworthy, in passing; a condition that separated them from their fellows united them in the border country between Samaria and Judea. This Samaritan provides the only New Testament example of a sufferer from leprosy being "healed"; the others were "cleansed." Luke's mention of the "many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet" (4:27) has no clinical precision, and is to be read in the light of the probable absence of true leprosy in Palestine at the time referred to.

Simon (Matthew 26:6 and Mark 14:3) was apparently allowed back in the town after clinical resolution of his disease, whatever it was.

To summarize, there are about fifty references to leprosy in the Bible: "leper" in the singular or plural occurs thirteen times in the Old Testament and nine in the New; "leprosy" occurs twenty-eight

times in the Old Testament and four in the New; and the cognate "leprous" occurs five times in the Old Testament. If, as we have seen, few of these references (if any) undoubtedly refer to the disease known today as leprosy, why the persistent loathing and widespread revulsion? The ancient Jewish attitude, based on the Mosaic code, was essentially concerned with a ceremonial uncleanness, and secondarily with a scaly skin disease, possibly infectious. The attitude in mediaeval times was reinforced by Jerome's (A.D. 383) mistranslation of Hebrew *naga* in Isaiah 53:4; the Vulgate has: *et nos putavimus eum quasi leprosum*; the version of Wyclif (d. 1384) reads: "We heelden hym has leprous."

Despite the fact that *naga* has no connexion with disease or leprosy, the association in both the Vulgate and early English translations was mainly responsible for a widespread belief that our Lord was afflicted with leprosy. It was held that "lepers are Christ's Poor," and high-born ladies kissed the feet of the beggarly (but often non-leprous) inmates of the numerous hospices they endowed for sufferers from a variety of conditions embraced by the vague and comprehensive term "leprosy." Latterly, these hospices served to house the aged and the indigent. On the Continent (of Europe), a person suspected of having leprosy was reckoned as dead (in accordance with Leviticus 13:45); the burial service was actually read over him before he was banished.

Extravagant exegesis invested Job with leprosy, and also Lazarus the beggar (Luke 16:19-31), though it is not explained why, if his "sores" were due to leprosy, he was allowed to remain at the gate of the rich man. Lazarus of Bethany also, on no discoverable grounds, was pronounced a "leper" and made the patron saint of those so afflicted. (Hence "lazar-house" and "Lazarine leprosy.")

It is certain that the returning Crusaders (1095-1270), brought more true leprosy back with them to add to the number of indigenous cases in western Europe, but the incidence of leprosy in mediaeval Europe has been greatly exaggerated. The guide-book explanation that the "squint windows" in churches were so used by sufferers from leprosy is barely a hundred years old.

There has been no indigenous case of leprosy in the British Isles for at least a century and a half; all the patients at present under treatment (about two hundred and sixty) have contracted the disease abroad.

The modern definition of leprosy and its differentiation from other diseases dates only from 1874, and the attitude of many today towards the disease and its victims still reflects the essentially unchristian mediaeval uncharitableness that associated leprosy with ceremonial uncleanness. We no longer use the word "leprous" in Isaiah 53; should we continue to use its cognates elsewhere in Old and New Testa-

ment passages where there is no reference to the disease known today as leprosy?

It is hoped that the above considerations may help to elicit not only an enlightened interest, but also a prayerful and practical helpfulness for the ten million or more sufferers from this disease in the world today.