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Chapter 4 Neurology in the Bible and the Talmud

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Abstract

The Bible, a major pillar of Western Civilization consists of Hebrew Scriptures, assembled over a millennium and accepted as of divine origin. The Talmud is a compendium of Jewish laws, covering every possible aspect of life, analyzed in depth from 200 BCE to 600 CE, becoming the foundation of Jewish existence.

The all-encompassing character of the books provides numerous medical problems and observations that appear in various connotations. When in need to clarify various legal dilemmas, the Talmudic sages displayed astoundingly accurate anatomical knowledge and were pioneers in clinical–pathological correlations.

The descriptions of “neurological” events in the Bible are very precise but show no evidence of neurological knowledge. Those reported in the various tractates of the Talmud are evidence of a substantial medical knowledge, marked by Hellenistic influence. Subjects such as head and spinal injuries, epilepsy, handedness neuralgias aphasia tinnitus and tremor were discussed in depth.

This chapter is an updated collection of the studies, extracting observations and discussions of neurological manifestations from the ancient texts.

Introduction

The Bible (The Hebrew Bible; Old Testament; Tanach) and the Talmud are the canonized writings of the historical, religious and cultural creations of the Jewish people, assembled over many generations from, roughly, the 14th century BCE to the 6th century CE on a continuum. It is evident, however, that during this process many other manuscripts and scriptures were excluded, and most of them lost. The Bible is the most essential foundation of the Jewish religion, cultural heritage and national identity, as well as one of the cornerstones of Western civilization. This is the major reason for the continued interest, scrutiny and research associated with it.

The first attempts at a systematic study of the medicine in the Bible (Old and New Testaments) were awakened by the Reformation (Bartholin, 1672). But it was only in the second half of the 19th century CE that scholars, especially in Germany, established a scientific approach to the study of the Bible and the Talmud, recognizing the continuity of these two creations. The study of medicine in these old texts was but one aspect of this flourishing discipline. Dr. Julius Preuss (1861–1913), a physician well versed in the Jewish Holy Scriptures, as well as in Semitic and classic languages, published in 1911 his *magnum opus* – *Biblisch-Talmudische Medizin* (Preuss, 1978), which is still the authoritative work on the subject. Fred Rosner (1978) edited and translated this book into English in 1978. Since then, many scholars have unraveled more bits of information and had new insights.

The present chapter will deal with the neurological observations and many related insights found in the Bible and the Talmud.

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Neurology in the Bible

Two main processes are to be recognized in the formation of the Bible. The first is evolutionary. Until reaching its final form and being “sealed” and canonized by a rabbinical committee on the eve of the 2nd century CE, this heritage, in the form of rules, histories, poetry and exalted prophecies, underwent a process of transmission from one generation to another in verbal versions, and only later in written forms. We have evidence of different versions and approaches coexisting. The second...

Neurology in the Talmud

Whereas the Bible is an assembly of ancient Jewish law, historical heritage, prophecies, literature and poetry that were concluded at the eve of the 2nd century CE, the Talmud is the record of oral rabbinic discussions of Jewish law, ethics, customs and history that developed at a later period. It is comprised of two components that are historically separate, the Mishnah and the Gemara.

The Mishnah is the first written assembly of Jewish law, which is an interpretation and expansion of the...

Conclusions

In the Post-Talmudic Era, Jewish scholar-physicians became an important part of Islamic medicine's endeavor to preserve and develop the Greco-Roman medical heritage. The spread of Jewish communities all over medieval Europe made the Jewish physicians an important link between Islamic medicine and the developing Christian medical schools and institutions. As all of these men were rabbinic scholars, as best exemplified by Maimonides, they were not mere conveyers but carried with them also the...

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[Saints, demons, and faith – A review of the historical interaction between Christianity and epilepsy](#)

2022, Epilepsy and Behavior

Citation Excerpt :

...The term “falling sickness” is representative of the difficulties that emerge when one searches for examples of epilepsy in religious texts. The “falling” could originate from translations and merely mean humility when bowing, not a physical act of falling down during a seizure [43,44]. Being one of the arguments for St. Paul’s diagnosis of epilepsy, falling is not specific for epilepsy and might be present in various situations (episodes of syncope, psychiatric conditions, transient ischemic attacks) or represent a textual exaggeration of an event to depict someone overwhelmed or in a moment of weakness (e.g., as a contrast to when St. Paul “re-gained his sight, got up and was baptized, ... took some food and felt strong again”, Acts 9:18–19) [32]....

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...In recent times, there has been escalating interest in providing medical diagnoses for the symptoms and signs afflicting numerous individuals in the Bible and more specifically their neurological diagnoses [9]. While descriptions of neurological events in the Bible are quite precise, they demonstrate no evidence of medical knowledge [10]. Epilepsy is mentioned on a number of occasions in the Pentateuch, (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)....

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[Third International Congress on Epilepsy, Brain and Mind: Part 1](#)

2015, Epilepsy and Behavior

Citation Excerpt :

...This summary reviews occurrences of symptoms in the Bible and Talmud that might resemble epileptic phenomena. A few seizure-like episodes are depicted in the Bible, and, oddly, all involved prophets [45,46]. One of them pertains to the Hebrew term “Nefilat Appayim” (falling on one's face)....

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