IV. THE HEALING OF THE LEPERS

Those who were healed by Jesus also included a number of lepers. The Synoptists refer to a surprising ease, whilst Luke separately reports the healing of ten lepers. It is striking that the fourth Gospel makes no reference to the healing of lepers, whilst there is nothing more said about these patients in the other books of the New Testament either.

The way in which the Evangelists speak of leprosy reveals that this disease was not only serious, but also greatly feared. When He sent forth the twelve disciples, Jesus mentioned lepers by name: “cleanse the lepers,” Mt. 10:8. In the message which Jesus sent to John the Baptist when the latter was in prison, John’s attention was drawn among other things to the cleansing of lepers, Mt. 11:5, Lk. 7:22. During the address that Jesus gave in the synagogue at Nazareth, the wrath of those present was aroused when He spoke of the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian by the prophet Eliseus (Elisha) whilst there were many lepers in Israel in the days of Eliseus, Lk. 4:27. In the house of Simon the leper Jesus was anointed with precious ointment of spikenard, Mt. 26:6, 7, Mk. 14:3.

The question which has been put countless times already and which must again be raised here is this: does the leprosy referred to in the Old and the New Testament correspond in all cases to what we understand by the term leprosy nowadays? Many consider the answer to this question problematical, and the matter will arise on a number of occasions in the course of our investigation. The following aspects require attention in our study:

(a) Medical description of leprosy.

(b) Description of leprosy in the Old Testament.

(c) Treatment of leprosy in former times and among primitive peoples.

(d) The healing of a leper.

(e) The healing of the ten lepers.

1 Mt. 8:1-4; Mk. 1:40-45; Lk. 5:12-16. Lk. 17:11-19, the ten lepers
(a) Medical description of leprosy

It seems desirable to begin with the medical aspects of the disease, so that we shall have comparative material available for the further sections.

Leprosy is described as a chronic infectious disease of man, caused by bacillus leprae. The origin of the disease is lost in Antiquity; the oldest accounts have come down to us from India. Right up to the last century, and even in this one, leprosy has been confused with other skin diseases. Many leproseries in Europe were in fact nothing more than dermatological clinics, according to Simons. In general infection occurs in youth. It is still unknown how the infection comes about; in any case direct and intimate contact is required. The disease begins with an invasion period, during

1 Carol, Leerboek der Huidziekten, p. 429 . . . According to Carol, in Antiquity Psora (= an itching eruption) and Psoriasis (= a peeling eruption) were not kept strictly apart. “Psora, alphas, lichen and lepra meant an accumulation on the skin of all kinds of morbid products, lichen (leichein = to spread) and lepra (lepein = to peel off) being used for the dry accumulations and psora more for moist, suppurating accumulations. Whilst lepra and lichen alluded more to scales and nodules, psora referred more to a moist, postulate eruption; alphas doubtless referred to white accumulations . . . It can no longer be properly investigated what these terms exactly meant in former times. Our leprosy would formerly have been called lepra arabum or lepra judaeorum (also elephantiasis Graecorum s. judaei); lepra alphoides alphas or alphosis was perhaps our psoriasis. Lepros meant peeling off, lepein = to peel off: (lepos = husk, scale or flake)” (p. 49). For the names given to leprosy by all kinds of peoples, see the detailed work by Zambaco, La Lèpre, p. 1. Rutgers, Lepra en Tuberculose, p. 1, states that there have been periods in history in which leprosy and tuberculosis were identified with one another. In the Middle Ages leprosy was also taken for a form of syphilis, whilst Boerhave (according to Danielsen) established a connection between leprosy and serious scurvy. Armauer Hansen discovered the leprosy bacillus in 1874; shortly afterwards, in 1882, Robert Koch discovered the tuberculosis bacillus.


4 Simons, op. cit., p. 181: “How infection occurs is an open question, the answer to which can be approached by elimination.” There must be close and lengthy contact (kissing, coitus, infection spread by coughing or sneezing; leprous parents and children sleeping in the same bed). Worthy of mention is Simons’ following statement: “In Surinam the evening Communion service in the churches is held in the mornings or afternoons to prevent patients who have freedom of movement from secretly attending the service and drinking out of the communal chalice” (p. 206). In his study “Bijeloof en Godsziekte,” Simons mentions among the metamorphosed demons in the Atlantic region a demon called fio fio in the