Leprosy in the Bible

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Abstract
For many years, the biblical term \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{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.

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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.\textsuperscript{1-4} 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.\textsuperscript{5}

The Hebrew term \textit{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.\textsuperscript{1,3} The words \textit{tzaraat} in the Old Testament and \textit{lepra} in the New Testament appear at least 68 times.\textsuperscript{6,7,*}

\textsuperscript{*} Ex. 4:6; Lv. 13 and 14; Lv. 21:16-22:9; Nb. 5:2; Nb. 12:10; Dt. 24:8; 2 S. 3:29; 2 K. 5; 2 K. 7:3-16; 2 K. 15:1-7; 2 Ch. 26. Mt. 8:2-3; Mk. 1:40-44; Lk. 5:12-13; Mt. 26:6; Mk. 24:3; Mt. 10:8, Lk. 4:27; and Lk. 17:12-19.
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

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 Krs. 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 Uzziah was stricken with tzaraat (2 Ch. 26:16-21) when discovered in the Temple by the chief priest attempting to burn incense on the altar.9 Gechazi, servant of prophet Eli’sha was punished with leprosy for his greed (2 K. 5:26-27).2

Rarely, as it was in Job’s story, leprosy was cast by God, as a sort of trial of faith.10

Chapter 5 of II Kings tells the story of healing the leprosy from Naaman, a non-Israelite, who came from Syria to visit the prophet Eli’sha; at his order, he dipped himself in the Jordan River and was cured (2 K. 5:14). The Synoptic Gospels of Mathew, Mark, and Luke (Mt. 8:1-4; Mk. 1:40-45; Lk. 5:12-16) contain the story about healing of the Galilean leprosy sufferer, who came to Jesus, who healed him (Mk. 1:41-44) (Figures 1 and 2). Saint Luke (Lk. 17:11-19) tells the story about the healing of ten leprosy sufferers by Jesus and the approach of the grateful Samaritan (Mk. 1:40-45) (Figure 3).11

In the biblical Jewish culture, each of the skin diseases would make a person culturally impure.11,12 The “Law of Purity” of ancient Israel, which refers to the set of rules concerning dealing with the sick, included regulations referring to leprosy. The leprosy sufferer during the disease’s duration was impure and would have been totally excluded from his community in order not to pass his impurity to healthy people. On what was to be considered as real leprosy was a decision for the priests. When the priest confirmed a diagnosis, the person suspected of having lepra was placed in a 7-day quarantine. If the clinical manifestations abated or disappeared after the ritual purification and an offering, the person could return to society. When signs still were observable, the priest claimed the person to be impure, and the sufferer had to abandon his family and his relatives. In these biblical times, the leprosy sufferers remained excluded from society, relegated to living outside of the villages in communities of similar people.13

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 today;1 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. In addition, the
term tzaraat referred to a group of skin diseases and not to
one particular disease.

Modern leprosy (ie, Mycobacterial leprosy or Hansen’s
disease) has long been thought to be the disease referred in
the Bible as to tzaraat, but tzaraat differs from our present
understanding of Hansen’s disease and is not similar to any
well-known dermatologic disease. There is a growing
consensus that the term leprosy used in the Bible for a
group of diverse cutaneous disorders bears no resemblance to
Hansen’s disease, as it is known today.

Leprosy takes its name from the Latin word lepra, which
means “scaly,” while the term “Hansen’s disease” was
coined for the disease later, after identification of its
pathogen, Mycobacterium leprae, in the year 1873, by the
Norwegian physician Gerhard Henrik Armauer Hansen
(1841-1912).

There are several arguments against considering Hansen’s
disease as biblical leprosy. Leprosy is one of the least
contagious human disease, children are more susceptible
than adults, infection is transmitted probably by respiratory
droplets, it has slow progression (changes can be seen just after
5 or even 20 years), and the symptoms of the disease do not ever
regress or show remission without the treatment. Tzaraat, on the other hand, was very contagious and might have
undergone complete remission in 1 to 2 weeks. Skin lesions of
Hansen’s disease do not have the biblical features of netek
(presence of golden hair in an area of localized alopecia), and
even the skin patches of mycobacterial leprosy are poorly
pigmented, they are neither pruritic nor painful (the affected
areas are anesthetic to heat and pain), and redness, inflammation,
or induration of the skin are associated with secondary skin
infections.

Potential countertypes of biblical leprosy include psori-
asis, seborrheic dermatitis, favus, dermatophyte infections,
nommular dermatitis, atopic dermatitis, pityriasis rosea,
crusted scabies, syphilis, impetigo, sycosis barbae, scabies,
neurodermatitis or scarlet fever (although in both cases there
are no hair color changes), lupus erythematosus, lichen
sclerosus et atrophicus, folliculitis decalvans, morphea,
sarcoid and lichen planopilaris, and psoriasis. It was suggested that the leprosy of Israelites entirely
disappeared and depended on some fungus which attached

Fig. 2 Cleansing of the ten lepers. Unknown author, circa
1035-1040; from: Codex Aureus Epternacensis (ie, an 11th-century
illuminated Gospel Book created in the approximate period
1030-1050); The Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg,
Germany.

Fig. 3 Christ cleanses the Leper. Instalment in the series of 12th century new roman mosaics of the Basilica Cattedrale di Santa Maria Nuova
di Monreale. Monreale, Sicily, Italy.
itself to the hair of people and animals, produced a crust similar to favus, only of a white color, and was found not only on men, but also on the skin of animals worn as garments and on the walls of the houses.  

Confirmation of the thesis that the biblical tzaraat was not leprosy in the contemporary meaning can also be made by looking at the chronology of the historic events and the double mistake in the translation work of both the Old and New Testament, done by the Greek translators.  

The latest date of the final Leviticus redaction is during or just after the Jewish exile in Babylon 587–538 BCE. The ancient roots of the leprosy derive from either Central Asia or Eastern Africa; however, according to the classic concept, the cradle of the worldwide leprosy epidemics is India. Mycobacterial leprosy was described in India around 600 BCE, but there is no historical, osteo-archaeological, or literary evidence of Hansen’s disease existence in ancient times, many scaling diseases were wrongly diagnosed as leprosy (in Greek language lepo means to scale); the most spectacular is psoriasis, which was called lepra (lepra vulgaris, lepra aliphone, and lepra nigra) until the 19th century.  

The term 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,” without regard to the modern medical terminology, led to not only a lack of the medical knowledge and the therapeutic possibilities (Figure 4), but also to the multicentury discrimination of the leprosy-affected persons, in agreement to the concept of tzaraat, understood as the punishment for the sins.  

According to the above, biblical leprosy was defined as “a disease of impurity” or “spiritual uncleanliness,” and they postulate that in modern Bible translations, the term leprosy should be replaced again by the term tzaraat, which should prove that we do not know what this term meant, or use the literary term “plaque,” which indicates an infectious disorder of great concern for the person, for his or her clothes, and home.  

**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. Misconception of the biblical term tzaraat as “leprosy,” without regard to the modern medical terminology, led to not only a lack of the medical knowledge and the therapeutic possibilities (Figure 4), but also to the multicentury discrimination of the leprosy-affected persons, in agreement to the concept of tzaraat, understood as the punishment for the sins.  

According to the above, biblical leprosy was defined as “a disease of impurity,” and other authors suggest that a more appropriate translation of tzaraat would be “sign of impurity” or “spiritual uncleanliness,” and they postulate that in modern Bible translations, the term leprosy should be replaced again by the term tzaraat, which should prove that we do not know what this term meant, or use the literary term “plaque,” which indicates an infectious disorder of great concern for the person, for his or her clothes, and home.  

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**References**  

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