

Leprosy and the *New English Bible*

The *New English Bible*, a new translation completed after 24 years of work by a panel of British Protestant scholars, was made available on 16 March 1970. Bible scholars indicate that this is probably the most accurate translation that has appeared, in English, of the ancient writings on which the Bible is based. Its handling of the subject of leprosy is therefore well worth the attention of these columns.

The term *lepra* first appeared in the Bible with the Septuagint in about 200 B.C. This was the first translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek by the seventy-two wise scholars gathered at Alexandria. These scholars were Jews, well versed in Jewish concepts and practices. Faced with the untranslatable term *tsara'ath* these scholars did what translators in a similar quandry are wont to do; they sought

the nearest equivalent available in the language into which they were translating. They chose the word *lepra*. The Old Testament had already equated the concept of spiritual blemish and ritual defilement with physical blemish, for man generally needs a visible and tangible symbol of the intangible in order to make the latter graphic and understandable. Subtly, in this process, the symbol often comes to be the concept. Thus the 13th and 14th chapters of Leviticus lay down elaborate ritualistic and public health measures for handling the conglomerate group of diseases which had come to represent *tsara'ath* and the story of Miriam had typified the relationship between physical blemish and disobedience to God's will—the moral blemish of *tsara'ath*. Indeed the symbolism had been extended to rot or blemish appearing on leather

(Leviticus 13:47-59) and on houses (Leviticus 14:33-53) as well as on woven cloth. All these symbols and concepts the translators of the Septuagint designated as *lepra*. In essence, leprosy became *tsara'ath*. Subsequent translators into most languages and many dialects including the *Gutenberg Bible*, and the major English translations known as the Authorized Version, (1611 A.D.) the American Revised Version (1901), and the Revised Standard Version (1952) followed the lead of the Septuagint translators and sought out their needed equivalent of the word *lepra*. Thus the disease leprosy became embedded in the Bible. So it stayed virtually without question till after World War II. The advent of specific therapy, with dramatic change in concept and handling of the disease following therefrom, triggered protests against the injustice of the ages old opprobrium associated with leprosy and a growing demand that patients with leprosy be treated and respected in the same manner as persons with any other disease. In other words, after more than two thousand years it was finally recognized that leprosy is not *tsara'ath*. Critical and emotional consideration was given to the question of whether or not leprosy was actually part of the physical entities included in *tsara'ath*, and so translated, as in Leviticus 13 and 14. Many concluded that since the skin signs and symptoms there given do not in many respects correspond to those presently required for a diagnosis of leprosy, leprosy was not present; or that there is no evidence that it was present. Much has thus been made of the fact that these Old Testament descriptions do not mention the anesthesia and neural manifestations which are so prominent in leprosy. Skinsnes and Elvove, in this issue of THE JOURNAL, (pp. 294-307), present a review of the use of leprosy in Occidental literature. All the fear, horror and opprobrium implied or expressed in the Old Testament are repeated and magnified in this literature. Much of it was written while leprosy was prevalent in the countries where the writings originated. Yet, interestingly, here too recognition of anesthesia and nerve involvement is not mentioned. Nevertheless there is no question but that leprosy was

present, recognized and meant. Some also concluded that, in view of the medically deficient Biblical descriptions, there is no evidence that leprosy even existed as a disease in Biblical society. However, it has recently been noted^{1, 2, 3} that there is considerable social indication that leprosy probably was included in the moiety included in *tsara'ath* and translated in the Septuagint as leprosy. Nevertheless, though leprosy probably did have the opprobrium that led to its choice in translation, it was not, and is not, *tsara'ath*.

This conceptual turnabout presented a translation problem for the translators of the *New English Bible*. The New Testament portion has been available since 1961 but now the full Bible, including the Apocrypha is available in a new scholarly translation employing present day English language usage and incorporating the full range of modern Bible scholarship and recent discoveries.

The New Testament portion, from a strictly translation point of view, is correct in translating the Greek *lepra* as leprosy. Medically, this translation may also have been correct for by New Testament times the disease was reasonably defined, as for example by the Roman physician Celsus in about 30 A.D. and Aretaeus in the second century A.D. Additionally there is no evidence that leprosy did not exist in the Palestine area during those times, but much suggestive evidence that it did.^{2,3} In the 1970 edition, however, the following footnote was inserted to Matthew 8:2, "The words *leper*, *leprosy*, as used in this translation, refer to some disfiguring skin disease which entailed ceremonial defilement." Thus far, correct. The note adds, however, the sentence, "It is different from what is now called 'leprosy'." Historically, and probably medically, this last sentence would seem incorrect. The Hebrews, now using the Greek, had accepted *lepra* as the equivalent of *tsara'ath*, which we now real-

¹ Skinsnes, O. K. Leprosy in society. I. "Leprosy has appeared on the face." *Leprosy Rev.* **35** (1964) 21-35.

² Skinsnes, O. K. Leprosy in society. II. The pattern of concept and reaction to leprosy in Oriental antiquity. *Leprosy Rev.* **35** (1964) 106-122.

³ Skinsnes, O. K. Leprosy in society. III. The relationship of the social to the medical pathology of leprosy. *Leprosy Rev.* **35** (1964) 175-181.

ize it is not, and thereby wrongly imputed all the moral opprobrium of *tsara'ath* to leprosy. At the same time, be it noted, all prior illnesses so included were progressively and unspectacularly released from the opprobrium as clinical acumen differentiated them from leprosy. One knows not what multitudes may thus have, almost inadvertently, been increasingly relieved of leprosy's stigma by the slow progress of improving medical understanding and diagnostic acumen.

The problem of *tsara'ath*, however, still remains though some modifications in the range of its translation have been made in the Old Testament now available. Thus the translators have substituted the word "mold" for the *tsara'ath* of garments and leather and "fungus infection" for the former "leprosy" of houses. This alteration will please those whose main concern is the elimination of the opprobrium attached to "leprosy," and this is, of course, commendable. Though these are not illogical choices, it must be noted that there is no more real proof the "mold" and "fungus" were originally meant than there is for "leprosy." Certainly, however, "mold" and "fungus" are a mistranslation in that neither is or was *tsara'ath*.

When the translators now approach translation as related to humans they are inconsistent. The word "leper" is retained in 2 Kings 15:5 and 2 Chronicles 26:20. In a 26:21 and 23, and the word "leprosy" in 2 Kings 5:5 and 2 Chronicles 26:20. In a number of instances (Exodus 4:6, Numbers 12:10, 2 Kings 5:2-7) nonspecific references to skin disease are used. In a number of instances in Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 in Deuteronomy 24:8 the term "malignant

skin disease" is employed. In the old sense of "malignant" as meaning "severe" the term might be passable. Medically, however, the term presently carries the concept of cancer (e.g., epidermoid carcinoma, basal cell carcinoma, etc.) and thus unjustifiably throws the associated opprobrium on also this group of diseases. There is no evidence in the original texts that malignancies were actually included in the original proscriptions. Their use will now give cause for protest to those combating modern fears of cancer. These diseases, also are not *tsara'ath*.

One must conclude that despite the general excellence of this new translation of the Bible, the problem of leprosy and *tsara'ath* has not been essentially improved and that obfuscation has been increased.

A seemingly simple solution commends itself, to wit, when faced with an untranslatable term, adopt that term. Languages are replete with examples of such cross-fertilization and enrichment. Thus, the Old Testament translation could retain the term *tsara'ath* and a very brief footnote, replacing the present insecure note, could indicate its connotation. The New Testament translation could retain "leprosy" as a historically correct translation of a disease and of social conditions then existent. Again, a brief footnote could indicate that by this time Hebrew society was in large measure employing leprosy as the major physical expression of *tsara'ath* and that this imputation grew out of the level of medical and social understanding then prevalent. It would appear that the Bible reader's understanding could thus be enriched and confusion dispelled.—O. K. SKINSNES.