

## NASAL DEFORMITIES IN THE BIBLE

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As the Apollo-8 spacecraft sped towards its goal the astronauts Borman, Anders and Lovell took turns solemnly reading the first ten verses of Genesis, on Christmas Eve of 1968.

We, gathered here on an international forum for achievement in Rhinology, may as well take a look back to see the nasal problems in their "Beginning". The Bible, apart from its many other wonderful aspects, is an inexhaustible treasure of interesting medical themes. It is not expected, however, to find in the historic, prophetic or poetic books of the Old Testament anything more than mere hints, or poetic allusions, either to morbid conditions or to their cures. Here and there do we find them scattered incidentally among religious sanitary rules, among the threats of punishment from the mouths of the prophets, and among the allegories and parables.

As to the nose it is mentioned in the Old Testament, in the original language, two hundred and sixty-eight times, and its meaning appears in four main groups: the nose proper, face, soul, and anger.

Definite allusions to today's topic — "Deformities of the nose", we find in the following verse of Leviticus. Moses, educated in Egypt, where Medicine stood at a top level in the Ancient World, ordered his people, saying:

"For whatever man he be that has a blemish, he shall not approach: A blind man, or a lame, or he that has a flat nose or anything superfluous — let him not approach to offer the bread of his God".

(Leviticus 21 : 18)

The "flat nose" is the translation of "Harum" while "anything superfluous" of "Saruah" in the original text. The Greek version of the Old Testament, dated from the beginning of the 3rd century B.C.E., the Septuagint, translated the two terms "Harum" and "Saruah" — the "disfigured nose". The Latin translation of the Scriptures, the Vulgate, prepared near the end of the 4th century A.D., rendered these terms — "a small or a big and twisted nose". Verbatim: "Si caecus fuerit si claudus si vel parvo vel grandi et torto naso". These deformities of the nose, which fell within the category of "crippling disorders", were vividly disputed in the post-biblical literature known as the Talmud, which is an enormous literary work, a collection of early biblical discussions with the comments of generations of teachers who devoted their lives to the study of the Scriptures. A detailed definition of the term Harum is given in the Babylonian Talmud:

Question: "What is a Harum"?

Answer: "One who can paint both of his eyes with one movement"

Or: "Harum is one whose nose is sunk between the eyes"

(Tractate Bekhoroth 43b)

No better representation in words enabling the reader to form the picture of a saddle-shaped nose could be given even in our days.

The second part of the Mosaic law in Leviticus 21 : 18 refers to the priesthood as it is written:

"No man that has a blemish of the seed of Aharon the priest... shall come near to the altar".

In the talmudical literature it was commented that a "flat-nosed is unfit for the priesthood".

What was the reason for the restrictions causing such severe social implications? Moses, who is considered the father of public health and preventive medicine saw in the nasal blemishes signs of systemic diseases which affect the skeleton of the external nasal pyramid. These diseases were syphilis, tuberculosis, and leprosy. Of the three diseases the existence of syphilis in biblical times is problematical. As for tuberculosis allusions are found in Leviticus 26 : 16 and in Deuteronomy 28 : 22. In both instances the English translation rendered is "consumption", and in both instances the word "consumption" is followed by the word "fever". Most of the authors agree on leprosy as the prevailing disease in biblical times responsible for the "facies leprosa" and the deformities of the nasal structures. Indeed the forbidding law in Leviticus 21, in which Harum and Saruah appear, follows closely the detailed description of signs and symptoms of leprosy in Leviticus 13-14. A second important etiological factor of nasal deformities, particularly for the loss of the entire nose, was the traumatic origin due to the cruel habit of "cutting-off" the nose. In fact there was a cruel custom in Babylonia, Assyria and in Egypt to punish prisoners of war and criminals by cutting-off their noses, to which prophet Ezekiel is alluding (Ezekiel 23 : 25). In the talmudical interpretation we find also Harum as — "possessing no nose, so that nothing prevents him proceeding to paint the other eye in one" (Bekhoroth 43b).

As might be expected the deformities of the nose, the most prominent anatomical structure on the face, attracted attention of the contemporary population and names arose. And so we find:

"Aharhel the son of Harum" (1 Chronicles 4 : 8) and

"Jedaiah the son of Harum'aph" (Nehemiah 3 : 10),

(aph is the Hebrew word for nose). Harum'aph would mean the man with the flat or the saddle-nose or with the twisted nose. It shows that this term was popular in biblical times and indicated a visible nasal defect.

Naturally, the following question arises: "Is there anywhere in the Bible an allusion to a normal nose"?

The image of the "ideal nose" was conveyed to us in a poetic comparative form in the "Song of Songs".

This song consists of dialogues and monologues of two lovers, who express

yearning, suffering through separation, the bliss of re-encounter, and the virtue of loyalty. Suddenly the lover declares:

"Thy nose is like the lower of Lebanon . . .

And the smell of thy nose like apples . . ."

(Song of Songs 7 : 5, 7 : 9)

It is fascinating to find a lover, praising the beauty of his love-making partner and at the same time paying her a "compliment" by comparing her nose to a tower. My long search for the proper interpretation of this verse has been rewarded by the following comments:

"That tower was evenly formed, without any bend or deformity" -  
Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1167)

"There was a tower in Lebanon which was famous for its beauty" -  
Moses David Cassuto (1883-1951)

"The comparison was probably intended to suggest a well-proportioned nose rather than a prominent one" - The Interpreter's Bible

"... and the smell of thy nose like apples" — is a sign of a normal and healthy nose. A pleasant scent and freshness of breath, with the aroma of an apple, was a sign of a healthy nose in contrast to the foetor, which was even a ground for divorce as appears in the Babylonian Talmud. Tractate Ketuboth, 77a, deals with "the offensive nasal smell" as one of the "circumstances in which the man is compelled to free his wife".

#### SUMMARY

Scattered allusions were gathered to form a picture of nasal deformities in biblical times as seen from the point of view of modern rhinology.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Des allusions éparées dans les textes bibliques ont été réunies pour faire une description des déformations nasales avec l'optique de la rhinologie moderne.

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