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## THE OLD TESTAMENT AND MODERN MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE.

IN order to form a true appreciation of the state of development and scientific value of the medical knowledge of the writers of the Old Testament, it is useful to have some kind of background with which to compare it. It would be absurd to judge it in the light of present-day knowledge. Medicine has not stood still for over three thousand years. The customs of primitive peoples of to-day furnish some kind of criterion, but the best background is what we know of the theory and practice of medicine and surgery amongst the Egyptians. Fortunately, two medical books have come down to us, as well as various fragments, from about the period 1600 to 1500 B.C., more or less contemporary with Joseph. These are the oldest books, not mere fragments, in the world, and they are compilations of much older texts. Naturally the translation presents exceptional difficulties, but it is clear that the two books form a great contrast. The Edwin Smith papyrus deals mostly with wounds, fractures and dislocations. The descriptions are clear, and advice is given whether the practitioner will be wise to undertake the case, or to let it alone. The directions for treatment are often clear and sensible; for instance, the method advised for reducing a dislocated jaw is the same as that followed to-day. But on the back of the papyrus a magical charm is given for restoring youth to old men! The Ebers papyrus deals with medical diseases, and offers treatments for them. Here we are in a different world altogether. A supernatural force is regarded as causing most of the ailments, and the remedies are a curious mixture of magic and medicine, charms, incantations, and prescriptions that savour of the charlatan. Often there is no clue to the translation, but we recognise opium (as a sedative for a crying child), water in which an old book has been boiled, fly-dirt and so on, until we are reminded of Martin Luther's encomium on the medical prescriptions of his own day, "Thanks

be unto God, Who has put healing virtue into such manner of muck!" Of accurate observation there is very little trace.

## I

The evidence of these two books is confirmed from other sources. The Egyptian mummies show some fractures set with reasonable accuracy, and well splinted with bark strips or rolls of papyrus. Some of these go back to 2700 B.C. There is a reference to the treatment of fractures in Egypt in Ezekiel xxx. 21: "Son of man, I have broken the arm of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and lo, it hath not been bound up to apply healing medicines, to put a roller to bind it, that it may be strong to hold the sword". On the other hand we may take it that the very numerous trephined skulls which have come down to us from Neolithic or later times give similar evidence. The holes made are too small to have relieved pressure symptoms, and it seems likely that the idea was to let out the demon causing headache, epilepsy or insanity. The practice of surrounding nations, therefore, may lead us to expect that the Hebrews would have some knowledge of the treatment of injuries received in war, or accidents, but that medical diseases would be looked upon as supernatural, or due to witchcraft, and to be treated as such. We should expect to find a wandering nation, lately come in from the desert, or a nation with a long history of suffering invasion after invasion, such as the Israel of the days of the Monarchy, much more backward in medical knowledge than a neighbouring country with a long settled civilisation.

It is surprising therefore to find in the Bible the observation of disease so accurate, and the sanitary science so much in accord with modern knowledge. A medical officer of health has as his principal concerns the right choice of food, the purity of water supplies, personal cleanliness, the disposal of sewage, the provision of healthy homes, and the control of contagious diseases. Let us consider the laws of Moses regulating these matters. For our present purpose, it is not important whether we date these laws from the time of the Exodus, or, with much less probability, during the Babylonian captivity. We find then that meat foods, which might theoretically be obtained from hundreds of wild animals, are in practice to be restricted to a very small number, and two tests are given which are well within

the competence of a primitive people; the beasts suitable for human food must both part the hoof and chew the cud. The remarkable thing is that modern man, after centuries of observation and experiment, has come to approximately the same conclusion. True, we eat the pig, the rabbit, the hare, but it is recognised that these animals are liable to parasitic infection, and that they are only safe if cleanly fed and the flesh well cooked. A primitive people would be well advised to avoid them. Of fish, that which has fins and scales is wholesome; other water animals are to be refused. Here again we approximately agree, though we rather neglect fresh-water fish nowadays. No easy classification of birds suitable or unsuitable for food is possible, so a catalogue has to be given, and once again modern experience and the Levitical law agree. Of insects, the locust alone is allowed. The writer well remembers seeing piles of locusts, dried, offered for sale in the market-place of an oasis in the Algerian desert, and the boys picking off the wings and legs and eating the bodies. A most important provision is added, that any beast that dies a natural death is unsuitable for food (Deut. xiv. 21). To-day, if a butcher exposed a carcase for sale in his shop that had died of disease, he would be prosecuted under the Food and Drugs Act, because there is the possibility of conveying some germ infection or parasite. The law is the more noteworthy, because thereby a considerable source of food supply is cast away as useless. Whence had the Biblical writer this insight, two or three thousand years in advance of his day?

## II

Water supplies must be clean, and it was recognised that a polluted source might lead to disease and death. The elders of Jericho were able to lead Elisha to the fountain that was the cause of an epidemic of miscarriage and death in their city. If a dead animal, for instance a mouse, was found in a vessel full of water, the water must not be drunk. Large pools or running water, on the other hand, were to be regarded as safe (Lev. xi. 29-36). The importance of a clean water supply is one of the major discoveries of the modern public health services. It was only about fifty years ago that it became recognised that typhoid fever in this country, cholera in India, bilharziosis in Egypt, and many other diseases, were spread

principally by polluted water. In a country like Palestine, where fuel is scarce, it is not a practical proposition to lay down the law that all water is to be boiled. Even in England to-day, it is not likely that such a law could be enforced. Other means of maintaining its purity had to be found.

Closely connected with the protection of the wells and springs is the safe disposal of sewage. Water-borne and fly-borne diseases, such as dysentery and enteric fever, have been the scourge of armies in the field even more than of stationary populations. In the South African War the loss of life from these diseases was greater than from wounds. It was not till the Great War of 1914-1918 that effectual precautions were put into practice. Yet all through the centuries the remedy was ready to hand, if the generals had troubled to read their Bibles, and to observe the directions given for the disposal of excreta by burial (Deut. xxiii. 12-14).

There are numerous incidental notices on the subject of personal cleanliness. The Jews were a washing people. The priests of the Tabernacle were provided with a laver for numerous ceremonial washings. Bathing was the accepted symbol of new life, in the preaching of John the Baptist, and of the Lord Himself. The scribes and Pharisees had a perfect mania for incessant ablutions.

Perhaps the most important of public health problems is the control of contagious diseases. We hear mostly nowadays of the epidemics that sweep our schools, but in Bible times the really serious contagious diseases were leprosy and gonorrhoea, either of which might have ill effects lasting a life time. There is therefore a whole chapter (Lev. xv) laying down really stringent regulations for those suffering from discharges; regulations that would go far to prevent the transmission of infection to others. Even more remarkable is the law concerning the method of dealing with leprosy. Leprosy was and is a terrible scourge. It spreads from patient to patient and especially to those inhabiting the same house. It was quite incurable; even with modern treatment only in a proportion of cases, varying in different countries, can the disease be arrested. It produces terrible disfigurement, with it may be loss of eyes, or fingers, or toes. There is no quick release, it might drag on for years. True, our word "leprosy" is not an exact translation of the Hebrew *tsara'ath*. Leprosy to a modern physician means

a disease due to Hansen's bacillus. Before the bacillus was discovered, it meant a disease characterised by involvement of the sensory nerves. In the Middle Ages, it meant a disease with certain skin manifestations. What *tsara'ath* meant is plainly described in a chapter in Leviticus, though the technical medical terms have puzzled our translators. It is, however, quite certain that the so-called leprosy of the Middle Ages, of which Robert the Bruce died, was in the main identical with the leprosy of to-day, and though the Bible account of the diagnosis does not mention the patches of anaesthesia, the changes in the hair and the risings and ulceration of the skin are sufficiently characteristic of the commoner form of leprosy, the nodular form, to make it clear that the Israelitish priest put in a modern leper camp would decide that most of the patients were suffering from *tsara'ath*. He might perhaps send a few to the camp who were not infected with Hansen's bacillus, but he would soon find out his mistake.

How was this really grave menace to the public health to be controlled? The primitive African tribes of to-day would call for the fetish doctor and start a witch hunt to find out who had laid the evil spell on the patient. Not so the law of Moses. The sufferer, after due care had been taken over the diagnosis, was to be expelled from society, and dwell alone. He must wear a distinct dress, and cry, "Unclean, unclean". He was not to be readmitted until the priest acting as health officer had certified that he was free from infection, and then various bathings and shavings were prescribed to make all safe. In practice, apart from an error in diagnosis, the ceremony so graphically described in Leviticus can seldom have been witnessed. What a marvellous picture it is, even in minute detail, of the cleansing of the sinner by the personal appropriation of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and the new life sanctified by blood and the anointing of the Holy Ghost.

The public health officer is also interested in good housing. There was a *tsara'ath* of houses as well as of patients. The description given tallies remarkably with that in the Government manual on the recognition and treatment of dry-rot, starting in the wood-work but spreading over the stones of the building, and if simply scraping does not stop the rot, the stones are to be replaced and the timber removed. Dry-rot is unsightly and unwholesome, and probably means that the house is damp.

## III

We repeat, all these principles are so free from paganism or magic, are so simple, so scientific, so neglected for centuries only to be rediscovered within our own life-time, so little likely to be due to the observation of a people as primitive as the Israelites, a thousand or fifteen hundred years before Christ, that we must surely conclude that the writers had a special revelation from God. Yet some say that the Bible is full of scientific errors!

There is a very remarkable story told in the first book of Samuel which enables us to make a confident diagnosis of the nature of an ancient epidemic, solely by reason of the accurate observations of the contemporary writer. The Philistines, as a judgment for their treatment of the Ark, were visited with a deadly disease which afflicted large numbers of the people, and which spread from town to town along the lines of human communication. The main symptom is given in the Authorised version as "emerods in their secret parts," a phrase which is unintelligible to the ordinary English reader. The mortality was very heavy, but some recovered. Most remarkable of all, we are told that the Philistine priests sent back to the God of Israel not only "five golden emerods", but also "five golden mice". Later, there was a great mortality in Judah also.

Now this passage lay on the page of Scripture for centuries uninterpreted until about forty years ago, when a great epidemic of bubonic plague, spreading from India all over the world, reawakened interest in the subject, and it was recognised that plague is really a disease of rats, and that many dead rats are found lying about during an epidemic outbreak. The Hebrews were not exact zoologists, and no doubt their word *akhbar* included rats as well as mice. We are told that the "mice" marred the land. Presumably they lay about dead. The "emerods" were plague buboes, that is to say, swollen lymph-glands in the groins. The significant point is that the writer to whom we are indebted for the story, or his informants, were sufficiently observant to notice the association of a mortality among the rats and among the human beings, and the spread along the lines of communication. This association with disease amongst rodents was completely missed during the great epidemics of the Middle Ages and up to about 1900; for instance,

it is not mentioned in the very full accounts that have come down to us of the Great Plague of London in 1665. The Bible narrative shows a remarkable degree of accuracy, even when nearly three thousand years go by before the facts are pieced together and explained.

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(NOTE.—This article is the expanded form of an address given to a medical audience in the old Parliament House, Helsinki, in 1936. For the main line of thought, acknowledgements are due to Professor Blair's pamphlet, "A Doctor looks at his Bible."—A.R.S.)