The word ra'atan appears in a number of sources (midrashim, Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud) and is usually understood as a term for a skin disease. However, information on its symptoms and the medications prescribed found in Talmudic literature seems to be corrupt, so that this illness has not yet been properly identified.¹ In this article, we try not only to point out the misreading that has bewildered historians of Jewish medicine but also to answer the perplexing question of the nature of this disease. We shall also consider the interrelations between the Jewish and the gentile wisdom and medicine relevant to this discussion.

Aiming to understand a rare term that appears in the language of sages, one should bear in mind the special cultural situation in Palestine of that epoch. In the end of the period of the Second Temple and several centuries after it, Jewish society existed in close contact with the gentile world. Not only the milieu of Mediterranean folk culture influenced the sages at that time, but also the explicitly expressed opinions of gentile sages found their place in the speculations of their Jewish counterparts. Jews spoke various dialects of Aramaic language, lingua franca of the ancient Middle East, they taught their children Greek, and, being in contact with the Latin administration, they knew some Latin.² Therefore, we base this work on the linguistic and cultural background of the Mediterranean culture.

¹ J. Preuss, Biblical and Talmudic Medicine (1978), p. 348: “Today we do not know of any illness that conforms to the clinical appearances and anatomical substrate described in the Talmud. In addition, I am unable to find any parallel thereto from antiquity.” The opinion of F. Rosner in his recent article (in press) is the same. Jastrow understands this to be a type of skin disease. In M. Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period, it does not appear at all.

Linguistic Evidence

Related words from other languages of the cultural surrounding of the Jewish people of that period (first through fourth centuries C.E.) offer considerable help in identifying the disease. Greek has no words resembling the word ra'atan for any disease. Yet the word ro'tono' does appear in Syriac, meaning pulmonaris; there are also several related words that can be translated as pneumonia (roto'), pulmone instructus or morbus pulmonarius (ro'tono') and dolor pulmonis (rtwuto'). The word is derived from the noun re'ah, lung. This noun also existed in Hebrew, at least in the period of the sages.

We will demonstrate below that the etiology of this disease can be explained on the basis of Greek medical science. The exact nature of the Greek and Syriac influence on Jewish culture is unclear in our case. Still, it is possible that the word ra'atan entered Jewish literature as a result of the influence of Syriac translations of Greek medical treatises.  

Below, we demonstrate how the term that initially meant pneumonia could have been understood as a term for a skin disease.

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6 Syriac translations from Greek appeared as early as 100-200 C.E., i.e., in the Mishnaic period. Unfortunately, we have no evidence of translations of medical treatises. The texts translated were mostly religious, Christian, and gnostic; see A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der Syrischen Literatur* (Bonn, 1922), pp. 16-26. It can also be supposed that Syriac translations of Greek medical treatises could influence Jewish medicine of the Amoraic epoch (see the discussion of B. Ket. below). At that time, various and numerous translations of Greek authors began to appear. In the beginning of this period (300-1000) the books translated were mostly treatises of the Christian authors or decrees of the Synods, but a MS (sixth-seventh century) of a translation of a Greek medical treatise and its commentary (*Peri kraseos ton haplon farmakev*, A. Baumstark, p. 168) also exists.