'Leprosy' and the Bible

K. P. C. A. Gramberg

(For several years the rendering of the Hebrew tsara'ath [1] *and the Greek* lepra *by 'leprosy' or its equivalents in other languages, has been questioned by many medical experts. They have pointed out that the symptoms described in Leviticus 13 and 14 do not agree with those known now as typical of leprosy, or 'Hansen's Disease' as it is sometimes called.* [2] *They accordingly hold the opinion that the word 'leprosy' should not be used in the Bible. This, for most of them, is no academic question, but one pathetically important for leprotics, whose fate, they maintain, has been made worse by the influence of the biblical ideas about leprosy and the prohibitions attached to it. Up to now their views do not seem to have been widely discussed among Bible translators.*

However, this problem is certainly important for every one engaged in translating the Bible. Therefore the Editorial Board of The Bible Translator *has decided to give it due attention in the coming issues. We start by giving here a paper by Dr. K. P. C. A. Gramberg, which we are able to publish by kind permission of the Editor and Publishers of* Tropical and Geographical Medicine, *with emendations approved by the author.*

Dr. Gramberg, a retired Dutch medical missionary, has given over twenty years of his life to the care and cure of leprosy patients. Even before the last war he approached the committee responsible for the New Dutch Version about their rendering of the term in question. Since then he has written several papers on the problem, trying to influence public opinion in general and Bible translators in particular.

While this article is chiefly concerned with the medical aspects of the problem, we hope to publish some remarks on the problem by a Bible translator in the next issue. It is hoped that readers and their medical colleagues will give their close attention to this and the following articles, and then send their considered opinions to the editor. In this way we may be able to publish a closing article which gives a general picture of opinion on this topic. Ed.)

For more than twenty years I have been possessed by the thought that the Bible is largely responsible in many parts of the world for the stigma attached to leprotics, and for their sad expulsion from society. In Java I found that the Mohammedan had no horror of the leprotic, but that where Christian influence came that horror spread, and biblical passages such as Leviticus 13 : 45, 46 seem to give reason for such an attitude. Yet I believe this is due to a tragic error, in that the Bible

[1] This Hebrew word is for the sake of uniformity always transliterated thus in this article, even though it is written differently, e.g. *zaraath,* in the original text of some of the works cited.

[2] There are those who strongly object to the use of the name 'leprosy' because of the bad connotation especially of its cognates 'leper' and 'leprous', and they prefer the term 'Hansen's Disease'. However, because the latter name may be new to many readers the two terms are here used interchangeably.

does not mention the disease commonly known today as leprosy. To determine whether this is so, we must examine the meaning of the Hebrew word *tsara'ath,* and of the Greek word *lepra,* by which it was rendered in the Septuagint and which occurs in the New Testament.

The description of tsara'ath in Leviticus.

A key passage for the study of the meaning of *tsara'ath* occurs in Leviticus chapters 13 and 14. Let us examine this in the light of medical knowledge. Quotations will be made from the R.S.V. text, but it should be noted that there are considerable divergences in the translation of certain important words. This will be discussed later. In verses 1—8 we read of a "swelling or an eruption or a spot" (E.R.V. "bright spot") where "the hair in the diseased spot has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of the body". Now in leprosy, depigmentation of certain spots unquestionably occurs sometimes, but by no means always, and the hairs at these sites do not turn white. Nor does the condition that the centre of the spot lies deeper than the surrounding skin hold good in Hansen's disease. Many of the spots are thickened and if the centre lies slightly deeper this is only seemingly so, because in the tuberculoid type the edges are often thickened. The condition (verses 5 to 7) that these spots must either have spread or must have disappeared by the end of two weeks, practically disposes of the resemblance with Hansen's disease.

Verses 9 to 17 describe so-called "chronic leprosy" (E.R.V. "old leprosy"): "there is a white swelling in the skin, which has turned the hair white, and there is quick raw flesh in the swelling." As soon as the raw flesh is healed and "is changed to white", and "the leprosy covers all his body, ..., it has all turned white, and he is clean." There is nothing in this description to remind us of present-day leprosy. In the first place there is no form of leprosy in which white patches cover the *whole* body, not to mention having white hairs also. Moreover, "raw flesh in the swelling" (which is not uncommon in other types of leprosy), is most uncommon in those white patches.

Verses 18 to 23 speak of the development of "leprosy" in the scar of a boil. There is nothing unusual in a scar being "a white swelling or a reddish white spot". However, it is not at all clear that this would be leprosy, the more so as the spot must be "deeper than the skin" and the hair have turned white. And what must we make of the skin becoming "dim"?

Verses 24 to 28 speak of the development of a "reddish-white or white" spot in a burn or in the scar of a burn. Here again there are three characteristics which speak against identity with Hansen's disease: the white hairs, the lower-lying spot, and change or healing within an observation period of seven days. On the other hand, it is of course quite usual for burns to occur in leprosy spots, but this is never attended by white skin, white hairs or a lower level of the skin.

The verses up to 37 describe "an itch, a leprosy of the head or the beard", and they mention the same criteria. However, the appearance of "black hair", at the site of the spot is a sign that there is no "leprosy".

The descriptions point clearly to something like *favus* or *tinea capitis* (kinds of skin-mould). Finally, verses 40 to 44 describe "leprosy" of the bald head; this offers us no clearer description of the disease. I would only point out that leprotic changes of the scalp are most uncommon; the colour of these lepromas on the head is red to brown and the hair may fall out, but it never turns white. True baldness is never attended with visible changes of the skin. Thus, there is not the slightest resemblance to leprosy.

The rest of the chapter describes "leprosy" of clothes and the second half of chapter 14 that of houses. It is remarkable that the same terminology is used as in human *tsara'ath;* again the lower level of the spot and the observation period of seven days to see whether the plague spreads. Obviously *tsara'ath* of man and of houses or clothes was one and the same thing to those who described the rites in Leviticus. This should give us food for thought. Of course, we may say that in antiquity the observation and classification of diseases were less perfect than in our day, but it would be wrong to consider that the Jewish law-makers could assume that a disease could pass from man to dead matter, and vice versa. In my opinion it is precisely this addition which points the direction in which we must look for the significance of *tsara'ath* in the Bible.

To summarize once more: the *tsara'ath* of the Bible is a *skin affection,* manifesting itself by white, sometimes also reddish-white (when developing in a scar or on the bald head) swellings or spots on the skin, the essential of which is that they lie lower than the surrounding skin and that the hairs at that site turn white. The spots have a tendency to spread or to regress. In chronic cases something develops in the skin which is translated as "quick raw flesh" (Hebrew: *mihyath basar hay*); these ulcerations can also heal, after which the white colour may spread over the whole body, so that the priest finds that *tsara'ath* covers the entire flesh; however, at this stage the patient affected with *tsara'ath* is pronounced clean.

When first reading a paper on this subject in 1937 (Gramberg, 1937) [3], I quoted Luther's translation of the Bible; the three most important words in the description of leprosy: *se'eth, sappahath* and *bahereth* he translated 'tumor, ulcer and blister', not as 'swelling, eruption and spot'.

As regards the translation of these three words in various languages, I found that there is no consensus of opinion on their meaning; not only do German, English and French differ quite distinctly, but old Chaldean and Syrian translations used markedly differing wordings; even the difference between the Dutch Lutheran and Dutch Reformed translations is striking.

Nor does the Mishna, the collection of Jewish laws written after the Dispersion, and collected by Rabbi Jehuda at the end of the first century A.D., help us. The word *tsara'ath* is no longer used in the so-called *Tractate nega'im* and the word *sappahath* is omitted from the description. *Se'eth* and *bahereth* remain sometimes interpreted as 'swelling' and 'spot', sometimes as 'scar' and 'blister', with other variations. The two words

[3] Details of this and other publications cited will be found at the end of the article.

are freely interchanged with only a difference in degree, and both seem to signify a discoloration of the skin; *bahereth* would represent the real white *spot,* not a blister.

The fact that the Mishna and Talmud speak exhaustively of the angle and strength of the light under which the priest must judge the whiteness of the spot, and that the number of hairs that should be white is discussed, indicates that to the Jews these two symptoms were the essentials. This weighs against the suggestion of some commentators that all kinds of symptoms belonging to the clinical picture of *tsara'ath* and not mentioned in Leviticus were so generally known that they needed no mention.

Finally, we should consider the meaning of the Hebrew words in verse 10 *mihyath basar hay,* according to the present text "quick raw flesh"! The Vulgate translates the phrase as *caro viva,* i.e. "living flesh". Münch (1893), however, was of the opinion—on the strength of several considerations, chiefly philological—that it might be translated as 'living skin', i.e. 'healthy skin'. The phrase "deeper than the skin" (verse 3 etc.)—whatever that might be—is also a translation that is by no means definitely established. The Mishna is silent on this characteristic. Some authors translate: "that the aspect of the skin appears to be deeper." Others think it means that the plague of *tsara'ath* has penetrated to deeper layers.

Thus this description is very puzzling to medical science. Although it appears to be very exact, it is medically inadequate, not least because the real meaning of several of the essential words in the Hebrew text is uncertain. On the one hand, the description of the disease of *tsara'ath* offers no direct point of contact with leprosy as we know it, and on the other we would ask ourselves—as did Jeanselme (1934)—why the law-maker failed to mention the anaesthesia of the spots and of the extremities, one of the principal characteristics, known in all countries where leprosy is endemic. Why did he cite symptoms which are little in evidence and are difficult to recognize, while forgetting or overlooking the marked swellings in the face, the hoarse voice, the mutilations and the pareses, all symptoms which immediately strike even the less expert eye. The omission of these characteristics is a new proof in favour of my opinion that the "leprosy" of the Bible is not Hansen's disease.

A short summary of medical opinion

However, there have been and still are physicians (Sitanala, 1937, and Ketting, 1922) who in spite of these objections hold that the Bible really means present-day leprosy. They virtually start with the premise that *tsara'ath* in the Bible is present-day leprosy, and then they set out to try to prove this in retrospect. Some of them assert that Moses and the rabbis who wrote the Leviticus laws only described the *initial* symptoms because it was necessary to recognize the patients as early as possible in order to expel them from the camp. It is evident that this explanation is wrong, because verses 9 to 17 speak of *chronic tsara'ath,* after the preceding verses have described the onset and the spread of the symptoms. At the end they unmistakably give the picture of an affection which has spread over the whole body.

Some authors emphasize that Moses cannot have been expected to give a complete medical description of the disease; the main point to him was a sharp definition of the legal side of the matter. We can agree with this, but the question remains why Moses made no mention of several principal symptoms of initial leprosy, and why he emphasized as characteristic of *tsara'ath* some secondary symptoms which are also present in other cutaneous diseases. Some authors argue that of course Moses knew these symptoms, especially anaesthesia, but that he deliberately made no mention of them in the general laws, keeping his information for secret instructions known only to the Levites; the sick would otherwise come to know of it and would use their knowledge to outwit the priest. I agree with Münch that this explanation is far-fetched; in the first place nothing is known of secret instructions given only to the Levites, and the Mishna does not mention analgesia, although its compilers have tried to add many details to the Leviticus laws, in order to complete and to explain them. If *tsara'ath* were really present-day leprosy, there would be little sense in suppressing such a striking sign as anaesthesia, whereas they discourse in detail on the hairs that turn white, a symptom which it would be easy to hide by plucking out the hairs.

Danielsen & Boeck (1847) were also of the opinion that the "leprosy" of the Bible was identical with present-day leprosy; they pointed out that Moses' description could not be accurate as he was not a doctor—a very poor argument, because in antiquity the priests were the healers and they were entrusted with the examination of sufferers from *tsara'ath* —and that the laws were kept vague because Moses preferred to expel a few harmless patients rather then keep a single *tsara'ath* patient in his camp.

Hebra (cited by Münch, 1893) is among those who do not assume that *tsara'ath* and present-day leprosy are identical. He took the line that leprosy is a hereditary disease; if *tsara'ath* were leprosy, then all present-day Jews—who have always intermarried—would be suffering from leprosy. According to Hebra, *tsara'ath* was a mixture of scabies and syphilitic and other ulcers.

Unna (cited by Jeanselme, 1934) was of the opinion that the *tsara'ath* of the Israelites runs parallel with the taboo-idea of primitive peoples. As such peoples believe that man should shun certain places and things in order to prevent sickness, so those suffering from *tsara'ath* should be shunned by the others. I agree with Jeanselme, that Unna has confused cause and effect; those who have *tsara'ath* were taboo, but not inversely, i.e., that every person or object that is taboo suffers from *tsara'ath*.

Simons (1950) remarks that Old Testament *tsara'ath* was not present-day leprosy; the leprosy of antiquity was a collective noun for numerous skin diseases.

Muir & Rogers (1925) did not go into the question; they mention only that the meaning of *tsara'ath* is uncertain and they state briefly how it was possible that the word was translated as *lepra* in an era when it by no means meant Hansen's disease. In a later publication (1948) Muir wrote:

> "The highly contagious condition described in the Jewish Law has obviously nothing to do with leprosy; and the disease of Naaman

the Leper is more likely to have been scabies, which is still cured by bathing in the sulphurous springs in the Jordan Valley."

Klingmüller (1930) records the three groups of opinions on this subject, viz. (1) those who consider that *tsara'ath* and present-day leprosy are identical (2) those who think that *tsara'ath* comprises all kinds of skin diseases, including Hansen's disease, and (3) those who hold that *tsara'ath* and leprosy are totally different. He points out the peculiarity that the Bible does not mention anaesthesia as an important symptom, and he concludes:

"The biblical representations of leprosy and lepers, and especially the uncompromising harshness of their expulsion from the community, have remained in man's mind even today. This explains the often ridiculous abhorrence and childish fear of even the most harmless skin diseases."

Sticker began the chapter on the history of leprosy as follows:

"If the history of a disease were to begin with its first accurate description and name-giving, that of syphilis would hardly go back beyond the middle of the 15th century and that of leprosy no further than the year 200 A.D. when Aretaeus of Cappadocia gave the first unmistakable description of the disease under the name of *elephantiasis.*"

And he continues:

".....and as regards the description of leprosy—which the Hebrew text calls *tsara'ath,* and the Greek translation of the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate call *lepra*—this disease has nothing to do with present-day leprosy."

He also emphasizes that the New Testament never speaks of the *healing* of lepers but, except in one case, of *cleansing.* I will refer to this point later on. He stresses that no *sure* signs of leprosy have ever been found either in drawings on papyri or in mummies, whereas all kinds of ulcers, eruptions and deformations have been clearly depicted.

Jeanselme (1934) argued that the most salient characteristics of leprosy, known in all countries with endemic leprosy, anaesthesia and deformation, are not mentioned in Leviticus, and that the rapid growth which made it possible to determine the true nature of the disease within three weeks, is quite unknown in present-day leprosy. Although the expulsion of those with *tsara'ath* closely resembles the expulsion of lepers in the Middle Ages (and still to-day in primitive communities), it cannot be overlooked that the reasons for expulsion were fundamentally different. Among the Jews it was a punishment of those who had violated the commands of the Levites; the perpetrators were not allowed to stay amongst those who adhered to the Law; in other peoples the reason was fear of contagion! Sufferers from *tsara'ath* had to cry: "*tomeh, tomeh*", which should be translated as "unclean", not as "contagious".

Jeanselme's conclusion was:

"On peut donc écarter sans réserve l'assimilation de la *tsara'ath* et de la lèpre."

The American textbook on dermatology (Becker & Overmayer, 1947) states simply:

"*Lepra* is as old as the records of history. It is the disease of Lazarus in the Bible."

This is absolutely wrong, but it is characteristic of the dicta on leprosy found in many other textbooks.

Herman & ten Broekert, in the Dutch textbook on tropical medicine (Kouwenaar and others, 1951), wrote as follows:

"Already in the Old Testament a revolting disease is presented under the name leprosy. Although it may be seriously questioned whether it was identical with present-day leprosy, the description has certainly created the deepest impression. .....There is no doubt that among the cases diagnosed as leprosy at that time, many concerned other affections....."

Cochrane (1947), at present one of the leading figures in the field of leprosy control, wrote as follows:

"What is the explanation of the wide-spread dread of this disease? In European countries this dread can be traced to the attitude adopted as the result of measures taken against leprosy in biblical times. It should here be explained that what is described as leprosy in the Bible, is, I believe, a generic name for a group of diseases. When the word *tsara'ath,* which probably covered a large number of diseases, was translated, it was referred to as leprosy. Hence a sense of horror was attached to the name; and the disease which does not deserve the opprobrium showered upon it, became synonymous with something which conveyed a sense of fear, dread and horror."

Chaussinand (1950) did not appear to be quite happy about the sweeping statement of his famous predecessor Jeanselme; he writes:

"Ces conclusions sont peut-être trop absolues. Le terme *tsara'ath* était vraisemblablement employé pour désigner différentes affections de la peau et non uniquement la lèpre."

The three last-named authors may be classed among the group of experts who consider that the "leprosy" of the Bible may mean different skin diseases, including leprosy.

Finally we come to two still more recent statements.

The American expert Lendrum (1952) published a paper on *The Name "Leprosy"*. His reason for writing it was that at a certain university a lady had been treated for leprosy for a long time because she had nodes in the skin. One day she was told that she was not suffering from leprosy but from cancer with metastases in the skin. On hearing this, the patient exclaimed: "Thank God, it is only cancer!"

The main object of his paper was:

"to examine the evidence whether the biblical name (of leprosy) is accurate regardless of its disastrous emotional associations."

He then discusses the probable meaning of the biblical words (or rather concepts) "unclean", "spot" and *tsara'ath*. He points out that the idea of 'unclean' persons existed among all peoples of antiquity,

but that it had nothing to do with our idea of hygiene or "soap and water". He recalls the millions of untouchables and pariahs in India, but in this case there is no association with contagion or bodily or mental uncleanliness.

As regards *tsara'ath* he is of the opinion—on the authority of several Jewish and Roman Catholic philologists—that the orthography of the word is uncertain. He is convinced that those who were smitten with *tsara'ath* were punished for disobedience to God, and that the description of the plague in Leviticus 13 and 14 bears not the slightest resemblance to Hansen's disease.

As for the word and concept of *lepra* in the days of the Septuagint and in the Vulgate, Lendrum remarks that the translators were confronted with the difficulty of translating a typically Hebrew word and idea into Greek where it did not exist. They therefore chose a neutral word which could mean anything, but decidedly not a recognizable entity. *Lepra* was a word only to be found in the books attributed to Hippocrates and it might be something like a scaly rash. In the description of Leviticus, this would fit only the *tsara'ath* of the scalp and beard (which resembles ringworm, *tinea capitis* or *favus)*.

Lendrum also expatiates on the fact that the New Testament always speaks of the *cleansing* of lepers, and only once (Luke 17 : 15) of *healing;* however, as he points out, this happened to a Samaritan who was not subject to the rigid Jewish law; Luke had therefore to use another word.

He ends with the words:

> "The *incorrect* use of the Biblical word 'leprosy' creates a curtain of terror. Such is the tragedy of the disease that now bears its name. The original texts leave no reasonable doubt that the Hebrew *tsara'ath,* the Greek *lepra* and the modern 'leprosy' have three entirely unrelated meanings. The problem of today is the removal of a barricade between patient and treatment, created by a disastrous nomenclature."

His final words contain an entire programme and an appeal:

> "For five millions of the sons of men with this aiment, however, the verse: "A good name is better than precious ointment" has immediate, terrible truth."

I would mention in this connection the interesting paper of Mac Arthur (1953) *Mediaeval leprosy in the British Isles* in which he sharply criticizes the many assertions that leprosy was very frequent in the Middle Ages; he stresses that in that era "leprosy" meant something quite different.

The second recent statement is that of an Israeli scholar. Tas (1953) first points out that the words *se'eth, bahereth* and *mihyath* have been translated in various ways. Then he discusses the symptoms which are in any case clear: the turning white of the hair, the spots lying lower than the surrounding skin, and also the symptoms of chronic leprosy with the question of the skin turning entirely white, after which the patient—*mirabile dictu*—is declared clean again. He states that:

> "although it is difficult to know what precisely is meant by these eruptions, it is clear that they are not a manifestation of Hansen's disease."

Also he adds that the most characteristic signs of present-day leprosy are not mentioned. He stresses that at the time of the Septuagint the word *lepra* meant nothing but a symptom: scaled skin. At that time Hansen's disease was known as *elephantiasis Graecorum*. He assumes that Hansen's disease was unknown in biblical times. Nor did the ancient Egyptians know true leprosy, in spite of some statements to the contrary. Critical analysis of this old allegation shows that the passage in the Ebers papyrus is not in the least characteristic of leprosy. No signs of leprosy have ever been found in mummies. The first correct descriptions of Hansen's disease date from the first centuries A.D.; they were given by Celsus and Aretaeus.

Tas is therefore of the opinion that the *lepra* of the Septuagint indicates nothing but a harmless skin disease. However, the punishment by expulsion was severe, because it meant uncleanness in a religious sense, not a contagious disease in the modern meaning; these very strict laws applied only to the Jews, not to the non-Jews. He arrives at the definite conclusion that the description of *tsara'ath* in the Bible bears not the slightest resemblance to Hansen's disease; the latter was probably unknown in biblical times.

The biblical and historical background

I would supplement my argument with two more biblical passages.

An Old Testament story in which *tsara'ath* plays an important part is that of Naaman. The text leaves us in doubt as to the nature of his skin disease; it was such that—had he been a Jew—he would have been declared unclean and driven from the camp, but this punishment did not apply to Syrians. He was healed after bathing in the Jordan. II Kings 5 : 14 states:

> "and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

These words fail to lend support to the assumption that Naaman had been suffering from leprosy. Those who have seen and treated a case of chronically infected scabies know that the unsightly patient may emerge from the last bath as one reborn. Naaman may have been suffering from scabies.

The passage II Chronicles 26 : 16 and following, is even more interesting. It is the story of King Uzziah who, in his pride, went to burn incense in the temple. When the priests withstood him, Uzziah became wroth and "the leprosy broke forth in his forehead". Now the forehead is a predilection site of spots in the tuberculoid type of leprosy; it is a fact that a scarcely visible, slightly pigmented spot, may sometimes turn vivid red with heat or excitement, thus becoming visible to the onlookers. However, there is the undeniable fact that the Old Testament always speaks of leprosy as being (as white) "as snow", and this must have been the case with King Uzziah; thus the picture does not agree with Hansen's disease.

The nature of the skin disease described in Leviticus and in other books of the Old Testament still remains to be settled. As I have already

stated there is no consensus of opinion as to the meaning of *tsara'ath*. The Hebraist, Gispen (1945), is of the opinion that it originally meant 'being struck', i.e. by the deity. One could translate it by expressions such as: 'being struck', or 'being visited by a plague'.

Some physicians have tried to recognize from the description in Leviticus a specific disease like psoriasis, exfoliative dermatitis, yaws, etc., but the only author who tried along really severely critical lines to recognize in *tsara'ath* a present-day skin disease was Münch (1893), who endeavoured to prove that it is identical with vitiligo. He reached this conclusion on the strength of his experiences in Turkestan where he observed many vitiligo patients; the latter were shunned by the population as if they were real leprosy patients, with whom they were confined in leper colonies. To my mind Münch's arguments are most convincing; there is little doubt that in the past it was chiefly sufferers from vitiligo who were declared unclean and driven from the camp. Still, I do not think that this is the final word on the matter. We should look further than the description of *tsara'ath* in Leviticus; we should try to grasp the meaning by considering its role in the practice of Jewish life.

A few texts and stories in the Old Testament make it clear that *tsara'ath* is always connected with persons who break the laws and incur the wrath of God. When Miriam (Numbers 12 : 10—15) rebelled against the leadership of Moses, God struck her "leprous, (as white) as snow". When King Uzziah presumed to burn incense in the temple—which was the exclusive prerogative of the high priest and the sons of Aaron—the priests suddenly saw the sign of *tsara'ath* on his forehead and "they thrust him out quickly..... *because the Lord had smitten him*". (2 Chron. 26 : 20)

Deuteronomy 24 : 8 states it clearly:

„Take heed, in an attack of leprosy, to be very careful to do according to all that the Levitical priests shall direct you: as I commanded them, so you shall be careful to do. *Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam.....*"

The New Testament makes it even more clear how we should interpret the Old Testament idea of *tsara'ath*. Sticker, in his chapter on the history of leprosy, states that nowhere in the New Testament do we find mention of the *healing* of lepers, but always of their *cleansing*. The leper does not plead to be healed, but to be cleansed. Jesus emphatically charged his twelve apostles (Matthew 10 : 8) to: "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers....." Sticker points out that the peoples of India, the Persians and other Arian peoples have also since time immemorial held the belief that there is an "evil mark" which singles out and stigmatises those who have trespassed against the gods. Herodotus recorded how in his time the Persians cursed those who bore a white mark, and how these unfortunates were expelled from the community. I think this strongly suggests the conception that *tsara'ath* of the Old Testament does not mean one distinct skin disease; rather, it was primarily a religious-cultic concept connected with a *syndrome:* one might say a *religious syndrome* ('syndrome' is the medical term for a complex of symptoms that occur more or less together). Those bearing the mark

were those smitten by the wrath of God, and therefore they had to be expelled from the community of Jews who kept true to the laws. The theory that this expulsion was originally an intuitively sensed hygienic measure, is little more than reading a modern interpretation into an ancient custom.

When in the third century B.C. a number of Jewish rabbis in Alexandria had to decide on the definitive Greek translation of the Torah, they sought for a Greek word that would reflect the meaning of *tsara'ath* and they believed they had found it in the neutral word *lepra*. In those times *lepra* certainly did not mean Hansen's disease; it was, in the sense of Hippocrates, a scaly affection which occurred frequently in the spring, itched violently and was easy to heal; it was more a disfigurement than a disease and sometimes it also involved the urinary bladder. It had thus nothing in common with the leprosy we know. Certainly Hansen's disease existed at the beginning of the Christian era; however, it was not called *lepra* but *elephantiasis Graecorum*. In that era *lepra* was one of the many skin diseases, belonging to the same group as scabies, impetigo, psoriasis etc.

The story of the word *lepra* is as follows. The word was adopted in the first Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate (about 400 A.D.). However, the first leper houses were not mentioned until 700 A.D.; in the period of the crusades (1000 to 1200 A.D.), during the great revival of Christianity, people became very much interested in the problem of lepers. It is remarkable that although the *concept* of leprosy was exclusively biblical, and although the existence of *leprosi anima*—i.e. the condition of those who had sinned against God and the Christian community and who were, therefore, excluded from mass and sacraments —was generally acknowledged, the *picture* of leprosy was held to be that of Lazarus who lay covered with sores outside the door of the rich man. Lazarus cannot possibly have suffered from *tsara'ath* in the old Jewish sense, because in that case he would have lain outside the city gates. Nevertheless, it was assumed on the authority of Church Fathers such as Origen that Lazarus was suffering from *lepra* (which would agree perhaps with the Hippocratic description of the disease). However, Lazarus was not considered to be 'leprous' because he had sinned, but because God wished to put him to the test in order to reward him hereafter.

Thus, those suffering from Lazarus's complaint were called "God's dear sufferers", as they were believed to have been chosen to suffer greatly in return for their reward later on. The Christian of the Middle Ages felt it his duty to take care of these unfortunates. The leper (or Lazarus) houses received large legacies and donations, and it became rather profitable to be a leper; at any rate this so-called 'leprosy' spread like wildfire in the 14th and 15th centuries. Leper houses belonged as much to the Middle Ages as tuberculosis sanatoria belong to our century (Sticker).

The reaction came when the rather morbid interest in religion and leper houses decreased and when the patients themselves demanded to be treated; after about a century practically no leper remained and most leper houses were closed. Once people were able to distinguish

true leprosy from pseudo-leprosy, and incurable leprosy from curable leprosy-like affections, it was found that the leper houses harboured infinitely more patients and wretches with pseudo-leprosy than true lepers. Still, there continued to be an undiminished confusion as regards the nomenclature of skin diseases, the word 'leprosy' being used for all kinds of affections, including *elephantiasis Graecorum,* the latter being the name under which Hansen's disease has emerged from remote antiquity.

However, in the course of the centuries the conglomeration of disfiguring skin diseases known as 'leprosy' began to separate into different entities. Syphilis and several kinds of skin diseases were differentiated. Ergotism and scorbut decreased in importance and were recognized as separate entities. 'White leprosy' became known as psoriasis. In 1847 Danielsen & Boeck published their classic description of *spedalsked* or *elephantiasis Graecorum* or *lepra.* In the eighteen-seventies Hansen discovered the bacillus which bears his name. The picture of Hansen's disease became increasingly clear; he already differentiated the tuberous and the neural types. In about 1925, *endangiitis obliterans* was recognized as a disease *sui generis.* The name of *elephantiasis Graecorum,* being too one-sided, was abandoned in favour of the term *lepra,* hence popularly 'leprosy', as the exclusive denomination of Hansen's disease. With this name we have inherited the ancient fear of those who were smitten by God; not only the fear, also the horror. The patient with Hansen's disease has become one who has "his dwelling without the camp".

Final plea

I did not write this paper for the purpose of historical study. I was induced to it by the misery of the leprosy patient, his loneliness, his despair which can drive him to suicide, as I have witnessed year in and year out during my work in Indonesia. We must give the true name to the disease, and to the sufferer from it, for two reasons: the first is that every man has a right to treatment worthy of a human being, no matter what condition he is in; the second is that because of this phobia it often becomes impossible to give the patient the optimal treatment.

When it suddenly became clear to me that this horror of leprosy was based on a confusion of ideas, and that the Old Testament *tsara'ath,* the *lepra* of Hippocrates and 'leprosy' (the sickness of Lazarus) of the Middle Ages have nothing in common with Hansen's disease—a disease which is severe and fatal only in a minority of cases and which, moreover, is *only very slightly infectious*—I thought it paramount that every physician who comes into contact with these patients should try to give the right name to the disease. For since it is very chronic and may last for ten, sometimes 30 to 40 years, it demands a varied and patient treatment, given in liberty, and not interrupted by the patient hiding away or fleeing to another region.

Fortunately, most prominent leprologists of the world admit that the isolation of patients in the past and present has conspicuously failed

to eradicate the disease—rather it has effected the reverse—so that in many countries enforced isolation has been abolished. However, in my opinion, too much is still talked about the infectivity of leprosy. As yet the mode of infection is unknown and the chances of infection are very small indeed. Only when the patient is convinced that he is in no danger of losing his job, and that his family will not be reduced to poverty as a result, will the clinician be able to examine and to treat cases at the first onset of the disease. It is only then that rational treatment and control become possible; the more so because today there are drugs which—although by no means ideal—are a great improvement on chaulmoogra oil.

Still, it is not sufficient that the law no longer expels the leprosy patient from the community; it is even more important that the community ceases to have a horror of him and learns to accept him as an ordinary patient. One of the patients of the Hansenarium in Carville (U.S.A.) wrote in her book *The wonder of Carville* (p. 191):

> "Why does the medical world—which has the power to change my ill-fated lot by one, small word—refuse to free my disease from its stigma, the biblical name leprosy, whereas they have given more scientific names to all other diseases which figure in the Bible?"

Indeed, as I have tried to show, *tsara'ath* in the Old Testament, and *lepra* of the Septuagint and New Testament cover undeniably different ideas from what we today know as leprosy. It would therefore be logical for 'leprosy' as a synonym of Hansen's disease to be suppressed in textbooks; it is the express wish of the Hansen patients at Carville, as stated in their bi-monthly *The Star,* that the word 'leprosy' should be banished from scientific publications and legal statutes. As Hansen's disease is not a scientifically accepted name, medical science would have to coin a new name for leprosy, for instance *leontiasis* and *leontide* respectively for the two chief forms.

However, it is not only a question for the medical world. Translators of the Bible should also avoid identifying the affliction mentioned in the Bible with the disease widely known today as leprosy. As I have sought to show, *tsara'ath* is definitely not leprosy, and cannot certainly be identified with any disease known today. Therefore I would suggest that the word be left untranslated, or be rendered in some other way. If some translator feels this is impossible I would ask him this: What should count more, his responsibility as philologist and theologian, or Christian compassion for those who are shunned by society? Or does he agree with the linguist who wrote to me and said: "Even though this is a medical and social question of the greatest importance, the linguistic and theological factors cannot be neglected." Is this entirely true? Is it absolutely impossible to rank Christian compassion above linguistic, historical or theological motives for the sake of the happiness of so many tragic folk?

It is my deepest conviction that every Christian doctor and linguist should strive towards the goal formulated by Dr. Lendrum: to give back sufferers from leprosy their "good name".

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