

The Good Word

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LEPROSY PART VI: 5TH-12TH CENTURIES

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LEPROSY IN EGYPT

In past articles we have seen the varying responses in Constantinople and Cappadocia to the epidemic of medical leprosy in the 4th and beginning of the 5th century AD.

Since Egypt was an early hot spot for *elephantiasis* (i.e., medical leprosy), one would have expected the Egyptian physicians and her bishops to have been on the cutting edge of its diagnosis and management. Moreover, they should have been the first in the eastern Mediterranean to have developed leprosariums. However, we do not find that to be the case. It wasn't until about AD 400 that a leprosarium was even mentioned in Egyptian sources. In his *Lausiac History* Palladius (written c. AD 419-220) related a story about a priest Makarios who tricked a wealthy widow in Alexandria into donating 500 denarii to his hospice for lepers which housed males on the first floor and women on the second floor.¹ About the same time, there is a story about a large leprosarium having received so much grain from the state-controlled wheat supply, that the monk Pâmbo took pains to redistribute it to the rural poor.²

"Pâmbo also established a tradition of collecting one *arataba* [38.78 liters] of wheat from each of the monks and hermits of Egypt to give to the many hospices for lepers throughout the land, as well as to widows and orphans. From the Pâmbo story we can see that by 400 there not only existed a leper asylum in Alexandria but a whole network of such institutions throughout Egypt.³

There are also many stories of the Egyptian monks which describe their heroic efforts to minister to those with this affliction. One of the most Christlike deeds was that of the monk Daniel, c. AD 400, wherein he brought one such afflicted leper to the monastery of

Scete in the desert. Daniel lovingly and faithfully washed and fed the leper each day, even helping him chew his food by patiently moving his mutilated jaws, all to atone for his own murdering of a barbarian who had held him prisoner for many years.⁴

Just a few years later, in AD 417, St. Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria (AD 412 to 444), used his traditional Paschal letter to exhort his flock to accompany their Lenten fast with good works and a spirit of joy, and in anticipation of the Heavenly Banquet awaiting faithful Christians. He then extolled a list of "good works" that Christians should perform during Great Lent: taking care of the poor, giving comfort to widows and orphans, visiting those in prison, and providing relief for lepers through "appropriate therapies". Consequently, we note that in Egypt, under the godly-wise guidance of St. Cyril, the care of the lepers became an accepted Lenten discipline, and some of the useful treatments for leprosy, such as soothing baths and proper diet, had become common knowledge. Moreover, alleviating the misery of people suffering from the disease had now taken its place beside the traditional Judeo-Christian practice of good deeds toward widows and orphans.⁵

By his allegorical interpretation of *Leviticus*, this celebrated Bishop of Alexandria furthered the paradigm shift away from considering *medical lepers* to be the same as the *biblical lepers* described in the book of *Leviticus*. In other words, he clearly understood from the *Scriptures* that:

"On the one hand the Old Testament banned lepers from the camp, but on the other hand it provided a complicated set of rituals including the sacrifice of a dove which a leper should perform if he/she were healed [cleansed] and sought readmission to society (a clear indication that Old Testament leprosy was not what Aretaios, Galen, and subsequent medieval society identified as a disease which was incurable) [*elephantiasis, i.e., medical leprosy*]."⁶

Nor was St. Cyril the first to allegorize that complicated set of rituals. Rather, he built upon the foundation laid by St. Justin the Philosopher.

COMMENTARIES ON SCRIPTURE REGARDING LEPROSY BY THE MARTYR ST. JUSTIN THE PHILOSOPHER (AD 100-165)

1. Miller TS and Nesbitt JW, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2014, p. 81-82.


2. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 43-45.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

6. Miller TS and Smith-Savage R, *Medieval Leprosy Reconsidered, International Social Science Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1/2, 2006, p. 20-21, at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41887256?seq=1>



St. Justin, born in Shechem (now Nablus in the West Bank) and martyred in Rome, was the first Christian writer to allegorically interpret *Leviticus 14* on the Levitical rites of the cleansing of lepers:

“X. By the two birds (*cf. Lev. 14:49-53*) Christ is denoted, both dead as man, and living as God. He is likened to a bird, because He is understood and declared to be from above, and from heaven. And the living bird, having been dipped in the blood of the dead one, was afterwards let go. For the living and divine Word was in the crucified and dead temple [of the body], as being a partaker of the passion, and yet impassible as God.

“By that which took place in the running [*Lit. “living”*] water, in which the wood and the hyssop and the scarlet [wool thread dyed a scarlet color] were dipped, is set forth the bloody passion of Christ on the cross for the salvation of those who are sprinkled with the Spirit, and the water, and the blood. Wherefore the material for purification was not provided chiefly with reference to leprosy, but with regard to the forgiveness of sins, that both leprosy might be understood to be an emblem of sin, and the things which were sacrificed an emblem of Him who was to be sacrificed for sins.

“For this reason, consequently, he ordered that the scarlet should be dipped at the same time in the water, thus predicting that the flesh should no longer possess its natural [evil] properties. For this reason, also, were there the two birds, the one being sacrificed in the water, and the other dipped both in the blood and in the water and then sent away, just as is narrated with respect to the goats.

“The goat [the scape-goat] that was sent away presented a type of Him who taketh away the sins of men. But the two contained a representation of the one economy of God incarnate. For He was wounded for our transgressions, and He bare the sins of many, and He was delivered for our iniquities.”⁷

**COMMENTARIES ON SCRIPTURE REGARDING LEPROSY
BY ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA**

In his commentary on the *Gospel of St. Luke*, the great Father of the Church St. Cyril of Alexandria expanded upon St. Justin’s allegorical interpretation of *Leviticus 14*:

St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Book of St. Luke*, “5:12 *And behold a man full of leprosy*:

“The faith, however, of him who drew near is worthy of all praise: for he testifies that the Emmanuel can successfully accomplish all things, and seeks deliverance by His godlike commands, although his malady was incurable: for leprosy will not yield to the skill of physicians. I see, however, he says, the unclean demons expelled by a godlike authority. I see others set free from many diseases. I recognize that such things are wrought by some divine and resistless force. I see, further, that He is good, and most ready to pity those who draw near unto Him. What therefore forbids His taking pity on me also? And what is Christ’s answer? He confirms His faith, and produces full assurance upon this very point. For He

accepts His petition, and confesses that He is able, and says, ‘I will: be thou cleansed.’ He grants him also the touch of His holy and all-powerful hand, and immediately the leprosy departed from him, and his affliction was at an end. And in this join with me in wondering at Christ thus exercising at the same time both a divine and a bodily power. For it was a divine act so to will, as for all that He willed to be present unto Him: but to stretch out the hand was a human, act: Christ therefore is perceived to be One of both, if, as is the case, the Word was made flesh.


“*Luke 5:14. And He charged him to tell no man.*”

“Even though the leper had been silent, the very nature of the fact was enough to proclaim to all who knew him how great was His power Who had wrought the cure. But He bids him tell no man: and why? That they who receive from God the gift of working cures may hereby learn not to look for the applause of those whom they have healed, nor indeed any one’s praises whatsoever, lest they fall a prey unto pride, of all vices the most disgraceful.

“He purposely, however, bids the leper offer unto the priests the gift according to the law of Moses. For it was indeed confessedly His wish to put away the shadow, and transform the types unto a spiritual service. As the Jews, however, because as yet they did not believe on Him, attached themselves to the commands of Moses, supposing their ancient customs to be still in force, He gives leave to the leper to make the offering for a testimony unto them. And what was His object in granting this permission? It was because the Jews, using ever as a pretext their respect for the law, and saying that the hierophant Moses was the minister of a commandment from on high, made it their endeavor to treat with contempt Christ the Savior of us all. They even said plainly, *We know that God spake unto Moses: but this man, we know not whence He is.* It was necessary, therefore, for them to be convinced by actual facts that the measure of Moses is inferior to the glory of Christ: *For he indeed as a servant was faithful over his house; but the other as a Son over His Father’s house.* From this very healing, then, of the leper, we may most plainly see that Christ is incomparably superior to the Mosaic law. For Mariam, the sister of Moses, was herself struck with leprosy for speaking against him: and at this Moses was greatly distressed; and when he was unable to remove the disease from the woman, he fell down before God, saying, *O God, I beseech Thee, heal her.* Observe this, then, carefully: on the one hand, there was a request; he sought by prayer to obtain mercy from above: but the Savior of all spake with godlike authority, *I will: be thou cleansed.* The removal therefore of the leprosy was a testimony to the priests, and by it those who assign the chief rank to Moses may know that they are straying from the truth. For it was fitting, even highly fitting, to regard Moses with admiration as a minister of the law, and servant of the grace that was spoken of angels; but far greater must be our admiration of the Emmanuel, and the glory we render Him as very Son of God the Father.

“And whoever will may see the profound and mighty mystery of Christ written for our benefit in *Leviticus*. For the law of Moses declares the leper defiled, and gives orders for him to be put out of the camp as unclean: but should the malady ever be alleviated, it commands that he should then be capable of readmission. Moreover it clearly specifies the manner in which he is to be pronounced clean, thus saying:

7. St. Justin Martyr, *Other Fragments from the Lost Writings of Justin, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. Peabody MA, 1994, p. 301.



“This is the law of the leper on whatsoever day he shall have been cleansed, and shall be brought unto the priest. And the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall see him, and behold, the touch of the leprosy is healed from the leper: and the high priest shall command, and they shall take for him who is cleansed two living clean birds; and the high priest shall command, and they shall kill the one into an earthen vessel over living water: and he shall take the living bird, and dip it into the blood of the bird that was killed over the living water, and shall sprinkle it seven times over the man cleansed of the leprosy, and he shall be cleansed: and he shall send away the living bird into the field.

“The birds then are two in number, both without stain, that is, clean, and liable to no fault on the part of the law: and the one of them is slain over living water, but the other, being saved from slaughter, and further baptized in the blood of that which died, is let loose.


“This type, then, represents to us the great and adorable mystery of our Savior. For the Word was from above, even from the Father, from heaven; for which reason He is very fittingly compared to a bird: for though He came down for the dispensation’s sake to bear our likeness, and took the form of a slave, yet even so He was from above.---Yea, He even, when speaking to the Jews, said so plainly, *Ye are from beneath: I am from above.* And again, *No one hath ascended up into heaven, but the Son of man That came down from heaven.* As therefore I just now said, even when He became flesh, that is, perfect man, He was not earthy, not made of clay as we are, but heavenly and superior to things worldly in respect of that wherein He is perceived to be God. We may see, then, in the birds (offered at the cleansing of the leper), Christ suffering indeed in the flesh according to the Scriptures, but remaining also beyond the power of suffering; and dying in His human nature, but living in His divine; for the Word is Life. Yea, too, the very wise disciple said, *that He was put to death in the flesh, but made to live in the spirit.* But though the Word could not possibly admit the suffering of death into His own nature, yet He appropriates to Himself that which His flesh suffered: for the living bird was baptized in the blood of the dead one; and thus stained with blood, and all but made partaker of the passion, it was sent forth into the wilderness. And so did the Only-begotten Word of God return unto the heavens, with the flesh united unto Him. And strange was the sight in heaven, yea, the throng of angels marveled when they saw in form like unto us the King of earth, and Lord of might: moreover they said, *Who is This that cometh from Edom?* -- meaning thereby the earth: -- the redness of *His garments is from Bosor:* the interpretation of which is flesh, as being a narrowing and pressing. Then too they inquired, *Are such the wounds in the middle of Thy hands?* and He answered, *With these was I wounded in the house of My beloved.* For just as after His return to life from the dead, when showing, with most wise purpose, His hands unto Thomas, He bade him handle both the prints of the nails, and the hole bored in His side: so also, when arrived in heaven, He gave full proof to the holy angels, that Israel was justly cast out and fallen from being of His family. For this reason, He shewed His garment stained with blood, and the wounds in His hands, and not as though He could not put them away; for when He rose from the dead, He put off corruption, and with it all its marks and attributes: He retained them therefore, that the manifold wisdom of God, which He wrought in

Christ, might now be made known by the Church, according to the plan of salvation, to principalities and powers.

“But perhaps some one will say, How can you affirm that Jesus Christ is one and the same Son and Lord, when there were two birds offered? Does not the law very plainly hereby show that there are certainly two Sons and Christs? Yes, verily, men [Nestorians] have ere now been brought to such a pitch of impiety, as both to think and say, that the Word of God the Father is one Christ separately by Himself, and that He Who is of the seed of David is another. But we reply to those who, in their ignorance, imagine such to be the case, what the divine Paul writes, *One Lord, one faith, one baptism.* If, therefore, they affirm that there are two Sons, necessarily there must be two Lords, and two faiths, and the same number of baptisms: and therefore, though he has Christ speaking within him, as he himself affirms, yet will his teaching be false. But this cannot be: away with such a thought! We therefore acknowledge one Lord, even the Only-begotten incarnate Word of God: not putting apart the manhood and the Godhead, but earnestly affirming that the Word of God the Father Himself became man while continuing to be God.

“And next, let those who hold a contrary opinion be the speakers [Monophysites]. ‘If there are two Sons,’ they say, ‘one specially of the seed of David, and the other again separately the Word of God the Father; must not the Word of God the Father be superior in nature to him of the seed of David? What, then, shall we do in seeing the two birds, not distinct in nature from one another, but, on the contrary, of the same kind, and in no point, as regards specific difference, unlike one another.’ But they gain nothing by their argument; for great is the distance between the Godhead and the manhood: and in the explanation of examples, we are to understand them according to their fitting analogy; for they fall short of the truth, and often effect but a partial demonstration of the things signified by them. We say, moreover, that the law was a sort of shadow and type, and a painting, as it were, setting things forth before the view of the spectators: but in the pictorial art, the shadows are the foundations for the colors; and when the bright hues of the colors have been laid upon them, then at length the beauty of the painting will flash forth. And in like manner, since it was fitting for the law of Moses to delineate clearly the mystery of Christ, it does not manifest Him as both dying and at the same time living in one and the same bird, lest what was done should have the look of a theatrical juggle; but it contained Him, as suffering slaughter in the one bird, and in the other displayed the same Christ as alive and set free.

“But I will endeavor to shew that my argument here does not go beyond the bounds of probability by means of another history. For were any one of our community to wish to see the history of Abraham depicted as in a painting, how would the artist represent him? as doing every thing at once? or as in turn, and variously acting in many different modes, though all the while the same one person? I mean, for instance, as at one time sitting upon the ass with the lad accompanying him, and the servants following behind. Then again the ass left with the servants, Isaac laden with the wood, and himself carrying in his hands the knife and the fire. Then in another compartment, the same Abraham in a very different attitude, with the lad bound upon the wood, and his right hand armed with the knife ready to strike the blow. Yet it would not be a different Abraham in each place, though represented in very many



different forms in the painting, but one and the same everywhere, the painter's art conforming itself constantly to the requirements of the things to be represented. For it would be impossible in one representation to see him performing all the above-mentioned acts. So therefore the law was a painting and type of things traveling with truth, and therefore even though there were two birds, yet was He Who was represented in both but One, as suffering and free from suffering, as dying and superior to death, and mounting up unto heaven as a sort of second first fruits of human nature renewed unto incorruption. For He has made a new pathway for us unto that which is above, and we in due time shall follow Him. That the one bird then was slain, and that the other was baptized indeed in its blood, while itself exempt from slaughter, typified what was really to happen. For Christ died in our stead, and we, who have been baptized into His death, He has saved by His own blood.”⁸

St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Book of St. Luke*, “17:12 Ten lepers met him:

“Again the Saviour manifests unto us His glory, and by working godlike miracles, endeavors to win senseless Israel unto faith, obdurate though he was, and unbelieving. What argument then will avail him at the day of judgment for refusing to accept salvation through Christ? Especially when they themselves heard His words, and were eyewitnesses of His ineffable miracles? For which reason He said Himself of them, *If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin*. And again, *If I had not done among them the works which no other man did, they had not had sin, but now they have both seen and hated both Me and My Father*. The cleansing of the lepers, as I said just above, was a plain demonstration (of His miraculous power): for by the law of Moses they were shut out of the cities and villages, as being impure.

“This then will suffice, I suppose, for introductory remarks. The lepers then having met the Savior, earnestly besought Him to free them from their misery, and called Him Master, that is, Teacher.

“No one pitied them when suffering this malady: but He Who had appeared on earth for this very reason, and had become man that He might show pity unto all, He was moved with compassion for them, and had mercy upon them.

“17:14 He said unto them, *Go and show yourselves unto the priests*:

“And why did He not rather say, ‘I will, be you cleansed;’ as he did in the case of another leper: but commanded them rather to show themselves unto the priests? It was because the law gave directions to this effect to those who were delivered from leprosy: for it commanded them to show themselves to the priests, and to offer a sacrifice for their cleansing. He commanded them therefore to go, as being already healed, and, that they might, so to speak, bear witness to the priests, as the rulers of the Jews, and ever envious of His glory, that wonderfully, and beyond their hope, they had been delivered from their misfortune by Christ's willing that they should be healed. He did not heal them first, but sent them to the priests, because the priests knew the marks of leprosy, and of its being healed. He sent them to the priests, and with them He sent

also the healing. What however was the law of leprosy, and what the rules for its purification, and what the meaning of each of the particulars commanded by the law, we have more fully described at the commencement of our Savior's miracles as recorded by Luke, and referring thither such as are anxious for learning, let us now proceed to what follows. The nine then, as being Jews, falling into a thankless forgetfulness, did not return to give glory to God: by which He shows that Israel was hard of heart, and utterly unthankful: but the stranger, -- for as being a Samaritan he was of foreign race, having been brought thither from Assyria: for the phrase is not without meaning, *in the middle of Samaria and Galilee*: -- returned with a loud voice to glorify God. It shows therefore that the Samaritans were grateful, but that the Jews, even when benefited, were ungrateful.”⁹

Elsewhere St. Cyril cautioned that Christians should never interpret these Old Testament laws for *biblical leprosy* as applying to *elephantiasis/medical leprosy* because it would be an evil act to ban the victims of *elephantiasis* from society. Rather, he stressed that these people deserved mercy not rejection. This is the reason for his traditional Paschal letters to encourage his flock to accompany their Lenten fast with good works such as taking care of the poor, giving comfort to widows and orphans, visiting those in prison, and ministering to the lepers.

Consequently, we can view St. Cyril's allegorical interpretation of *Leviticus 14* as a safeguard against wrongful interpretation and wrongful application of the Mosaic Law to those stricken with horrible and disfiguring diseases as being cursed by God and subject to quarantine from the community as prescribed in *Leviticus*.¹⁰


ST. ROMANOS THE MELODIST (AD 490-556)

St. Romanos the Melodist, was born a Jew in the Syrian town of Emesa. As a youth he converted to Christianity and was baptized. Moving to Beirut he was ordained as a deacon. After moving to Constantinople, when asked to read the assigned kathisma from the Psalter, he faltered badly and was quickly replaced. For this he was ridiculed by some of the more educated clergy as being illiterate and without musical training. In his humiliation and sorrow he prayed to the Theotokos who appeared to him and gave him a scroll to eat which filled his mouth with indescribable sweetness and which miraculously gave him divine gifts of singing and of writing hymns. The next day with the blessing of the Patriarch he mounted the ambo and with an angelic voice sang his extemporaneous composition/homily, *Today the Virgin*

8. Saint Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, *Chapter 5, Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983, pp. 106-109.

9. Saint Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, *ibid.*, pp. 465-466

10. Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaphyrorumin Leviticam liber (Book of Refinements regarding Leviticus)*, PG 69, cols 353-357, as quoted in Miller TS and Smith-Savage R, p. 21.



Giveth Birth, to the amazement of all in the Church of Blachernae at the Vigil of the Nativity. Celebrated by all for his gifts of hymnography and singing, he is reported to have composed over 1,000 *kontakia* [chanted sermons] over the remainder of his life, including one entitled *On the Leper*:

Romanos' Homily in the form of *kontakia*, was to be sung during the liturgy for Wednesday of the third week after Pascha when the Gospel stories were read that described Jesus' miraculous healing of the lepers. Unlike the *Gospels* which do not describe the affliction, in his *kontakia*, Romanos unfortunately gave his afflicted victim a description reflective of *medical leprosy, the Elephant Disease*, a disease which deformed its victims and crippled their limbs, and not a description reflective of *Levitical tzara'at*. Other than his confused description of the *leper*, Romanos' *kontakion* is a marvelous portrayal of our Savior's love and mercy for the afflicted.

ON THE LEPER (OF THE HUMBLE ROMANOS)

Prelude: As You cleansed the leper of his disease, O All Powerful, • Heal the pain of our souls, as you are compassionate, • At the intercession of the Mother of God, O Physician of our souls, • Lover of mankind, • *Saviour and alone without sin.*

1. Let us sing the praise of Christ, the God and Benefactor and Saviour of our race, • Who makes our souls glad, He the root of good things, • Because He is gladness and salvation for mortals. • For He is merciful and compassionate and a trusty physician. • With ineffable wisdom, He directs the universe • And, by His divine will, as God He heals the passions of the soul, • He controls all things as undivided and only Sovereign. • He possesses, and grants to all, joy and glory and forgiveness of faults, lover of mankind, • *Saviour and alone without sin ...*

3. He heals that wretched nature, held in the grip of so many sufferings. • Having mercy on it He came, and He saves those in need. • As a wise doctor, He doctors the sick. • From mortals He drives out all the demons, • As God He orders the blind to see again and the paralyzed to run. • He cleanses lepers by His divine will alone, • Because of all things invisible and seen • You are the Creator, the Lover of mankind, • *Saviour and alone without sin.*

4. Let us carefully contemplate what Christ says to the leper as he approaches, • and how the sick man showed his disease to the all-wise physician. • For the book of the inspired writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell his story clearly, • that he was in such a large crowd, in a vast multitude • of many people running towards Christ. • He was not ashamed to show everyone the defilement of his affliction, • and so he falls to the ground before them all crying, • "Like all the rest, save me also, Lover of mankind, • *Saviour and alone without sin.*"

5. This affliction is abhorrent and shameful in everyone's eyes, • and so those who are tried by this dread disease hasten to hide it. • It is the most hideous of all afflictions among mortals, the flesh being cropped by it, as though it were

grass. • It spreads itself on all the limbs as though wishing to display the victim as an object of total shame, • for the unclean disease is related to *lupus*¹¹ • which the art of medicine has no way to cure, • but Christ expels it, the Lover of mankind, • *Saviour and alone without sin.*

6. Warred on by the disease, the leper lamented through his tears. • Each hour he saw that he was gaining an increase of pains, • and he spoke such words as these, "Alas, my flesh has been dyed • by grave illness with a terrible dye contrary to nature, • and like a stain it spreads over my whole body. • My skin has been transformed and become a hideous sight to me, • like the scar from a burn, a dreadful decay to those who see me. • I have not one single hope • of salvation, unless He grants it, the Lover of mankind," • *Saviour and alone with sin ...*

14. Being the only compassionate, He stretches out His hand and touches him, • and the leper's own body is cleansed at that instant, • for he was freed from the leprosy and it fled at once. • The colour of his flesh recovered its natural beauty. • All who were present were amazed • as the leper shouted out, "You alone are God all-powerful, • and you came into the world to call back the world that had gone astray; • for these works are certainly not those of a human. • You, then are God of all things, Lover of mankind, • *Saviour and alone with sin.*"

15. But when the Compassionate heard this, he ordered the leper in front of all, • go, fulfill the Law, and hurry, show yourself to the priest, • and offer the gift that Moses my servant ordered • lepers among the nation who had been cleansed to offer. • Jews call me an enemy of the Law, • and say that I am Moses' implacable foe. • Be My witness to them that I fulfill everything in the Law. • As payment for your cure give me your witness, • For I am a guardian of the Law, Lover of mankind, • *Saviour and alone without sin ...*


18. Son of God, Who reigns before the ages and to the ages, • As You had mercy on the leper, driving out his affliction with a word, as You are powerful, • Save us also, us who approach your goodness, • And grant pardon of our faults. • For You alone are able, as creator of all things, • to forgive sins. Therefore we implore: give us Your aid, • At the prayers of the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary, • Through whom we all approach You and ask Your help; • "Have mercy", we cry, "as Lover of mankind, • *Saviour and alone with sin.*"¹²

WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE'S RESPONSE TO LEPROSY

"In the Greek-speaking Christian world which evolved into the Byzantine Empire, bishops, monks and lay people were usually able to distinguish allegory from reality. Although Byzantine writers continued to describe sin as spiritual leprosy, such allegorical language had no effect on the actual treatment of lepers. A twelfth-century jurist of

11. The term *lupus* in medicine has traditionally referred to tuberculosis of the skin which in advanced cases looks as if the person's face was bitten by a wolf. *Lupus* is Latin for wolf. The two diseases are in fact related as both are now recognized to be due to mycobacterial infections, neither of which were curable by medical doctors until the 20th century.

12. St. Romanos the Melodist, *On the Leper, Kontakia on the Life of Christ, Chanted Sermons by the Great Sixth-Century Poet and Singer*, HarperCollins Publishers, San Francisco, CA, 1995, pp. 49-58.



Constantinople, Theodore Balsamon, observed how Byzantine society allowed lepers access to the same churches, cities, and assemblies that healthy people attended. Were Latin-speaking Christians also able to distinguish symbol from reality?

“In the Western Roman Empire -- the Latin speaking provinces of Italy, Gaul, Spain, and North Africa -- leprosy also began to claim more victims by the late fourth century. In a letter written before AD 400, Saint Jerome -- a monk and a priest of the Roman Church --praised a wealthy widow named Fabiola, a resident of Rome for her many charitable activities. Jerome believed that her outstanding act of charity was constructing a hospital in Rome for those with distorted feet, inflamed complexions, and truncated noses, people whose blood had become turgid, i.e., muddy with the black bile of leprosy (the cause of Aretaios’ *living death*). Fabiola built her leprosarium for these dying people, and even personally served them by washing their oozing flesh. As in the sermons of the two Gregories, Jerome portrayed the care of lepers as the greatest act of Christian charity.¹³”

“Outside of Rome, few references to leprosy survive from the Western provinces until AD 539 when the bishops of Gaul met in a synod at Orleans. Here the bishops approved a number of canons to regulate Christian life in the new political world of German dominance. One of these canons stated that Christian piety required that the bishop of each city provide lepers with food and clothing from the resources of the local church. At a later synod held in Lyons in AD 583, the bishops reaffirmed that they themselves should assist lepers but added that leprosy victims should receive aid only in the cities where they had permanent residence and should not wander from place to place. The synod of Lyons thus enacted the first restrictive regulation against lepers found in our research of primary sources.

“By the end of the sixth century, some bishops had set up permanent institutions to house and feed lepers. Bishop Gregory of Tours mentioned one such leprosarium at Cabillonum, the modern Chalon-sur-Saône. *Circa* AD 550 Cabillonum’s Bishop Agricola had built just outside the town an institution that St. Gregory of Tours described as a *xenodochion* (hospice in Greek) for lepers ... St. Jerome had employed another Greek term *nosokomeion* (hospital for the sick) in referring to Fabiola’s refuge at Rome. As Galen had noticed, leprosy was especially common in Egypt and the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and rare in Germany and the North. The Latin sources reviewed here also suggest that leprosy and methods to assist its victims began in the East and then moved West ...

“Most scholars agree that the Crusades caused the return of leprosy to Italy, France, England, and Germany in the High Middle Ages. The crusaders apparently contracted the disease in Palestine after AD 1098 and then carried it back to Western Europe on their return home. This would explain the sudden reappearance of leprosy in the twelfth century and also its concentration in France, the primary recruiting ground for Christian warriors against Islam. ... The chief response of Western Christian society during the High Middle Ages to the spread of leprosy was to support leprosaria, but as this study demonstrates, these institutions had a long history stretching

back to the Greek Christian fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries, institutions which were clearly not meant to confine lepers or punish them for their alleged sins.


“Numerous collections of regulations survive from the French leprosaria of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and provide much information on how the lepers lived their daily lives in these hospices. ... It is therefore helpful to examine a few of these regulations to see how leper hospices of the High Middle Ages treated those infected with disease.

“The Bishop of Montpellier (Southern France) together with the local count approved one of the oldest surviving regulations in the 1150s for the town’s leprosarium. The rules required that lepers who wished to enter the leprosarium surrender their property (one would assume movable property) upon entering the community. After a ten-day period, lepers had to decide whether to join the community. If some decided to leave, they received back their belongings and were free to reenter the secular world. The leprosarium did not force the sick to stay. Once members of the community, lepers were now required to attend church services each day and to pray for the benefactors of the community. These statutes include few details concerning organization; they mention only that the lepers -- always referred to as brothers and sisters (the hospice accepted both men and women) -- should obey the administrators, but provide no indication of who these administrators were or how they were chosen.

“The statutes of the leprosarium at Lille in Northern France provide additional evidence that medieval leprosaria were not designed to imprison lepers or to punish them in any way. Walter, Bishop of Tournai, approved these rules in 1239. In his introduction, in fact, Walter declared that leprosy had come from God as a special gift because through leprosy God was calling the sick to holiness. In his balanced account Brody cites this passage to demonstrate how medieval people interpreted leprosy as both a curse and a blessing. The rules of Lille did include restrictions on the behavior of lepers: they should not leave the leprosarium without permission; when they did leave, they should always travel in pairs; and, there should be no private conversations between women and men. Such regulations, however, were the same for contemporary monks and friars who were considered members of medieval society’s First Estate. The rules also mentioned that the leprosarium had a gate which opened onto a piazza and that houses stood across the square opposite the hospice entrance. Thus, the founders had not located this leprosarium in a remote location, isolated from other dwellings. These statutes mention only two officers in the community: a *magister* and a priest chaplain ...

“The statutes of the leprosarium of Brives, issued in 1259, for a hospice in the Loire Valley offer a more thorough explanation of organization. They required that the brothers and sisters elect their *magister* and stipulated that he should be a leper himself. Moreover, these rules gave considerable power to the community of lepers, called the *collegium*. The *magister* was to make all major decisions affecting the institution with the advice and consent of the *collegium*. Even some punishments meted out to the brothers and sisters required the consent of a committee formed from the *collegium*. The leper community at Brives apparently functioned democratically. To be sure, the rules for conduct seem repressive by modern standards -- no games, no

13. Reference to St Jerome, *Letter LXXVII to Oceanus*, *NPNF* V2.06, <https://ccel.org/ccetschaff/npnf206/npnf206.v.LXXVII.html>



conversations between men and women, repetitious prayers throughout the day -- but again these regulations simply reflected the monastic community life.

“In his book on Anglo-Norman medicine, historian Edward Kealey studied English leprosaria and included a commentary on the earliest regulations to survive from any leper hospital in Europe, those from Saint Mary Magdalene at Dudston (ca. AD 1130). In agreement with the interpretation of the French leprosaria *regulae* offered in this study, Kealey concludes that these Anglo-Norman rules were designed to assist lepers, not to punish or imprison them. And, as in the case of French asylums, lepers had to leave this institution if they refused to obey its regulations.

“Although Kealey did not find any evidence that the Magdalena leprosarium incarcerated its residents, Risse and especially Moore insist that French leper hospitals were designed to confine lepers. Both of these scholars stress the significance of Canon 23 of the Third Lateran Council, held in 1179 under Pope Alexander III. This canon required that leprosaria throughout Europe provide chapels and cemeteries for leper hospitals and hire leper priests to serve them. Moore interprets this canon as the decisive step in incarcerating lepers. If one reexamines the wording of this canon, however, one notices that the bishops of the council envisaged this regulation as offering a great benefit to the lepers. It not only guaranteed leprosaria their own chapels and chaplains as all monasteries had, but it exempted lepers from paying tithes to the local bishop. In fact, Canon 23 said nothing to restrict lepers’ freedom to leave the leprosaria.

“Even a cursory rereading of the primary sources reveals that leprosaria were never designed to confine victims of leprosy. From their inception in the Greek provinces of the Late Roman Empire until they disappeared from Western Europe during the sixteenth century, leprosaria were designed to assist lepers, not to incarcerate them. Upon reviewing another set of documents, however, one will see more clearly why some elements of medieval society did reject victims of leprosy.

“In 643, the Lombard king Rothari issued a code of law which, although written in Latin, derived from the old Germanic customary laws of the Lombard tribe. When the Lombards had entered Italy in 568, they were among the least Romanized Germanic tribes. Some Lombard clans still practiced the ancient Teutonic religion, although most had become Christians of the Germanic Arian creed. Among Rothari’s statutes, drawn up for a primitive Germanic people -- only the Saxons of North Germany and Britain had less Roman influence -- one dealt with leprosy. The Lombard rule regarding lepers, Chapter 176 of *Rothari’s Edict* (the customary name of the code) clearly did punish lepers. This regulation required that those whom the judge or the people confirmed as having leprosy had to leave the city where they dwelled and give up their own homes to live in isolation. Moreover, these people lost all control over their property as though they had died. Lepers retained only a right to receive sustenance from the revenues of their former property which apparently lepers’ heirs were to manage.

“Rothari’s law had no subsequent effect on any ecclesiastical rulings by popes or on any decrees of church synods, but it did influence secular legislation. In 789, Charlemagne, who more than a decade earlier had conquered Lombard northern Italy and annexed it to his Frankish-Roman

state, issued some new laws for his Western European Empire. Among the laws of 789, one reflected the sentiments of Rothari’s statute; Charlemagne decreed that lepers should not mix with other people.

“Perhaps the most striking example of leper exclusion and loss of legal rights is found in English Common Law, supposedly the great bulwark of personal freedom that offered the English the necessary tools to resist oppressive government. In his commentary on thirteenth-century English law, Henry of Bracton stated that English law compared lepers to those who were excommunicated from the Church. The victim of leprosy had to leave society to join a leprosarium. From that time forward, a leper could not inherit property or make contracts. Like the *Sachsenspiegel*, Henry of Bracton mentioned that common law tradition allowed lepers to retain control of property that they had owned when they had fallen ill.

“*Rothari’s Edict*, the *Sachsenspiegel*, Carolingian legislation, and Henry of Bracton’s commentary on English Common Law either exclude lepers from society and/or impose severe restrictions on their legal rights. It should be noted that all of these codes originated in societies strongly influenced by Germanic customary law, a legal system less profoundly informed by Christian values than the Roman law of Justinian.

“In Latin society of the twelfth-century, however, lepers did suffer exclusion in some areas, but the concepts motivating this reaction derived from Germanic customs, not from Christian doctrine. The Christian leprosaria branded by Watts, Risse, Moore, Brody, and Ells as places of exile, never served as prisons, but as havens of physical spiritual support in an often hostile secular world.”¹⁴

“[Nevertheless,] leprosy was not a diagnosis to be taken lightly. As early as 757, the Frankish law permitted leprosy as grounds for divorce. Alexander III specifically forbade divorce on the basis of leprosy in 1180, but a year earlier the Lateran Council decreed that leprosy patients could not share church, cemetery, or even social life with the non-afflicted. By 1220, it was a civil crime for a leprosy patient to live among the healthy. Further, the diagnosis occasioned a religious rite in which the leprosy patient was cut off from the rest of Christian society. Leprosy patients were legally dead in some parts of Medieval Europe. Medical writers tended, at least by the 14th century, to recommend a conservative approach to diagnosis. Gaddysdyn stated that only one whose face had been destroyed by the disease should be declared a leprosy patient. Guy de Chauliac, probably the most important late medieval commentator on leprosy, advised that doubtful cases be observed over time, so that the disease could declare itself unequivocally. For all of these reasons, only frank lepomatous leprosy was likely to be diagnosed as leprosy at all, precisely in keeping with the results of the leprosaria studies.”¹⁵

EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE’S LATER RESPONSE TO LEPROSY

“Christian concepts and institutions, whether in the Greek East or the Latin West, were not responsible for banishing lepers from healthy society. Balsamon testified that lepers in

14. Miller TS and Smith-Savage R, pp. 19-25.

15. Ell SR, *Leprosy and Social Class in the Middle Ages*, *International Journal of Leprosy and Other Mycobacterial Diseases*, Vol. 54, No. 2, June 1986, p.302.

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twelfth-century Constantinople continued to live with healthy people. Thus, Greek Christian writers and preachers had apparently succeeded in convincing Greco-Roman communities of the Eastern Mediterranean to modify their initial response to isolate lepers.”¹⁶

“Even aristocratic laywomen of Constantinople labored to assuage the pains of *Elephant Disease*. The ninth-century monastic leader St. Theodore the Studite (AD 759-826) considered his mother a paragon of Christian virtue even before she entered the monastery. As a mother she had taught Theodore’s sisters to wash the ulcers of the lepers with their own hands. Moreover, she herself often worked with the director of the Zotikos Leprosarium in caring for the sick who resided there.”¹⁷

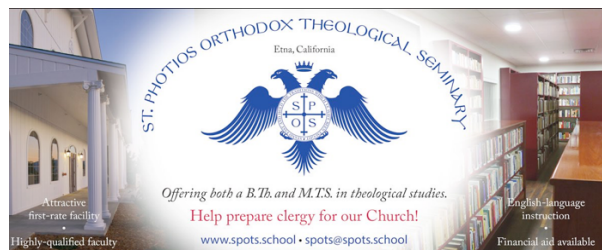
St. Photios the Great (AD 810-891), Patriarch of Constantinople, also a great scholar and philanthropist, not only built many hospitals, but having also trained in medicine personally treated patients afflicted with leprosy.¹⁸

“The examples set by bishops such as Basil and monks such as Theodosios in Palestine inspire even the emperors to assist lepers. We have already seen how emperors supported the Zotikos Leprosarium in Constantinople. The emperor John Tzimiskes (AD 969-976), however, not only multiplied the dormitories for patients at the Zotikos hospital, but he also visited the residents in person, distributed gold coins to them, and even personally treated their ulcerous sores. The emperor Michael IV (AD 1034-1041) descended into the bath for the lepers at the Zotikos asylum, poured warm water over them, and wiped their feet. The rhetorician and intellectual

Michael Psellos described how Emperor Constantine IX (AD 1042-1054) also washed lepers at the Zotikos and even kissed them as Saint Basil had.

“In fact, it appears that a visit to this leper hospital had become by the reign of Michael IV one among many liturgical duties of the emperor, probably performed on a particular feast of the Church’s calendar. The emperor would arrive at the Zotikos Leprosarium to distribute gold coins to the patients, and then he proceeded to the baths, where he helped some lepers bathe, applied appropriate medicine, and, at least in the cases of Michael IV and Constantine IX, embraced and kissed them.”¹⁹

Nevertheless, the leper, was not left without the hope of a miraculous cure, for St. Alypius/Olympius, Iconographer of the Kiev Caves († AD 1114), healed a man of leprosy through confession, placing an icon on his wounds, giving him communion in the Holy Mysteries, and washing his face with the water the priests had used for the ablutions after the Liturgy.²⁰



16. Miller TS and Smith-Savage R, pp. 19-25.

17. Miller, TS and Nesbitt, JW, pp. 43-45.

18. Hierodeacon Photii, *Lecture: “St. Photios the Great: Beacon of Reconciliation and Unity,”* Oct 27, 2020, 5:00-6:15
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjxoOg8qB_Q&t=359s

19. Miller, TS and Nesbitt, JW, pp. 44-45.

20. St. Nikolai Velimerović, *August 17, The Prologue from Ochrid, Part Three*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, England, 1986, p. 206; and Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, *The Synaxarion: The Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church, Vol. VI*, Holy Convent of the Annunciation of Our Lady Ormylia, Chalkidike, Gr., 2008, p. 516.