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Leprosy in the Bible ☆

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Abstract

For many years, the biblical term *tzaraat* has referred to leprosy. In fact, the disease or diseases described under this name have no relationship to leprosy, as it was known in the Middle Ages or today; moreover, the term referred not only to skin disease, but also to the state of the ritual impurity and punishment for the sins.

Although the real nature of *tzaraat* remains unknown, the differential diagnosis might include the following: Psoriasis, seborrheic dermatitis, favus, dermatophyte infections, nummular dermatitis, atopic dermatitis, pityriasis rosea, crusted scabies, syphilis, impetigo, sycosis barbae, alopecia areata, furuncles, scabies, neurodermatitis, scarlet fever, lupus erythematosus, lichen sclerosus et atrophicus, folliculitis decalvans, morphea, sarcoidosis, and lichen planopilaris.

Leprosy became interchangeable with the biblical leprosy due to two inaccurate translations: The Hebrew *tzaraat* was first translated into Greek as leprosy in the sixth century, and later, the word leprosy was translated into Arabic as *lepra* in the ninth century.

Introduction

Chapters 13-14 of the Book of Leviticus, the third book of the Bible (the third of five books of the Torah or Pentateuch), that is in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, is the source of biblical leprosy.[1], [2], [3], [4] The book contains material that it dates back to the time of Moses, was created by anonymous scholars, and in present form was finished only in the Persian period, 538–332 BCE. Leviticus was the divine code of proceeding rules for Levites (in historical Judaism, they were the priestly classes with exclusive rights to learn and teach Torah to others, served particular religious duties for the Israelites, and had political responsibilities as well) and instructs collection for the lay people, regulating and controlling all aspects of life. Chapters 13-14 relate to impurity and ritual purity, which is essential for an Israelite to be able to approach God and remain part of the community.⁵

The Hebrew term *tzaraat*, originally used in chapter 13 of Leviticus, is the root word and refers to collective skin diseases, among them also to biblical leprosy, which, according to the Old Testament, rendered one ritually unclean. An unclean person was physically separated from other members of the community to prevent moral contamination rather than for medical concerns of physical contaminations.[1], [3] The words *tzaraat* in the Old Testament and *lepra* in the New Testament appear at least 68 times.[6], [7]*

In the Hebrew of the period, *tzaraat* had a broad meaning and was related to almost all types of skin diseases and concerned four forms:

- lesions on previously normal glabrous skin
- lesions on previously abnormal skin
- lesions in areas of diffuse alopecia
- localized alopecia.

To make matter more complex, each form had its own primary and secondary characteristics.³

Chapter 13 of Leviticus describes seven conditions which could make a person unclean:

- bright spot—*baheret*

- swelling—*se'et*
- white inflammation—*shechin*
- erythema that turns white or red-white—*baheret*
- hair shaft breakage, yellow, and thin hair—*netek*
- anterior scalp hair loss—*gibachat*
- posterior scalp hair loss—*karachat*.¹

Tumefaction, eruption, or spot (Lv. 13:1-8), suspicion of ulcers (Lv. 13:18-23), leprosy on burn (Lv. 13:24-28), leprosy on head or chin (Lv. 13:29-37), urticaria (Lv. 13:38-39), or leprosy in the bold (Lv. 13:18-23), when confirmed by a priest, justified the diagnosis of *tzaraat*.

Medical knowledge in that era, needless to say, was limited. The term leprosy was also used in the reference to the relatively less harmful diseases, such as psoriasis and fungal infections. The term leprosy was also applied in reference to the raiment (Lv. 13:47), which meant the fabrics being affected with some sort of mold and also to buildings (Lv. 14:33), which might be moldy.⁴ In the Biblical sense, leprosy was described as a swelling of the skin, with crust and whitish patch, which severity might have been evaluated by the depth of the affected skin.⁸

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Section snippets

Leprosy in the Biblical aspect

The early Israelites believed that illness was the punishment for sin and the particular heinous set of syndromes referred to *tzaraat*.² Leprosy, then, was both a punishment for a sin (Lb. 12,10; 2 Krn. 26,19-21) and divine curse because it was a chronic and incurable

disease until our times.[4], [8] In the Bible one can find numerous examples of the punishments for sins.

Miriam was made leprous “as white as snow” (Nb. 12:9-10) by order of the Lord, because she criticized Moses, her father.² King ...

Modern interpretation of leprosy in the Bible

It is generally assumed that the diseases which existed in the biblical times are similar to the diseases known today¹; however, the difficulties connected with using the contemporary countertype of biblical leprosy ignore the fact that none of the contemporary disease or diseases meet the criteria for the diagnosis of biblical *tzaraat*.¹ In addition, the term *tzaraat* referred to a group of skin diseases and not to one particular disease.[1], [8]

Modern leprosy (ie, Mycobacterial leprosy or...

Conclusions

Leprosy has long been thought to be the disease referred in the Bible to *tzaraat*, which referred to a variety of inflammatory granulomas with pigmentary disturbances or only to a spiritual concept of moral and ritual cleanliness. *Tzaraat* (the disease or diseases) have no relationship to leprosy as it was known in the Middle Ages or today (ie, to Mycobacterial leprosy or Hansen’s disease); however, a few may have been originally leprosy.

Mistranslation of the biblical term *tzaraat* as “leprosy,”...

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☆ All biblical references are to the English text according to *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Garden City, New York, 1985.

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