

Nose-rings in the Bible

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SUMMARY

The "nose-ring" was a common ornament of women of the Bible. In wearing her nasal adornments the Hebrew woman was careful to preserve the integrity of the nasal septum and to refrain from interfering with the functioning of her nose. In her attitude she was guided by the rules of health and sanitation in the Mosaic Law.

THE solemnity of the occasion, to which this paper is dedicated, prompted the search for a subject in which art and rhinology should be combined and adequately represented.

At first glance a paper dealing with biblical ornaments of the nose is primarily non-medical, and therefore might appear quite baffling in a highly specialized medical journal. Further reflection, however, does suggest that this is not a remote subject, and that it can be discussed from a medical point of view demonstrating the sound approach of the ancient Hebrews to the integrity and function of the nose as sanctioned by rules of religion.

Since time immemorial women care for their personal appearance. This was also the case with women of the Bible who were famous for their beauty: "And thy renown went forth among the nations for thy beauty; for it was perfect . . ." (Ezekiel 16 : 14). Bathing followed by anointing was foremost among the essentials of a well-cared-for-body (II Samuel 11 : 2; Ruth 3 : 3). On vogue were "raiments of fine linen, and silk, and richly woven work" (Ezekiel 16 : 13), and painting of the eyes (II Kings 9 : 30; Ezekiel 23 : 40) and golden ornaments: ". . . that thou clothest thyself with scarlet, that thou deckest thee with ornaments of gold, that thou enlargest thine eyes with paint . . ." (Jeremiah 4 : 30). The Bible contains many references to feminine jewelry including signet rings, earrings, and nose-jewels. Jewelry was part of the marriage settlement. Brides wore a golden tiara shaped like the city of Jerusalem (Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1971). Scattered throughout the numerous volumes of the Talmud (Epstein, 1952) are references to women's ornaments such as "necklaces, finger-rings, ear-rings, and nose-rings" (Tractate Shabbath, 59b; Avodah Zarah, 43b, Kelim 11 : 8). Some of the allusions have a surprising relevance to the present: "The things for which a woman longs are adornments." (Tractate Ketuboth, 65a).

"Nose-rings" or "nose-jewels" (Isaiah 3 : 21), of which the Hebrew term is "NEZEM-APH", were of different types. They reveal to us not only folklore and rites but, at the same time, also the attitude of the people towards the health of the nose. It is noteworthy that, contrary to other nations, nasal jewelry was an exclusive feminine custom (Solieli and Barchuz, 1961). The "nezem" as a small jewel or a golden ring of roughly six grammes of weight was worn through the dorsal part of the right nasal wing, as it is customary (Mazar, 1959; Solieli and Barchuz, 1961), with Beduin girls to this very day (Figure 1). Anatomically this structure, composed of skin, areolar and adipose tissue, resembles the ear lobe, which used to be pierced for ear-rings. Physiologically this way of wearing the jewel is least interfering with the function of the nose.



Figure 1. "Nezem-aph". From "Views of the Biblical World". Courtesy of B. Mazar, Professor of History of the Jewish People in the Biblical Period, and Archaeology of Palestine. The Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

A second type of nasal decor was a chain of golden jewels put in the region of the glabella, and covering the nasal dorsum, or strings of coins worn, by children in particular, on the forehead (Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1971) a practice not uncommon even today among Beduin women and girls in Israel. It is rendered in the Bible by the following verses: To win Rebekah's heart Eliezer "put the ring upon her nose, and the bracelets upon her hands" (Genesis 24 : 47). "He gave her a nose-ring, wherein was set a precious stone half a shekel in weight, foreshadowing the halfshekel which her descendants would once bring to the sanctuary years by year" (Ginzberg, 1947). And in Ezekiel we read: "And I put a ring

upon thy nose, and earrings in thine ears, and a beautiful crown upon thy head" (Ezekiel 16 : 12). This again was a healthy solution to the use of nasal ornaments with no harm done to any vital structures nor was there any obstruction caused to the respiratory air stream.

A third type was the nasal ring in the mid-line, between the two nares, piercing the membranous and/or the cartilaginous septum. It should be pointed out, however, that these nose-rings, as well as hooks and snares, were mentioned in the Bible in connection with animals only: "Shall any take him by his eyes, or pierce through his nose with a snare? Canst thou put a ring into his nose? (Job 40 : 24 & 26). In the Talmud (Epstein, 1952) we come across a similar reference: "A white camel with its iron nose-ring". (Tractate Shabbath, 51b).

The respectful attitude towards the integrity of the nasal structures, this natural tendency to refrain from harming the septum, was mainly due to the immense impact of the Mosaic Law on everyday life of the people. Throughout the Holy Scriptures man's health and hygiene, public health measures, preventive medicine, and the danger of diseases was of constant concern. These rules of health and hygiene were sanctioned by strict orders of religion.

How could the common man know what is good and what is wrong, what is permitted and what forbidden?

The answer was given to him in the "Torah", which literally translated means "teaching", "instruction" or "guidance". Later did Torah come to mean Law (Werblowsky and Wigoder, 1966), and since the Torah had to be a complete guide of living the knowledge of the Torah became a prerequisite to it. The people had to be educated to understand and to obey the Law, and at gatherings (later synagogues) the Scriptures were read and expounded. The precepts of the Torah required elucidation and interpretation out of which grew the Mishnah, meaning teaching by "repetition". Comments, additions and disputations on points raised in the Mishnah gradually accumulated, and were designated Gemara, meaning "Completion". The Mishnah, with its commentary the Gemara, make up the Talmud (Hebrew "Study"). Two Jewish Academies, in Palestine and Babylonia, produced each an independent Talmud; the former was completed in the fourth century, and the latter a century later. The only complete manuscript of the Palestinian Talmud is that of Leyden; while the Munich Codex (1334) is the sole surviving manuscript of the whole Babylonian Talmud (Werblowsky and Wigoder, 1966).

The Hebrews knew the consequences of a perforated septum; they observed the sunken, flat, disfigured nose and coined the term "Harum" for it (Rosen, 1971). Brim (1936), describing physical disabilities in the Bible, referred to "Choroom" as perforation of the nasal septum. He based his views as follows: "The origin is from the word "choroom" which means to perforate; hence choroom may signify a perforated nasal septum. The application of this term to a saddle nose is based on the assumption that the nose in such cases is so flattened as to show the openings of the nostrils". The nasal deformities, as signs of systemic diseases, caused severe religious and social restrictions in biblical times (Rosen, 1971).

The fear of crippling blemishes, which prohibited the approach to the altar and the offering of sacrifices (Leviticus 21 : 21) guided the Hebrew woman in her careful and respectful use of her nasal adornments. It may be pointed out that, according to Scriptural legislation, even an animal with a perforated septum was unfit for sacrifice in the Temple. A doctrine in the Mishnah (Danby, 1933) states: "If its nose is pierced, defective or slit . . . it may not be slaughtered in the Temple or in the provinces" (Bekhoroth 6 : 4 & 6 : 12).

It becomes evident that a perforated nasal septum was regarded as equivalent to a blemish disqualifying humans from performance of certain religious rites, and hence harming of the septum by nasal rings and jewels was carefully avoided. Obviously nose-rings were spoken of and seized upon, by the ancient Hebrews, to press home sayings. A proverb, attributed to King Salomon, and dealing with beauty without discretion, reads as follows: "As a ring of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman that turneth aside from discretion" (Proverbs 11 : 12). The term discretion literally means "taste", including here both intellectual and moral discrimination. The expression reflects an ethical moral and philosophical aspect (Toy, 1948; Buttrick, 1955).

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Nasenring gehört zu den üblichen Schmuckstücken der Frau in der biblischen Zeit. Die Frauen der Hebräer bedienten sich dieses Nasen-Ornamentes mit grösster Vorsicht um die Integrität des Septums zu bewahren und um jede Störung der Nasenfunktion zu vermeiden. In ihrem Handeln wurden sie durch Gesundheits — und Sanitäts — Regeln des Mosaischen Rechtes geleitet.

RÉSUMÉ

L'"anneau nasal" était un bijou commun pour la femme de la Bible. En portant son bijou nasal la femme Hébreu devait faire attention afin de préserver l'intégrité de la cloison nasale, et se méfier des répercussions quant au bon fonctionnement de son nez. En cela elle était guidée et conseillée par les commandements sanitaires de la Loi Mosaique.

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