

NEUROPATHOLOGY IN THE BIBLE

J. C. E. KAUFMANN, M.B., CH.B. (CAPE TOWN)

Neuropathology Department, South African Institute for Medical Research, Johannesburg

(Continued from p. 750 of the *Journal* of 26 September 1964)

PART II

EPILEPSY

With the introduction in the New English Bible (NEB) of the word 'convulsions' for 'straight away the spirit tare him' and 'goes rigid' for the words 'and pineth away', the story of the boy at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration reads in parts like a modern case history:

"A man in the crowd spoke up: "Master, I brought my son to you. He is possessed by a spirit which makes him speechless. Whenever it attacks him, it dashes him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and goes rigid. I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they failed." Jesus answered: "What an unbelieving and perverse generation! How long shall I be with you? How long must I endure you? Bring him to me." So they brought the boy to him; and as soon as the spirit saw him it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked his father, "How long has it been like this?" "From childhood," he replied: "often it has tried to make an end of him by throwing him into the fire or into water . . ." [Jesus] rebuked the unclean spirit, "Deaf and dumb spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never go back!" After crying aloud and racking him fiercely, it came out; and the boy looked like a corpse; in fact, many said, "He is dead". But Jesus took his hand and raised him to his feet, and he stood up' (*Mark: 9, v. 17-27*).

Little further need be said about this remarkable description of a *grand mal* seizure, probably idiopathic epilepsy, except to remark upon the assumption that the illness was due to possession by an evil spirit (madness, to be discussed later, was also supposed to be due to demon possession).

In *Luke: 9, v. 39-42* in the parallel version a cry, 'he suddenly crieth out' (AV), or 'sudden scream' (NEB), precedes the convulsions, and the evil spirit is stated to be the devil in the latter part of the passage. In *Matthew: 17, v. 15-18* the same narrative is also abbreviated and the word 'lunatick' becomes 'epileptic' in the NEB. The father says

'Have pity, sir, on my son: he is an epileptic and has bad fits, and he keeps falling about, often into the fire, often into water.'

A man at Capernaum also had an epileptic seizure. He was a member of the congregation listening to Jesus teaching in the synagogue.

'Now there was a man in the synagogue possessed by an unclean spirit. He shrieked: "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" Jesus rebuked him: "Be silent," he said, "and come out of him." And the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry left him. [The congregation were dumbfounded and noted that] "When he gives orders even the unclean spirits submit"' (*Mark: 1, v. 23-28, NEB*).

Again the parallel version adds a fragment. We learn that the devil after throwing the man down in front of the people left him without doing him any harm. This no doubt refers to the absence of injury to the tongue or bodily part occasioned by the fall (*Luke: 4, v. 33-36*).

Preuss³⁶ remarks that the illness of the apostle Paul cannot be diagnosed with certainty as epilepsy. Paul complained of a thorn in his flesh:

'I was given a sharp pain in my body which came as Satan's messenger to bruise me; this was to save me from being unduly elated' (*II Corinthians: 12, v. 7, NEB*).

He was glad that the Galatians did not spit before him to express their contempt as was done towards epileptics,

'And you resisted any temptation to show scorn or disgust at the state of my poor body' (*Galatians: 4, v. 14, NEB*).

On the road to Damascus a light flashed from the sky around him and he fell to the ground and heard a voice speak. He also replied to the voice. When he got up and opened his eyes he could not see; he was blind for 3 days and took no food or drink. Ananias later placed his hands on Paul and spoke to him; consequently he regained his sight, was baptized, and took food (*Acts: 9, v. 3-19*).

Some of the essential features of a seizure, such as involuntary movements, are missing. Bicknell³⁷ mentions that some try to explain the happening in terms of the psychology of conversion. It seems that there is insufficient reason for considering Paul's conversion as an epileptic attack.

A Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon sought help for her daughter who was tormented by a devil (*Matthew: 15, v. 22-28*), and annoyed the disciples by shouting after them. They urged Jesus to send her away but he spoke to her and from that moment her daughter was restored to health. Unfortunately we do not know whether the illness was epilepsy or some other form of madness, both of which were considered to be due to demon possession. The parallel narrative (*Mark: 7, v. 25-30, NEB*) adds nothing. Similarly we know nothing of the condition of Mary of Magdala 'from whom seven devils had come out' (*Luke: 8, v. 2, NEB*).

APOPLEXY, PALSY, ETC.

Palsy may be introduced with the case of Alcimus; the Hellenizing High Priest who took ill in May, 160 BC:

' . . . Alcimus commanded that the wall of the inner court of the sanctuary should be pulled down; he pulled down also the works of the prophets. And as he began to pull down, even at that time was Alcimus plagued, and his enterprises hindered: for his mouth was stopped, and he was taken with a palsy, so that he could no more speak any thing, nor give order concerning his house. So Alcimus died at that time with great torment' (*I Maccabees: 9, v. 54-56*).

That 'he could no more speak anything' seems to suggest aphasia rather than dysarthria. The absence of a dramatic loss of consciousness would favour a cerebral vascular thrombosis.

Two cases of palsy are mentioned in the New Testament and the word 'palsy' is used for both; in the NEB the word is replaced by 'paralysis'. The first is a bed-ridden paralysed man at Capernaum. The news went around that Jesus was at home,

... and such a crowd collected that the space in front of the door was not big enough to hold them. And while he was proclaiming the message to them, a man was brought who was paralysed. Four men were carrying him, but because of the crowd they could not get him near. So they opened up the roof over the place where Jesus was, and when they had broken through they lowered the stretcher on which the paralysed man was lying . . . [After a short discussion with lawyers who were present] he turned to the paralysed man — "I say to you, stand up, take your bed, and go home." And he got up, took his stretcher at once, and went out in full view of them all, so that they were astounded and praised God. "Never before," they said, "have we seen the like" (Mark: 2, v. 2-12, NEB).

The same story is told in *Luke*: 5, v. 17-26, and in abbreviated form in *Matthew*: 9, v. 2-8 and there is no clue in any of these or in the following case as to the nature of the palsy. Preuss points out that the authors of the New Testament did not distinguish between paralysis and any interference with movement and thus the possibilities become very numerous.

The second was seen by Peter when he stopped at Lydda during a general tour:

There he found a man named Aeneas who had been bedridden with paralysis for eight years. Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ cures you; get up and make your bed", and immediately he stood up. All who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him; and they turned to the Lord' (*Acts*: 9, v. 33-35, NEB).

All the foregoing instances suggest paralysis of movement or at least involvement of one leg. The following, with one exception, concern one or other arm and several can be related to nerve involvement. The first extract is an allegory about a foolish shepherd:

Woe to the idol shepherd that leave the flock: the sword shall be upon his arm, and upon his right eye: his arm shall be clean dried up, and his right eye shall be utterly darkened' (*Zechariah*: 11, v. 17).

The RSV gives 'worthless' for the curious 'idol' and states quite clearly 'may the sword smite his arm and his right eye.' The drying up of the arm could mean atrophy following arterial injury but nerve injury with neural atrophy of muscle would be more probable. The combination of a dried up arm and darkened right eye has been assumed to mean that the prophet *Zechariah* threatened the shepherd with hemiplegia.¹⁸ In the light of the RSV this must be rejected.

Unlike the shepherd, the New Testament case of the man with a withered arm has nothing to indicate the cause of the disability. Again the same tale is told in *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*, which respectively mention hand, arm, and right arm. As is usual in medical matters, *Luke* is the most specific:

There happened to be a man in the congregation whose right arm was withered; and the lawyers and the Pharisees were on the watch to see whether Jesus would cure him on the Sabbath. . . . [He] . . . said to the man with the withered arm, "Get up and stand out here". So he got up and stood there . . . He looked round at them all and then said to the man "Stretch out your arm". He did so, and his arm was restored' (*Luke*: 6, v. 6-11, NEB).

A nerve or nervous disorder is the most likely possibility.

A rather similar deformity was the rigid arm of King Jeroboam. The king commanded the arrest of a certain man who protested against the burning of incense at an altar:

And it came to pass, when King Jeroboam heard the saying of the man of God which had cried against the altar in Beth-el, that he put forth his hand from the altar, saying, Lay hold on him. And his hand, which he put forth against him, dried up, so that he could not pull it in again to him'. [Later the King appealed to the man of God to entreat the Lord and to pray for the restoration of his hand. This was done.] . . . and the King's hand was restored to him again, and became as it was before' (*I Kings*: 13, v. 4-6).

Shepherd calls this a brachial monoplegia.¹⁸ Preuss³⁸ considers a subluxation and doubts whether the case should be discussed with paralyzes. Turner³⁹ observed that the Greek word for rigid is used here 'and his arm became rigid . . . and he could not draw it in'. The same Greek word is used in the description of the epileptic seizure already discussed (*Mark*: 9, v. 18), so a functional rather than organic disorder must also be considered.

Although both the AV and RSV have the sentence 'his heart died within him', Preuss⁴⁰ (giving the views of others), Brim,¹⁷

Shepherd,¹⁸ Short⁴¹ and Stenning⁴² are unanimous in interpreting the illness of Nabal as apoplexy or a stroke rather than a cardiac disease. Nabal was a wealthy sheep-owner whose flocks had been protected at certain seasons by David and his men. At the sheep-shearing festival David asked for some reward for his services. Nabal denied any obligation and insulted David's messengers. At once David set out with 400 men to punish Nabal for his insolence. Realizing the danger of the situation and without informing her husband, Abigail, Nabal's beautiful wife, set out to intercede with David. She carried a large supply of food with her as a present. The two companies met halfway. Abigail frankly admitted her husband's folly, pleaded for forgiveness and urged David not to take blood vengeance, saying that afterwards he would be glad that he had not done so. David promised to forego his vengeance and accepted the present. Then the following came about:

And Abigail came to Nabal; and, behold, he held a feast at his house, like the feast of a king; and Nabal's heart was merry within him, for he was very drunken; wherefore she told him nothing, less or more, until the morning light. But it came to pass in the morning, when the wine was gone out of Nabal, and his wife had told him these things, that his heart died within him, and he became as a stone. And it came to pass about ten days after, that the Lord smote Nabal, that he died' (*I Samuel*: 25, v. 36-38).

Later Abigail became one of David's wives. The expression 'like a stone' has been taken to mean like one dead as in apoplectic coma or the immobility of a paralysed person. Short observes that the ancients regarded the heart as the conventional centre for feeling and willpower and not as the main organ for the circulation of the blood.

Finally there is an interesting incident suggestive of a functional disorder which concerns Eleazer, one of David's three mighty men who defied the Philistines:

He arose, and smote the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand clave unto the sword: and the Lord wrought a great victory that day; and the people returned after him only to spoil' (*II Samuel*: 23, v. 10).

Oppenheim's diagnosis was an occupational cramp⁴³ but Preuss quotes the historian Josephus who noted in the original text that the hand stuck to the sword because of the blood. Occupational cramps may be associated with more strenuous activities than writing, e.g. hammerman's cramp and mason's cramp. Eleazer was a professional soldier and the movements used by swordsmen in combat must have been repeated many times previously. Local fatigue, a necessary element in the production of the muscle cramp, we know to have been present. Blood would surely have been mentioned to be the cause of the hand sticking to the sword if it were so and in any case it is difficult to imagine a soldier as strong as one of David's three mighty men being inconvenienced by such a weak adhesive.

Ginsberg narrates a startlingly similar incident concerning another of David's soldiers, Joab, his nephew, who became a most overbearing captain in his army.⁴⁴ According to the legend Joab was a hero who was responsible for the taking of the Amalekite capital. Joab succeeded in persuading his soldiers to hurl him into the capital by sling. This was accomplished and he pretended to the woman who found him that he was an Amalekite prisoner turned back by the Israelites. Disguised as an Amalekite he killed 500 warriors, none escaping to expose him. After a period of retirement he sallied out a second time and caused such bloodshed among the Amalekites that his gory weapon 'clave to his hand' and his right hand lost all power of independent motion. It could be made to move only in a piece with his arm. He hurried to his hiding place to apply hot water to his hand to free it from his sword. On his way he met the woman who was lodging him and she realized that he was one of the enemy. Seeing himself recognized, he was forced to kill her. Scarcely had his sword touched her, when it was separated from his hand, and his hand could move freely, for the woman was pregnant and the blood of the foetus had loosened the sword.

(To be continued)