

A non-stigmatizing Bible(*)

ABRAHAO ROTBERG (**)

ABSTRACT — The "tsará-ath" of the Hebrew Books, translated as "Lepra" in the Greek "Septuaginta" Bible was a ritual defilement based on various skin and scalp lesions and on blemishes, probably mold, on garment, leather, walls and stones. The previous appellation ("Lepra") of those lesions changed to "Vitiligo", "Psoriasis" "Tinea", etc. but is still current for Hanseniasis (Hansen's disease), whose signs cannot be found in the Bible.

This historical linguistic confusion is an important cause of serious psycho-social, medical and preventive problems in Christian endemic countries, spreading to non-Christian areas. The last known example is that of the highlands of Papua New Guinea, where Hanseniasis was "a disease like the others", until the arrival of Western influences and religious missions, resulting in stigmatization and ostracization of patients and their families.

To ensure that evangelization should neither be accompanied by discrimination nor by misinformation about the disease, some modern Bible translations are no longer using the word "Leprosy". This term has also been abandoned by the Brazilian Ministries of Health and of Social Welfare, as well as by the United States Public Health Service, and by the government of Portugal.

Key words: Bible. Biblical "leprosy". "Leprosy" stigma.

It is acknowledged in our times that the "tsara'-ath" of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as its "lepra" correspondent of the Greek Septuaginta "Biblia" have no relationship whatsoever with hanseniasis (4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 18, 19, 27, 29, 30, 31). A few authors believe that hanseniasis "might have been" one of the "lepras" of the Old (2) or the New Testament (4), but even this is far from certain. Anaesthesia, paralytic and trophic changes, which

would help us today in qualifying as hansenic vaguely described skin lesions, are conspicuously absent from the Bible.

What is certain is that the same old name "lepra" was applied to a bacterial disease whose identity and etiology were only established in the 19th century. As an obvious consequence, applied to the "disease lepra" were also all the Biblical anathemas, defilement and "sinful" concepts intended for the

(*) Presented at the II Congresso Brasileiro de Hansenologia (2nd. Brazilian Congress of Hansenology) Rio de Janeiro, June 29/July 2, 1978.

(**) Professor of Dermatology, University of São Paulo, Brazil; Chairman of the Hansenology Committee, Public Health Service, State of São Paulo, Brazil.

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"ritual lepra" of skin and scalp, of garments, walls and stones.

The tragicomic side of the story is that diseases known today as vitiligo, psoriasis, tinea, impetigo, etc., whose signs correspond more closely to those of the Leviticus, have escaped from the shameful associations of their former "leprous" name: it is easy to imagine the sorry plight of a psoriasis patient if his disease were still called "lepra alphos" or "vulgaris" (fig. 1), as

it was up to the 18th century. Whereas hanseniasis, the non-biblical "elephantiasis" of the Septuaginta times, was later involved by the generic and confusing name "lepra" and never after managed to escape from the heavy load of defamation carried by it (fia. 2). The original "lepras" of the Bible are no longer Biblical nor "lepras", the non-biblical "elephantiasis" is the one "lepra" and the one "Biblical disease" today (27, 28).

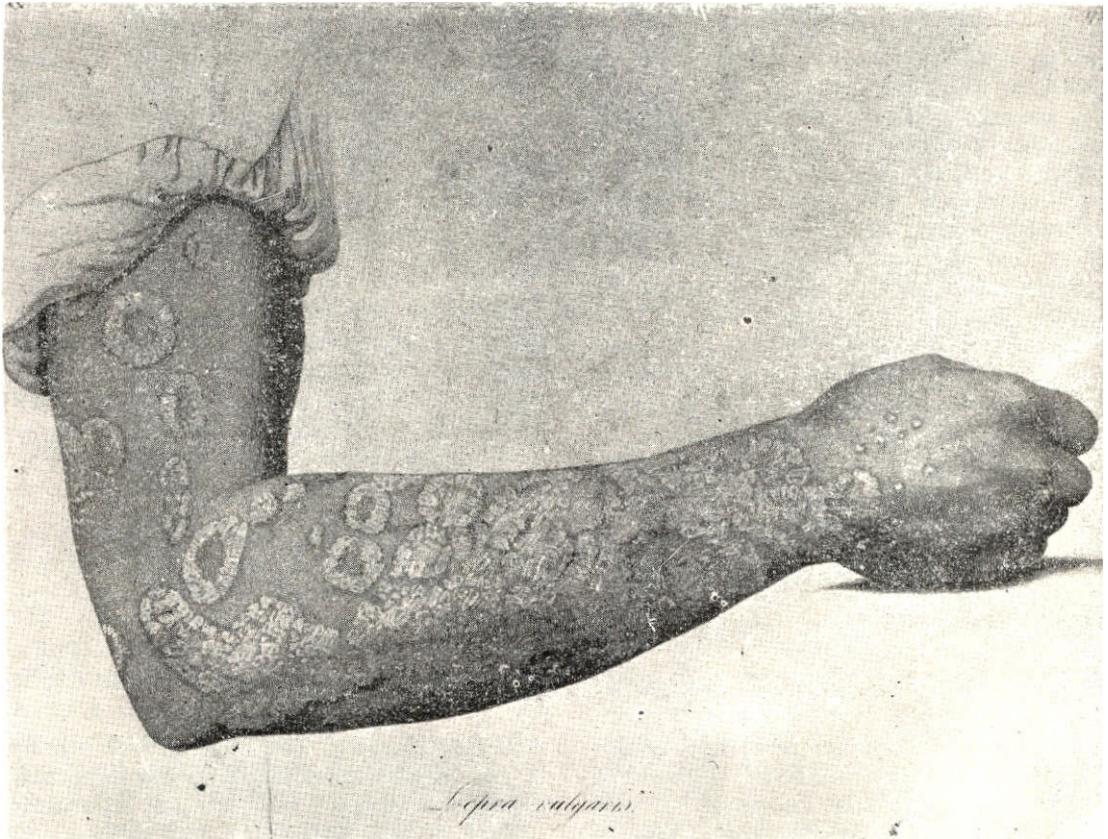


Fig. 1 — The historical linguistic confusion: the <<Lepra vulgaris>> was replaced by <<Psoriasis>>. (French drawing of the 19 th. century; collection of the author).

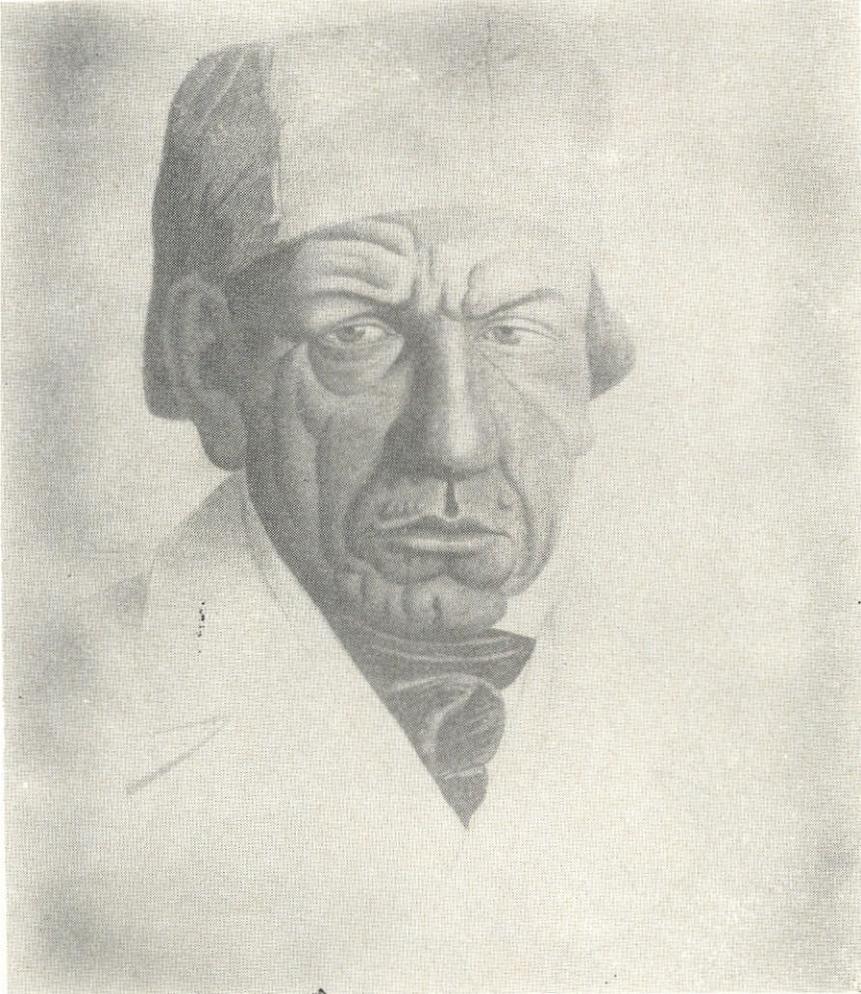


Fig. 2 — The historical linguistic confusion: the <<Elephantiasis of the Greek>>, not described in the Bible, was replaced by <<Lepra>>. (French drawing of the 19 th. century; collection of the author)

The far from comic consequences of this "historical confusion of ideas" (Gramberg, 10) is that millions of people living *now* in the Anglo-Romance speaking Christian countries — hanseniasis patients, contacts, ever. distant relatives and descendants — have fallen prey to the intense, ingrained social rejection of "leprosy" and to profound fear and anguish, often leading to

mental diseases. The clinical and prophylactical consequences are no less important: patients abscond and do not cooperate; their disease aggravates and the endemic spreads. *No use developing vaccines and new medicines which patients and contacts will reject as flatly as society rejects them*(26).

STIGMATIZING EVANGELIZATION

This serious man-created pseudo-biblical "psycho-social disease" is no longer the sorrowful lot of the Christian countries alone, the first to incorporate St. Jerome's Latin Vulgata. Bibles written in English or French have carried the degrading connotations of "leprosy", "leper", "lépre", "lepreux" into all countries where those languages are widely employed. Furthermore, the hundreds of local appellations for hanseniasis in the non-Christian world have been adopted as a correspondent for "tsara'-ath" in the hundreds of languages into which the Bible has been translated. Legions of missionaries and preachers have taken to all corners of the world the notions that the patient with the disease "X" was considered "unclean" and expelled "without the camp"; that only by a miracle was his condition "cleaned" up; that houses and garments stricken by "X" were to be destroyed; that even "X" stones were to be removed to an "unclean" place.

In many cases the local "X" name was already degrading and ostracizing for non-biblical reasons. The respected and influential missionaries of the prestigious Western world contributed to reinforce local beliefs and misconceptions, and to confirm ostracization.

In other cases, stigma and ostracism were introduced and nurtured by the Bible itself.

There was no social stigma attached to the "X" disease in the highlands of Papua, New Guinea. But "Western influences have succeeded in changing much of the traditional outlook toward leprosy which was not of condemnation or ostracism, whilst a patient could adequately perform his obligations to his society". "The biblical idea of leprosy as 'loathsome' and the ignorance of many Europeans in regard to the nature of the disease have both helped to encourage and increase the stigma of leprosy present in numerous other countries, and now in Papua New Guinea" (Kerr, 13).

How many Papua New Guineans have converted to Christianity, Social Welfare Officer Kerr does not report. But it is clear that the psycho-social problems of "tsara'-ath-leprosy" have begun to exert its noxious powers on the population, and that a new group of stigmatized and rejected patients and families were born to the world.

Evangelization produced misinformation about the disease and stigmatization of its victims and contacts. Is it conforming to Christ's teachings?

THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND THE REMEDIES

The Bible is certainly not to be blamed for this situation. The priests who ordered the burning of linen and wool corrupted by "tsara'-ath" could not prophesize that some millenia later its Greek translation "lepra", with all of its pejorative overtones, would be applied by the medical world to a single bacterial disease of man. Nor that taxonomists of the 19th century A.D. would not have found anything better for the agent of the disease than the name "Mycobacterium leprae", i.e., the mycobacterium of "tsara'-ath", and of Biblical opprobrium.

It behooves to those responsible — doctors and bacteriologists — to repair the tremendous harm caused to patients, to society and to prevention.

This redeeming process is on the way. Considerably delayed after "tinea", "scabies", "vitiligo", "psoriasis" and "pemphigus" severed their ties with Biblical "leprosy", "hanseniasis" in the Brazilian Ministries of Health and of Social Welfare, and "Hansen's disease" in the United States Public Health Service, and in the government of Portugal have begun to follow their examples. This disentangling trend would be accelerated should the Judicial Commission of the International Committee on Bacteriological Nomenclature decide to study the substitution of *Mycobacterium hansenii* (8) or other non-opprobrious appellation for Myco. leprae; and should

the Terminological Unit of the World Health Organization, the International Leprosy Association and the College of Hansenology of the Endemic Countries agree to accept the results of extensive inquiries conducted in Brazil, Argentina and the United States, which have proved beyond doubt that the term "leprosy" is a "disintegrator of the patient's personality" (17) "a label which blocks education" (20) a "continued psychic pain and trauma" (23) "the most negative of all medical terms" (25). The medical world which has recently substituted the term

- "sexually transmissible" for the stigmatizing "venereal" diseases is now morally obligated to pay attention to the human rights of the innocent victims of the most stigmatizing (3, 10, 24) "anti-social" (21) and "ugly" (7) word.

Although not responsible, the Bible is beginning to sever the ties linking the religious ritual to a physical disease. "The new Catholic Bible translated by the Catholic Biblical Association (of the United States of America) comes out boldly in a footnote to the effect that the Hebrew term used does not refer to Hansen's disease, currently called leprosy" (apud Browne, 4).

The "New English Bible" (1970) is even more drastic and wipes the word "leprosy" out of the Old Testament altogether. The "malignant skin disease" which has taken its place might not have been the best solution: there is no malignancy in skin diseases which could spontaneously heal in less than seven days of stay "without the camp". Malignancy not being applicable to walls, clothing or

leather, "leprosy" changed here into simple "mould", "fungus infection", "stain" or "rotting" — thus splitting the unity and the character of the ritual and necessarily derogatory "tsara'-ath". Moreover — and unfortunately — "leprosy" comes back again with full force in the New Testament.

Perhaps "blemish" would be a more adequate substitute, as it participates both of the moral and physical connotations.

However, if the substitution was incomplete and if the substitutes were not the best, the intentions were, and exhibited the New English Bible's willingness to contribute to a solution. Evangelization would then proceed liberated from the unbearable onus of stigmatization, while medico-preventive measures would be rationally applied to cooperative patients liberated from spuriously inherited socio-linguistic handicaps (27).

A CONCERTED EFFORT

It seems, therefore, that both the religious and medical fields are beginning to banish a degrading and "dirty pejorative" (22) a "tragic" (16) "horrifying and repulsive" (5), "superstitious" (3), "terrorizing" (14) and "obnoxious" word (1), which should not be allowed to be applied to human beings in a modern and civilized world.

All organizations and persons in the field of religion, science and human rights are invited to help developing endemic countries in this arduous fight against stigma, terror and disease.

Addendum — Dr. Felix Contreras Duerias, President of the Association "Amigos de los Enfermos de Lepra" — Fundación Raoul Follereau, Madrid — has been working to extirpate the words "leprosy" and "leper" from the Bible ever since the International Congress for the Defense and Social Rehabilitation of the "Leper" (Rome, 1956) opened by the late Pope Pius XII. As a result, authorized by the Vatican with the "Nihil obstat", those words have disappeared from the Old and New Testaments of the Spanish, French, Italian and English versions.

"Skin diseases" is the new title of Chapter XIII of the Leviticus, replacing the old "Laws and tokens whereby the priest is to discern leprosy".

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Received for publication June 1978.