

## Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

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### CHAPTER SIXTEEN -

#### Sickness in Bible Lands

#### OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING ON HEALING AND SICKNESS

PROMISES OF HEALTH through obedience to the law. Through their wilderness experiences and after they were in the Land of Promise, the Hebrew families could look to the promise GOD originally gave to them about health for their bodies:

**If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee which I have brought upon the Egyptians, for I am the Lord that healeth thee** (Exodus 15:26).

Health was promised upon condition of obedience to the law of GOD.

*Sickness as punishment for disobedience.* The law also taught Israel that sickness could be expected when GOD's law was disobeyed. The twenty-eighth chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy lists many curses that would come upon the people of Israel because of disobedience. Among them are these:

**"He will bring upon thee all the diseases of Egypt, which thou wast afraid of; and they shall cleave unto thee. Also every sickness, and every plague, which is not written in the book of this law, them will the LORD bring upon thee, until thou be destroyed"** (Deuteronomy 28:60, 61).

The families of Israel who were acquainted with the Hebrew Bible would be brought up on the idea that health was the reward for obedience, and sickness the punishment for disobedience.

#### WHAT OLD TESTAMENT JEWS DID IN TIME OF SICKNESS

Ordinarily, the ancient Hebrews did not go to physicians when they were sick. There are surprisingly few references to physicians in Old Testament days. Job mentions the existence of such when he says, **"Ye are all physicians of no value"** (Job 13:4). King Asa was criticized by the sacred writer who says of him, **"He sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians"** (1 Chronicles 16:12). The prophet Jeremiah asked the question, **"Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there?"** (Jeremiah 8:22). It is quite probable, that any physicians referred to in these days were foreigners, and not Jews of the land.<sup>1</sup> (cf. Jeremiah 5:14-16)

There are many examples of prayer to GOD for healing of sickness under the dispensation of law. Moses prayed for the healing of the Israelites bitten by the snakes (Numbers 21:7). The Sixth Psalm is David's prayer in time of sickness, and one which GOD heard. One of the great thanksgiving Psalm has a section in it dealing with gratitude to GOD for healing of the sick (Psalm 107:17-21). King Solomon in his dedicatory prayer for the temple, encouraged the people to expect GOD to answer their prayer for healing of sickness (II Chronicles 6:28-30). And King Hezekiah was healed in answer to prayer (II Kings 20).

### **JEWISH ATTITUDE TOWARD SICKNESS IN CHRIST'S TIME**

*The Jews of that day were largely lacking in a scientific knowledge of medicine. This fact may be accounted for in their belief that sickness was caused by either the sin of the sick person, or of his relations, and that it was sent as punishment for that sin. Concerning the blind man, the disciples asked JESUS, "**Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?**" (John 9:2). Also, sickness was usually attributed to demons. Therefore, they considered that the cure was the casting out these evil spirits. Among them, it was the most pious rather than the most educated man who would have this power. JESUS referred to this practice when the Pharisees wrongly accused him: "**And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast them out?**" (Matthew 12:27) These facts explain the Jewish lack of medical knowledge in those days.<sup>2</sup>*

Mark adds an interesting fact in his report of CHRIST healing the woman with the issue of blood. He says that she "**had suffered many things of many physicians**" (Mark 5:26). One writer quotes the Talmud of Babylon as authority for the fact that some of the rabbis themselves posed as physicians, and very queer remedies indeed were prescribed by them for a woman with this ailment. If one course of procedure did not succeed in healing, another one was suggested. One of these was this:

"Dig seven pits, and burn in them some vine branches not yet four years old. Then let the woman, carrying a cup of wine in her hand, come up to each pit in succession, and sit down by the side of it, and each time let the words be repeated: 'Be free from thy sickness.'"<sup>3</sup>

### **PREVALENCE OF SICKNESS IN PALESTINE IN CHRIST'S DAY AND IN MODERN TIMES**

The Gospel records tell of the presence of a multitude of sick people in the land, and how these were brought in great numbers to JESUS to be healed. "**And at even . . . they brought unto him all that were diseased . . . and all the city was gathered at the door. And he healed many that were sick of divers diseases**" (Mark 1:32-34).

In the days before the British occupation of the land, and before the modern Jews brought scientific medical skill in the healing of disease, the Land of Israel was overrun with all kinds of afflicted people. One traveling through the land would scarcely ever be out of sight of blind beggars, or crippled people, or lepers, etc. Such a situation has served to illustrate the conditions under which the ministry of CHRIST was carried on so effectively, in meeting the need in the homes where sickness was present.<sup>4</sup>

## **EXPECTATION OF SUPERNATURAL POWER TO HEAL BY A REPRESENTATIVE OF GOD**

Dr. Trumbull has called attention to a very interesting situation which he discovered in the Orient. He says:

"Another fact that sheds light upon the work of JESUS and His disciples in their ministry of healing, is the universal expectation, in the East, of the cure of disease through the supernatural power of some reputed representative of GOD. So it is, and so it has been."<sup>5</sup>

A multitude of people lay about the pool of Bethesda expecting an angel to trouble the waters and cure their sicknesses (John 5:1-4). A blind beggar was given an orange and a crust of bread, but he pointed to his sightless eyes, and asked Dr. Trumbull to cure his blindness. He thought that this traveler was a representative of GOD who could heal him. Such is the faith that exists in the East, in modern times. This universal faith in divine power to heal, in Messianic times, presented JESUS and His apostles with a marvelous opportunity to demonstrate the healing power of a compassionate GOD.

1. "Treatment of Disease," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, pp. 271, Z12.
2. Edmond Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of CHRIST*, pp. 251, 252.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 256, 257.
4. H. Clay Trumbull, *Studies in Oriental Social Life*, pp. 295-298.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 304.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 308-309.

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