

THE EYE AND EYE DISEASES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ANCIENT BABYLONIAN AND BIBLICAL SOURCES: A STUDY OF SELECTED TEXTS

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Abstract

Until the late 19th century, the sources of the Hebrew Bible as well as the writings of classical Greco-Roman authors, provided the only information about the history of ancient Mesopotamia, Canaan, and other civilizations of the ancient Near East. It is difficult to determine how much Hebrew ophthalmology depends on the ophthalmology of other nations. It can only be said that the Babylonians and Egyptians had the greatest influence on it. The Jewish ancestor Abraham immigrated from Mesopotamia to Canaan, and Babylonia already had a high culture in the fourth millennium BC, also in relation to medicine in general, and ophthalmology in particular.

The following study presents the meaning and understanding of the human eye and eye diseases from the perspective of selected ancient Babylonian and Biblical sources.

Keywords: eye, eye diseases, ancient Babylonia, Hebrew Bible, Codex Hammurabi, Babylonian Diagnostic Handbook

INTRODUCTION

Until the end of the 19th century, the sources of the Hebrew Bible as well as the reports of classical Greco-Roman writers and poets provided the only information about the history of ancient Mesopotamia, Canaan and other civilizations of the ancient Near East [1].

The one of the most famous ancient historians, Herodotus (born approximately in 484 BC and died in 425 BC) describes in *The Histories* the ancient Babylonian customs concerning the medical healthcare as follows:

They bring out their sick to the marketplace, for they have no physicians; then those who pass by the sick person, confer with him about the disease, to discover whether they have themselves been afflicted with the same disease as the sick person, or have seen others so afflicted: Thus the passers-by confer with him, and advise him to have recourse to the same treatment as that by which they escaped a similar disease, or as they have known to cure others.... [2]

It was only thanks to the archeologic discovery of thousands of clay tablets written in cuneiform that scientists were able to get useful insight into the political, religious and scientific ideas of these cultures. It is necessary to stress that Mesopotamian medicine is not explicitly presented in any treatises on medicine as such and the sources only seldom provide information needed to make a diagnosis in a modern sense. Medical prescriptions from the Ur III period (2112-2004 BCE) are considered to be the earliest evidence of medical practice.

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1 The eye in the sources of Babylonian period

Already in the old Babylonian period (1894–1595 BCE), medical texts also included descriptions of signs and symptoms as well as diagnoses with instructions for the preparation and administration of remedies [3]. The next elaboration of medical knowledge is known from the Middle Assyrian and Middle Babylonian periods (ca. 1430–1050 BCE). In the period of 1st millennium BCE, eye disease texts, written on cuneiform tablets, are represented by therapeutic prescriptions as well as incantations. However, according to Panayotov, scattered sources were already known in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE, from which it follows that texts about eye diseases were transmitted, collected and edited during two millennia [4].

Since the disease was also perceived as a violation of the otherwise good relationship between the patient and the deity, for the Babylonians the goal of examining the patient was not just to name the disease for the purpose of therapeutic relief [5]. According to the etiological ideas of the Babylonians, not only gods, but also various demons were capable to cause different diseases. Thus, they could approach people with malicious intent at the direct command of the deity or attack [5]. On the other hand, the healers of this period did not rely only on the power of the incantations and on the healing powers that were transferred to them in rituals through the connection with the deity. As they search for remedies, they also carried out systematic botanical and pharmacological studies and recorded what had proven effective for teaching purposes and for future generations as well [1].

1.1 Babylonian Diagnostic Handbook

The so-called *Diagnostic Handbook* is a compilation of the texts arranged by the Babylonian scientist Esagil-kin-apli in the middle of 11th century [4]. This compilation, called ‘Symptoms’, contains more than 3000 diagnostics, which are distributed across 40 clay tablets with an average of around 80 entries each. Heeßel in his article *Diagnostik in Babylonien und Assyrien* presents an overview on the chapter from the Diagnostics Handbook (Tab. 1) [7].

Table 1 Diagnostics in Babylonia and Assyria, adapted from Heeßel, p. 252.

Nr.	Tables	Title of the chapter	Contents of the chapter
1	1–2	When the conjurer goes to the patient's house	observations of a general nature on the way to and in the house of the sick person by the conjurer or another person
2	3–14	When you approach the patient	observations of symptoms on the patient's individual body parts from head to toe
3	15–25	When he is ill for a day	consideration of the onset of illness and the duration of the illness as well as observation of general symptoms on the patient's body
4	26–30	When a stroke strikes him – epilepsy symptoms	descriptions of symptoms in various forms of epilepsy
5	31–35	When the heat of the sun heats him up	predictions about the duration of fever illnesses, linking symptom observations and the identification of the cause of the illness with illness names
6	36–40	when a woman of child-bearing age becomes pregnant	pregnancy prognoses, observations of illnesses during pregnancy as well as symptom observations in women's and children diseases

Each tablet deals with symptoms in one part of the body, with seven tablets devoted to the head and only five to the rest of the body, which shows the importance of the signs and symptoms related to the head [7].

1.2 The eye in the anatomical and metaphorical sense

The people in ancient Babylonia differentiated following parts of the eye: the eyeball, the pupil, the shiny or green part of the eye, probably the skin of the eye, the iris, the eyelid, the eyelashes. The term tutelary eye goddess as part of the eye is also known, probably meaning pupil or eyelid. According to Ebeling, there is the same word meaning eye socket as well as a kind of ulcer [8].

Ancient Summer civilization used the word eye to mean the face, too. According to Ebeling, expression “sharp eye,” (i.e. visual acuity or sharpness of vision) was for the Babylonians a sign of a sharp mind [8]. In this way, Abd El Mohsen argues that the eye was not only an organ of vision, but, moreover, was considered a means of communication with the all-seeing god, i.e. symbol of life, but also death and destruction [9].

1.3 Ancient Babylonian physicians

The notion physician is attested in the 3rd millennium BCE in Mesopotamia. The medical prescriptions of the Ur period, on the other hand, seem to be the earliest evidence of medical practice. Even some Summerian prescriptions for eye complaints are known from this period of time (see Tab. 2) [4].

Table 2 Cuneiform Eye disease texts, adapted from Panayotov, p.2

1	x x ʾše-barʾ? utu	... (old reading [e]n ʾeʾ-[nu-r]u / ʾdʾutu)
2	7 [...] gi	and 7 reeds?
3	u ₄ -ʾtenʾ-ta	⁴ you put ³ in the evening
4	a-a ù-gar	in water.
5	ge ₆ -ba-a-ka	At midnight
6	igi ^d utu-šè	– before dawn –
7	igi-a gar-ra	apply (the salve) onto the eye.
r.1	eme-ni lú	The man who knows his language(-spell)
	i-ni-zu	
r.2	a-rá-7-àm	^{r.3} rubs his eye (with the salve) ^{r.2} seven times.
r.3	igi-na bí-ib-ùr-e	

In Babylonia, however, illnesses were believed to be caused by evil spirits, ghosts and demons. Thus, for example, *alu* was the evil spirit causing blindness and three types of healers, diviners, exorcists, and physicians were dealing with it [10]. According to Biggs, therapeutic medicine and magical practices existed side-by-side and complemented each other rather than opposed each other [11]. The Mari Letters, a large archive of royal correspondence found near the modern Iraq border and written around 1800 BCE, contain information about treatments provided by both physicians (*asûm*) as well as exorcists, with diviners being important in determining the cause of the illness [5]. Thus, this act was important to eliminate the deeper cause of the illness, which lay in a discord in the relationship between man and his God [1]. Physicians, according to Geller, played a role only in medicine, and from the description of their roles it can be assumed that they dealt primarily with drugs and drug-related therapies [5].

1.4 Recipes and therapeutic treatments in medical texts

While magical texts usually contain long incantations and short rituals, medical texts, on the other hand, contain long or large numbers of recipes (corresponding to the magical rituals) and short incantations [5]. The content of therapeutic texts is, as Biggs states, the purpose of the treatment, a list of ingredients, the method of treatment preparation, instructions for its administration, as well as an optimistic prognosis 'he will recover' [11]. Each particular section usually begins with the phrase, "If a man (suffers from) a certain illness, has certain symptoms, you prepare the following ingredients in the following way and administer it as follows," i.e. act in accordance with a specific recipe [12]. Medical literature from Babylonia sounds very optimistic, in the sense that most medical remedies end with the statement that once the drugs are administered, the patient will get better or recover from his illness. In this connection, Geller states that these statements are hardly realistic, since diagnostic texts often give a prognosis, according to which the patient will die [5].

1.5 The Codex Hammurabi

During the reign of the Babylonian king Hammurabi (about 1792-1750 BCE), a legal code called the Codex Hammurabi mentions particular health care concepts. These principles of managed care, carved in stone and written on many hundreds of clay tablets, recorded descriptions of illnesses associated with parts of the body, such as diseases of the ears, eyes, nose and throat, gallbladder problems, heart diseases, skin diseases, abscesses, diseases affecting the lungs and chest, venereal diseases, rectal prolapse, constipation, but also plague, intoxication, fevers, tumors, and rheumatism [13].

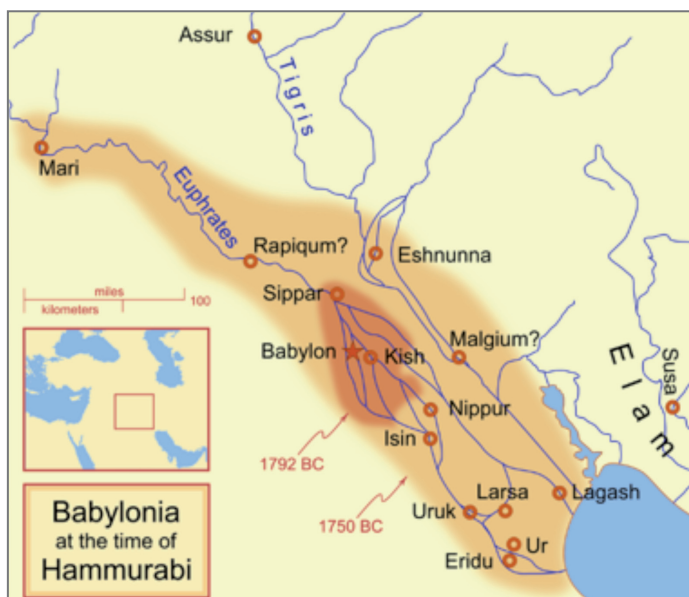


Fig. 1 Babylonia at the time of Hammurabi
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_of_Hammurabi#/media/File:Hammurabi's_Babylonia_1.svg

1.6 Hammurabi Codex and practice of ophthalmology

The King Hammurabi in his Code replaced the priestly administration of justice with civil judges and provided certain protections for all classes in Babylonian society [14]. His edicts are rigorously structured in a grammatical style with a protasis, a proposition beginning with 'if', "If during a quarrel one man strike another and wound him, then he shall swear, 'I did not injure him wittingly,' and pay the physician (*asûm*);" (CH 206).

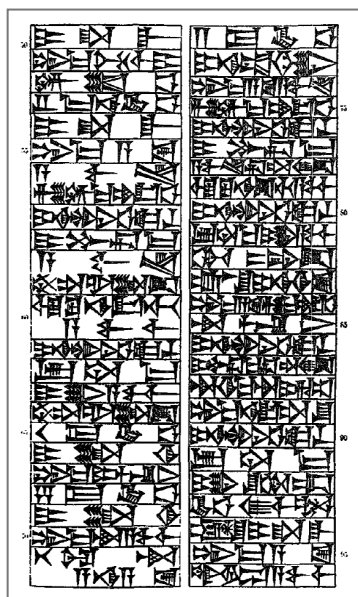


Fig. 2 The Code of Hammurabi, King of Babylon

The Code of Hammurabi, King of Babylon Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1904

The Code of Hammurabi translated by L.W.King in The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Lay Library, 2008.

The Code regulated the activities of the physicians even to the extent of setting conditions under which they could charge general surgery, eye surgery, fixing fractures, curing diseased muscles and other services a physician would normally perform. All social classes in the Babylonian society were covered by the health care system specifically identified in the 282 edicts of the Code [5]. The rates of payment were adjusted to the social status of the patient. The Codex's scheduled fees were as follows:

CH 215 If a physician [*asûm*] makes a large incision with an operating knife and cure it, or if he opens a tumor (over the eye) with an operating knife, and saves the eye, he shall receive ten shekels in money.

CH 216 If the patient is a freed man, he receives five shekels.

CH 217 If he [the patient] be the slave of someone, his owner shall give the physician two shekels.¹²

Thus, Hammurabi's Code mentions explicitly the practice of ophthalmology for the first time [15]. It is interesting that this Codex used a special fee scale according to social class to reimburse medical care services. Thus, the fee for a successful operation, which saves the eye of the noble patient from the upper class (*awelum*), should be ten shekels of silver, in the case of a free man from the middle class (*mushkenum*) five shekels, and only two shekels for the owner of the slave (*wardum*) [15]. It means that regardless of social class, access to medical care was unlimited. In the case of an unsuccessful operation leading to

¹² Payment for medical services ranges between 2 and 10 shekels of silver, which is the equivalent at the time of purchasing 600 to 3000 liters of barley, a considerable sum of money, which would only be affordable by upper classes in society. Based on the comparisons, it is obvious that physicians were well paid for their services.

¹³ CH 218 If a physician operates on a man for a severe wound with a bronze lancet and cause the man's death; or open an abscess in the eye of a man with a bronze lancet and destroy the man's eye, they shall cut off his fingers.

CH 219 If a physician operates on the slave of a freeman for a severe wound with a bronze lancet and cause his death, he shall restore a slave of equal value.

CH 220 If he opens an abscess in his eye with a bronze lancet, and destroy his eye, he shall pay silver to the extent of one-half his price.

death of a noble man, the surgeon should have his hand cut off. In the case of a slave, the penalty was the payment of silver to the extent of half of his price.¹³ In this connection, Frank Joseph Goes points out, surgery was performed on a free man's eye only when he was blind [16].

In the course of the history of treatment, there has been a partial differentiation between the surgeon, physician and even veterinarian. Probably another reason for its distinction was the custom of passing down knowledge of surgery from father to son and master to pupil [17]. According to Krause, physiology was unknown at this time and surgeons' knowledge of anatomy was probably only elementary, leading to the assumption that they were incapable of performing complex operations [10, 17].

The medical texts from Mesopotamia, written mainly in the first millennium BCE, indicate that a physician compiled lists of diseases affecting the eye and various parts of the body, made a diagnosis, wrote and compiled prescriptions, and suggested treatments [11]. Recipes were carefully prepared. After the drugs were powdered by crushing or heating, they were made into tinctures, extracts or incorporated into oils or fats. Consequently, thus prepared fats were applied to bandage the eyes or forehead. A metal tube or reed was used to introduce the drug into the eye. A knife, made from copper or bronze, was used for operations on or about the eye [17].

The Code of Hammurabi provided a protection for all classes in society. Even individuals from conquered nations were covered by the Babylonian health care system [15]. In addition to the 15 texts that mentioned physicians, veterinarians, or barbers, there were about 20 others that dealt with injuries from fights such as an eye injury, a broken bone, a knocked-out tooth, a punch to the cheek, causing a miscarriage, or punching resulting in death. However, these texts do not mention health care services, but impose monetary fines or "eye for an eye" type of penalty [15]. The legal requirements of the ancient Near and Middle East regarding duties and responsibilities were reinforced in the form of the Mosaic Law in the kingdoms of ancient Israel and Judah as mentioned in biblical sources [18].

2 The eye in biblical sources

Although we do not have any sources of purely medical content from the early periods of Judaism that could tell us about ophthalmology of that time, we do have another work, namely the Bible. The eye as very important organ is mentioned more than 800 times in the Bible, but is described only in its external appearance and significance, according to the experience of everyday life.

2.1 Life as a gift

In the biblical sources, God is depicted as the living God whose power never ceases, whose care never ends, who acts on behalf of his people and overwhelms even the threat of death [18]. It means that divinity had the power to rule over life and death. Thus, the role of a healer or even a physician was very limited and not well known in the Hebrew Bible [19]. So, for instance, the king of Judah, Asa (910–870 BCE), died from a disease affecting his feet after seeking the help from physicians (2 Chronicles 16:12). Joseph calls physicians to embalm his father Israel (Gen 50:2). On the one hand, Job described his experience: "worthless physicians all of you" (Job 13:4), on the other hand, Jeremiah called for a physician (Jeremiah 8:22) [20].

For the biblical people of ancient times, life in God's presence was life in its fullness providing prosperity, health and descendants. Consequently, any foreshortening of the human life span, reduction of its duration, its full potential, was considered a great evil for them [21].

2.2 Medical treatment and physicians in ancient biblical sources

It is necessary to stress that in ancient biblical sources there is not such a distinction between life and death as it is known today, when people wish to escape death and live

as long as possible in this world, trying to follow some special medical or surgical treatment. This is especially visible in the ancient passages of the Old Testament, where death is seen as a natural part of the natural order of creation (Gen 3:19) [18, 21]. First of all, the one who brings help for physical ailments is God who “heals all your diseases” (Psalm 103:3). There are many examples of prayers of thanksgiving for healed diseases in the Old Testament (cf. Psalm 107). Even the healing of eye diseases, as the psalmist says, comes from God “the Lord gives sight to the blind” (Palm 146:8). The prophets and angels also successful heal those suffering from eye diseases as they did for all the sick in general.

The Bible does not mention a single instance of a priest having performed the functions of a physician. It cannot also be assumed that the doctors were allowed to perform autopsies, and in fact there is never any mention of such things in the ancient biblical sources. The Prophets, however, practiced occasionally also healings, i.e. the prophet Isaiah cured King Hezekiah of an inflammation by applying a plaster made of figs (2 Kings 20:7) [22]. Although a number of medicinal plants are mentioned in biblical texts, most of them were also known from medical practices in Ancient Egypt and/or Mesopotamia [22, 23].

Copper and its compounds were probably used by the Hebrews to treat diseased eyes. On the one hand, copper is mentioned several times in the old biblical texts (cf. Gen 4:22; Lev 26:19), on the other hand, the ophthalmologists of the Greeks and Romans used it frequently too. And as mentioned above, a copper knife used for operations on or about the eye was also known in ancient Mesopotamian texts [4].

2.3 The eye in the anatomical and metaphorical meaning

Biblical texts provide many references to vision decline and eye disease, intertwining physical conditions with spiritual consequences. These themes reflect the importance of sight, both literally and metaphorically, in understanding health and divine intervention. The biblical narratives related to the vision also highlight the broader human experience of seeking healing and understanding.

The word for ‘eye’ in Hebrew, *ayin*, is derived from the word stem *ayn*, which is translated as ‘spring’ (Genesis 16:7). Based on the belief that the eye was like a spring, the mechanism by which brain injury was thought to cause blindness was believed to be overflow of fluid from the brain to the eye. This corresponds to the Hippocratic theory that all diseases are related to the balance of humors or fluids [25].

2.3.1 Anatomical part of the eye

As mentioned above, it is not surprising that we find only the most general information about anatomy and the human eye in the ancient biblical sources. Of the two eyes, however, the right one is given priority, as the right half of the body was considered the preferred one not only among the Jews (Exodus 13:9.16), but also later among the Greeks and Romans.

The following parts are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible: the eyeball, the pupil (*ishon* = literally: ‘a little man,’ whose image appears in the eye as in a mirror), the eye-socket, sclera, the eyelashes, the eyelids, and the eyebrows [22, 20]. There is only a very general and vague reference to the tear organs in biblical sources. The Hebrew word stem *ayn* (עין) means to flow, to flow out as water or tears as well as looking envious (1 Sam 18:9). The substantive *ayin* means both, eye and fountain/source, so called from its resemblance to an eye, i.e. there are identical [25]. This is a phenomenon which Gesenius explains that the eye is a source of tears, and it was this observation that led to express both with one word, without there being any dispute as to which meaning was the first [25]. The same agreement can be found in other languages, for example in Persian. The Greeks also understood the word *pege* (πηγή) the source to mean the inner corner of the eye, where the *lacus lacrimarum*, a small triangular space of the conjunctiva of the eye, is located [25].

2.3.2 Metaphoric use of the term eye

The notion eye is used in many different contexts in the Hebrew Bible. It is used as a metaphor referring to one's general appearance, positive things ("good eye"), and negative things ("evil eye") (cf. Exodus 10:5). Especially the following phrases are to be noticed: first, 'before the eyes' of any one means to be present before the face of anybody, and is used very frequently (e.g. Gen 23:11.18; Ex 4:30; 7:20), and secondly 'in my eyes', i.e. according to my judgment, in my opinion, by which in Hebrew the meaning 'to seem' is expressed (e.g. Gen 19:14, 29:20; 2Sam 10:3) [25]. The Hebrew phrase 'between the eyes' means on the forehead (Ex 13:9.16) or on the front of one's head (Deut 14:1).

Positive thing is expressed by the phrase 'to set one's eye on any one', which is commonly used as to regard any one with kindness, to look to his/her good. On the other hand, many human passions of their mind, such as envy, pride, desire are manifest in the eyes. The characteristic features of an individual that belong to the persons themselves are often applied to the eyes, e.g. "my eye is evil against someone" that means I envy him (Deut 15:9). Similarly, expression 'proud eyes' means a pride person (Prov 6:17).

2.4 Eye diseases in ancient biblical sources

Due to advancing age, the eyes became naturally dim, as in the case of Eli who was 98 years old when his eyes were so dim that he was not able to see (1 Sam 4:15, cf. 1 Kings 14:4). The harmful effects of excessive crying are also recorded in biblical sources and tear-bottles were regularly used, as found in ancient sepulchers (cf. Psalm 56:8) [26]. Exophthalmos is also mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and attributed to high living standard, "their eyes bulge with abundance" (Psalm 73:7) and bloodshot eyes are due to excessive drinking of wine (Prov 23:29-31.33) [27]. When Jacob announces the future to his sons, he says of Judah, alluding to its wine-growing and animal husbandry: "His eyes will be darker [cloudy] than wine" (Gen 49:12). The same clouding of the eyes after drinking wine occurs in the Proverbs of Solomon. Here the question: "Who has redness [clouding] of the eyes?" is answered: "Those who linger long at the wine. Those who go in search of mixed wine" (Prov 23:30).

Redness and burning sensation of the eyes, ophthalmia was said to accompany fever "that shall consume the eyes" (Leviticus 26:16) [26]. The eyeball (*bulbus oculi*) is known to be partially covered by the conjunctiva, whose diseases are among the most common of the eye (e.g. conjunctivitis). The biblical sources mention, among other things, conjunctival hyperemia. In the passage "As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes" (Prov 10:26), for instance, there is a hint pointing toward the subjective symptom of conjunctival hyperemia as burning and biting sensation. The cause, however, is said to be the smoke, which is harmful to the eyes. Another medical problem connected with vision is corneal staining. As with chemical burns, a corneal stain can also be caused by a burn (2 Kings 25:6-7). The plague prediction "their eyes will rot in their sockets" (Zech. 14:12) is known, indicating chemical or radiation damage [22].

Healthy eyes are valued with great respect in biblical sources, which is also expressed by certain religious and ritual regulations of ancient Judaism. For example, priests must not be blind, they must not have a bald spot on their head or corneal spots (Lev 21:5.18.20).

2.4.1 Blinding as a punishment

Men in ancient times were sometimes cruelly punished by having their eyes gouged out. The gouging out of the right eye is described as an extremely shameful punishment imposed on the defeated, and the darkening of the right eye is threatened as a curse in Zechariah 11:17, as is the destruction of the eye by the sword. Jeremiah gives an account of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who pronounced judgment on Zedekiah, king of Judah: "Then the king of Babylon killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. And he killed all the princes of Judah in Riblah. He also put out the eyes of Zedekiah;" (Jer 52:10-11). Samson was also blinded by the Philistines (Judges 16:21). The law of exact retaliation (*lex talionis*)

is expressed by the phrase “eye for eye” (cf. Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20). Blinding as a type of physical punishment was practiced quite frequently. It was a practice which continued for many centuries, and which was considered to be the lowest form of degradation [26].

CONCLUSION

To what extent Hebrew ophthalmology depends on that of other peoples is difficult to determine in detail. One can only say that the Babylonians and Egyptians had the greatest influence on it. The Jewish ancestor Abraham immigrated from Mesopotamia to Canaan, and in Babylonia, a high culture already existed in the fourth millennium BCE, also in relation to medicine and not least ophthalmology. It is meanwhile sure that Egyptian medicine had an influence on Greek medicine. Thus, Ebers writes [28]: “Le Page Renouf has shown that an ancient Egyptian recipe is found in almost verbatim reproduction in a text attributed to the great Asclepiades” and immediately afterwards: “The medical works of the Greeks are full of Egyptian sources, a considerable part of the medical writings of the Greeks originated in Egypt.” It is necessary to stress that much of the ophthalmology mentioned in biblical sources was influenced by the ophthalmology of other nations. One can say: *Ex oriente lux!* (Light came from the east).

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