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CARE AND NOURISHMENT OF INFANTS IN THE PRE-CHRISTIAN ERA

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I PROPOSE giving you in this article a brief and I am afraid very sketchy, outline of the care and nourishment of infants in the days before Christianity began to influence the world.

I shall briefly outline at first the social status of the child in primitive society, then the incidence of infanticide at that time, and continue with the salient points of the care of children in Egypt, India, Israel, Greece and Rome.

Finally, I shall briefly outline the instructions of Soranus of Ephesus contained in probably the first book on Pediatrics, written about 200 A.D.

SOCIAL STATUS OF THE CHILD. It is well known that the science of Children's Diseases is the last and least addition to the science of disease in general. Among more important factors causing this delay was the absolute neglect of the proper care and hygiene of infants among the primitive peoples, and even among the highly civilised peoples of the immediate past. Few realise, indeed, that it was the policy of the Greeks, Romans, Arabians and some later peoples to destroy rather than to save a majority of new born infants, partly for economic reasons, and partly from inherent selfishness.

It is almost inconceivable to-day to realise that in ancient times the new born child was often predestined to be murdered; also that even in later times, the child, if of poor or humble parentage, was predestined to be maltreated, starved or tortured.

In primitive society the child was regarded as a negligible factor due to the tremendous struggle for existence at that time; the individual was sternly sacrificed for the welfare of the tribe or race and the weakest inevitably went to the wall. Thus, infanticide, abortion, cannibalism and ritual sacrificing of children was rife throughout the world at this time, whereas solicitude for their preservation was the exception. The young were often mutilated by tattooing, scarification of face and body, artificial deformation of the skull, face or extremities and ritual operation upon the genitals were rampant everywhere.

Twins were frequently killed as something unnatural or upon the supposition that one of them was a monstrous superfoetation from adulterous intercourse. Children born on unlucky days were slaughtered; also those born feet first or if born with teeth, or in a caul or with any abnormality. In fact almost any pretext for infanticide was seized upon to limit the population to a statutory number of a given family.

The only protection the child had in the savage state originated in maternal feeling, but as you know at this time the mother was invariably subject to the male.

Infant girls were more maltreated than infant boys. The story of the routine sacrifice of female infants is one of the saddest pages in human history. Even among the Greeks and Romans the murder of the infant girls and the glorification of the male element clearly reveals a marked degree of latent barbarity in otherwise highly civilised people. Plato said that the "foetus in Utero" was to be regarded as an animal, while Plutarch declared the destruction of one's own children to be oftimes a great and virtuous action.

However, in Egypt and Babylon where civilisation was of the matriarchal type, children received greater care and consideration than in other States where patriarchal influence dominated.

INFANTICIDE: Payne in his Book on "The Child" points out that the lowest human tribes are less human in sentiment for their women and offspring than many beasts and birds. Darwin holds almost the same views when he says "The instincts of the lower animals are never so perverted as to lead them to regularly destroy their own offspring or to be quite devoid of jealousy".
The normal causes of infanticide among savages are either superstition or fear of famine. In old and almost stationary civilisations, such as China and India, the routine sacrifice of female children and the selling of children into slavery grew with increasing density of the population or latterly with occasional periods of famine and privation. In China, the drowning of infants, especially girls, is still prevalent in spite of endless imperial edicts, such as the edict of Cheen Tche (1633) "I have heard that the sad cry uttered by these girl babies as they are plunged into a vate of water and drowned is inexpressible. Alas! that the heart of a father and mother should be so cruel." It was estimated at the time of this edict that 25 to 40 per cent. of female infants were drowned annually.

In ancient Japan, the sons of a polygamous father were natural enemies and had no claim on him. Human sacrifice in Japan was abolished about 3 B.C. but famine sometimes produced cannibalism and children were legally punished for the crimes of their parents up to the end of the 17th Century. The Japanese never disliked girls as the Chinese did, nor was their population ever so dense, yet it is interesting to note that as late as during the famine of 1905 children were sold and infanticide was practised following the high taxation after the last Russo-Japanese War.

In ancient India, the Aryans, originally an agricultural people, later became a race of fanatical warriors. Male children became part of their scheme of wealth to increase the fighting capacity of the tribe. Females were preserved for procreative purposes only. The Laws of Manu declare that "Women are born to bear children."

The ancient rituals of India show that female children were practically doomed at birth; female infanticide was held to be of divine origin, but we now know the real reason for its existence was economic. This practice continued in India right up to 1871 when the Infanticide Act was the final effort of the Government of India to suppress the practice.

Among other races, the ancient practice of sacrificing the first born for ritual reasons was also prevalent. In the Old Testament we read of Abraham and Isaac and the daughter of Jephtha.

The Arabian sacrificed their infant and even adult daughters by burying them alive until the practice was stopped by Mohammed.

The Greeks, in some respects the most intelligent people the world has known, were utterly callous about the fate of children foredoomed to exposure by economic conditions or by the shame of pregnancy in unmarried women. Yet there is evident tenderness for child-life in the similes of the Homeric poems as in the 4th Iliad Minerva repels the arrow shot at Menelaus "as a mother drives away a fly from her child when it lies in sweet sleep." In the 16th Iliad we find Achilles addresses the weeping Patroclus thus: "Why wepest thou, O Patroclus, like an infant girl, who running along by her mother, begs to be taken up, and holding on by her dress, delays the hurrying mother, and looks at her with eyes full of tears, in order that she may be taken up and carried."

Similar passages showing affection for children may be found in Herodotus, Euripides and Thucydides.

EGYPT.

Women were fond of their children—in the mural decoration they are always depicted as comely, of attractive appearance and in the family groups there is every sign of affection.

In the earlier Egyptian civilization there are some evidences of human sacrifice, but no indication of "infanticide" or maltreatment of children.

Egypt then was a land of plenty and children were well cared for.

Aristotle says explicitly that the Egyptian women bore many children and that all children born into life were well brought up.

Diodorus Siculus (1st Cent. B.C.) states that the children of ancient Egypt were clothed and reared at a trifling expense. He says of the ancient Egyptians that those who killed their children were not executed themselves, but were condemned to hug their dead offspring continually in their arms for three days and three nights in order to experience their full deserts of horror and remorse.

At birth, the Egyptian infant was not constricted in swaddling clothes but carried about in loose, soft wrappings.

After weaning, its diet was cow's milk only, later vegetable foods and water. It led a wholesome healthy existence in the open air, completely naked up to five, barefoot up to ten, playing with hoops, balls and dolls before taking up the three R's.

Ritual circumcision was performed upon boys of the priestly and warrior castes with a flint knife:
INDIA.

In ancient India, the warrior gentlemen predominated, the caste system was rigid, and the status of women was low, and abortion and infanticide were common.

Later on, in the second Century B.C., we encounter for the first time a reasoned, consistent body of pediatric doctrine. Among Susnuta’s orders concerning the care of the child after birth were the following:

“After severing the umbilical cord the baby’s face is sprayed with cold water, and it is allowed to lick an electuary of honey, clarified butter, gold dust and the expressed juices of Brahmi leaves from the ring-finger of the feeder.”

“The body of the infant is then anointed and bathed with infusions of certain leaves, or in water in which red hot gold or silver bars have been immersed, according to the season, or physical condition of the child.”

“Breast feeding was postponed until the 4th day after birth.”

Prior to the breast feeding, the necessary evacuation of the meconium was attained by the simple device of giving a little honey.

On the first day the baby is fed at morning, noon and evening with a child’s handful of clarified butter and honey mixed with pulverised roots of a certain plant (Ananta).

On the second and third days the diet was clarified butter mixed with another root (Lakshana). On the fourth day the child was given its own handful of honey and clarified butter, morning and noon, and in the evening the mother squeezed off a quantity of her own milk and put the child to her breast for the first time.

CLOTHING: The infant was wrapped in silk, laid on a bed covered with a silken sheet, and fanned with the branches of certain trees. A thin pad, soaked in oil, was kept constantly on its head, and its body was fumigated with the fumes of mustard or other drugs to avert evil spirits. The same drugs were also tied about its head, neck, hands and feet, for this purpose, and the floor was strewn with powered sesamum, mustard and linseed. On the tenth day the rites of benediction were performed and the child named.

As opposed to the Egyptian custom a wet nurse, when required, was selected from the matrons of the child’s own caste. She had to be “neither too old nor too young, too thin nor
too corpulent, of sound health and good character, of an affectionate heart and with all her children living." If there was loss or suppression of milk in the mother, from anger, grief, etc. her equanimity had first to be restored and a flow of milk brought on by a generous diet of rice, barley, wheat, wine, sesamum-paste, fish, lotus-stalk, etc. Breast milk was tested by casting it in water. Pure milk was supposed to mix intimately with water, producing neither froths nor shreds.

If drugs had to be administered to a suckling infant, they were given either through the vehicle of milk and clarified butter, or by the nurse, who swallowed the remedy herself, so that the child might obtain the effect through the breast milk; some drugs, however, were plastered upon the breasts of the wet nurse as a paste.

ISRAEL.

The facts and findings of Jewish medicine were never cast into the form of a definite canon, or Scripture, but were scattered throughout the Old Testament and the Talmud. Israel was the founder of preventive medicine.

In the Old Testament, disease is attributed not to demons but to the wrath of God, who alone was supposed to confer health. In the New Testament demons were sometimes exorcised in certain cases of "possessions".

Modern civilization, as you know, flows from two main streams of culture, the Hellenic and the Hebraic; Hellenism gave us Science, Art and the principles of taste, while Judaism gave us religion and certain ethical principles for regulating the conduct of our lives. That the Hebrews placed great store by children is everywhere apparent. In the Bible we learn that children are a blessing, childlessness a curse.

Psalm 127:3. "Lo, children are an Heritage of the Lord."

Jeremiah 22:30. "Write ye this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days."

Tacitus ascribes the prohibition of infanticide among the Jews to their desire to increase the population. Male children were especially valued. as future priests or soldiers.

Our knowledge of ancient Jewish Pediatrics is mainly drawn from the commentations upon the five books of the Mosaic Law, which began to accumulate after the Babylonian captivity (536 B.C.) and which make up the Talmud.

In the Talmudic ritual which attended the ushering of the new born into the world, there is evidence of ancient practice, and also of superstition. The child was weighed, and coins of this weight were given to the poor.

At birth, the Jewish child was washed with water, rubbed with salt and given the breast even before cutting the umbilical cord, and wrapped in swaddling clothes. This procedure, essential in the Talmud, is preserved even in the imprecations of Ezekiel against Jerusalem:

"And as for thy nativity, in the day that thou wast born; thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed with water to supple thee; thou wast not salted at all." (Ezekiel xvi. 4.)

The swaddling (Sod: Bie) of the child, practised also amongst the Greeks, was thought to give it a thicker, tighter skin with immunity from eruptions.

In Talmudic times the child was also sometimes bathed in wine. If it made no sound, it was rubbed with the after-birth. If the child did not breathe, it was swung in a swing—a treatment somewhat similar to that adopted by Schultz, in 1871 for Asphyxia Neonatorum.

If it refused the breast, a beaker of hot coals was held near its mouth to stimulate the facial muscles.

The swaddling of the child consisted in compressing the body into rigid mummy-like mould by a system of tight bandages. The intention was perhaps Orthopedic, as the head was also compressed to make it long or round.

The ancient belief that honey purges the new born of meconium is preserved in Isaiah vii, 14, 15:

"Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil and choose the good."

Talmudic theory maintains that the child can suck all day without harm. Breast feeding was continued for eighteen months to two years. We are told in Genesis that Sarah at the age of 90 suckled her son Isaac.

Breast nursing was regarded as a primal duty of the mother by the Hebrew prophets:—In Isaiah we read:—

"Can a woman forget her suckling child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb." (Isaiah xi. ix. 15.)
If twins were born, one was fed by a wet nurse. It was considered shameless to suckle infants in public.

If a wet nurse were required, she was usually a slave or hired woman. She was engaged for two to three years, undertook no other occupation, and suckled no other child, not even her own. In Exodus ii., 7-9 we read when Moses was discovered in the bulrushes by Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses’ own mother was secured as his wet-nurse by the stratagem of his father’s sister.

Like Deborah, the nurse of Rebeccah, the wet nurse was regarded as a member of the family and held in esteem, if competent. This is somewhat similar to the customs of the ancient Greeks of the Homeric Period.

There is no mention of artificial feeding in the Talmud; the child must have human milk or die.

There is no evidence of the existence of nursing bottles, although they were employed in Rome and Alexandria about this time.

**HELLAS.**

In the Homeric Period infants, when not exposed, were nursed by their mothers. Among the upper classes, slave nurses, sometimes captured women, were also employed. The nurse in Homeric life was as the nurse in “Romeo and Juliet,” a member of the family, indeed the general housekeeper; thus Demeter in the Homeric Hymn (141-144): “And truly I could fatten a young infant, having him in my arms, and could take care of the house, and could spread my master’s bed in the recess of the well-built chambers, and could manage the works of a woman.”

For such service the nurses were richly rewarded.

When we come to consider Spartan methods we find entirely different customs from those practised during the Homeric period.

In Plutarch’s life of Lycurgus (880 B.C.), we are told that Eugenics, or the securing of a vigorous parentage to offspring, was practised without any regard for conventional morality: “children were not so much the property of their parents but of the whole commonwealth”: puny ill-formed infants were exposed in a chasm under Mount Taygetus, since it was "neither for the good of the child itself, nor for the public interest that it should be brought up, if it did not from the very outset appear made to be healthy and vigorous.”

For the same reason the newly born were not bathed in water, but in wine, “to prove the temper and complexion of their bodies.” It was thought that epileptic and weakly children wasted away under this treatment, while the strong and vigorous child acquired firmness and a temper like steel by it. No swaddling bands were used; the children grew up free and unconstrained in limb and form, and not so dainty and fanciful about their food.

Upon this account, Spartan nurses were often brought up or hired by people of other countries.

In Hellenistic Athens, infants were wet-nursed not only by slaves and captives, but also by free women usually through poverty and the necessity of supporting dependents in this manner.

Foreign nurses were sometimes employed by the Athenians; the Spartan women were usually preferred, on account of their robust physique and their sturdy, wholesome natures. Six months Breast and eighteen months artificial feeding was the rule. Nursing bottles were carried with children.

The practice of swaddling the infant continued right down to the late Roman period and was carried over into medieval custom.

Sudhoff in writing of this period says: “Even though the exposure of weakly or un-welcome children, in Spartan Greece and Italy, as well as in the Orient, left an ineradicable stain, yet the Greek upbringing of children, in its harmonious development of body and spirit is a wonderful phase of hygiene.”

**ROME.**

From Rome came the first laws for the protection of children, but there was to be a long struggle with Infanticide, the systematic destruction of female infants, and the inhumanities, of the “patra potestas” (by which a father could sell, mutilate, or even kill his own offspring). The Roman policy was always to encourage, while the Greek policy was always to restrain population, and infanticide never appears to have been common in Rome until the corrupt and sensual days of the Empire.

According to legendary tradition, Romulus, the founder, who had been an exposed infant, decreed that all male infants who weren’t monsters or otherwise malformed were to be reared, as also the first born of all female infants.
In the best days of the Roman Republic, private life, particularly married life, was sacred, and there was even then a tax on bachelors. But in the last days of the Republic, depravity was rampant everywhere, celibacy, divorce and abortion were frequent and unwelcome children were thrown into the Tiber. The "Patria Protestas" was somewhat modified by Caesar Augustus about the time of Christ but it was not finally abolished until about 190 A.D.

One of the last edicts before the fall of the Roman Empire was that ordering punishment of a parent for the exposure of his children.

In conclusion I wish to give a few extracts from the most remarkable and complete account of Pediatrics in antiquity: it is from the gynaecological treatise of Soranus of Ephesus written in the 2nd Century A.D. It consists of twenty-three Chapters dealing with the birth, washing, swathing and nutrition of the infant, the choice of a wet-nurse, teething, tonsillitis, skin eruptions, coughing, brain fever, diarrhoea etc.

Immediately after the birth he advises that the cord be severed with a sharp knife and the stump ligated. He utterly condemns the existing customs of plunging the child into cold water after severing the cord—also the washing of the child in wine or urine—also the exposure of the infant on the house-top. Swaddling of the infant is condemned and a rational routine with special regard to gentleness in procedure is given in great detail. He advises that the child be placed in a clean, moderately warm room, avoiding draughts, and a mosquito netting for the infant's bed is recommended. The child is not fed until it shows signs of hunger, when moderately stewed honey is offered. Soranus considered mother's milk valueless for the first twenty days and during this period another infant was generally put to the breast and goat's milk and honey offered to the newly born infant. He had another far to the effect that a child generally thrived on the milk of a woman other than its own mother. His directions for the choice of a wet nurse, her diet and mode of life, the testing of her milk are given at great length and not very different from our procedure in this respect to-day. He warns against suckling the child each time it cries and advises one to seek for other causes than hunger when the crying is continuous. Rocking or too much handling after a feed is not advised. Weaning is advised when the child can take solid food, when bread crumbs softened in honey water, milk or sweet wine may be given; also a soup made of ground husked wheat and soft boiled eggs. These foods were generally not given until the child was about 18 months old.

Infantile diarrhoea was treated by rectal injections of plantain juice, but if the child was still at the breast, astringent medicines were given to the nurse and not the baby; similarly for constipation, laxatives were given to the nurse.

From these extracts you may be able to judge how very little we have advanced in certain respects since then in the care of the Infant. Naturally there are many matters about which Soranus and his successors held really ridiculous views such as the treatment of meningitis by applying a concoction of pumpkin, cucumber, and egg yolk in rose oil; yet this does not distract us from admiring the admirable and common sense methods he advised in the care of the newly born.

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Put off your imagination as you take off your overcoat, when you enter the laboratory; but put it on again as you put on your overcoat, when you leave the laboratory.

—Claude Bernard.