



Unchanged Maladies:

Current Perspectives on Old Testament Diseases

As
a physician
reading
the Old Testament
this year, I often find myself speculating about some of
the medical conditions referred
to in the Old Testament.

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Although many disease entities have surely changed significantly over the past several thousand years, the human anatomy remains basically unchanged, thus rendering man susceptible to the same categories of disease in any day and age. The following examples of Old Testament disease, with some modern-day applications, may be of interest to those who diagnose, heal, and teach in today's world. Although many of the comments represent pure speculation, the major categories of disease in Old Testament times are of interest to today's physician.

ENVIRONMENTAL ILLNESS

Now king David was old and stricken in years; and they covered him with clothes, but he gat no heat.

—I KINGS 1:1

Certainly throughout the ages man has struggled with the challenges of his environment. As temperature homeostasis is essential to life and health, maintaining euthermia despite environmental conditions of excessive heat or cold is a universal struggle. This scripture alludes to hypothermia associated with advanced age, the now well-described phenomenon of altered thermoregulation among geriatric patients. As little other information is available regarding King David's condition, other disease entities such as hypothyroidism, hypopituitarism, hypothalamic dysfunction, or sepsis may also account for his symptoms.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Command the children of Israel, that they put out of the camp every leper, and every one that hath an issue, and whosoever is defiled by the dead.

—NUMBERS 5:2

Numerous references to leprosy and other "issues" attest to the prevalence of infectious disease in Old Testament times. Although our ability to treat infection has changed remarkably over the past few centuries, infection still represents a major cause of morbidity and mortality today. Of special interest are the recommendations of the Old Testament for treating infectious disease, specifically hand washing (Leviticus 15) and isolation (Leviticus 13–15, Numbers 5), techniques not uniformly practiced in medicine until the teachings of Joseph Lister and others in the 1800s, when germ theory and infection became more widely accepted.

DERMATOLOGIC DISORDERS

So went Satan forth from the presence of the Lord, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown.

—JOB 2:7

Job's dermatologic condition may have been due to a number of diagnoses we encounter today. Perhaps he suffered from pemphigus vulgaris, an autoimmune disorder associated with disseminated painful lesions and often associated with malaise and weight loss. Pemphigus vulgaris has a higher incidence among people of Jewish and

Mediterranean heritage. Other possible diagnoses include erythema multiforme major, bullous dermatitis herpetiformis, or bullous pemphigoid. In any case, Job's suffering related to his skin condition was severe, as with any patient with a disseminated skin disorder.

GASTROINTESTINAL DISEASE

And after all this the Lord smote him in his bowels with an incurable disease.

And it came to pass, that in process of time, after the end of two years, his bowels fell out by reason of his sickness: so he died of sore diseases.

—2 CHRONICLES 21:18–19

Jehoram's disease seems to be a chronic gastrointestinal malady, perhaps similar to Crohn's disease, which is known to be three to eight times more common among Jewish populations. Crohn's disease would in fact be considered incurable prior to the availability of therapy with steroids and sulfasalazine. The statement that "his bowels fell out" may refer to the bloody diarrhea associated with Crohn's disease. Other possible explanations of Jehoram's malady include ulcerative colitis or chronic infection with an agent such as Yersinia.

VASCULAR DISEASE

And Asa in the thirty and ninth year of his reign was diseased in his feet, until his disease was exceeding great: yet in his disease he sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians.

—2 CHRONICLES 16:12

King Asa, the third king of Judah, suffered from some type of foot ailment, perhaps vascular disease. Whatever the specific disease, it was of sufficient severity to ultimately cause his death (2 Chr. 16:13). Though not commonly mentioned in the Old Testament, it is likely that men suffered from various types of vascular disease, including complications of diabetes, lipid disorders, etc., in prior times as well.

PSYCHIATRIC ILLNESS

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.

—I KINGS 19:4

Perhaps Elijah suffered from major depression, with the above noted symptoms of isolation from others and a desire to die. Of particular interest to physicians is the treatment for Elijah prescribed by the Lord, that of physical sustenance (1 Kings 19:5) (his need for physical sustenance may be due to vegetative symptoms such as anorexia), followed by the establishment of a series of goals and purposes (1 Kings 19:15–21). Perhaps these treatment modalities, particularly of establishing meaningful goals, may be of use to those who heal today.

Then said Saul unto his armourbearer, Draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me. But his armourbearer would not; for he was sore afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword, and fell upon it.

—1 SAMUEL 31:4

Saul's example of suicide, despite the refusal of his armorbearer to assist him in suicide, illustrates an important point to practitioners. We as health-care professionals respect the autonomy of patients, even on occasions when patients make decisions that may appear irrational to the physician. Many patients, like Saul, choose death rather than torture and pain.

ALCOHOLISM

Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation.

—LEV. 10:9

Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink.

—ISAIAH 5:22

The numerous counsels of the Old Testament to avoid strong drink suggest that alcohol and its deleterious effects were well known in those times. Today alcohol has been estimated to contribute to 50 percent of traffic fatalities, as well as to a large proportion of fires, hypothermia, suicides, and homicides. The counsel of the Word of Wisdom in modern times is in concordance with the Old Testament counsel to avoid strong drink.

VIOLENCE

But Amasa took no heed to the sword that was in Joab's hand: so he smote him therewith in the fifth rib, and shed out his bowels to the ground, and struck him not again; and he died.

—2 SAM. 20:10

The Old Testament contains many tales of war and violence, and in them many descriptions of related injuries and deaths. Although the specific reasons for violence and manifestations of violence may change, violence still represents selfishness, inability to resolve issues civilly, and a lack of concern for other members of humanity. Violence, unfortunately, has been a common tendency of man throughout the ages. Injuries remain the leading cause of death among individuals under the age of 44; a high number of those deaths are due to violence. In some sectors of society, homicide is the leading cause of death among young people. As a physician, I struggle daily with lamentable injuries inflicted by one man upon his brother. I believe that the role of physician may extend beyond the healing of physical wounds, even beyond the healing of emotional sorrow, to the prevention of violence and its effects, perhaps as an active voice in the community. I look forward with gladness to the day when "violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise" (Isaiah 60:18).

CONCLUSION

As many principles taught in the scriptures remain unchanged throughout the millennia, one wonders how diseases have changed over the same time period. Perhaps there have been remarkable changes in microbiology, oncology, and cardiovascular disease; however, the anatomy and physiology of the human body is likely unchanged for the most part. Many disease processes that existed thousands of years ago may remain today.

The mention of various medical conditions in scripture serves to illustrate the transient nature of our human existence. Even as our understanding about medical disease and treatment expands, death is still the ultimate outcome of each life. These examples throughout scripture remind us of the frail nature of our human existence. As countless Old Testament men have "slept with [their] fathers" (2 Chr. 16:13), so shall we soon. Though we recognize the temporal nature of humanity, we nevertheless endeavor to function in this life as healers of the body, and sometimes of the soul. □

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