

Jewish Law and Sanitary Science by Jacob Snowman (1896) Quotes

OF all branches of medicine that of hygiene or sanitary science is acknowledged to be the most important. The future of medicine from the utilitarian standpoint is bound up with the welfare of this single branch. It is in this direction the permanent advances of the healing art are to be sought, and we look to it to speed the time when medicine will cease its existence as a curative art and enter upon its new career as the art of preventing disease. It is only within recent years that the necessity has arisen to assign to hygiene a separate place among the sciences.¹

Various opinions have been expressed as to the object of the Mosaic system of cleanliness with its peculiar care for the life of man, its propagation, birth, death and subsequent decay. Some have considered that the matters pronounced unclean were natural objects of aversion to the people, that they were the types of uncleanness at which human nature then revolted, and therefore they formed a necessary field for legislation. An idea, to which Maimonides and several other philosophers adhered, tended to see in them arbitrary regulations with the definite aim of educating a newly born people to virtues of a high order, and especially alienating them from the contaminating example of surrounding nations. Others maintain that in addition to this end they served the immediate purposes of health, while others would divorce them entirely from religious significance, apart from the maxim of *mens sana in corpore sano*. The great difficulty in accepting the last view is that if the laws be weighed in the scales of sanitary science they will be found wanting. It cannot be too strongly insisted that there was no anticipation of subsequent discoveries in hygiene, and the value of the quasi-sanitary laws of the Pentateuch must not be gauged from modern standpoints. Though the general Mosaic system was certainly directed to attain by a moral revolution a degree of religious excellence not otherwise to be arrived at, the confines of that unique movement were limited to religion, it did not encroach upon other domains of human intelligence.²

But there is at least one section of legislation which claims consideration as primarily instituted for the preservation of public health. The laws relating to leprosy were imperative for economical reasons. It was common in Egypt and clung to the Israelites during the whole period of their settlement in Palestine, a disease which still holds considerable sway in the East. The chapters in

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Leviticus possess in addition to their intrinsic value the scientific interest of being remarkably early examples of the diagnosis and treatment of disease. The thirteenth chapter of Leviticus is quoted as a masterly piece of differential diagnosis, and the precautions to prevent infection remain to this day in principle unimproved. If the skin disease referred to were spreading, if it were excavated below the level of the skin, if it showed a raw ulcer on an old scar, or if the hair on it became white or yellow and downy, or if there were ulceration of a bald head, the patient was shut up for a time for observation, and if the malady spread he was pronounced leprous and unclean and shut out from the camp. Now is the disease identical with what we now understand by the term leprosy, the most destructive of all diseases? Is the [tzara'at (צָרַעַת)] leprosy of Leviticus the same disease traceable throughout the Bible and the later Hebrew literature? the victim of which the Talmud regards as already dead, and into whose family we are warned against intermarrying. True leprosy runs a fairly definite course, beginning with a trifling sore that declines to heal, but spreads eventually over the whole limb it has attacked. The limb swells, the skin becomes hard and presents brown patches. To these there succeed scarlike spots, but the skin is not broken; the nerves swell, pain follows and a fatty perspiration bathes the body. Or the disease begins with a couple of white spots devoid of all sensation, but gradually extending till horrid but painless ulcers are eaten into the flesh of the extremities. The surface is cold, the fingers and toes look glazed. In the advanced stage, joint after joint is exposed and opened, bone after bone drops away, leaving limbs fearfully distorted and quite useless. It may be stated at the outset that some philological confusion exists on the subject. The word leprosy originally signified any disease of the skin. Now-a-days it is applied only to a specific disease of the constitution which generally has certain manifestations on the skin. Etymologically the leprosy of the Bible means nothing more definite than skin disease. A study of the details of the Biblical disease shows distinctly that it is not the malady to which the term leprosy is now applied. There is not sufficient evidence to warrant us in absolutely identifying any of the descriptions afforded by the text. The descriptions certainly embody several varieties of disease, some are fairly comparable to recognised forms; they seem to range over a large field, including the conditions known to-day as psoriasis, impetigo, leucoderma, local ulcers and perhaps the rashes of contagious fevers. It is difficult to identify to-day carefully described diseases observed fifty years ago; little wonder then that the brief and fragmentary verses of the time-honoured Bible fail to furnish us with sufficient data for the purpose. Curiously enough there is hardly any unequivocal reference in the whole Bible to true leprosy. There can be little doubt that the disease existed during the whole period of the Hebrew occupation of Palestine, there can be equally little doubt that it was often mistaken for and confused with other conditions. "When in the sixteenth century an inspection was undertaken in France and Italy of the over-crowded leper hospitals the fact came out that in many of them by far the greater number and in some instances the whole of the inmates were found to

be suffering merely from various skin diseases, and only a minority from true leprosy." (Diseases of the Bible, by Bennoti). We may therefore well believe that the sanitary duties of the priests in Palestine did not always result in isolating the true cases of leprosy or distinguishing between it and other forms of disease. In so far as they followed out the directions given in Leviticus they were performing a religious ceremonial which undoubtedly reflected beneficially on the national health; but they were not engaged in a scientific campaign against disease. In our comparative ignorance of the true nature of the affections treated of in Leviticus it is useless to speculate on the question of their contagiousness. But it will be seen that any value these laws possess as sanitary precautions turns upon this single point; for if those diseases did not spread by infection the entire system enforced becomes divorced from sanitary associations and resolves itself into a purely religious rite.³

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