

6-10-2007

Biblical Leprosy: Shedding Light on the Disease that Shuns

Alan L. Gillen

Liberty University, algillen@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/bio_chem_fac_pubs



Part of the [Biology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gillen, Alan L., "Biblical Leprosy: Shedding Light on the Disease that Shuns" (2007). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 146.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/bio_chem_fac_pubs/146

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Biology and Chemistry at Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu.

Biblical Leprosy: Shedding Light on the Disease that Shuns

by Dr. Alan L. Gillen on June 10, 2007; last featured October 25, 2009

Leprosy has terrified humanity since ancient times and was reported as early as 600 BC in India, China, and Egypt. Hansen's disease is still a major health problem.

Disease is a constant reminder of just how much things have changed since God pronounced a curse on the earth. At first, everything was “very good,” but Adam’s sin brought death and decay into the world.

One of the most well-known examples of debilitating disease in this sin-cursed creation is *Mycobacterium leprae*, the infectious bacterial agent of leprosy. Leprosy is discussed quite often in the Bible. While its definition in modern times is different from biblical times, there is no doubt that the definitions overlap, and the modern form of the disease still illustrates important spiritual lessons today.

The term “leprosy” (including leper, lepers, leprosy, leprous) occurs 68 times in the Bible—55 times in the Old Testament (Hebrew = *tsara'ath*) and 13 times in the New Testament (Greek = *lepros, lepra*). In the Old Testament, the instances of leprosy most likely meant a variety of infectious skin diseases, and even mold and mildew on clothing and walls. The precise meaning of the leprosy in both the Old and New Testaments is still in dispute, but it probably includes the modern Hansen’s disease (especially in the New Testament) and infectious skin diseases.

STUDYING LEPROSY HELPS US TO SEE WHY PAIN IS A VALUABLE “GIFT.”

The term “Hansen’s disease” was not given until 1873, when Gerhard Henrik Armauer Hansen described the leprosy bacillus (the lay term for the “bacterium”). Only at this point was a precise definition for leprosy made available.

The Origin of Hansen’s Disease (Leprosy)

Leprosy has terrified humanity since ancient times and was reported as early as 600 BC in India, China, and Egypt. Hansen’s disease is still a major health problem in many parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. For many centuries, leprosy was considered a curse of God, often associated with sin. It did not kill, but neither did it seem to end. Instead, it lingered for years, causing the tissues to degenerate and deforming the body.

Many have thought leprosy to be a disease of the skin. It is better classified, however, as a disease of the nervous system because the leprosy bacterium attacks the nerves. Leprosy’s agent *M. leprae* is a rod-shaped bacterium related to the tuberculosis bacterium. Leprosy is spread by multiple skin contacts, as well as by droplets from the upper respiratory tracts, such as nasal secretions that are transmitted from person to person.

Its symptoms start in the skin and peripheral nervous system (outside the brain and spinal cord), then spread to other parts, such as the hands, feet, face, and earlobes. Patients with leprosy experience disfigurement of the skin and bones, twisting of the limbs, and curling of the fingers to form the characteristic claw hand. Facial changes include thickening of the outer ear and collapsing of the nose.

Tumor-like growths called lepromas may form on the skin and in the respiratory tract, and the optic nerve may deteriorate. The largest number of deformities develop from loss of pain sensation due to extensive nerve damage. For instance, inattentive patients can pick up a cup of boiling water without flinching.

It was the work of Dr. Paul Brand (the late world-renowned orthopedic surgeon and leprosy physician) with leprosy patients that illustrated, in part, the value of sensing pain in this world. The leprosy bacillus destroys nerve endings that carry pain signals; therefore patients with advanced leprosy experience a total loss of physical pain. When these people cannot sense touch or pain, they tend to injure themselves or be unaware of injury caused by an outside agent.

In fact, some leprosy patients have had their fingers eaten by rats in their sleep because they were totally unaware of it happening; the lack of pain receptors could not warn them of the danger.

According to Dr. Brand, the best example in the Bible of a person with Hansen's disease is the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:5; Matthew 12:13; Luke 6:10). He likely suffered from tuberculoid leprosy.

Biblical Leprosy and Hansen's Disease



[View larger image](#)

Cleaning the deformed foot of a person suffering from leprosy (Hansen's disease) with an antiseptic. Leprosy is a chronic inflammatory disease caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae*.

In addition to pain and disfiguration, biblical leprosy and Hansen's disease are both dreaded, and people were shunned because of them. The noun *tsara'ath* appears about two dozen times in the Hebrew text.

As previously mentioned, biblical leprosy is a broader term than the leprosy (Hansen's disease) that we know today. The Hebrew *tsara'ath* included a variety of ailments and is most frequently seen in Leviticus, where it referred primarily to uncleanness or imperfections according to biblical standards. A person with any scaly skin blemish was *tsara'ath*. The symbolism extended to rot or blemish on leather, the walls of a house, and woven cloth. Other Old Testament references to leprosy are associated with punishment or the consequences of sin.

In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, *tsara'ath* was translated as *aphe lepras*. These words in Greek implied a skin condition that spread over the body.

Others have suggested that the translation of *tsara'ath* includes "molds." The recent discovery of a highly toxic mold (*Stachybotrys sp.*), which contaminates buildings and causes respiratory distress, memory loss, and rash, lends support to the translation of *tsara'ath* to include "mold." As

noted, *tsara'ath* incorporates a collection of contemporary terms, including Hansen's disease, infectious skin diseases, and mold (or even mildew) diseases.

LEPROSY HAS TERRIFIED HUMANITY SINCE ANCIENT TIMES. IT IS A POWERFUL SYMBOL REMINDING US OF SIN'S SPREAD AND HORRIBLE CONSEQUENCES.

References to leprosy have a different emphasis in the New Testament. They stress God's desire to heal. Jesus freely touched people with leprosy. While people with leprosy traditionally suffered banishment from family and neighbors, Jesus broke from the tradition. He treated lepers with compassion, touching and healing them.

Although we can't know all the reasons that God allows disease into our lives, biblical leprosy is a powerful symbol reminding us of sin's spread and its horrible consequences. Like leprosy, sin starts out small but can then spread, leading to other sins and causing great damage to our relationship with God and others.

Studying leprosy helps us see why pain is a valuable "gift," a survival mechanism to warn us of danger in this cursed world. Without pain and suffering, we might be like lepers, unable to recognize that something is terribly wrong and that we need the healing touch of God. As Dr. Brand said, "I cannot think of a greater gift that I could give my leprosy patients than pain."

Let us not be too quick to remove pain in our lives (whether physical, emotional, social, or spiritual pain). It may be God's megaphone to get our attention that something is seriously wrong and that we should flee to the One who created us.

Condensed and adapted from the book, *The Genesis of Germs*, published by Master Books.