

Science

in the perspective of
**African Religion (AFREL),
Islam & Christianity**



EDITOR IN CHIEF
S.O. OYEWOLE

EDITORS

* Ade P. Dopamu * I.O. Umejiesi * P.O. Amanze
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Date _____

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With the sustenance and continuity of this award, the Chairman of LSI and NASTRENS, Professor Ade P. Dopamu facilitated the second conference which was tagged: SCIENCE IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF AFRICAN RELIGION, ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY. This book is the product of the conference. Therefore, I would like to appreciate Metanexus Institute particularly for the award and the recognition for the inter-textual approach to the study of Science and Religion.

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Professor S.O. Oyewole

Editor-in-Chief

Vice Chairman of LSI and NASTRENS

PREFACE

This series, *Science in the Perspective of African Religion, Islam and Christianity* arose out of all-inclusive conference of Science and Religion, organized by the now prestigious The Local Societies Initiative (LSI) at the University of Ilorin, 2006. It is an excellent initiative and has elicited exciting responses from gamut of participants. A handful of articles were presented, and thought-provoking and thematic issues of periodicals between science and religion were rigorously raised and discussed. This series is comprehensively detailed, with studies on the family, African necromancy, African scientific bullet-proof, religious variables, reproductive technology, African religious science, technological culture, scientific advancements of modern biology and medicine. In fact, this series is encyclopedic text designed by editors to again fill a scholarly gap in knowledge dissemination in the two disciplines of Religion and Science. No doubt, the essays in this edition eloquently testify, there is no qualms on the two subject matters as rival disciplines, hence the duo are mutual disciplines in the service of humanity. The recent engagements between science and religion have poised scholars to dredge up deeper layers of our consciousness on the putative connection between them and their explanations. I am well aware that what is presented here is not a beginning of dialogue between science and religion; rather the dialogue is a continuum of which much specialized investigation is needed as a result of the complementarity of the future of science and religion.

Seasoned scholars have placed science and religion in dialogue. What we know about God, helps illuminate what we equally know of science. Science *per se* is not enough. Revelation from God casts nature in a new light and leads us toward a more adequate understanding of its reality. It is appropriate that scientific developments should be brought to bear in reflecting on the topic of divine action. It became clear that a recital of the possible problems of science and religion is not satisfying. In reflecting on the huge potential for future conflict in polarized scientific culture with religious differences, the concepts of common basis

would commend themselves as having the potential to lead to constructive rather than destructive tensions.

The book titled: *Science in the Perspective of African Religion, Islam and Christianity* is spread out in forty-nine robust chapters, reflecting wide-ranging variegations in themes and theoretical and scholarly perspectives on the subjects treated. The most gratifying result for which I could hope would be that this study would become the theme of a continuous dialogue which leads to deeper mutual understanding. This is a courageous step in the right direction. It promises further excitement for the future of scholarship. This eclectic and semiotic thrust emphasizes the intertextuality of knowledge, especially in this era of multi-disciplinary approach to scholarship.

Professor S.O. Oyewole
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CAUSES AND TREATMENTS OF SKIN DISEASES IN ANCIENT ISRAEL, AFRICAN SOCIETY AND THE ORTHODOX MEDICINE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

C.O. OGUNKUNLE

Introduction

Apostle John, while writing to his friend, Gaius prayed "that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well" (3 John 2). Similarly, in the African society, especially among the Yoruba, living in good health is the legitimate concern of every man. P.A. Dopamu notes:

The Yoruba know that to be healthy is to live. Without life, there is no man. And since illness or disease is an indication that the means of existence or life, is being threatened, and the gate to quietus is being gradually opened, man must of necessity find a means of combating it, and this means is adequately found in medicine. Medicine is used against diseases, ailments or illness of all categories.¹

However, skin diseases are terrible and they tend to pose a serious danger to human health and especially individuals that have them. Skin diseases disfigure the surface of the body and destroy its wholeness. Therefore the trust of this paper is to examine the causes and treatments of skin diseases in Ancient Israel, African society and the orthodox medicine. The historical-comparative method is adopted in the research. The paper is historical in the sense that several literatures on the subject are examined. Also, it is comparative as our findings in Ancient Israel are compared with what is obtained in the African society and the orthodox medicine.

Meaning of Some Related Hebrew and Yoruba Words

The Hebrew verb *חלל* has two meanings: one, it means "to become weak" as in the case of Samson (Judges 16:7, 11, 17 cf. Isa. 57:10; Ezek. 34:4, 16). Two, it means "to become sick or ill" as Jacob (Gen. 48:1); David (I Sam 19:14); Abijah (I Kgs. 14: 1,15)", Ahaziah (I Kgs. 1:2) etc.²

The Hebrew word *צרעת* is a feminine noun which is a general word for any form of skin disease cf. (Lev. 13:2; Deut. 24:8; 2 Kgs. 5: 3, 6, 7, 27; 2 Chro. 26:19 etc.)³ Its verb form *צרע* means "to smite or strike" with leprosy.⁴ Skin diseases include leprosy (Exod. 4:6); syphilis (Prov. 7: 22-23); smallpox (perhaps Job's boil); boil or carbunche (II Kgs. 20:7); anthrax (Exod. 9:3); scabies (Deut. 28: 27) itch or ringworm (Lev. 13:30); etc.⁵ Leviticus 13 treats the law concerning leprosy in men and garments where about 24 different cases of skin diseases are highlighted. Leviticus 14 contains the rites of sacrifice in the cleansing of skin diseases.

Generally, skin diseases have the characteristics of discolouring the surface of the body (Lev. 13:3; 49, 14; 37); affecting different parts of the body (Lev. 13: 9-13; 14:37, 42; 55); and a times spread fast to other parts of the body (Lev. 13:7, 51; 14:44). Skin diseases are said to be "unclean" because they tend to disfigure the "appearance of a man and his works destroy the wholeness that ought to characterize the creation"⁶ And still writing on leprosy in particular, Wenham notes that:

True leprosy (Hansen's disease) is a gruesome complaint that affects the skin, and makes other parts of the body become numb and insensitive to pain, while the bones are deformed and eventually the sufferer dies. It is still widespread in parts of the East and Africa. It is also contagious and until recently was incurable.⁷

Some of Yoruba skin diseases and their meanings include the following:⁸

- a. **Eela** – a skin disease, which is the swelling of glands all over the body, especially of a baby.
- b. **Ete** (leprosy). It is a very serious infectious skin disease in which the flesh and nerves are gradually destroyed.

- c. **Eewo** (boil or abscess) – it is a painful infected swelling under the skin.
- d. **Eeyi** (measles) – it is an infectious illness in which a person has fever and small red spots on the face and body.
- e. **Ifo** (Eczema) – it is an inflammatory disease of the skin which is characterized by itching and formation of scale's.
- f. **Inarun** (nettle-rash) – it is an inflammatory skin disease which is characterized by red pimples and burning or stinging sensation.
- g. **Lapalapa** or **Ekuse** (Ring worm) – it is a skin infection that causes red rings, especially on the head.

Causes of Skin Diseases in Ancient Israel, African Society and in Orthodox Medicine

Several individuals and scholars have given various causes for sicknesses that are plaguing men in our society. Charles C. Ryrie gave five points as to why people become sick. These include sickness that comes for the purpose of glorifying God (John 11:4); sickness which Jesus healed in order that men might believe (John 9); illness that comes as an activity of demons (Mark 5: 4-5); sickness that comes as a result of sin; and sickness that comes as a result of overwork.⁹ Also, writing from an ecclesiastical perspective, an unidentified writer in the *Life Magazine* listed causes of sickness as follows: transgression and iniquity (Psalm 107:17); rejecting God's word (Psalm 107:20); misuse of the tongue. (Numbers 12: 2, 9, 10); touching the Lord's Anointed (Psalm 105: 12-15); refusal to worship the Lord in the beauty of his holiness (Zechariah 14: 18-20); and marital infidelity (Numbers 5:27)¹⁰.

As for the skin diseases, of which this paper is centred on, it is not specifically stated anywhere in the Bible that all skin diseases were caused by particular sins. An example is the case of Job of which the Bible says "Job did not sin against God" but then God allowed Satan to torment him in several ways that include skin disease (Job 2: 4-8). Also, the fact that inanimate objects like garments (Lev. 13: 47-58) houses (Lev. 14:33-53) were affected evidently rules out such a strict connection between sin and skin diseases. However, in several cases in ancient Israel, skin diseases are definitely viewed as the consequence of specific sins.¹¹ Some of the cases are:

- a. Miriam (Numbers 12: 9-12) whose offence was her speech against Moses because of the Cushite wife (Num. 12:1). In other words, Miriam and Aaron challenged the authority of Moses, the action that brought down the anger of God as shown in the life of Miriam.
- b. Gehazi (2 Kings 5: 26-27). Gehazi was the servant of Elisha, the prophet who healed Naaman of his leprosy but then he refused to accept the gifts from Naaman. Gehazi thought to himself that his master was too kind to Naaman by not accepting the gifts. Therefore, he resolved to accept the gifts that his master rejected (2 Kgs. 5: 19-21). Thus he ran after him saying that his master asked him to collect a talent of silver and two sets of clothing (v.22). Unfortunately for Gehazi, Elisha had the understanding of everything that transpired between him and Naaman. So by the time he came back to Elisha, the prophet simply pronounced judgment on him. Thus he went from Elisha's presence and he was leprous, as white as snow (2 Kgs. 5:27). Thomas L. Constable notes that:

Naaman's leprosy had been removed from him for his trust in and obedience to God. Now, ironically, leprosy would cling to Gehazi for his lack of trust in and obedience to God. The servant had brought dishonour to Yahweh's name... Gehazi's judgment was serious because his sin had far-reaching consequences; this story was probably told all over Aram and Israel.¹²

- c. King Uzziah (2 Kgs. 15:5; 2 Chro. 26: 16-21). King Uzziah was a very good king who reigned in Judah for many years. But towards the end of his reign his power led to pride which eventually led to his downfall cf. (Prov. 16:18; 12). At a point in his reign he started to depend on men and weapons rather than on the LORD who had been helping him. He even usurped the priestly function of burning incense of the altar. This action made Azariah the priest and eighty other courageous priests to condemn him. The king responded in rage but then the propriety of the priests' rebuke was immediately evident when his forehead broke out with leprosy that rendered him ceremonially unclean of which

he had to leave the temple at once. He became a leper until his death and even in death he was ostracized because of his disease and therefore he was buried near his fathers, not with them (2 Chro. 21: 20; 24: 2; 28:27).

Writing from the African perspective, P.A. Dopamu rightly identifies three sources of diseases. There are: (1) natural or physical causation which include cough, cold, slight fever, etc. (2) supernatural causation which is caused by a witch or sorcerer. This is manifested in serious and protracted illness. Finally, (3) mystical causation which is caused by spirits, divinities and ancestors as a punishment for offences against them.¹³

Speaking of the cause of leprosy, a major skin disease, from the orthodox medicine, it has been noted that:

The disease is caused by a rod-shaped bacillus, mycobacterium leprae, which is similar to the bacillus that causes tuberculosis. The leprosy bacillus was identified in 1874 by the Norwegian doctor Gerhard Henrik Armauer Hansen.¹⁴

It was further stated that:

The disease is found frequently in countries where nutrition is poor. In other words, the poor nutrition leads to lowered resistance to diseases.¹⁵

Treatments of Skin Diseases in Ancient Israel, African Society and the Orthodox Medicine

There seems to be no record of method of treatment for skin diseases in Ancient Israel. However, anyone with a skin disease was sent out of the camp as commanded by the LORD in Numbers 5: 1-3:

The LORD said to Moses, command the Israelites to send away from the camp anyone who has an infectious skin disease or a discharge of any kind, or who is ceremonially unclean because of a dead body. Send away male and female alike; send them outside the camp so that they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them.

This means that the Levitical law provided no means of curing skin diseases. R.K. Harrison notes, "a diagnosis of skin disease was as much of a death sentence to the Ancient Israelites as tidings about an advanced malignancy would be to a modern patient."¹⁶

According to (Leviticus 13:45-46), the priest would prevent the victim from bringing unnecessary sorrow and hardship to his countrymen while at the same time ensuring the health of the community. This means that the priest did not function as a doctor to prescribe medical treatment. He functioned more like a public health officer who determined whether a person was infected and then isolated him from the community.¹⁷ Therefore once a person is confirmed to have a skin disease he had to adopt the posture of a mourner by tearing his clothes, allowing his hair to become unkempt, covering his beard or moustache, and crying 'unclean'. He had to live outside the camp, or perhaps in company with other lepers cf. (2 Kgs. 7:3). R.K.Harrison notes "unless there was a quick remission of the disease, the victim of a clinical leprosy knew that his condition would be of lengthy duration, and that its loathsome nature would prohibit significant contact with society."¹⁸

The sufferer had to wait in hope of cure from God without human aid. It was after the healing that he could present himself to the priest for certification. However, the coming of Jesus Christ made a significant difference. Jesus sought out for lepers and He healed them (Mat. 8: 2-4; 11:5; Mark 14:3; Luke 17: 11-19). In fact, one of the major assignments He gave to the twelve disciples was "to cleanse those who have leprosy" (Mat. 10:7-8). Also, Jesus did not abrogate the Levitical laws rather He told the healed lepers to observe them (Mat. 8: 4; Lk. 17:14).¹⁹

In the African society, especially among the Yoruba, much value is placed on body beautification as the people acknowledge beauty in different parts of their body.²⁰ Therefore, when a person discovers that he has a particular skin disease, he may carry out the treatment by himself either by preparing the appropriate remedies, or by prescribing the medicine for a relative to prepare for him. This happen when the "disease is recognized to be a minor one, one that is of natural causation"²¹. However, if the disease is of mystical and supernatural causation, then the treatment will be at a higher level. In other words, the diviner or Ifa-priest must be contacted for thorough investigation on the cause of the

disease and its treatment.²² The ingredients and prescriptions for the treatment of two of the skin diseases among the Yoruba are as follows:

a. **Inarun - Nettlerash**

Ingredients: *Iyere* (West African Black pepper) *alubosa* (onion); *aridon* (tetrapleuro tetraptera; mimosaceae; *Ipeta* (securidaca longipedunculata; polygalaceae; the violet-tree); the root of *inobiri* plant (*plumbago zeylanica*); nine bitter-kola (*orogbo*); *eeru* (*xylopia Aethiopica*; Anonaceae; Ethiopian pepper); *konwun* (potash); the root of *asunrun* plant (*cassia podocarpa*); nine alligator peppers; the fruit of *tagiri* plant (*Adenophus Brevifloris*); *Isereegun* plant.

Prescription - Pound them together. Drink half-desert spoonful of the powder in hot *eko* (maize paste) from time to time.²³

b. **Lapalapa or ekuse - ringworm**

This is a kind of irritation on the skin of children usually caused by the oil.

Ingredients - The leaves of *alubara* (*citrullus vulgaris*; water-melon); *iseta* (the musk scent obtained from the civet-cat).

Prescription - Grind them together with *ori*. Apply it on the affected part.²⁴

As for the treatment of skin disease with the orthodox medicine, it has been stated that "the use of chaulmoogra oil was for many years the established treatment of leprosy."²⁵ Also, the use of drug such as dapsone, ritampin and clofazimine and provision of adequate nutrition are recommended. And most importantly a leprosy vaccine is currently under development.²⁶ And for minor skin diseases, there are various creams such as Hydrocortisone, Nixoderm, etc that are available for sale in the chemists.

As for the treatment of skin diseases in orthodox medicine, much progress has been made in the contemporary society. Apart from numerous drugs and creams that are available to cure skin diseases, there are dermatologists in our teaching hospitals, who are specially trained to handle cases of skin diseases.

Concluding Observations and Remarks

The following observations and remarks are made from this paper:

1. Throughout history, skin diseases pose a serious danger to human health. The Hebrew word *צָרַעַת* that is generally translated 'leprosy' has a broad meaning to include all forms of skin diseases. The danger, however, is that many of the skin diseases are not leprosy and thus victim should not be victimized or stigmatized.
2. The victim of skin disease in Ancient Israel had to rely on Yahweh for divine healing otherwise he remained outside the camp for life. The priest on his part made no attempt to heal him. He simply diagnosed and subsequently separated the individual from the community. The African society recognizes the seriousness of skin diseases but then attempt is made at various levels to heal the affected individuals. In other words, the elder in the community or *Onisegun* (medicine man) or the Ifa priest makes effort to heal the person through herbal medicine. The situation is much more improved with the introduction of the orthodox medicine. The dermatologist makes every effort to cure the affected individuals with the use of several medicated creams and drugs that are available currently. Indeed, there seems to be a progression in the knowledge of man in his understanding and treatment of skin diseases.
3. Despite the fact that skin diseases are curable as noted in the Old and New Testaments, African society, and with the orthodox medicine, the issue of stigmatization and segregation remains a major thing to address. Generally members of the community find it hard to associate with any one with serious skin diseases even when such are not contagious. This was the case in ancient Israel as already noted and unfortunately the situation is the same in the contemporary African society.²⁷ This explains why leprosarium centres are built in some cities.²⁸

Notes and References

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 27. The fact that lepers or people with serious skin diseases are being stigmatized was confirmed by Dr. Daramola, a Dermatologist in the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital in my interaction with him on March 1st, 2006.This is further corroborated with the case of one Mr.Isaac Okunise Essie whose wife abandoned him because of the infection.cf. Tope Abiola et.al. "Life at Lepers' Colony" *Nigerian Tribune* Monday (10th April 2006), p.14.

28. An example is "The Promise Land, Camp of Grace", in one of the Local Governments in Ogbomoso, cf. Tope Abiola et.al. "Life at Lepers' Colony" *Nigerian Tribune* Monday (10th April 2006), p.14.