

Doctrine of Leprosy

1. The precise meaning of leprosy in both the Old and New Testament is still in dispute. It is a vague, comprehensive term that in most cases does not include modern leprosy.

1.1 The metaphorical meaning however is clear—leprosy is used of sin in both the Old and New Testaments.

2. In Hebrew, the word **Saraath**, translated "leprosy," has several meanings:

- a scaly condition of human skin and of inanimate objects and
- a human disease, sometimes serious and sometimes a sign of divine displeasure, entailing ceremonial uncleanness and exclusion from the community.

3. In some contexts, **Saraath** indicates an enervating or prostrating infirmity. The emphasis is not on its clinical manifestations or contagiousness (though this latter may be implied), but on its ritual significance. Medical and ceremonial words are used indiscriminately in different passages.

4. **Saraath**, as used by doctors and laity in modern Israel, is used to describe any repulsive skin condition, including leprosy. In widely scattered lands, true leprosy has for centuries evoked deep-seated emotional reactions attributable to various reasons (guilt complex, taboo violation, fear of deformity or divine punishment, dread of contracting a supposedly highly contagious disease, etc.). Regrettably, such an attitude may result from, or be reinforced by the misidentification of biblical "leprosy" with true leprosy.

5. Leprosy is a contagious disease caused by the *Microbacterium leprae*, discovered in 1874 by Gerhard A. Hansen (thus it is called, Hansen's disease). It mainly affects the limb nerves and the skin and can have a lengthy latent period of up to 15 years. It is never hereditary, but susceptibility to leprosy may be inherited.

6. No evidence of leprosy is found in inscriptions, skeletal remains or mummies from dynastic Egypt, or from Palestine. The earliest written records (c. 600 B.C.) are from India and the earliest skeleton with leprotic lesions dates back to the 5th century A.D.

7. There are many references in the Old Testament and Gospels to this disease. The details given in Lev 13 and 14 to help priests distinguish between Saraath and benign conditions are of no diagnostic value today. The exact meaning of the Hebrew words in Lev 13:2-10 and 30, translated in the KJV "rising, scab, bright spot, quick raw flesh" and "scall," is problematic. Let me give you these verses in the NIV.

Lev 13:2 "When anyone has a swelling or a rash or a bright spot on his skin that may become an infectious skin disease, he must be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons who is a priest.

Lev 13:3 The priest is to examine the sore on his skin, and if the hair in the sore has turned white and the sore appears to be more than skin deep, it is an infectious skin disease. When the priest examines him, he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean.

Lev 13:4 If the spot on his skin is white but does not appear to be more than skin deep and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest is to put the infected person in isolation for seven days.

Lev 13:5 On the seventh day the priest is to examine him, and if he sees that the sore is unchanged and has not spread in the skin, he is to keep him in isolation another seven days.

Lev 13:6 On the seventh day the priest is to examine him again, and if the sore has faded and has not spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only a rash. The man must wash his clothes, and he will be clean.

Lev 13:7 But if the rash does spread in his skin after he has shown himself to the priest to be pronounced clean, he must appear before the priest again.

Lev 13:8 The priest is to examine him, and if the rash has spread in the skin, he shall pronounce him unclean; it is an infectious disease.

Lev 13:9 "When anyone has an infectious skin disease, he must be brought to the priest.

Lev 13:10 The priest is to examine him, and if there is a white swelling in the skin that has turned the hair white and if there is raw flesh in the swelling,

Lev 13:30 the priest is to examine the sore, and if it appears to be more than skin deep and the hair in it is yellow and thin, the priest shall pronounce that person unclean; it is an itch, an infectious disease of the head or chin.

8. The signs of **Saraath** (central depression, whiteness of skin and hair, scaliness, infection of the scalp) are not typical of modern leprosy. Conversely, the hallmarks of modern leprosy (nodules, lion-like face, skin patches, and ulceration of extremities) are not mentioned in Scripture.

9. In Leviticus "leprosy" could be a localized infection of the skin; complications of a burn; a ringworm or scaling of the scalp or beard; a pustular (pus filled "rising") dermatitis; a favus (a fungi infection usually of the scalp) or desert sore; a mildew of garments or leather; or even a fungus growing on a stone wall. The priest could order exclusion from the camp when any such appearance or appearances occurred on a person or, in the case of home or wall, special cleansing might be ordered.

10. Old Testament examples of leprosy were

- Moses' hand became "leprous as snow" (Exo 4:6);
- Miriam became leprous, white as snow" (Num 12:10);
- Gehazi became "a leper as white as snow" (2Ki 5:27).

11. Leprosy lesions today are never achromic (white or grey), therefore the description "as snow" may characterize flakiness rather than whiteness. References to a leprosy victim as "one dead", whose "flesh is half consumed" (Num 12:12) cannot indicate the benign "white leprosy" of medieval Europe and modern India.

Num 12:10 And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous.

Num 12:11 And Aaron said unto Moses, Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned.

Num 12:12 **Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed** when he cometh out of his mother's womb.

Num 12:13 And Moses cried unto the LORD, saying, Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee.

Num 12:14 And the LORD said unto Moses, If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be ashamed seven days? let her be shut out from the camp seven days, and after that let her be received in again.

Num 12:15 And Miriam was shut out from the camp seven days: and the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again.

12. The instructions in Num 5:2-3 place "leprosy" on a ritual par with sexual pollution and contact with a corpse.

Num 5:2 "Command the Israelites to send away from the camp anyone who has an infectious skin disease or a discharge of any kind, or who is ceremonially unclean because of a dead body.

Num 5:3 Send away male and female alike; send them outside the camp so they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them."

13. Moses received a sign involving leprosy.

Exo 4:1 And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee.

Exo 4:2 And the LORD said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod.

Exo 4:3 And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it.

Exo 4:4 And the LORD said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand:

Exo 4:5 That they may believe that the LORD God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee.

Exo 4:6 And the LORD said furthermore unto him, Put now thine hand into thy bosom. And he put his hand into his bosom: and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous as snow.

Exo 4:7 And he said, Put thine hand into thy bosom again. And he put his hand into his bosom again; and plucked it out of his bosom, and, behold, it was turned again as his other flesh.

14. The nature of Naaman's **Saraath** (2Ki 5:1-14), which did not render him socially "unclean" or unfit for public office, is unknown. It was possibly scabies, for which the sulphur containing baths near Tiberias are a reputed cure to this day; sufferers are still being exhorted to "dip seven times."

2Ki 5:1 Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.

2Ki 5:2 Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife.

2Ki 5:3 She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

2Ki 5:4 Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said.

2Ki 5:5 "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing.

2Ki 5:6 The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

2Ki 5:7 As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"

2Ki 5:8 When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel."

2Ki 5:9 So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house.

2Ki 5:10 Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed ..."

2Ki 5:14 So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

15. The four leprous men of Samaria (2Ki 7:3-4) were living outside the city, but were mobile.

2Ki 7:3 Now there were four men with leprosy at the entrance of the city gate. They said to each other, "Why stay here until we die?"

2Ki 7:4 If we say, 'We'll go into the city' -- the famine is there, and we will die. And if we stay here, we will die. So let's go over to the camp of the Arameans and surrender. If they spare us, we live; if they kill us, then we die."

16. When Uzziah reigned as King of Judah, he interfered with the work of the priests, and while inside the Temple a leprous lesion appeared on his forehead (2Ch 26:19-21); possibly true leprosy, a product of his unauthorized assumption of priestly duties.

2Ch 26:19 Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the LORD'S temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead.

2Ch 26:20 When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the LORD had afflicted him.

2Ch 26:21 King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house -- leprous, and excluded from the temple of the LORD. Jotham his son had charge of the palace and governed the people of the land.

17. New Testament references make for similar imprecise identifications. There are ten references to the word leprosy in the New Testament and they all appear in the Gospels.

Mat 8:2 And, behold, there came a **leper** and worshipped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.

Mat 8:3 And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. And immediately his **leprosy** was cleansed.

Mat 8:4 And Jesus said unto him, See thou tell no man; but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.

Mat 10:5 These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not:

Mat 10:6 But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Mat 10:7 And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Mat 10:8 Heal the sick, cleanse the **lepers**, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.

Mat 11:4 Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see:

Mat 11:5 The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the **lepers** are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

Mat 11:6 And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

Mat 26:6 Now when Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the **leper**,

Mat 26:7 There came unto him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on his head, as he sat at meat.

Mar 1:40 And there came a **leper** to him, beseeching him, and kneeling down to him, and saying unto him, If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.

Mar 1:41 And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; be thou clean.

Mar 1:42 And as soon as he had spoken, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was cleansed

Mar 1:43 And he straitly charged him, and forthwith sent him away;

Mar 1:44 And saith unto him, See thou say nothing to any man: but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing those things which Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.

Luk 4:27 And there were many in Israel with **leprosy** in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed -- only Naaman the Syrian."

Luk 4:28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

Luk 4:29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.

Luk 4:30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Luk 5:12 While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with **leprosy**. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

Luk 5:13 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the **leprosy** left him.

Luk 5:14 Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

Luk 7:22 So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have **leprosy** are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

18. When consideration is given to the uses of the term leprosy in the Old and the New Testaments, we readily see a metaphorical meaning. Leprosy in the Bible speaks of sin as (1) becoming overt in loathsome ways and (2) as incurable by human means.

19. This is made quite clear by the manner in which the Levitical priests conducted the cleansing ceremony. The liturgy was very similar to that done in the manner of the cleansing of sins.

Lev 14:1 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,

Lev 14:2 This shall be the law of the leper in the day of his cleansing: He shall be brought unto the priest:

Lev 14:3 And the priest shall go forth out of the camp; and the priest shall look, and, behold, if the plague of leprosy be healed in the leper;

Lev 14:4 Then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be cleansed two birds alive and clean, and cedar wood, and scarlet, and hyssop:

Lev 14:5 And the priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water:

Lev 14:6 As for the living bird, he shall take it, and the cedar wood, and the scarlet, and the hyssop, and shall dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water:

Lev 14:7 And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be cleansed from the leprosy seven times, and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird loose into the open field.

Lev 14:8 And he that is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and wash himself in water, that he may be clean: and after that he shall come into the camp, and shall tarry abroad out of his tent seven days.

Lev 14:9 But it shall be on the seventh day, that he shall shave all his hair off his head and his beard and his eyebrows, even all his hair he shall shave off: and he shall wash his clothes, also he shall wash his flesh in water, and he shall be clean.

Lev 14:10 And on the eighth day he shall take two he lambs without blemish, and one ewe lamb of the first year without blemish, and three tenth deals of fine flour for a meat offering, mingled with oil, and one log of oil.

Lev 14:11 And the priest that maketh him clean shall present the man that is to be made clean, and those things, before the LORD, at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation:

Lev 14:12 And the priest shall take one he lamb, and offer him for a trespass offering, and the log of oil, and wave them for a wave offering before the LORD:

Lev 14:13 And he shall slay the lamb in the place where he shall kill the sin offering and the burnt offering, in the holy place: for as the sin offering is the priest's, so is the trespass offering: it is most holy:

Lev 14:14 And the priest shall take some of the blood of the trespass offering, and the priest shall put it upon the tip of the right ear of him that is to be cleansed, and upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the great toe of his right foot:

Lev 14:15 And the priest shall take some of the log of oil, and pour it into the palm of his own left hand:

Lev 14:16 And the priest shall dip his right finger in the oil that is in his left hand, and shall sprinkle of the oil with his finger seven times before the LORD:

Lev 14:17 And of the rest of the oil that is in his hand shall the priest put upon the tip of the right ear of him that is to be cleansed, and upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the great toe of his right foot, upon the blood of the trespass offering:

Lev 14:18 And the remnant of the oil that is in the priest's hand he shall pour upon the head of him that is to be cleansed: and the priest shall make an atonement for him before the LORD.

Lev 14:19 And the priest shall offer the sin offering, and make an atonement for him that is to be cleansed from his uncleanness; and afterward he shall kill the burnt offering:

Lev 14:20 And the priest shall offer the burnt offering and the meat offering upon the altar: and the priest shall make an atonement for him, and he shall be clean.

Lev 14:21 And if he be poor, and cannot get so much; then he shall take one lamb for a trespass offering to be waved, to make an atonement for him, and one tenth deal of fine flour mingled with oil for a meat offering, and a log of oil;

Lev 14:22 And two turtledoves, or two young pigeons, such as he is able to get; and the one shall be a sin offering, and the other a burnt offering.

Lev 14:23 And he shall bring them on the eighth day for his cleansing unto the priest, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, before the LORD.

Lev 14:24 And the priest shall take the lamb of the trespass offering, and the log of oil, and the priest shall wave them for a wave offering before the LORD:

Lev 14:25 And he shall kill the lamb of the trespass offering, and the priest shall take some of the blood of the trespass offering, and put it upon the tip of the right ear of him that is to be cleansed, and upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the great toe of his right foot:

Lev 14:26 And the priest shall pour of the oil into the palm of his own left hand:

Lev 14:27 And the priest shall sprinkle with his right finger some of the oil that is in his left hand seven times before the LORD:

Lev 14:28 And the priest shall put of the oil that is in his hand upon the tip of the right ear of him that is to be cleansed, and upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the great toe of his right foot, upon the place of the blood of the trespass offering:

Lev 14:29 And the rest of the oil that is in the priest's hand he shall put upon the head of him that is to be cleansed, to make an atonement for him before the LORD.

Lev 14:30 And he shall offer the one of the turtledoves, or of the young pigeons, such as he can get;

Lev 14:31 Even such as he is able to get, the one for a sin offering, and the other for a burnt offering, with the meat offering: and the priest shall make an atonement for him that is to be cleansed before the LORD.

Lev 14:32 This is the law of him in whom is the plague of leprosy, whose hand is not able to get that which pertaineth to his cleansing.

20. Much in this categorical study of leprosy comes from the *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*.