

6.21.09 / Mark 1:40-45

Leprosy as God's Wrath

Several stories involve God striking people with leprosy as a sign of His displeasure.

In Numbers 12 Aaron and Miriam pick a fight with Moses about the ethnicity of his wife, and brag that God speaks through them too. In response, a cloud descends on Miriam, and when it leaves Miriam is "leprous like snow". The severity of this punishment is demonstrated by Aaron's plea for his sister. He responds to this action by crying out, "Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb." God informs them that Miriam will remain unclean, and banished from the camp, for seven days.

In 2 Chronicles 26 we learn that Uzziah goes to the Temple to burn incense. While this action may look devout, it is a priestly duty. Most surrounding nations had kings who were high priests as well, or even claimed descent from one of their gods. Israel, uniquely, remained a nation with at least two centers of power – the ceremonial religious authority of the priests (an inherited position) and the secular authority of the king (also inherited, but not within the same family line as that of the priests). Uzziah's apparent devotion could be viewed as more of a power grab. He is rebuked by the priests, and, as he gets angry with them, he is struck with leprosy on his head, and is forced to live in seclusion while his son rules in his stead.

Conversely, in 2 Kings 5 we hear of a man cured of leprosy. This man, Naaman, is the commander of the armies of Aram (often translated Syria, although it has little connection to the modern day country of Syria, and obscures the connection to the occasional references to the Arameans). As such, he is an enemy of Israel, and a pagan. However, in his willingness to trust in the Lord, and abandon the god of his people (Rimmon), he is healed. In this case, healing of leprosy accompanies a conversion from being one of God's enemies to one of his own.

Together, these stories suggest that leprosy was a very serious problem for the afflicted leper, and aside from resulting in forced exile it may have been seen as a sign that God hated the afflicted person.