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HYGIENE AND DISEASE IN PALESTINE IN MODERN AND IN BIBLICAL TIMES. (Part III)

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(Continued from Q.S., 1918, p. 71.)

CHAPTER IV.--*The Ideas among the Natives of Palestine regarding the Causes and Cure of Disease.*

THE ideas of the modern fellah or bedawi regarding the causes and cure of disease are derived from a number of traditions that have survived from various successive ages. First of all, there is a stratum of folklore belief which is universally respected to-day, but which, from its wide distribution and quaint unreasoning nature, is evidently extremely primitive; then there are beliefs connected in some degree with the orthodox religions, especially with the Kur'an and the official interpreters of these Scriptures; a later stratum, which accounts for disease on rational grounds, belongs to mediaeval medical lore; while in some parts of the land modern ideas of sanitation and of medical and surgical treatment are slowly coming to be recognized.

Belonging, doubtless, to really primitive beliefs, we have the cult of the **Evil eye**, an influence which is to-day considered by the majority in the land as the most potent of all causes of disease and death. "The eye fell on him and he died," is the way a mother will narrate the death of her firstborn. In the Orient the most dreaded eye is a blue one; the owner of such may, quite innocently, bring misfortune, disease, or death at any time. A look or a word of admiration bestowed, however casually, may prove disastrous unless the owner of the eye checks the influence by muttering the name of God. Children and horses are particularly liable to fall under this curse. It is to avoid the glance of the evil eye that many a child is kept unwashed, or dressed in the shabbiest clothes--often only in garments given by or begged from

strangers. For fear of this or of a very similar malignant influence not defined, children will be called by displeasing names, such as "wolf," "jackal," "bear," or "leopard," or given such names as "forsaken." In other cases a child will be allowed to remain unnamed, being addressed as either "boy" or "girl," as the case may be. Sometimes the mother pretends to sell the child to another woman, who gives her, perhaps, a sum equivalent to a farthing for it. To guard against the evil eye, amulets are worn by most children and by horses. In the latter case, bright blue beads are considered sufficient; but around a child's neck there is frequently a necklace of assorted charms--in some cases a veritable museum. Thus, a large lump of alum is added to the collection because it is a substance irritating to "the eye"; bright coins or beads are employed because they attract "the eye" away from the child's face; the bone of an owl because this bird's keen sight at night invests its bone with peculiar virtue as a guardian; or we find such objects as a hedgehog's hoof, the vertebra of a wolf or dog, or a small dog's tail. Commonly, too, an amulet called a *hajib*, a small metal or leather case containing an extract from the Kur'an, or a cabbalistic charm, written by a *kateb*, is worn; in the Jerusalem district it also often contains a piece of the black "stink stone" of Nebi Musa. The Oriental Jews also frequently add small metal plates with some Hebrew words, and metal, or other material, moulded into the form of a hand--the "hand of might." Besides the special amulets, the fellahin adorn a child for whose safety they specially fear with a cap (*tukeyeh*) of some bright colour--red, yellow, or green--while the Oriental Jews further ornament such a cap with blue beads, often arranged in a Hebrew device. All these things may be considered as part of the prophylaxis against disease.

When, on account of a child wasting away, it is suspected that the "eye has fallen on him," various magical means are resorted to in order to ascertain who is the guilty owner and to destroy his power. Such a ceremony is called a *rakweh*. A "wise woman" --the modern survival of the "witch"--is called in; she takes¹ a little barley, salt, alum, *meriamiyeh* (an aromatic plant), and olive leaves, and, placing them together in an earthenware dish over a fire, she allows the fumes to come over the sick patient, while she

¹ This is the account of one ceremonial--the details vary in different localities and religions.

mutter: "O God! prayer in the name of the Prophet, from every blue eye and from all divided teeth.¹ The Prophet has charmed his female camel and followed his companions. O God! prayer in the name of our Lord Muhammad. Let there be fire in the eye of the neighbour; let there be a *khisht*² in the eye of the maiden; let there be a sword in the eye of the guest; and let there be a *shurshura*³ in the eye of the woman and in the eyes of all that saw you and made no prayer to the Prophet." The lump of alum by this time has melted in the heat, and the woman exclaims that the crackling sound that it makes means the destruction of the offending eye; while she professes to recognize in its shape, as it hardens, the features of the individual who has bewitched the child. The next step is to destroy his or her influence. To do this it is necessary to secure part of his clothes or other personal property, and to burn it before the afflicted child. Pieces of the straw mat from the room--preferably taken from the four corners--or a fragment of the palm leaf carried on Palm Sunday, may also be burnt as curative fumigators. For this purpose the Oriental Christians cherish these leaves from one Palm Sunday to another.

A child wasting away is sometimes declared to be a changeling, and a "wise woman" recommends various remedies to right matters for example, letting the child down a well, or burying it up to its neck in a dungheap.

Another common cause of disease, according to native medical lore, is fright. A sleeping person must be very gently and slowly aroused, lest the start of a sudden awakening should cause disease. For one who has undergone a severe shock of any kind, the popular remedy is to make him drink for seven days--a mouthful at sunrise and sunset--from the *tasat er-ra'beh* (lit. "cup of fear"). This cup must be kept all night in the rays of the moon; no sunlight must fall upon the liquid. The ritual must commence with the appearance of the new moon: The cup is properly made from the vault of the skull of a murdered man, and is lined with silver or copper, and such cups are brought to the villages by the pilgrims from Mecca. But, failing that, a copper cup may be used. Among some of the villagers, an elaborate ceremony is substituted, in which the patient

¹ Divided teeth are a secondary characteristic of the bearer of the evil eye.

² *Khisht*, a long splinter of wood used by the fellahin to close a sack when they have nothing wherewith to sew it up.

³ A small sickle used for cutting grass.

is steamed in a vapour arising from a cooked fowl stuffed with some forty different herbs.

Of the peculiar ideas regarding the causes of special diseases, a few selected examples may be given here. Leprosy is considered to be due to contact with the gecko, which, in consequence, is known as *Abu baras* ("the father of leprosy"). Sore heads (ring-worm, etc.) are ascribed to the excrement of bats falling upon them in the dark. Enlarged spleen is often due to swallowing fragments of the finger nails, and this disease--known as *tahal*--is in turn considered a cause of hernia. Warts are said to be the result of trying to count the stars. Haemorrhoids, or "piles," called *bowaser*, are considered as the source of troubles all over the body; for example, a Druze woman under the writer's care asked whether her nasal polypus was not due to *reh bowaser* (lit. "the breath of piles"). Rheumatism is called *reh* (lit. "wind") in the joints. Tetanus, epilepsy, and all forms of lunacy are ascribed to possession by evil spirits. A person must never step across a child lying on the floor, or it will cease to grow; if this has been done by accident, the individual must carefully retrace his steps.

Of the extraordinary number of *remedies* recommended for various diseases, only a few specimens, carefully verified, can be given here. Of the nature of charms we have : the hyoid bone, or canine tooth of a wolf, worn as a sure protection against whooping-cough; a small metal frog, a charm against the "evil eye" in general, is worn particularly against ranula, a cystic swelling beneath the tongue; the fat from the neck of an ostrich is a potent application in rheumatism; a particular rounded red stone, called *bazleh*, is constantly worn suspended from the headdress over the eyebrow of a chronically reddened eye--when the eye gets better, the stone is believed by some to turn white. Red appears to have peculiar healing virtues, because the wearing of a red coral necklace is a remedy against fever, and this, too, is said to become white when it has worked its cure. A calcined calf's foot, powdered and applied in a piece of red material, is a good local remedy for *prolapsus ani*. The urine of a fasting boy, and fasting saliva--a well known remedy--are recommended as cures of ophthalmia. Ear wax is used for ringworm. The hairs taken from the forehead, between the eyes, of a perfectly black donkey, if burnt, are a remedy for eye and other diseases. The hoof of a mule, charred, powdered and mixed with fat is useful in baldness, as is also the gall of an old he-goat. For

"shock"--due to a fall or other accident--a remedy much believed in is quickly to kill and skin a sheep and wrap the patient in the smoking hot skin, while the meat is distributed to the poor; for enlarged spleen, goat's dung, dried and dissolved in vinegar, is applied locally; a fever patient may be strengthened if fed on camel's milk which has been stirred with the camel's tail until the milk is dark in colour. For barrenness there are, naturally, many remedies, among which may be mentioned the claws of a hoopoe burnt and dissolved in syrup, or a diet of donkey's brains. The eye of an owl enclosed in a piece of the skin of a wolf will drive off poisonous insects, the penis of a fallow deer is a protection against serpents, and boiled Egyptian vulture is thought (by the bedawin of Sinai) to be a remedy for snake-bite. Ointment of crabs is, in some districts, a favourite remedy for lumbago. For this disease it is also considered good to pull up a mandrake from the roots (a feat requiring considerable exertion); when the last fibres give way, the root emits a shriek, but the man who does this will be childless, and so it is a remedy only to be recommended to the old. To cure a "stye" in the eye, some dough must, be begged from three Fatmehs or three Miriams, and the eye poulticed with it. For fever, a piece of bread and some bits of candle are taken to the centre of cross roads, a rough enclosure of stones is built over the bread, and the candles are lighted; when a dog comes and knocks over the construction the fever will be cured. Should a woman have a miscarriage or premature delivery, the dead child must be buried below the threshold of the door to prevent the recurrence of such a misfortune.¹

Belonging to another class are the "charms" made for particular diseases, written by the sheikhs in a decoction of saffron or in ink. The majority of these consist of little more than sentences of the Kur'an, especially the fathah (opening sentences), repeated over and over again, the spaces between the sentences being filled up with scrawled Arabic letters with no meaning. In some cases the patient is directed either to wear the charm in the cap (e.g., in a case of headache), or to wash off the ink and drink the liquid, to dissolve the paper and swallow it, or, in yet other instances, to burn the paper and inhale the smoke. Occasionally, the directions are to dissolve one half and drink it, and to fumigate with the other half.

¹ An account of many more such remedies will be found in the *Q.S.*, 1906, pp. 97-102.

One patient was directed to cut his "charm" into strips to put daily one strip into a cup and leave it outside the house that the "dews" of night might fall upon it; he was to drink the water so collected, using a new strip every night for a week, after which he would be cured of his cough. Other charms consist of strings knotted in a particular way, a verse of the Kur'an being recited as each knot is tied.

The sheikhs are very specially consulted for the exorcism of spirits, for which they profess to have great gifts; they pretend, before the assembled patient's friends, to concentrate the demoniacal power gradually into one limb, say a leg, and then gradually make it leave by a particular toe. There is no question that some hysterical cases are "cured" by psychical influence. There is an elaborate ritual for the exorcism of demons called *indulca*, which is well known among the Spanish Jews of Jerusalem. It is performed by a "witch."

For all diseases the *weltys* and other sacred shrines are visited. Vows and sacrifices are made for the recovery of the sick. The plants from such shrines are considered valuable for fumigation of the sick, and the dry earth from the neighbourhood is curative of many diseases (cf. Numb. v, 17). Many springs and wells are credited with healing properties. Some, like 'Ain es-Sultan (Elisha's fountain) at Jericho, are beneficial to all diseases; some are useful for the cure of special diseases. Naturally, the hot springs at Tiberias and at el-Hammeh are much resorted to: that there is a supernatural influence believed to be present is shown by the fact that the name of God must not, so it is taught, be uttered while bathing.

Some shrines, particularly those devoted to *el-Khuder*, are credited with special virtues for the cure of insanity. Here, too, there is plenty of evidence that "cures" of certain functional nervous affections do actually take place.

To a different class of treatment belong the bleedings, cauterizings, and issues which are universally used; they are, no doubt, survivals of the orthodox treatment of a past age. Bleeding is commonly done by barbers for fever, and some of the Syrians are accustomed to be bled every spring--a habit to the omission of which in some special year the writer has frequently heard many ills ascribed. The cautery is a constant and universal remedy. The usual spots chosen are the centre of the cranial vault for headache, between the

breasts for cough, over the epigastrium for dyspepsia and enlarged spleen, over the throat for diphtheria, and so on. For other pains, such as lumbago, a number of small cauterizations, in sometimes quite an elaborate pattern, are made; or the part is tattooed. Issues, kept open for years by inserting a pea, are exceedingly common on the arm for chronic trachoma; and other issues are made in the neighbourhood of painful joints.

With regard to vegetable remedies, a number of indigenous herbs are credited with curative virtues, but are of quite secondary importance to amulets and the magic of the sheikhs. In the towns a number of old prescriptions are used, by which such substances as pepper, ginger, saffron, honey, and garlic are mingled in varying proportions. More effective than these prescriptions is the method of treatment known as *el-'ushbeh*, which is used for Syphilis. The patient is isolated for forty days in a tent or room, fed on unleavened bread (without salt), honey and raisins, and is made to drink great quantities of a decoction of sarsaparilla, with which he is also steamed. The method is also tried for other diseases which have failed to yield to treatment.

In connection with childbirth there are many customs. The most noticeable is that firmly and universally held in belief by Oriental Jews of the danger threatening mother and child from the malignant influence of Lilith, a female demon about whom there are innumerable tales. To protect against her influences, mother and child must not for a moment be left alone, but be watched night and day, preferably, it would seem, by a noisy crowd of relations and friends; copies of an amulet printed in Hebrew are hung on the bed and about the room; a bunch of garlic, one of rue, a Pass-over cake shaped like a hand, and some bright blue beads are also commonly hung on the bed. Among the fellahin the midwife is usually responsible for the child the first forty days of its life. When she cuts the navel cord the infant receives its name and, with boys, in many cases the name of his future bride (the "daughter of So-and-so") is also mentioned, such a betrothal being binding. Hence the proverb "Your navel was not cut in my name" means "I am not bound to do this or that thing." As soon as the navel is cut the midwife rubs the child all over with salt, water, and oil, and tightly swathes it in clothes for seven days; at the end of that time she removes the dirty clothes, washes the child and anoints it, and then wraps it up again for seven days--and so on till the

fortieth day (cf. Ezek. xvi, 4). Among the bedawin of Sinai a male child is often made to swallow the ashes of a scorpion mixed with milk, or the finely-chopped feather of the long eared owl; the former is considered to be a protection against scorpion bites; the latter brings luck. Both must be taken before the mother's milk is first tasted.

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