

# Lupus and Lepros

TO THE EDITOR:

For many centuries skin tuberculosis has been termed lupus vulgaris. The great German pathologist Rudolf Virchow<sup>(6)</sup> was intrigued by this name and established that it had appeared in the writings of the masters of the Salerno school of medicine, founded in the 10th century, and particularly in those of Roger of Salerno (ca. 1180). Nevertheless the origin of the term remained obscure.

It is generally assumed that the word *lupus* (Latin: a wolf) alludes to the tissue destruction characteristic of tuberculosis. In 1736, for example, Turner remarked that “. . . it is termed lupus, for that is, say some, of a ravenous nature, and like that fierce creature, not satisfy'd but with flesh”<sup>(5)</sup>. Paradoxically, though, lupus vulgaris is an extremely chronic affliction: the very slow progression of the destructive process is in strong contrast to the feeding habits of even the most indolent of wolves.

Could lupus, therefore, be a corruption of some other word used to describe a chronic and disfiguring skin disease? An intriguing possibility is that it originated from the same Greek word, *lepros*, from which leprosy was derived. This word originally denominated various skin diseases characterized by peeling and was used to translate the Hebrew word *Tsara'ath*. (Leprosy, as we now define it, was known by the Greeks as *Elephantiasis Graecorum*.) This, in turn, raises the possibility that the lesions termed *Tsara'ath* in the old Testament and Gospels included skin tuberculosis. At a time when tuberculosis was prevalent in cattle in Great Britain, many cases of lupus vulgaris were seen and over half were due to bovine tubercle bacilli<sup>(4)</sup>. There is ample evidence that cat-

tle farming was well established in ancient Israel, and it has been suggested that the “wen” of cattle (Leviticus 22:22) referred to tuberculosis<sup>(3)</sup>. (Pulmonary tuberculosis also afflicted the Israelites and was termed *Shachepheth*.) Thus, there is a strong likelihood that lupus vulgaris occurred in Israel before and during the time of Christ and that it was included in the conditions termed *Tsara'ath* and, subsequently, *lepros*. Hence the names for skin lesions due to *Mycobacterium leprae* and to *M. tuberculosis* could have a common etymological origin.

As *Tsara'ath* was amenable to healing by the laying on of hands (Luke 5:12–15), it has been suggested that the disease had a psychogenic rather than an organic cause<sup>(2)</sup>. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that scrofula, lupus vulgaris, and other nonpulmonary manifestations of tuberculosis were, for many centuries, considered curable by the touch of a reigning monarch, hence the collective epithet “King's Evil”<sup>(1, 7)</sup>. The belief that this gift was bestowed by Divine Grace, and Christ's particular directions to His followers that they should heal the victims of *Tsara'ath* (Matthew 10:8), established a further speculative link between Biblical “leprosy” and tuberculosis.

—John M. Grange, M.Sc., M.D.

*Cardiothoracic Institute  
Fulham Road  
London SW3 6HP, U.K.*

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