

Leviticus 13

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2022

It was the belief of the ancient Hebrews that God, while overseeing the entire world as sovereign ruler, was also intimately involved in the personal affairs of the individual. In Hebrew, it's called השגחה פרטית 'particular providence'. God thus both judges entire nations and peoples and also recompenses each individual for their individual deeds. Misfortune, and in particular disease, was thus linked to morality and individual sin. Chapter 13 introduces extensive rules about skin disease, called צִרְעָה 'Tzarat'. It is usually translated as leprosy in most Bibles. The word derives this translation from the LXX which used the Greek word λέπρας 'Lepros'. However, what we define today as leprosy or Hansen's Disease is not what is referred to in the Bible as צִרְעָה 'Tzarat'. The Biblical word is expanded to include not only skin disease but also mildew and rot in homes and clothing. The issue facing the Israelites as they are preparing to enter Canaan and establish themselves as the people of God in the Land of God is, where does misfortune such as skin disease come from and what are the spiritual implications?

The Lord returns speaking to both Moses (prophet) and Aaron (priest) concerning this matter of skin disease. Such ailments were thought to be highly contagious and therefore they were treated in all seriousness for the sake of the community. The person who detects a skin abnormality has the responsibility to come before the priest to be examined. Initial responsibility is born on the individual affected. Severity of potential spread of the plague or skin disease meant immediate quarantine following further assessment. Israelite priests acted as the judiciary in society and now also function as a doctor. God was known as the Divine Physician who could heal, thus His clergy were expected to also enact that healing power on His behalf. This is still as true today as it was in antiquity. We see this theological practice continue into the New Testament community when in James 5:14-16 the sick are to be brought before the elders, anointed with oil and prayers offered for healing. Should the sickness be a result of sin then forgiveness is received accordingly. And this then is the theological question asked by nearly all Jewish commentators: is there a spiritual aspect to צִרְעָה or is it only biological?

The Levitical text does not describe a direct link between the skin disease and personal sin. In fact, the word 'sin' is not mentioned in the chapter at all. From the literal text, the skin disease is discussed purely in natural medical terms. Purity and cleanness is the issue at stake. Animals could transmit uncleanness to others only when dead, however humans have the capability to impute impurity while alive. The tension remains between the natural and the supernatural.

The priest must examine from where the disease originates, and this requires investigation. The New Testament is likewise ambiguous on the biological and spiritual natures of disease and sickness. Many healings in the New Testament involve the removal of demonic activity, yet other healings have nothing to do with the spirit world nor of personal sin. And we have already noted the James passage to call the elders for prayer. As previously stated, the majority of Jewish commentaries make a spiritual connection to *tzarat*, in particular with the sin of '*lashon hara*' (evil speech). Several examples in the Hebrew Bible support this view: the accounts of Miriam and her leprosy in Numbers and of King Uzziah and his leprosy through inappropriate incense offering in 2 Chronicles. Job 5:17-18 describes God being the author of both the good and the bad. Does this mean that all evil that befalls us is a punishment from the Lord? Of

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course not. Does this mean that all physical illness has no spiritual connection? Again the answer is no. God, who is the same yesterday today and forever, has brought plagues upon His people in the past as punishment and as warnings.

How then do we view the modern-day plague such as coronavirus? The biblical view seems to hold both natural and supernatural origins in tension. The literal text treats disease purely as a biologic phenomena, no sin is mentioned at all. However, all the commentaries (including ancient and modern ones) seek metaphysical analysis. Any plague then should be viewed as a 'wake up' call for the Church. We should be active in the Kingdom of Heaven seeking to create a pure and unblemished bride for the Messiah. We cannot and should not tolerate sins like we do. At the same time, we cannot blame sin on something that is also biological in nature. Sickness and disease need to be dealt with, and they can be through modern medicine. Eat right, live longer is not only a truism but also good science.

To describe this in Jewish thought, the Lord instructed Adam to subdue (conquer) the earth. God did not instruct Adam on how to practically do this. God did not instruct Adam to farm the land, nor domesticate animals, nor develop the food pyramid. The instruction is to subdue; the practical working out is the *halacha* we develop. Thus at the same time as James 5 urges us to pray for the sick, we see in the book of Sirach 38:1-2 of the usefulness of medicine as a healing tool. 'Honour physicians for their services, for the Lord created them; for their gift of healing comes from the Most High'. As a side note, the Epistle of James quotes Sirach several times and thus knows of the apocryphal text well.

In summary, then, צָרַעַת or λέπρα is a biological skin disease that has the potential to spread and or dissipate. The holiness, cleanness and purity of God's people, therefore, require diligent examination and quarantine. Diligent examination also acknowledges that all things are in the hands of Heaven and thus there may be a spiritual component to the disease. Sin of any form needs to be addressed thus God may be warning people through sickness. Medicine is not to be ignored, as it is a gift from heaven, and likewise the prayer of the righteous man should not be overlooked. The Hebraic perspective is to maintain both aspects in tension.