Pandemics and Public Health in Ancient Israel:

What did Moses do?

Julian Thompson, DPhil (cand.)

3,000,000

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Theology can Kill.

- **Denial** — "Covid does not exist, it is a deception."

- **Spiritualisation** — "God will protect me, I have faith."

- **Misinterpretation/Misunderstanding** —"The vaccine is the Mark of the Beast"
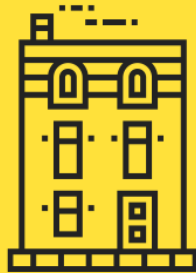
Public Health

'PUBLIC HEALTH' DEFINED:

"the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organized efforts of society"
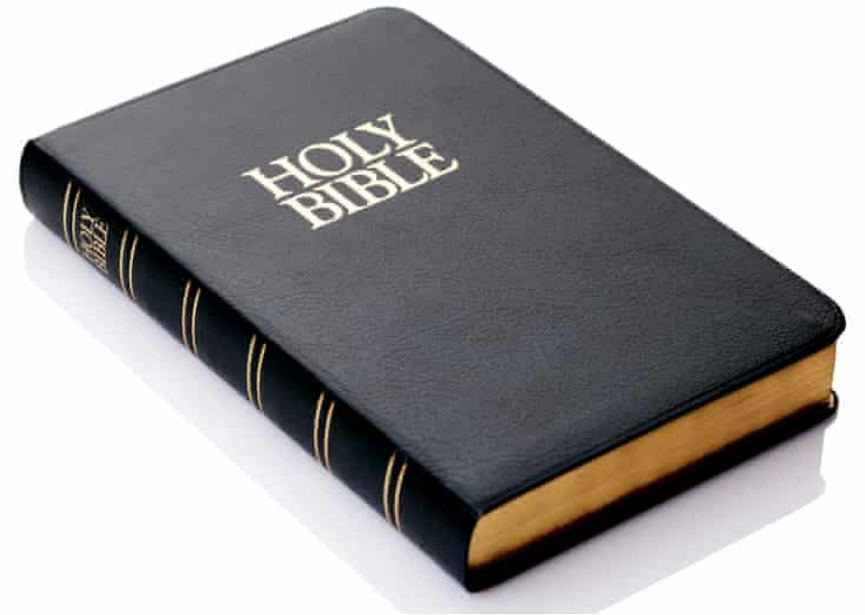
(Acheson, 1988; WHO)

Pandemics? Public Health? Ancient Israel? Moses?

We must be careful not to impose our views on the text.

~~Do comparable Public Health Initiatives exist in the Bible?~~

~~How did Ancient Israel deal with outbreaks of contagious disease?~~

Did the concept of <u>CONTAGIONS</u> exist in Ancient Israel?

Comparative Evidence:

'Contagion' Defined:

"The communication of disease from body to body by contact direct or mediate"

Oxford English Dictionary

Contagion
ANE Context

- There is no textual evidence to suggest that the concept of "contagion" exists in Egyptian medicine.

- In Mesopotamia however, there are numerous examples such as references found on the Mari Tablets.

- In Pre-Islamic Arabia, tribal traditions viewed disease as being caused by demons and evil spirits.

- Greek and Roman Nosologies subscribed to the humeral theory of disease that saw disease as the result of 'miasmata' which is not the same as the modern medical understanding of contagion.

(Glasby, 2017: 231-238)

Was 'Leprosy' a contagion ?

STRUCTURING LEVITICUS

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying…
The Lord spoke to Moses, saying…
The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying..

Leviticus 13:1; 14:1; 15:1

THE LAW OF THE LEPER

"All who enter the house while it is shut up shall be
   unclean until the evening;
 and all who sleep in the house shall wash their clothes;
   and all who eat in the house shall wash their clothes."

Leviticus 14:46-47

The Law of the Leper

- Symptoms & Diagnosis (Lev 13:2–44)

- Self-Identification (Lev 13:45)

- Quarantine (Lev 13:46,14:2)

- Cleansing & Re-entry (Lev 14)

"The sanitary code has aroused deep fascination among experts in modern preventative medicine."

(Alfonso Fernandez-Vazquez, 2016)

"To use a modern analogy the priest in ancient Israel was more like a public health inspector than a physician. He determined whether a person was infected; he did not attempt to cure him."

(Wenham 1976 : 207)

Balavignus

1348

'Leprosy' vs Leprosy

OT Examples

Leprosy

- Moses (Exod 4:6),

- Miriam (Num 12:10),

- King Uzziah (2 Chr 26:16–21)

- Naaman (2 Kgs 5:9–14)

Hansen's Disease

Signs and Sypmtoms

- Discolored patches of skin, usually flat, that may be numb and look faded (lighter than the skin around)

- Growths (nodules) on the skin

- Thick, stiff or dry skin

- Painless ulcers on the soles of feet

- Painless swelling or lumps on the face or earlobes

- Loss of eyebrows or eyelashes

(Source: CDC Website)

'Leprosy' was not Leprosy (Hansen's Disease)

- The Leprosy spoken of in Leviticus and the Hebrew Bible was **NOT** 'Hansens Disease'.

    - The symptoms do not match.

    - No evidence of Hansen's disease in the ANE has been found BCE

    - Scholars do not know conclusively what the leprosy in the Hebrew Bible referred to.

- The interesting case of Naaman (2 Kgs 5:9–14)

THE LAW OF THE LEPER REVISITED

"All who enter the house while it is shut up shall be
unclean until the evening;
and all who sleep in the house shall wash their clothes;
and all who eat in the house shall wash their clothes."

Leviticus 14:46-47

Can Leviticus 13-15 be understood in a medical sense?

"Whether they are medically contagious is not the point at issue…"

(N.H. Snaith : 1967)

The primary function of the laws in Leviticus 13—15 was not medical.

Nevertheless, faithfulness to the levitical laws would have brought the community in Ancient Israel enhanced protection from disease.

Faithfulness reinforced an understanding as to who God was, as well as one's responsibility towards the wider community.

Faithfulness.

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Opportunities

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- **Conscientiousness**

- **Partnership**

- **Health Inequalities**

- **Social Justice**

- **Sustainability**

- **…**

Theology can Save Lives.

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