

Crisis and healing: Reflecting on Leviticus 13–14

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Teaching the Pentateuch in a COVID-19 world

We teach The Pentateuch every second year in the Bachelor of Theology at Charles Sturt University. Students are asked to prepare an exegesis assignment and have a choice of a range of texts from the first five books of the Old Testament. This year one of the suggested texts was Numbers 12, the narrative in which Miriam and Aaron bring a challenge to the leadership of Moses, their brother. “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses” they ask. “Has he not spoken through us also?” (Num. 12:2, NRSV). The text tells us that God then became angry with Miriam and Aaron (Num. 12:9). Miriam was afflicted with a skin disease that required a seven-day expulsion from the camp. Moses and Aaron both interceded for her and, we are told, “the people did not set out on the march until Miriam had been brought in again” (Num. 12:15). Whilst normally this text raises questions for me about leadership, authority, and equality (why was only Miriam punished with disease?); this year in the context of the COVID-19 crisis I was particularly struck by two aspects: the fact that Miriam was placed in quarantine; and the effect that this event had on the whole community. The narrative context for both this account and the underlying legislation found in Leviticus 13–14 is the wilderness wanderings of the Exodus community on their way from Egypt

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to the promised land. As seen in this narrative, when a member of the community became ill and had to be isolated, the rest of the community had to make camp and wait until the crisis was over.

In this volume of essays, my colleagues and I are using insights from our sub-disciplines to each reflect on the challenges and responses that have arisen in 2020, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. As someone who studies the literature of the Old Testament, I get excited when biblical traditions intersect with our everyday lives.¹ This essay is not going to be a philosophical discussion of theodicy (why God allows bad things to happen), or a theological treatise on healing in the Old Testament. Instead, it will reflect on biblical verses and traditions that have taken on new relevance this year as I taught The Pentateuch in this particular context. Up until now, for example, I have never noticed that bats are on the list of unclean animals (Lev. 11:19), or that Moses wears a mask to interact with the community after he had been in the presence of God (Exod. 34:29–35).

The focus of this essay is to take a new look at the legislation in Leviticus 13–14 relating to skin disease and ask what an examination of these Old Testament traditions might illuminate for us as we graciously respond to this year. The condition that was in the mind of the authors of Leviticus has not been firmly identified,² so I will use the Old Testament's own Hebrew term *tzara'at* when referring to the biblical passages.

The difference genre makes

When I commenced research for this essay my notes included a comment that I would need to deal with a problematic aspect of the Old Testament, namely the general understanding that illness is caused by sin. There are several narratives along with Numbers 12 that describe individuals contracting *tzara'at* for wrongdoing. For example, King David calls down divine punishment in the form of *tzara'at* upon Joab for the murder of Abner (2 Sam. 3:29). The prophet Elisha has the power to afflict *tzara'at* on a dishonest servant (2 Kings 5:27). King Uzziah was struck with *tzara'at* by YHWH for committing a cultic sin (2 Chron. 26:19).

My research on the book of Leviticus, however, made clear that the Priestly law attributes *no* relationship between *tzara'at* and sin. Joel Baden and Candida Moss note that Priestly laws are carefully ordered, so placing the legislation relating to *tzara'at* is not accidental.³ In Leviticus, *tzara'at* is grouped with bodily discharge, childbirth, and contact with dead bodies,

described by Baden and Moss as “natural and largely unavoidable parts of human activity”.⁴ The Priestly legislation refers only to identification and management of the disease for its duration and its aftermath, including rites of purification and reintegration into the community. Therefore, while it is true to say that non-Priestly narrative traditions *do* connect sin with illness, there is no need for us to read the Priestly texts found in Leviticus through that perspective. The priests dealing with *tzara'at* understood it as a natural part of life, not a punishment from God. Nonetheless, it was a serious threat to the wellbeing of the community and needed careful supervision. The principles underlying the management of the misfortune of contracting *tzara'at* as recorded in Leviticus 13–14 may have something new to say to us in a COVID-19 world.

Illness in Leviticus 13–14

The chapters dealing with *tzara'at* are among the most detailed in the book of Leviticus. Baden and Moss begin their article by pointing out:

Of all the eccentricities and diversities of human embodiment, no physical abnormality seems to have captured the imagination of biblical authors so much as *šāracat* (שָׂרָעַת), “skin disease,” which is accorded detailed treatment in both Priestly legislation and non-Priestly narratives.⁵

As has already been noted, the legislation concerning *tzara'at* is found among discussion of other natural bodily processes including childbirth and genital secretions for both males and females. For the ancient Israelites, religious matters were not separated from real life matters. Faith was an embodied faith, concerned about real things. This is one of the inspiring aspects of Biblical Studies as it encourages us to continue to find connections between our real-life experience and our Scriptures. On the other hand, recent scholarship warns against attempts to diagnose *tzara'at* through knowledge of modern medicine.⁶ The biblical text seems to be dealing with conditions that have a similar appearance rather than a specifically diagnosable ailment. Hence the application of the laws to garments and buildings as well as people (Lev. 13:49; 14:37). The principle underlying the detailed descriptions of these ailments is the necessity to discern between clean and unclean in order to maintain a holy society (Lev. 19:2). A way of understanding the concept of “holiness” and “purity” in Leviticus is

that boundaries are breached when things become impure: skin (and also clothing and walls of buildings) is “broken” (described as swollen, blotchy, reddish, discoloured, scaly in appearance) and therefore the person (clothing or building) is “unclean”.⁷

The Levitical priests, the members of the community charged with such discernment, were concerned with maintaining purity within the community and preventing contamination of the tabernacle where worship took place. Although there would not have been any conception of germs in a pre-scientific society, the condition of *tzara'at* described in Leviticus was clearly understood to be contagious, and therefore a threat to the well-being of the community as well as the sanctuary. It was the role of the priest to examine the affected person, cloth, or building and place them in quarantine, routinely visiting and assessing the condition until such time as reintegration into society was possible (or, in the case of cloth or buildings, destruction was necessary). The priest also oversaw the ritual sacrifices and offerings that marked the return to normal life. For a healed person, these rituals took place within the sanctuary, the significance of which is noted by Maurice Harris:

The priest and the healed person perform a sacred ritual, and then, when the person is finally permitted back into the community, he or she accompanies the priest to the central sanctuary and makes ritual offerings. This is important, because, upon re-entry, the person who has healed from *tzara'at* is brought to the most sacred and precious place in the entire community.⁸

In addition to the significance of the sanctuary, it is important to note that the ritual includes anointing of the extremities on the right side of the body (earlobe, thumb, big toe), perhaps symbolising that the person is entirely clean: from top to toe. The sprinkling of blood seven times on the healed person (Lev. 14:7) and house (Lev. 14:51) enhances the holistic nature of the ritual, since the number seven is usually understood as conveying completeness in the Old Testament.

Many translations, including the NRSV, use the terms “guilt offering” (*'asham*) and “sin offering” (*chatta'it*) when describing these rituals in Leviticus 14. The *chatta'it* offering is used for the dedication of a newly constructed altar (Lev. 8:15), offerings following childbirth (Lev. 12:6, 8), and

genital discharge (Lev. 15:15, 30), none of which describe circumstances that involve sin. Baden and Moss argue that the order of events in this chapter do not match the usual legislation for offerings for unintentional sin as seen in Leviticus 5, and so the *'asham* offering is better understood “. . . not to make reparations for some sin, since none has been committed, but rather to effect the process of purification, particularly by virtue of the *ʿāšām*'s unique utilization of blood.”⁹ These terms are better translated “reparation offering” and “purification offering” as proposed by Jacob Milgrom.¹⁰ Martin Noth has made a similar point in his commentary: “The ‘guilt offering’ . . . served to get rid of the ‘guilt’ . . . in this particular case it is at once clear that there is no question of subjective guilt, but only of an objective ‘taint’ caused by the in no way blameworthy cultic uncleanness.”¹¹ The function of these sacrifices is to purify persons, buildings, and especially the sanctuary after decontamination. We should also note that, like in other parts of Leviticus, flexibility is available for those members of community who are poor. The description of the ritual is repeated but less expensive animals are acceptable for sacrifices (Lev. 14:21–32).

To sum up the content of Leviticus 13–14, a particular type of illness described as *tzara'at* that could affect humans, clothing, and houses was understood to be a threat to the well-being of the entire community as well as the holy sanctuary within its midst. It was the role of the Levitical priest to identify and monitor the progression of the *tzara'at*, to apply quarantine measures when necessary, and to oversee the rituals prescribed for purification after healing with allowance for individual circumstances. Those who had become impure due to illness engaged in a process to be reinstated into the worshiping community. Although recognised as a natural occurrence, the main purpose of the management of this condition was to ensure that the community as a whole, and the worship sanctuary in particular, remained clean to enable the continuing presence of God. These chapters present *tzara'at* as a natural issue, a community issue, and a spiritual issue.

Healing in Leviticus 13–14

In a number of places the Old Testament claims that God is the great Physician (Exod. 15:26; Deut. 32:39; PSS. 41:3, 103:3; Isa. 57:19; Jer. 3:22, 30:17; Hosea 6:1, 14:4; 2 Chron. 7:14; Job 5:18). In the psalms, prophets, and narrative traditions we see individuals interceding in prayer for healing (Num. 12:15; 2 Kings 20:3–5; Jer. 17:14; PSS. 6:2, 41:4). By contrast, in these passages

about illness in Leviticus, there is neither direct reference to God as healer nor do we see the priest engaging in prayers of intercession. The offerings and rituals are to be made “before the Lord,” implying that healing comes from God. Unlike “healers” in other ancient societies, the Levitical priests had no role in healing *tzara’at*. Instead, their role was to diagnose, observe, and wait alongside the sufferer, and then engage in a carefully managed process of restoration once healing had come. According to Baruch Levine, “The rites ordained for the purification of a person who had suffered from *tzara’at* are among the most elaborate in the priestly laws.”¹² Several types of sacrifices and offerings are involved (Lev. 14:1–20), adjusted for the financial circumstances of the one healed (Lev. 14:21–32) and modified again when applied to the restoration of a building (Lev. 14:34–53). One part of the ritual involved the dipping of a branch of hyssop into blood for sprinkling over the affected person (Lev. 14:7) or house (Lev. 14:51). Other significant mentions of hyssop are at the Passover event where it was used to spread lamb’s blood on the doorposts to save the Israelites from destruction (Exod. 12:22) and the psalm attributed to King David recording a prayer for forgiveness and restoration (PSS. 51:7). These intertextual links underscore the importance of ritual for all members of the community to experience liberation: from the foundational Exodus population to an individual healed from *tzara’at* disease to the greatest of Israel’s kings.

The priestly rituals described in Leviticus 13–14 are echoed in the healing ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed as the great Physician, but his acts of healing frequently included advice to observe Levitical guidelines, to go and show oneself to the priest and offer the gifts that had been commanded (see Matt. 8:1–4; Mark 1:40–44; Luke 5:12–14, 17:11–19).¹³

What do these Old Testament traditions have to say to us today?

At least three aspects of the legislation in Leviticus described above are applicable in our current situation: the significance of embodiment, the relationship to the whole community, and the fact that for the biblical authors this was a spiritual issue.

First, embodiment. On the one hand, we are separated from the community that produced, received and transmitted the book of Leviticus by many degrees. The early Israelite community was pre-scientific, theocratic, located in the ancient Middle East. On the other hand, illness and wellbeing

is relevant in all human communities in every generation. As John Pilch puts it, "Healing, or restoration of meaning in life, is the common human experience in modernity as in antiquity."¹⁴ A focus on these chapters in Leviticus that examine the material body or human-made product reminds us that the authors of biblical texts were concerned about the physical lives of their audiences. The detailed descriptions of what a priest might expect to find upon examination and the setting out of cleansing rituals including contact with various parts of the body show that, for the ancient Israelites, the goodness of life was reflected in the bodily state, not in any other-worldly realm. This text in Leviticus is modelling attention to real issues confronting real people.

Second, examination of legislation for *tzara'at* in Leviticus gives a fresh appreciation for the impact of illness upon the whole community. In 2020, our world has been brought to a standstill by a virus that is spreading aggressively, and for which there is, as yet, no cure. The need for vigilance in how we use our own bodies and interact with others has been pressed upon us in all sectors of family, community, and political life. Our tendency towards individualism has been challenged by this crisis in our community, and this individualistic approach is similarly challenged by the Priestly worldview of Leviticus where the corporate life of the community is closely tied to the behaviour of each individual: "each individual is responsible for the health of the Israelite body as a whole."¹⁵ Placing an affected person in quarantine has long been viewed as equally necessary for the protection of the community as a whole as for the well-being of the individual. One of the troubling sections of his text is where the affected person is instructed to rend their clothes, uncover their head and call out "unclean, unclean" when in the presence of others (Lev 13:45). As can be seen from stories of lepers in the gospels and the shunning of leper colonies throughout history, this verse has been at the basis of shameful stigmatisation. More positively, however, the text shows that the individual was expected to take responsibility for the well-being of their community. In our times, we are asked to voluntarily isolate, mask, and practice social distancing in order to protect each other. Even church communities are asking this of parishioners. Nonetheless, the description in Leviticus of periodic visits by a priest to the affected person demonstrates that the isolated individual was not a rejected or forgotten member of the community. Instead, their well-being, along with public safety, was key aspect of the management of the disease.

Although the narrative setting of the book of Leviticus in the Pentateuch suggests that the community was static between the end of Exodus and the beginning of Numbers, the story of Miriam in Numbers 12 shows that when the community *was* on the move in their wilderness wanderings, the isolation of an individual in quarantine would necessitate a period of waiting for the whole community. Compassion for the affected person was shown not only by the spiritual overseer. The whole community, by implication, was prepared to wait for renewed health before recommencing their journey.

Finally, examination of these chapters in Leviticus reminds us that the physical condition of *tzara'at* was also a spiritual issue. The biblical authors knew that faith is relevant to every aspect of life. For those of us living in the south-east of Australia, the year 2020 has brought a series of events that have had far-reaching effects. The bush fires that dominated the summer months including dangerous levels of smoke haze were followed by heavy rainfall and flooding in some areas, and a massively destructive hailstorm here in Canberra. Before we could properly recover from these events, we were experiencing the rapid impact of the pandemic across the world and its impact upon Australia. We have felt a surprising lack of control over our lives.

There has been the temptation to see signs of judgement or apocalypse in these disasters of fire, flood, hail, and pestilence. Unlike narrative traditions that equated illness with sin, however, Leviticus 13–14 understands such conditions as a natural part of life rather than punishment or a lesson to be learned. Like the description of *tzara'at* in Leviticus, these events have arisen without explanation. Priests neither infer the “hand of God” nor offer prayers of intercession. Instead, “the affliction comes without warning and disappears only with the passage of time.”¹⁶

Contracting *tzara'at*, then, is seen in the Levitical legislation as a natural event in life rather than a moral consequence of behaviour. There is a practical dimension to these chapters that focus on the safety of the community as a whole. Nonetheless, the management of *tzara'at* also exhibits a spiritual dimension as part of its distinctly priestly theology that cares for the suffering individual in the midst of the community.¹⁷ Compassion is expressed through the priest’s careful diagnosis, periodic examination, and oversight of rituals that enable full re-integration of the sufferer into society. Adjusted requirements for those in poverty also model a level of care and compassion for the weakest of society during crisis.

During the various crises that have marked 2020 we have seen members of the broader community practicing qualities that reach beyond the practical to integrate the spiritual. Neighbours have checked in on each other, distant families and friends have reconnected, community groups are finding new and safe ways to communicate and support each other. Those who are held up as heroes in 2020 are the frontline workers: emergency workers, medical staff, carers in childhood and aged facilities, cleaners, security staff. We will do well if we don't lose sight of the value of such members of society as the crisis abates.¹⁸

For people of faith, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are frequently a source of comfort and encouragement when we encounter crisis. Whether it be words that soothe in a time of need, or relief that the Scriptures do not recoil from engaging with the negative side of existence, a reader or hearer of these traditions can find a connection with their own experiences. As we read Leviticus 13–14 with the fresh perspective of a global health crisis, we can be assured that faith embraces our embodied experience, that responses must be for the good of the whole community while offering care and compassion to those isolated, and that all that we do during and after such a crisis is invited into the presence of the Lord.

Endnotes

- 1 See the article by my Biblical Studies colleague David Neville in this volume for a nuanced view of the relationship between biblical texts and our own contexts. Whilst we agree that seeking relevance in individual texts for our own situation can be precarious, I think we also agree that the biblical traditions can and should be in dialogue with contemporary readers.
- 2 Many translations use the term "leprosy" (e.g. ESV, KJV, NIV, NJPS, NRSV), based on the Greek Septuagint's rendering *lepra*. There is consensus amongst scholars, however, that *tzara'at* could not have been understood as Hansen's Disease by the writers of Leviticus since the condition described there was evidently able to be cured. Lloyd R. Bailey laments the great disservice done over history in understanding this skin affliction as leprosy, "thus adding a biblical condemnation to the burden of

- the modern victims of that catastrophic illness.” Lloyd R. Bailey, *Leviticus-Numbers* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 167.
- 3 Joel S. Baden and Candida R. Moss, “The Origin and Interpretation of *ṣāraʿat* in Leviticus 13–14,” *JBL* 130, no. 4 (2011): 643–662, at 645.
 - 4 Baden and Moss, “The Origin and Interpretation of *ṣāraʿat*,” 643.
 - 5 Baden and Moss, “The Origin and Interpretation of *ṣāraʿat*,” 643.
 - 6 For example, Bailey, *Leviticus-Numbers*, 166–67; Baden and Moss, “The Origin and Interpretation of *ṣāraʿat*,” 659, n. 55; and John J. Pilch, “Healing,” in *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, Third Edition, ed. John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 86–89.
 - 7 Similarly, Levitical food laws are based on the principle of boundaries. Animals that are “clean” for consumption are those that fit into normal categories, such as birds that are feathered, and fly, and do not prey on other animals. Bats, animals that fly but do not have feathers and prey on other animals, clearly do not fit into the “normal” categories and therefore are “unclean”.
 - 8 Maurice D. Harris, *Leviticus: You have no idea* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 45.
 - 9 Baden and Moss, “The Origin and Interpretation of *ṣāraʿat*,” 649.
 - 10 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 253, 319.
 - 11 Martin Noth, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 108.
 - 12 Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 84.
 - 13 See the subsequent article by David Neville on Luke 17:11–19 in this number of *St Mark’s Review*.
 - 14 Pilch, “Healing,” 89.
 - 15 Baden and Moss, “The Origin and Interpretation of *ṣāraʿat*,” 647.
 - 16 Baden and Moss, “The Origin and Interpretation of *ṣāraʿat*,” 646.
 - 17 Priestly theology has often been characterised as dry and legalistic and for a time was dismissed by biblical scholars as less valuable than prophetic traditions with their emphasis on social welfare and justice. These passages mitigate against such perceptions.
 - 18 Again, I refer the reader to David Neville’s article in this number of *St Mark’s Review*, where a more explicit plea is made to recognise the needs of the most vulnerable and to value those who contribute selflessly to improve the wellbeing of all.