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SOME SCRIPTURAL REFERENCES TO THE CARE AND TREATMENT OF CHILDREN*

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ALTHOUGH we hear excerpts of the New Testament read at Mass in English every Sunday and many of us studied Bible History in elementary school, Catholics in general are not very familiar with the Bible. I admit that I am an example of the general rule.

It is interesting to find in this connection that the bibliography of Ancient Hebrew Medicine goes well into the three figure numbers.¹ Although articles in English are in the small minority, we are fortunate that two outstanding members of the medical profession covered the subject very carefully: Dr. Fielding H. Garrison in his *History of Medicine* and in "Abt's System of Pediatrics,"² and Dr. A. Macalister in his *Dictionary of the Bible*.³ I quote most extensively from the article by Dr. Macalister who was Professor of Anatomy at Cambridge, an M.D., LL.D., and Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. Also authorities are Dr. Max Neuberger, of Vienna,⁴ whose history has been translated into English and who agrees in general with Drs. Garrison, Macalister and Wm. Smith.⁵

Since the specialty of Pediatrics dates back no further than the second half of the 19th century, it is quite natural that no pediatricians are mentioned in the Bible. In fact, the word physician rarely appears. In early biblical days God appeared often to His chosen people, instructed them, was their physician. Disease was considered divine punishment of sin, either personal or parental, and healing a sign of God's forgiveness. Even Christ prefaced his miraculous cures with such expressions as, "Thy sins are forgiven thee," or "Thy Faith hath made thee whole."

Asa, the great-grandson of King Solomon, was held as an example of the folly of trusting in human medical skill. Quoting from the second Book of Paralipomonon (2 Pa. 16,12&13), we learn: "And Asa fell sick in the nine and thirtieth year of his reign of a most violent pain in his feet. And yet in his illness he did not seek the Lord, but rather trusted in the skill of physicians. And he slept with his fathers; and he died in

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the one and fortieth year of his reign." His disease is assumed to have been either gout or senile gangrene of the feet.

Even in the New Testament physicians were discredited. St. Mark, describing the case of the woman with an issue of blood for twelve years said, she "had suffered many things from many physicians and had spent all that she had; and was nothing the better, but rather worse." (Mark. 5,26)

To offset such references as these, there is evidence that physicians' fees were recognized as early as the days of Moses. The laws set forth in Exodus, Chapter 21, provide in verse 19 that if one man injure another without killing him, the offender shall be required to make restitution, including the injured man's "expenses upon the physician."

It is also claimed from Exodus, Chapter 30, verse 25, that pharmacists were established in the time of Moses, but the Catholic Bible version translates the word as "perfumer" instead of "pharmacist." Apothecary as a druggist is definitely referred to in Ecclesiasticus, Chapter 38, verse 7, in the course of advice by Jesus of Sirach, showing that physicians and the practice of medicine were highly respected. These words, written about 200 years before Christ, exalt our profession to the level of a divine mission, and at the same time should make us realize that we do very little healing except with the help of God. To quote (Eccu. 38, 1-15):

"Honour the physician for the need thou hast of him; for the most High hath created him.

"For all healing is from God; and he shall receive gifts of the king.

"The skill of the physician shall lift up his head; and in the sight of great men he shall be praised.

"The most High hath created medicines out of the earth; and a wise man will not abhor them.

"Was not bitter water made sweet with wood?

"The virtue of these things is come to the knowledge of men; and the most High hath given knowledge to men, that he may be honoured in his wonders.

"By these he shall cure and shall allay their pains; and of these the apothecary shall make sweet confections and shall make up ointments of health. And of his works there shall be no end:

"For the peace of God is over all the face of the earth.

"My son, in thy sickness, neglect not thyself; but pray to the Lord and he shall heal thee.

"Turn away from sin and order thy hands aright; and cleanse thy heart from all offense.

"Give a sweet savour and a memorial of fine flour, and make a fat offering and then give place to the physician.

"For there is a time when thou must fall into their hands.

"And they shall beseech the Lord that he would prosper what they give for ease and remedy, or their conversation.

"He that sinneth in the sight of his Maker shall fall into the hands of the physician."

Other pleasant references to physicians in the Bible are St. Paul's words, "Luke, the most dear physician," (Col. 4,14), speaking of the apostle Luke, who was a physician by profession. Also, Christ's words used figuratively, "Physician, heal thyself," (Luke 4,23) and "They that are in health need not a physician, but they that are ill." (Mat. 9,12).

Students find no trace of medical education in Palestine in biblical days although it is known that Egypt had schools of medicine in the 15th century before Christ. Since Moses was educated in all the science of the Egyptians, he is believed to have learned whatever they knew of medicine.

Although the early Hebrews lacked the accumulated knowledge of present day medicine and surgery as well as the facilities for its application, and the services of pediatricians, they came very close to some of the basic principles upon which the science of preventive medicine is founded.

Wanting children, loving them, giving them individual and personal care, providing cleanliness of surroundings, of food, of water, of body, and isolation of communicable diseases,—these are not discoveries of the twentieth century, but regulations instituted by Moses through divine inspiration. (Lev. 13 & 16—diagnosis of leprosy and other diseases, isolation, etc.; Deut. 14, 1-21, dietary regulations).

Garrison says (*History of Pediatrics*, Abt, Chapter 1, p. 27), "The main features of Biblical medicine (in the Old Testament) are a clear recognition of contagion as a fact, with the institution of prophylactic measures against certain infectious diseases by the high priests (as medical police), the rigid regulation of sexual hygiene, etc." Also, "Apart from the foundation of preventive medicine, the ritual hygiene and cult-cleanliness of the Hebrews were indeed remarkable." To quote further, the Bible and the Talmud with their "rules for hygienic conduct, are especially noteworthy in the attention paid to the care of the mother and the hygiene of the newborn." (Abt, p. 1)

Since until late in the 19th century midwives were the nearest approach to pediatricians, it is gratifying to find as early as Exodus, Chapter 1, evidence—not long after the death of Moses—that two Hebrew midwives were highly respected by God as well as by man. Their names were Sephora and Phua. Phua is credited with inventing artificial respiration by insufflation. (Macalister, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, p. 331.) However, I have no exact biblical references to support this claim.

The Egyptian King, jealous of the prolific increase of the Hebrew race, ordered all male children to be killed at birth, commissioning the two midwives to do it. Exodus, Chapter 1, verse 15, tells us, "The midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded; but saved the men children." In other words, they risked their lives in sparing the babies they had been commanded to kill. With this evidence and the fact that childlessness was considered a curse and children a blessing of God, it is safe to conclude that babies and children in biblical times received a full measure of care within the limitations of available resources.

In biblical times it was customary, after cutting the umbilical cord, to bathe the newborn infant in water, rub it with salt and wrap it in swaddling clothes. (Eze, 12:4; Luke 2:7) On the Eighth day in the case of a boy, a name was given and circumcision was performed, according to the covenant of circumcision made by God with Abraham (Gen., 17,12). It was performed with a flint knife, cummin (or other ointment) applied to the wound, and tightly bound with the thighs immovable. Parents, midwives and later priests performed circumcisions, but rather as a religious rite than as a surgical operation.

Breast feeding was continued for two or three years, as witnessed by the words of the martyred mother to one of her seven sons (martyred by Antiochus), "My son, have pity upon me that bore thee nine months in my womb and gave suck three years and nourished thee and brought thee up to this age." (Ma. 7,27)

Although only a few instances of a mother's death at child-birth are mentioned in the Bible, the need for foster mothers must have been well recognized, and a customary fee established, for in Exodus, where the finding of Moses by Pharaoh's daughter is recorded, we are told: (Ex. 2,7-9) "And the child's sister said to her: Shall I go and call to thee a Hebrew woman, to nurse the babe? She answered: "Go." The maid went and called her mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her: "Take this child and nurse him for me. I will give thee thy wages. . . ."

Breast feeding was so important that God worked a miracle to provide it for Isaac, born when his father Abraham was 100 years old and

his mother Sara, 90. In the words of Sara, "Who would believe that Abraham should hear that Sara gave suck to a son, whom she bore to him in his old age? And the child grew and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast on the day of his weaning." (Gen. 21,7) It was customary to celebrate the weaning of a child with a feast. Probably the Hebrews realized that the dangers against survival were greatest in the first two years of life.

Boys remained under their mother's care until about five years old when they were taken under the personal supervision of the father. In the case of wealthy families each boy was provided a personal attendant or tutor, called a nursing father. (Num. 11,12; Isa. 49,23) This function was often performed by eunuchs. The legal age of a boy was 13.

Girls remained with their mothers, or nursing mothers (Ruth 4, 16) until marriage. Girls of poor families were likely to be hired out as domestic servants. The legal age for girls was twelve or younger.

Parents had almost absolute power over their children, as shown by Abraham's right to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22,2-12). And children were required by law to revere and respect their parents. Striking or cursing a parent was punishable by death (Lev. 20,9).

If we could look in on the home of a Hebrew patriarch of old, we would see a settlement more like a village than our conception of a modern home. Polygamy was legally recognized. Each wife was provided a separate tent where she cared for her children. In addition we would see the separate tents of the concubines with their respective children. Sons of concubines shared in the family inheritance. Daughters, legitimate or otherwise, only inherited if there were no sons. When sons married they were likely to establish their households under their father's patronage and if so, remained under his authority. With such a household set-up, each mother, prizing her children as gifts of God, must have fulfilled our present ideal of providing sufficient love and affection which is so important an element in child care.

We have no way of accurately determining infant mortality in biblical days, but it is believed to have been very high. In this regard Hebrew writers are credited with the statement, "It is easier to rear a forest of young olive trees than one child."

Diseases in the Bible were described and named in extremely vague terms such as pestilence, fever with cold, with burning and with heat, with corrupted air and with blasting (Deut. 28,21 & 22), consumption, irritation and heat, crookedness, lameness, withered hand, emerods, fever and bloody flux, plague, itch, scab, scall, botch of Egypt, ulcer of Egypt.

Translated into modern terms, diseases which could have affected Hebrew children in biblical days have been interpreted to be: leprosy,

diphtheria—so dreaded that the first case in a village was heralded by trumpets,—various fevers,—probably malaria, typhoid or Malta fever—erisypelas, smallpox, bubonic plague, acute dysentery, anterior poliomyelitis, epilepsy, sunstroke, skin diseases such as itch, scab, scall, an itchy disease erroneously called scurvy, ophthalmia causing blindness, deforming spinal curvatures, bites of scorpions, insects or reptiles called poisonous serpents.

Not many individual cases of sickness in children are described in the Bible, most of them cured miraculously:

(1) The newborn son of David and Bethsabee (wife of Urias the Hethite). Symptoms are not described, but it is recorded that the infant died on the seventh day, stricken by God in punishment for David's sin. (2 Kings 12,14)

(2) The son of the widow of Samaria, "whose sickness was very grievous so that there was no more breath left in him." He was miraculously restored to life by the prophet Elias (1 Kings 17:17-22) as was also,

(3) The son of the Sunamitess, who died following what has been interpreted to have been a sunstroke. While out in the field with his father the child said to his father: "My head acheth, my head acheth. But he said to his servant: Take him, and carry him to his mother. And when he had taken him, and brought him to his mother, she set him on her knees until noon: and then he died." The child was restored to life by the prophet. (2 Kings, 4:19-37)

(4) In the New Testament, there was Christ's miraculous cure of the son of a certain ruler at Capharnaum at the point of death with fever. The ruler asked Jesus to go down and heal his son. Jesus answered, "Go thy way, thy son liveth." The gospel goes on to tell that the ruler met his servants bringing word that his son's fever had left at the very hour Jesus pronounced his cure. (John, 4:46-54)

(5) The restoration of Jairus's twelve year old daughter is familiar to most Catholics, with Christ's words, "The girl is not dead, but sleepeth." The gospel continues: "And they laughed him to scorn. And when the multitude was put forth, he went in and took her by the hand. And the maid arose. And the fame hereof went abroad into all that country." (Mat. 9, 24-26; Mark 5, 41; Luke 8, 41-55)

(6) Jesus also cured a boy of what was apparently epilepsy from the description of the spell he had, falling on the ground, rolling and foaming. The boy's father called his son a lunatic, saying he was possessed of a dumb spirit or a devil. (Mat. 17, 14-21; Mark 9, 14-29; Luke 11,14)

(7) The daughter of a Canaanite woman was said to be possessed of an unclean spirit. Christ declared the devil to be gone out of her. Whether this, too, was a case of epilepsy is not known, but we read that when the woman returned home, "she found a girl lying upon the bed and that the devil was gone out." (Mark 7,25-30)

(8) And let us not forget the account that "they brought to Jesus also infants, that he might touch them." When the disciples rebuked the people, Jesus said, "suffer children to come to me and forbid them not." It is not said that any were sick, but it is implied that His touch would assure their welfare. And following the record of miraculous cures it is evident that physical welfare was in the minds of the mothers. (Luke 18, 15-16; Mat. 19,13; Mark 10;13)

Treatment of disease in biblical times was either entirely lacking,—as the mother who set her child upon her knee until he died,—or was simple, including such procedures as bathing, binding, anointing with oil.

Surgery was limited to circumcision, and it was classed purely as a religious rite. Although eunuchs were common in the service of Hebrews of wealth and in royal households, it is not believed that the operation involved was performed by the Hebrews.

It is claimed the Hebrews used roller bandages in fractures. (Eze. 30,21) The Catholic translation gives "tied up with clothes and swathed with linen" instead of "roller." Jonathan had a son who remained lame as the result of a fall when five years old. (2 Kings 4:4) Both legs were injured, probably fractured, but no treatment is described.

Internal remedies were mainly dietary. Meal, milk, vinegar, wine, water, almonds, figs, raisins, pomegranates, honey, dibs and butter, made up a large part of the Egyptian and Jewish pharmacopoeia, although there were other less pleasant remedies such as heart, liver and gall of Tobiah's fish. Garlic was believed to have medicinal value then as even now. Mandrakes were used as a stimulant to conception even for girls at an age when we consider them still children. (Mandrakes were a fruit).

External remedies consisting mainly of balms and oils were extensively used. Among the most common were balm of Gilead, assumed to be resin of *Pistacia Lentiscus*, mastic tree; or resin of *Balanites Egyptica*, which is still used on sores. Salt was believed to harden the skin. Undoubtedly many Jews also resorted to charms and amulets.

Jewish children, as well as the entire nation, were safeguarded in health by protection against disease rather than by scientific means of cure. Leprosy and other infectious diseases were isolated. Jewish law also forbade mixing with neighboring nations. Hygienic rules governed food supplies.

Except during years of drought and famine and for the forty years the Jews spent in the desert when God provided the miraculous Manna,

the people of biblical days had plenty of food and a variety quite sufficient to meet the needs of healthy children.

Breast feeding was continued much later than is our custom, and foster mothers were provided when necessary. Either to supplement mother's milk or after the child was weaned the ancient Hebrews had cow's milk, goat's milk, even camel's milk. Quite a large number of foods were available; butter, cheese, honey, figs, grapes and raisins, apples—which some authorities believe were citron instead of the apples we know—dates, pomegranates, so-called nuts, which were the fruit of the *Pistacia Vera*, almonds, walnuts, olives made into oil which was used in cooking or eaten on bread, beans, lentils, onions, leeks, garlic, cucumbers, melons of several kinds including watermelons, bread made of cereal grains, wheat, millet and barley, parched corn—which some believe is another name for grain in general and not the corn we know—salads of lettuce, endive, garden horehound or beet and coriander. For special occasions there were meat, the animals permitted being oxen, sheep, goats, deer, gazelle, wild cow, antelope, wild goat, oryx, and game birds which were not carnivorous. There were also eggs available.

As throughout history, the poor could always starve even in a land of plenty, but there was certainly a variety of food for those who could pay for it or raise it.

In conclusion, I fully realize that this is only a very superficial study. And yet, even its limited references provide a valuable lesson. The children of biblical times did not have the great advantage which modern medical knowledge offers for the care and treatment of children of today, namely, prevention of many diseases and remedies for most of them. But their care included the basic formula of being wanted and loved which pediatricians, psychologists and educators of today advocate for rearing well adjusted individuals.

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