

“LEPROSY”¹ IN THE NEW ENGLISH BIBLE

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The publication, on 16th March 1970, of the full text of the New English Bible (NEB), is an historic event. In Britain, the entire edition of one million copies was sold out on that day. The influence of the new translation is likely to be comparable in many ways to that of the Authorized Version (AV), and in the English-speaking world will probably exceed that of the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

For those interested in Hansen's disease (leprosy) this is all to the good, for the RSV follows the AV closely in both Old and New Testaments in the translations of the words *tsara'ath* (Hebrew) and *lepra* (Greek), rendered into English as “leper”, “leprosy” and “leprous”. In fact, these words are used without justification or modification in the RSV, even when the reference is to cloth or stone walls. It is to be regretted that the translators paid no heed to the modern scientific delimitation of the disease, and perpetuated the old term, with all its medieval meanings and superstitions and accretions.

The New Testament portion of the NEB has been available since 1961. In so far as the translation of the Greek *lepra* and its cognates is concerned, the text follows closely that of the AV in all thirteen instances (Matt. 8:2-4; 10:8; 11:5; 26:6; Mark 1:40-45; 14:3; Luke 4:27; 5:12-15; 7:22; 17:11-19) where the words occur. Thanks to representations made to the translators, however, the following footnote was inserted (in the 1970 edition) to Matt. 8:2: “The words *leper*, *leprosy*, as used in this translation, refer to some disfiguring skin disease which entailed ceremonial defilement. It is different from what is now called leprosy.” We must be grateful for this concession, but would have preferred that another word had been used in the NEB New Testament to convey this ritualistic conception of defilement and uncleanness, rather than a word that (at least since the publication of Daniellssen and Boeck's work in 1847), has been restricted to a single clinical entity having absolutely no connection with ceremonial defilement or physical uncleanness.

It is apparent that the translators of the Old Testament (NEB) were not only aware of the representations made to Professor Sir Godfrey Driver, the Joint Director, in respect of the translation of Hebrew *tsara'ath*, but tried to take cognizance of the need to convey, in their translation into the modern idiom, the real meaning and flavour of the original text. The difficulties, however, are enormous, for *tsara'ath* embraced within itself widely differing meanings that scientific twentieth-century man finds it impossible to combine in a conceptual verbal unity. In other words, we have no single term—and cannot imagine a term—that would cover ritual defilement, and a scaly condition of the human skin, of woven cloth, leather goods and the walls of houses. Then again, we might look in vain for a single medical term that would embrace all the diverse conditions mentioned in the 13th and 14th chapters of Leviticus.

¹ See TBT Vol. 11, 1960, and Vol. 12, 1961, for other articles on leprosy in the Bible.

We can have nothing but gratitude for the way the translators of the NEB have resolved the questions of the "leprosy" of linen and woollen garments, and of anything made of leather (Lev. 13:47-59), and the "leprosy" of houses (Lev. 14:33-53). In the first group, the word "mould" is used, with or without the addition of "stain" or "rotting"; and, in the second, it is "a fungus infection" or simply "the infection".

Regarding the defiling condition that attacks the human skin, the translators are inexcusably inconsistent, and no explanatory footnote accompanies the word "leper" in 2 Kings 5:1 (though an alternative reading is given: "his skin was diseased"), or 2 Kings 7:3, or 2 Chron. 26:21 and 23; or the word "leprosy" in 2 Kings 15:5 or 2 Chron. 26:20. This is to be regretted.

However, *tsara'ath* is also translated in the NEB in the following ways: the skin was diseased (Ex. 4:6); her skin diseased (Num. 12:10); foul disease (2 Sam. 3:29); the disease (2 Kings 5:11); his disease (2 Kings 5:6 and 7); his skin diseased (2 Kings 5:2-7).

The difficulty of translating an ancient text into modern English arises most acutely (as is to be expected) in chapters 13 and 14 of Leviticus, which deal with the recognition of defiling skin disease, its differentiation from conditions that resemble it but which are not defiling, and the procedures to be adopted on purification or cleansing. The translators offer the renderings "malignant skin-disease" (14 times), "chronic skin-disease" (once), "skin-disease" (3 times), the neutral "the condition" (twice), and "his disease" (once). The phrase "malignant skin-disease" also occurs in Deut. 24:8.

The principal medical objection to be raised against these diverse translations of the one word *tsara'ath* is that the term most frequently used—"malignant skin-disease"—denotes a definite group of cutaneous neoplasms (epithelioma, basal-celled carcinoma, melanoma, etc.), and fails to convey the essential concept of *tsara'ath* which was (and is today) terrible and awful because it was ritualistically defiling. A malignant disease is one that tends eventually to cause death; it is fatal, lethal, and not simply serious. And "malignant skin-disease" can only refer to a skin "cancer", which is lethal by local extension or secondary deposits, but which is in no sense defiling.

By avoiding the word "leper" in these two chapters, the translators have earned the gratitude of sufferers from Hansen's disease the world over, who for far too long have had to endure the unjustifiable opprobrium and stigma inseparable from this word. It is to be regretted that they did not complete their good work and provide consistent translations of *tsara'ath* and *lepra* in accord with both linguistics and scientific medicine.

Another small point concerns the intrusion of the word "white" in describing the appearance of a scaly skin eruption in the case of Moses (Ex. 4:6), Miriam (Num. 12:10) and Gehazi (2 Kings 5:27). The attribute should rather be "flakiness" or "scaliness" (as in Psalm 68:14—"like snowflakes falling") or, in medical parlance, a furfuraceous desquamation.

These matters, which loom large on our restricted horizon, may appear as unimportant verbal quibbles to others. It is to be hoped that the reservations expressed in this paper may encourage a systemic study of the New English Bible, which will inevitably lead to an appreciation of its abiding worth.