A NOTE ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF piler  

by

JOHN F. A. SAWYER

Newcastle upon Tyne

It is now generally accepted that Biblical descriptions of piler, traditionally translated "leprosy", do not refer to true leprosy, as it is diagnosed and treated today, and there is no need to repeat the arguments for the view that piler in Biblical Hebrew was applied to various "repulsive scaly skin diseases", particularly psoriasis. The last word on the subject has probably now been written in a recent article by Dr. E. V. Hulse 1). But one assumption which underlies several modern discussions seems to the present writer to be in need of modification. It concerns the etymology of the word piler. This is a question primarily of historical interest, since the "root-meaning" may not have been productive in the usage of the term in Biblical times 2), and Hulse wisely makes no reference to this aspect of the matter. In the complex task of identifying and explaining the peculiar overtones and associations which this term acquired, however, etymological evidence may be important, and it is the aim of this note to ensure that that evidence is correct.

It has been widely assumed that there is an etymological relationship between Hebrew piler and Arabic ular "to throw down". G. R. Driver, for instance, begins his detailed article on "Leprosy" in the one-volume revised edition of Hastings's Dictionary of the Bible as follows: "The Hebrew ular and uler 'prostration' are general terms for any prostrating experience or disabling disease (cf. Arabic ular 'prostrated', ular 'was prostrated by epilepsy' and ular 'submitted oneself; was feeble, weak')" 3). L. Koehler, in his classic study Hebrew Man, gives the following definition of uler: "The Hebrew calls this disease uler, which means 'stroke.' The meaning of this description is clearly that God has stricken

the sick man and has punished him thereby for sin” 4). The same etymology is given for sāräʿat in the standard Hebrew dictionaries 5). But was sāräʿat ever “a general term for any prostrating experience or disabling disease”? Are sāräʿat and sīrʿā (traditionally translated “wasp, hornet”) synonyms in Biblical Hebrew as Driver implies? Are we justified in reading into sāräʿat the kind of theological explanation of disease that Koehler bases on its etymology?

1. The form of sāräʿat, as well as its meaning, suggests that it belongs to a large group of medical terms in which the root manifestly indicates one of the more obvious symptoms of the disease: e.g. dalleqet “inflammation” (cf. dālaq “to burn”); ṣāḥem “measles” (cf. ṣāḥem “red”); šāhebet “jaundice” (cf. šāḥēb “yellow” 6). Against this background the proposed etymology which connects sāräʿat with words for “to be prostrated, smitten (sc. by God)” is highly improbable.

2. The common expression nega sāräʿat “an attack of sāräʿat” 7) raises a further difficulty for the “prostration” etymology. Since nega is itself “a general term for any prostrating experience or disabling disease”, with recognizable overtones of being struck or smitten by God, the phrase would be oddly tautologous if sāräʿat had virtually the same meaning. There are of course several words for disease or “plague” related to verbs for “to strike”: e.g. maggēpā, makkā, maktaš (Aramaic) and nega. But sāräʿat is sharply distinguished from them both in form and usage.

3. sāräʿat is not a general term for any disease, but is clearly distinguished from related terms by being specifically reserved for skin-diseases. General terms like boli, mahalād and nega are applied to all kinds of disorders such as a headache (Isa. i 15), diseases of the bowels (2 Chron. xxi 15), the plague (Ex. ix 14) and multiple injuries resulting from a fall (2 Kings i 2), while sāräʿat is applied exclusively to surface

---

7) Nearly half the occurrences of sāräʿat in Biblical Hebrew are in juxtaposition with nega (16 out of 34).