

MEDICINE IN THE HOLY BIBLE

P.K.J.P. SUBHAKTHA*

ABSTRACT

The study of history of medical science from non-medical sources needs no apology. At first sight the discussion of what was thought in the past rather than what is known now appears to be of merely anti-quarian value. The Hebrews can be proud of having preserved in the old Testament many old medical practices and traditions which throw light on ancient medicine in general and on Hebrew medical practices in particular. The Bible is a genuinely documented book representing the wisdom, medical knowledge and the culture of a nomadic race.

The Bible is the great family chronicle of the Jews. This family chronicle is accepted by millions of Christians as the word of God. No book has been published in so many languages in such vast quantities as the Bible. No other book has had so many interpreters of its every word from the "In the beginning" of Genesis to the last "Amen" of Revelations.

Bible has not been nearly such a static thing as we imagine. It has worn all sorts of different dresses in different ages and countries. The authorised version dated from 1611 and is an astonishing production. For our greater astonishment, that, it was a miracle produced by a committee of forty-seven men. Praise and appreciation has been accorded to the version by many generations of literary critics for the tenacious conservatism.

Ancient Hebrews attributed health and disease to one divine source. Disease and premature death were considered as curses from God. Every one who suffered from any bodily ailment was thought to have previously violated a divine ordinance for which his bodily affliction was an atonement. As examples may be cited the case of Miriam who was punished with Leprosy for slandering her brother Moses and the cases of Gehazi and Uzzaiah who were punished with the same disease for sins of avarice and presumption respectively. For similar reasons, Jehoram was infected with intestinal disease and prolapse of the rectum.

Like sickness healing was also clearly a divine attribute as may be seen from the following passages. "If you will lend your ears to the laws and observe all the statutes you will never contract

* Assistant Research Officer (A.Y.), Indian Institute of History of Medicine (CCRAS), O.M.C. Buildings, Putlibowli, Hyderabad (India).

any of the diseases of Egypt, for the Lord is your physician" (Ex. 15:26) and "will take away sickness from your midst." (Ex. 23:25) disease and its cure emanate from God. Everything is accomplished through His divine powers. He is the supreme healer of the sick.

Since disease was considered to be the natural sequel to sin, only prayer and repentance could heal or prevent its occurrence once some wicked deed was perpetrated. In the case of Miriam, her brother Moses cried out "Heal her now, oh God I beseech thee." Each leader of his generation is endowed with divine powers, under the direct guidance of God to lead, to instruct to judge and to heal. The Lord God, empowered Adam to rule, to minister and to instruct (Gen. 1:28).

Each chieftain among the antediluvian people (The first ten generations from Adam to Noah) performed such duties. Noah was the chief executive for the period of the Deluge (Gen, 9).

Ten generations later, a new leader Abraham appeared with whom God executed a pact and its symbol is the rite of circumcision. Abraham performed this operation upon himself when he was ninety-nine years old, upon his son Ismail when he was thirteen years old and upon his eight days old son, Issac.

Joseph, the son of the third patriarch, Jacob was the first Hebrew ruler (governor). He administrated the affairs of state for Pharaoh the king of Egypt.

At that time Egypt possessed a culture and a civilization which greatly influenced the generations of Jacob. While medicine among the nomadic tribes was crude and aboriginal, the Egyptians had developed a highly scientific medical standards. Medicine was highly specialized. Skilled surgeons, ophthalmologists and diagnosticians were practicing their arts. Medicine had its special branches then as now.

The ancient crafts of physicians were skilled in embalming. After Jacob had died, Joseph "Ordered his servants, the physicians, to embalm his father and the physicians embalmed Jacob (Gen. 50:2). Thus the method of embalming described; they took strong alcoholic preparations and mixed them with strong spices which they boiled. In to this medicated bath they placed the corpose, where it lay for 40 days "And 40 days were fulfilled from him for its took 40 days to embalm." (Gen. 50:3).

The drugs used by the early Hebrews formed the ingredients of preparations, compounded according to the art of the apothecary. Even in days of their wanderings the ancient Hebrews mixed drugs and apothecaries, dispenced medicine. (Ex. 30:25). Special care was exercised in the preparation of such important compounds as the oil of holy ointment and the holy incense.

The holy ointment was used to anoint the tabernacle, the ark, furniture and vessels including the alter. The aromatic

fumes which issued forth from every article anointed were supposed to have a sort of sanitary effect upon the thickly populated and overcrowded camps of the Israelites. The inhalation of these odours and their absorption helped to preserve the health by penetrating to the lungs and hence the blood stream. Even modern cures are affected by inhalation of medicated air.

The holy incense which was burnt morning and evening upon the alter of the sanitary also acted as a deodorant and fumigator, and its effect were similar to those of the holy ointment. It was supposed to purify the air and so act as a disinfectant in contagious epidemics.

In the discourse of Moses to the Israelites, as narrated in Deuteronomy, health, long life, and and prosperity are promised to those who follow the Mosaic teachings. Among the rewards are "He will also bless the fruit of thy womb and the fruit of thy land thy corn... thou shall be blessed above all people there shall not be male of female barren among you, or among your cattle. And the Lord will take away from thee all sickness, and will put none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which thou knowest upon thee but will lay them upon all them that hate thee." (Deut. 7:13 To 15).

Failure to adhere to the teachings of the Mosaic code will result in the development of severe, undiagnosable epidemics including in infantile plagues as well as the ordinary chronic diseases.

(Deut. 28:59 - 62).

Epidemics were brought on a community for trespassing certain regulations, by the people themselves or by the leader of the community. The Sodomites were smitten with blindness for their attack on Lot. The Egyptians were punished with pestilence for the sins of Pharaoh. The Philistines were attacked with emerods (tumors) because their chiefs had committed a gross offense against the Israelites. Pharaoh was punished with a peculiar skin eruption for the abduction of Sarah the wife of Abraham and for the same offense Abimelech and his household were punished with barrenness.

At a later period, human agencies were added to religious rites in treating disease. Thus the prophets Elijah and Elisha, when called upon to administer to children who were at the threshold of death resorted to physical devices. In the case of Elijah, the child not breathe; the prophet took him to the roof of the abode in the open air and "stretched" himself upon the child. (stretching was perhaps an ancient method of artificial respiration) then he resorted to prayer and supplication.

Elisha when called to treat a supposedly dead child, after prayer and supplication put his mouth to the mouth of child, possibly for the purpose of blowing air, a form of artificial respiration presently employed soon after birth when the new born does not breathe. Elisha

followed this treatment by stretching himself upon the child, and soon the flesh of the child was warm, he repeated same process, the child sneezed and opened its eyes.

Still later Isaiah is recorded to have administered a cataplasm (a cake) made of figs to the inflamed parts of king Hezekiah. King Asa appears to have been the first patient on record to separate religion from medicine, and in the thirty ninth year of his reign, Asa was diseased in his feet, His disease was exceedingly great, yet in his disease he sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians. And died in the fortieth years of his reign." The outstanding implication with regard to Asa (915 to 875 B.C.) is that 450 years before Hippocrates, the people of Judea had professional physicians who separated priesthood from magic.

In the days of Jeremiah (6th century B.C.) there appears to have been many physicians in Palestine. Jeremiah thought it unbelievable that there should be no physicians. Is there not balm in Gilead?" He asked. Is there no physician there? Why there is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?

Job (7th - 4th B.C.) mentioned physicians, but he had no confidence in them. He characterized them as physicians of no value. The practice of healing among Hebrews was not, as it is generally understood, in the hands of priests as it was among the Egyptians,

Babylonians and Persians.

The distinction of medicine in the old Testament does not lie in the diagnosis of diseases nor in the therapeutics but in social hygiene, five centuries before the Greeks visited the land of the Pharaohs (1200 B.C.), Israel was in possession of a document containing laws and regulations, the realization of which was bound to promote the welfare of the ancient Israelites and the preservation of the future nation.

The precept that physical and mental purity are interdependent was the keystone of the Mosaic law. Prevention of epidemics, suppression of prostitution and venereal diseases, frequent ablution, care of the skin, regulation of the sexual life, dietary laws, regulation of labour, the observation of the Sabbath day, measures with regard to menstruation and pregnant women, circumcision, isolation of those suffering from gonorrhoea, and many other laws tended to prevent disease from spreading through Palestine.

It is entirely immaterial whether the hygiene and prophylaxis as promulgated by Moses in the pentateuch (five books attributed to Moses but held by scholars to be a composite work of documents dating from the 9th Cen. B.C. to the 4th Cen. B.C.) were intended as religious rituals or as health measures. The fact is that neither the old Egyptian medical documents nor other early medical codes were so thorough going on subjects of

hygiene and prophylaxis as the Mosaic code.

The recognition that "announce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" accounts for the absence in the old Testament of many diseases which prevailed in Egypt at the period. The strict sanitary and dietetic regulations and the balmy climate of Palestine were destined to eliminate many diseases prevailing in the neighbouring countries.

If Moses was not the father of Jewish medicine, he certainly was an apt pupil according to the Bible, Moses was instructed in "all the wisdom of the Egyptains," which included medicine, for medicine in Egypt was a branch of general culture. Clement of Alexandria (160-214 A.D.) also asserted that Moses was trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptains which included medicine and alchemy.

After Moses, tradition credits king Solomon (reigned 971-931 B.C.) with a useful knowledge of medicine. The "Book of Kings" refers to him as a wise monarch, particularly learned in botany and natural history from the scriptural books described to him, it is evident that he had a knowledge of the bodily organs and their functions. His long peaceful reign and his friendly relationship with neighbouring countries particularly, Egypt, offered him added opportunities to study the wisdom of the Egyptains where medicine was highly developed at that period.

The early Israelites considered the blood to be the seat of soul. It is treated, "only flesh with life thereof which is the blood thereof shall ye not eat." The heart is frequently mentioned in the old Testament as the seat of emotion and intellect. They had a good knowledge of the abdominal viscera even understanding the function of the omentum as the policemen, of the abdomen. The liver and kidney mentioned many times in Biblical passages. It refers to that part of the organs which has to be sacrificed as a fatty piece. They know that the liver is a vital organ, trauma of which would lead to uncontrollable haemorrhage.

According to ancient Hebrew tradition, even before Moses time, cleanliness of the body was so inextricably tied up with purity of the soul that the old testament, without any question, assumes that the two go hand in hand. Before one could communicate with God or purify himself after disease he had to cleanse himself thoroughly. In Exodus, it is noted that before the Israelites were permitted to obtain the commandments, "The Lord said unto Moses: go unto the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments..." so deeply was this idea of personal cleanliness ingrained that it was often used symbolically, unclean influences put the body in a state of taboo until thorough cleansing was accomplished. Elaborate sanitary precautions were exercised by persons

having communicable diseases and by persons coming in contact with them. When a person was exposed to a corpse, a bone, or a grave, he was required to bathe in water. Anyone eating carrion was likewise obliged to cleanse himself.

The spirit of cleanliness was carried by hospitality beyond the defined limits of the Pentateuch. Thus a good host had his guests feet washed. We note that Abraham's servant obtained "Water to wash his feet and the feet of the men that were with him" before entering Rebecca's house.

A list of several diseases prevalent in Biblical times is presented in the 26th chapter of "Leviticus" and in 28th chapter of "Deuteronomy." These include Consumption, Fever that will consume the eyes (a severe form of chronic Malaria that effects the eye) Inflammation, Jandice, Egyptian boils, Scurvy, Skin diseases, Insanity, Blindness and the sore boils of the knees and legs., Dropsy, Gout and Dyspnoea etc.

The two great diseases considered communicable and discussed in the old Testament are Leprosy and Gonorrhoea. According to the priestly code, the priesthood is given exclusive control only over these diseases. The statutes dealing with these dreaded plaques are obviously concerned, not only with imparting a knowledge of the symptoms and thus making diagnosis comparatively easy, but also with preventing them from spreading. Gonorrhoea is believed to have

been the dominant venereal disease of antiquity. According to the priestly code, whenever there was an intermittent or continuous discharge from person's sexual organs, that person was declared unclean and anyone engaging in coitus with him or touching him or anything with which he had come in contact (i.e. bed, chair, saliva) had to wash his clothes and bathe in water. Earthen vessels used by the infected person has to be broken and wooden ones washed. After the discharges had stopped for seven days, the infected person was required to wash his clothes and bathe in running water, after which the taboo was removed. These statutes given completely in the chapter "Leviticus" are excellent hygienic measures to hinder the spread of Gonorrhoea.

Contagious abortion of cows, hogs and other domestic cattle was shown to be caused by bacillus abortus as recently as 1918. But this disease was known in biblical days and is alluded to when Jacob takes inventory of his labors for his father-in-law. During that period Jacob reported that "not a sheep, nor a goat aborted" (Gen 31:28). We find another allusion in the general blessing "There will be no barren male nor barren female among you, including your cattle." (Deut. 7:14).

There is a record in the Bible of an unnamed epidemic, which followed in the wake of the disaster occasioned by Korah's revolt. Hundreds of dead bodies

had collected within the camp, and before their disposal was expedited this epidemic broke out and spread like wildfire (Numb. 14:37). In the second world war epidemics of Typhus, Influenza and other communicable diseases were caused by the decomposing material of the unburied dead which had accumulated upon the battle fields and in the trenches. In the case of the Biblical epidemic mentioned above, "Moses ordered Aaron to take the censer and place upon it the fire from the alter, and put in to it the incense offering, and then go quickly among the congregation.....may hap the epidemic will abatэ." (Numb. 16:46). This was probably some sort of disinfectant which acted by fumigation and so prevented the spread of the epidemic.

Other than these the Bible records the existence of mid wives and instances

of multiple pregnancies, premature births, instances of births to mothers in advanced age, difficult labour, the obstetric chair, the roller bandage for a broken arm, noting the ointments of the apothecary and their use as an emollient etc. These are the expositions of the science of medicine in the Bible.

The study of history of medical science from non-medical sources needs no apology. At first sight the discussion of what was thought in the past rather than what is known now appears to be of merely antiquarian value. A deeper consideration will admit that the history of science is the guarantee of its freedom. The mistakes of our prediccissor remind us that we may be mistaken, and by studying the processes of their thought we may hope to have a better understanding.

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सारांश

पवित्र बाइबिल में चिकित्सा शास्त्र

- पी.के.जे.पी. सुभक्ता

बाइबिल प्रमाणिकता से प्रलेखी एक ग्रन्थ है जो एक खानाबदोष जाति की बुद्धिमत्ता, संस्कृति एवं उसके चिकित्सा विषयक ज्ञान का प्रतिनिधित्व करता है। इब्रानी लोग बजा तौर पर इस बात के लिए गौरव का अनुभव कर सकते हैं कि उनके द्वारा बहुतसी प्राचीन चिकित्सा पद्धतियों एवं परम्पराओं का प्राचीन बाइबिल के विधान में परिरक्षण किया गया है जो कि प्राचीन चिकित्सा विज्ञान पर सामान्यतया तथा इब्रानी चिकित्सा पद्धतियों पर विशेष रूप से प्रकाश डालती हैं।