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MEDICINE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Whether it is the *Old Testament* or the *New Testament* the Bible is not to be construed as a medical textbook. It is a book of religious and moral instruction. Its undeviating and single purpose is to expound the singleness, the uniqueness and significance of God for all mortal beings. Medicine does not appear in the Bible as a distinct science or art. In the *Old Testament* it determines certain hygienic laws or gives comparative medical terms for moral punishments where sin was committed; in the *New Testament* it only identifies the sick bodies which Jesus miraculously healed.

In all religions from time immemorial, control over health and disease emanated from the godhead. Before the appearance of the Israelites, before the time of Moses, gods were identified with countless diseases. There was a god for every conceivable illness and since primitive man attributed malignant and benign influences to animals, to various natural phenomena, to

objects inanimate and often repulsive, these became his gods. The first medicine men were the magician-priests who acted as intermediaries between the diseaseridden populace and the multiple deities. In their roles as invokers they eventually learned to practice excellent medicine. However their charlatanism and mysticism in combination with the superstitions and credulity of ancient society produced situations where such practitioners as Imhotep, Horus, Aesculapius and many others became deified as medical and healing gods.

This type of worship with its strange rites and cruel orgies was eradicated, with the advent of the Bible. Health and disease are still considered of divine origin but the one God cannot be controlled at the beck and whim of the temple functionaries. With monotheism the intercession by priests, sorcerers, incantators is prohibited and forbidden. Bible passages show that disease and its cure emanate from God: "I will kill and I will make to live, I will strike and I will heal . . ." (*Deut. 32:39*) "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord, thy God, and will do what is right in His sight and will give ear to His commandments and keep His statutes, I will put none of the disease upon you which I

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have brought from the Egyptians for I am the Lord that heals you." (Ex. 15:26)

The Biblical concept of medicine thus was one of prophylaxis instead of therapeutics. Among the ancient Hebrews religious rituals and ceremonials became a code of preventive medicine. Physical purification was placed on a par with moral purification, and cleanliness of the body went hand in hand with cleanliness of the soul. This inter-relatedness of the physical and spiritual is also manifest throughout many passages of the *New Testament* and is exemplified in the rites of baptism.

The *Old Testament* makes reference to many signs and symptoms of illness but mentions only one disease — leprosy. The leprosy described in *Leviticus*, however, does not resemble the chronic disease we know today. The ancient Hebrews had a very realistic knowledge of the principles of sanitation, and *tzaraas*, the Hebrew word for leprosy, is more properly an inclusive generalization for all skin diseases, contagious or otherwise. Other words and descriptions which imply physiology as well as pathology are discharge, wasting, fever, emorods (Buboes or hemorrhoids), womb, bile, barrenness, obesity, menstruation, to mention just a few. The numerous narratives referring to afflictions as threats of punishment serve as a wonderful and original source for investigation and research. The language is very basic and exegesis of the Bible stories is broad and varied. As a result the commentaries are astronomical in

number. While these are predominately homoletical, scholars and commentators over the millennia have recorded every conceivable phase of medicine including anatomy, embryology, surgery, ophthalmology, obstetrics and gynecology, dermatology, public health, etc.

In making a list of medical subjects and words in the Gospels, it is found that *Matthew* with 28 chapters has 239 such references; *Mark* with 16 chapters has 123; *John* with 21 chapters has 148, and *Luke* with 24 chapters has 252, more references than either *Matthew* or *John* and twice the number that *Mark* uses.¹ This is to be expected for *Luke* was a physician, the "Beloved Physician" of Paul. (Col. 4:14) His account of the life of Christ describes more medical instances than do the accounts of the other Evangelists. He records 24 while the others give them as follows: *Matthew* 19, *Mark* 16, and *John* 6. His descriptions in the original Greek indicate an acquaintance with medical terminology compared to the lay words used by the other Gospel writers.

The several disease entities mentioned in the *New Testament* are easily recognized, and the language describes them very adequately. A third year medical student can make a diagnosis from the lucid descriptions. Among the medical conditions mentioned are arthritis, menorrhagia, epilepsy and poliomyelitis. These are recognized by their descriptions while

¹ Smith, C. Raimer: *The Physician Examines the Bible*, Philosophical Library, New York 1950, page 183.

others like dropsy, palsy, blindness and sores are only identified by their names. *Luke's* experience in orthopedics is evident from the following: "Behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity 18 years and was bowed together and could not lift herself up." (*Luke* 13:11) What infirmity would last so long and not cause the patient's death? *Luke* picked this patient correctly, for this disease is far more frequent in women than in men. She suffered from osteoarthritis with ankylosis or fixation of the joints. The cure, "Woman, thou art loosed from thy infirmity" (*Luke* 13:12), envisions a technique or procedure whereby the adhesions and calcifications are broken up and dissolved away, and pliability is restored to her joints and movement to her limbs.

Mark and *Luke* both record the instance of the woman who suffered from menorrhagia (*Mark* 5:25-26, *Luke* 8:34). *Mark*, the layman, seemingly had a poor opinion of doctors. He was also concerned with the cost of medical care, an ancient as well as a modern problem, to quote: "And a certain woman which had an issue of blood 12 years, and had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing the better but rather worse." *Luke*, the physician, was non-committal concerning the unsuccessful treatment by other colleagues, to quote: "And a woman having an issue of blood 12 years who had bestowed all her substance on physicians, and could not be healed by any." Besides

being a good practitioner, *Luke* observed medical ethics. He was also cognizant of the high cost of medicine as every physician should be.

The above examples were incidents of Christ in the Synagogue. So was the following: "And behold a man among the crowd cried out, saying: Master, I beseech thee look upon my son, because he is my only one. And lo, a spirit seizeth him, and he suddenly crieth out, and he throwing him down and teareth him, so that he foameth; and bruising him, he hardly departeth from him." (*Luke* 9:38-39) *Mark* makes some additional observations: "Sometimes he falls into the fire and sometimes he falls into the water." (*Mark* 9:17-22) What more is required to identify an attack of epilepsy. This is a classical description. In the *Old Testament* the phrase "falleth, and so his eyes are opened." (*Num.* 24:4) is interpreted as signifying an attack of epilepsy.

"The man whose right hand was withered" (*Luke* 6:6) presumably survived an attack of polio which left his right hand atrophic and useless. (*Matthew* 19:12) describes instances of eunuchism: "For there are some eunuchs which were so born from their mother's womb and there be some eunuchs which are made eunuchs of men." This is the earliest reference in any literature recognizing the difference between congenital and acquired hypogonadism.

From the examples cited one can conclude that a high degree of medical knowledge existed in Biblical

times, and that the observations of 2000 years ago deviate very little from the basic medical concepts we hold today. Study of the Bible reveals an extraordinary concordance between data of the Scriptures and many of the mod-

ern and most recent discoveries in the biological and medical fields. To quote Sir Isaac Newton: "The Scriptures are the most sublime philosophy. I find more marks of authenticity in the Bible than in profane history anywhere."



THE NEW OFFICERS and retiring president of the National Federation posed for a photograph during the busy session of the Winter Executive Board meeting held in Denver, December 1, 1961. Seated, from the left: F. E. Verdon, M.D., Miami, Fla., secretary; J. E. Holoubek, M.D., Shreveport, La., the new president; E. J. Murphy, M.D., Bronx, N. Y., retiring president; Rt. Rev. Msgr. D. A. McGowan, Washington, D.C., national moderator; Miss Jean Read, executive secretary. Standing, from the left, are G. P. J. Griffin, M.D., Brooklyn, N. Y., first vice-president; C. P. Cunningham, M.D., Rock Island, Ill., second vice-president; Reverend John J. Flanagan, S.J., editor *THE LINACRE QUARTERLY*, and F. M. Taylor, M.D., Houston, Texas, third vice-president.