

Short Articles

Résumé of: E. V. Hulse, 'The nature of biblical "leprosy" and the use of alternative medical terms in modern translations of the Bible', *The Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 1975, 107: 87–105.*

In older versions of the Bible the Hebrew word *šāra'at* and the Greek word *lepra* are translated as "leprosy". Recent work on the history of leprosy has shown that there is no evidence that leprosy occurred in Palestine and the Middle East in Old Testament times and that in New Testament and earlier times the word *lepra* was not used for leprosy.

Internal evidence of the nature of the disease comes from the Old Testament rather than the New, although biblical writers obviously used *šāra'at* and *lepra* for the same condition. The long passage on the disease in Leviticus (chapters 13 and 14) can be misleading until it is realized that it was not meant to be a description of the disease but was a list of differential diagnoses and "clinical" tests to guide priests when, for ritualistic purposes, they had to distinguish between *šāra'at* and diseases which resembled it.

The key to understanding the condition comes from passages where it is said to be "as snow" (Exod. 4:6; Num. 12:10b; 2 Kgs. 5:27). This comparison was not used because the skin was white, the phrase "white as snow" is a mistranslation, but because the most characteristic sign was the presence of scales which, when rubbed off the surface of the skin, resembled flakes of snow. One sufferer of the disease is compared to a macerated foetus (Num. 12:12) which confirms that peeling or flaking of the superficial layers of the skin occurred and suggests that the underlying surface was red.

Various desquamating diseases are considered, particularly in relation to the signs enumerated in Leviticus 13, and psoriasis is found to fulfil most of the characteristics of the condition. A special variety of *šāra'at*, called *neṭek* in the Hebrew (Lev. 13:31), is most probably favus. Severe cases of some other diseases viz: seborrhoeic dermatitis, patchy eczema, pityriasis rosea and fungus diseases of the skin other than favus, may occasionally have been called *šāra'at*.

Patients with *šāra'at* were segregated because they were cultically unclean and under taboo and it is an anachronism to relate their isolation to modern ideas on the control of infectious disease. The loose scales of *šāra'at* may have been thought to be akin to discharges, which also made individuals unclean.

Various alternatives to "leprosy" have been adopted in modern translations. Some are very unsatisfactory, the worst being the *New English Bible's* phrase "malignant skin disease" for which there is no justification whatsoever. As no single disease is fully appropriate for translation purposes a descriptive phrase such as "a repulsive scaly skin disease" is recommended.

***Editor's note:** It is not our usual practice to publish material that has appeared elsewhere. However, in this special instance it seems worthwhile to bring this paper to the attention of *Medical History* readers who might not otherwise have an opportunity of seeing the original.