



JA'FAR AL-ŞĀDEQ V. AND HERBAL MEDICINE

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v. Herbal Medicine

Imam Ja'far al-Şādeq's work on medicine (*Ṭebb al-Emām al-Şādeq*) belongs to a genre of traditional herbal medicine attributed to the Shi'ite imams and known as the Medicine of the imams (*ṭebb al-a'emma*), whose salient figure is Imam Ja'far al-Şādeq. Imam Şādeq's narrated dictums (Hadith) are central to Shi'ite medical literature as it enhanced, in the course of time, the spiritual image of the imam in popular religion. Imam Ja'far, indeed, was not the only imam who contributed to Shi'ite traditional medical wisdom, but the variety of his ethical instructions on the priorities of foods and drinks has significantly extended the chapter of "eating and drinking" (*bāb al-aṭ'ema wa'l-ašreba*) in Shi'ite jurisprudence (see FEQH; Āqā Bozorg Ṭehrāni, XV, pp. 139-40). Before juridical rearrangements of Imami traditions by Shi'ite authors of the 4th/10th century (particularly by Abu Ja'far Kolayni, d. 329/940 and Ebn Bābuya, d. 381/991, q.v.), Imam Ja'far's medical instructions were compiled by some of his companions under the rubric of *ṭebb al-a'emma* (Āqā Bozorg Ṭehrāni, XV, pp. 139-42; Ebn Beštām, tr., p. xv). A similar rubric *ketāb al-ṭebb* (the book of medicine) appears in the earliest collection of Hadith of the Prophet Moḥammad by Moḥammad Boḳāri (d. 256/870; Boḳāri, IV, pp. 8-23), whose contents, too, were rearranged and renamed with different designations in



Sunnite jurisprudence.

Another main reshuffling of Shi'ite medical traditions occurred in the late Safavid period by two renowned authors, Moḥammad Ḥorr 'Āmeli (d. 1104/1693, q.v.), and Moḥammad-Bāqer Majlesi (d.1111/1699), who refashioned the imam's traditions not only with more popular flavor, but also with religious sanctions. The juridical instructions of the imam appear with medical sanctions in the language of Majlesi. Based on the above-mentioned sources, Imam Ja'far al-Şādeq's medical statements were re-collected in the modern period (see Āqā Bozorg Ṭeh-rāni, XV, p. 141). The most recently published collection, compiled by Moḥsen 'Aqil, endeavors to support the imam's instructions with today's scientific medical evidence.

Following a summary of Imam Ja'far al-Şādeq's traditional herbal medicine according to Moḥsen 'Aqil's arrangement, this article will deal with intellectual reactions to the traditional herbal medicine and comments by various observers and scholars.

IMAM AL-ŞĀDEQ'S POPULAR MEDICINE

Imam Ja'far al-Şādeq's medical traditions are concerned with three spheres: a variety of beneficial and harmful food items and drinks; some commonly known diseases and their remedies; corroboration of some traditional methods of treating illness.

Useful and harmful foods and drinks. Beneficial fruits reportedly mentioned by Imam al-Şādeq include apple (10 Hadiths), dates (7 Hadiths), quince (6 Hadiths), pomegranate (5 Hadiths), citrus fruits (4 Hadiths), pear, walnut, and raisins (3 Hadiths each), grape, melon, and olive (2 Hadiths each; 'Aqil, pp. 7-79, quoting Majlesi, LXIII, pp. 133-74, 181-82, 188, 196, 198; Ḥorr 'Āmeli, XXV, pp. 124, 151,156, 164, 167-68, 170-71, 174, 177; Nuri, XVI, pp. 397-98, 400-2, 405-6).

Vegetables, legumes, and grains with health benefits reportedly recommended by Imam al-Şādeq include barley, lentil, and rice (16 Hadiths), rice (13 Hadiths), wild chicory (5 Hadiths), eggplant (5 Hadiths), black cumin and chard (4 Hadiths each), onion (3 Hadiths), radish, harmful peganum, marshmallow, turnip, beans, and pumpkin (2 Hadiths each), carrot, lettuce, leek, garlic, and frankincense (1 Hadith each; 'Aqil, pp. 80-161, 187-89, quoting Majlesi, LIX, pp. 220 234, LXIII, pp. 208, 215, 221, 227-28, 237, 239, 248-49, 280-81, 444, LXXIII, p.



86; Ḥorr ‘Āmeli, XXV, pp. 14-18, 21, 129-31, 189, 195-96, 199-200, 205-6, 212; Nuri, XVI, pp. 337, 339, 416-17, 423, 428-30).

Imam Ja‘far al-Šādeq is also credited with naming a number of juices and beverages as being beneficial to one’s good health. They include water (12 Hadiths), milk, and vinegar (7 Hadiths each), honey (3 Hadiths), and rose water Hadiths; ‘Aqil, pp. 162-63, 213-59, 291 460-67, quoting Nuri XVI, pp. 363-64, 369; Ḥorr ‘Āmeli XXV, pp. 88-92, 112, , 115, 302-3; Majlesi, LIX, pp. 145-47, 221-29, 236, LXIII, pp. 95, 101, 302-3; Kolayni, VI, pp. 336-39).

Beneficial kinds of meat and other animal products, reportedly remarked by Imam al-Šādeq, include general references (13 Hadiths), fish (7 Hadiths), egg (4 Hadiths; see ‘Aqil, pp. 268, 278, 446-47, quoting Majlesi, LXII, pp. 190, 207-8, 212, 215, LXIII, pp. 46-47; Ḥorr ‘Āmeli, XXV, pp. 39-41, 44-45, 77). Harmful drinks and foods which cannot be used even for medical treatment include alcoholic beverages, specifically wine (13 Hadith), blood, pork, and dead meat (1 Hadith each; see ‘Aqil, pp. 410, 594, quoting Majlesi, LIX, p. 89).

Commonly known diseases and their remedies. In cases of certain pain in the waist, honey and cumin are advised (3 Hadiths; ‘Aqil, p. 325, quoting Majlesi, LIX, p. 170). In cases of certain stomach pains, honey, cumin, rice, and sumac are advised (4 Hadiths; ‘Aqil, p. 327, quoting Majlesi, LIX, p. 177). For treating certain hemorrhoids, it is advised to eat rice, leek, especially white leek (3 Hadiths; ‘Aqil, pp. 337-38, quoting Majlesi, LIX, pp. 195-96). In case of head cold, among other things, violet oil is advised (3 Hadiths; ‘Aqil, p. 341, quoting Majlesi, LIX, pp. 183-84). For treating tapeworm, freckles, throat pain, cough, chest pain, nightmares or anxiety during sleep, herbal medicine are mostly advised (1 Hadith each; see ‘Aqil, pp. 354-61, quoting Majlesi, LIX, pp. 165, 182). For treating fever, in general, twenty-one Hadiths are quoted in which footbath and eating fruits such as apple and, on occasion, onion and honey are advised (‘Aqil, pp. 372-76, quoting Majlesi, LIX, pp. 93-99, 101-4). For the remedy of eye disease, washing, cleaning, nail-cutting, and eating specific foods are advised (9 Hadiths; ‘Aqil, pp. 291-92, quoting Majlesi, LIX, pp. 145-47).

Methods of treating some illnesses. Imam Ja‘far al-Šādeq has corroborated some traditional methods of treating illness and health problems. He has sometimes supported his instructions with God’s blessing and *šari‘a* law; treatment of the eyes with kohl (9 Hadiths; ‘Aqil, p. 390, quoting Majlesi, LXIII, pp. 94-96); vento treatment (*hejāma*) or art of cupping (39 Hadiths; ‘Aqil, pp. 394-402, quoting Majlesi, LIX, pp. 108-31; see BLOODLETTING); cauterization



(*kayy*) or burning the skin (1 Hadith; ‘Aqil, p. 410, quoting Majlesi, LIX, p. 74); cutting down on food (11 Hadiths; ‘Aqil, pp. 481-82, quoting Ḥorr ‘Āmeli, XXIV, pp. 239-40, 242-43, 247; Nuri, XVI, p. 213; Majlesi, LXIII, p. 232; 336); taking a bath (8 Hadiths; ‘Aqil, pp. 281-82, as cited by Majlesi, LXXIII, pp. 70-71, 76-79).

PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMAM’S TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

On the authenticity of the above-mentioned Hadiths, Āqā Bozorg Ṭehrāni quotes Majlesi’s view that the imams’ traditions on food and drinks do not need strong documentation (*al-asānid al-qawiya*) on the part of transmitters, because their ignorance does not spoil what they have heard and quoted from the imam (Ṭehrāni, XV, p. 140). This argument is in line with the opinion articulated by the pioneering scholar of early Shi’ism, Shaikh al-Ṭā’efa Abu Ja’far Moḥammad Ṭusi (d. 460/1067), who adopted weak traditions from ignorant or exaggerative narrators relying on their general knowledge of the religion (Ṭusi, p. 349). An example of a weak transmitter in Imam Ja’far al-Şādeq’s medical traditions is Mofazzal b. ‘Omar Jo’fi (q.v.), who, as a companion of the imam, figures repeatedly in the imam’s traditions, but whom the famous biographer of the early period Aḥmad b. ‘Ali Najā-ši (d. 450/1058-9) described as “weak” (Ebn Beṣṭām, tr., p. xxii, quoting Najāši).

Unlike the Shi’ite position that regards the imams’ statements as *aḥkām* (rulings) or parts of divinely inspired ordinances, Ebn Ḳaldun (d. 809/1406, q.v.) characterized the Prophet Moḥammad’s medical statements as something customarily practiced among the Arabs. According to him, “the medicine mentioned in religious tradition is of the (Bedouin) type. It is in no way part of the divine revelation. (Such medical matters) were merely (part of) Arab custom and happened to be mentioned in connection with the circumstances of the Prophet, like other things that were customary in his generation. They were not mentioned in order to imply that that particular way of practicing (medicine) is stipulated by religious law. Moḥammad was sent to teach us the religious law. He was not sent to teach us medicine or any other ordinary matter. In connection with the story of fecundation of palms, he said: “You know more about your worldly affairs (than I)” (Ebn Ḳaldun, III, p. 150).

Ebn Ḳaldun’s quotation of the above tradition of the Prophet refers to three Hadiths documented by Abu’l-Ḥosayn Moslem b. Ḥajjāj (d. 261/875) saying, “I am a human, follow me when I order you something concerning your religion, when I order you something out of my opinion, [be aware] I am a human. You know more about your worldly affairs [than I]” (Moslem, XV, pp. 116-17).



Neither is Imam Ja‘far al-Şādeq’s overall language so juridical in his medical statements as they are in religious matters. Today’s Shi‘ites, however, make use of the imam’s medical traditions mostly for invocation, good omen, and recently to prove the miraculous insight of the imam that can be ascertained by contemporary scientific evidence (‘Aqil, p. 6).

Michael Dols has characterized the origin and contents of the imams’ medical traditions as a blend of three distinct elements, “The folk medicine of the Arabian Bedouin, the borrowing of Galenic concepts (see JĀLINUS; HUMERISM) that had become common parlance (such as humours, temperaments, and qualities), and the over-acting principle of divine or supernatural causation” (Dols, p. 421, as cited in Ebn Beşām, editor’s Introd., p. xvi).

Commenting on the *tebb al-a’emma*, Fazlur Rahman observes that the Shi‘ites “underplay the natural cures and emphasize the value of suffering.” Such tendencies, he argues, were “undoubtedly connected with the passion motif and the stress on martyrdom, of which Sunni Islam has little trace” (Rahman, 1987, pp. 37-38, as cited in Ebn Beşām, editor’s Introd., p. xv). In Imam Ja‘far al-Şādeq’s collection of medical traditions, however, we do not find any obvious trace of such value in suffering or martyrdom.

Given the high priorities of fruits and vegetables prescribed by Imam Ja‘far al-Şādeq, one may conclude that the imam was essentially concerned with herbal-based remedies then current in Mesopotamia, where he traveled in the latter part of his life. He occasionally combined his food and drug instructions with invocation to God, or recitation of passages from the Qur‘ān; but, in his medical stipulations he did not ascertain his remarks by attributing them, even by implication, to divine inspiration, neither did he ascribe them to a tradition of the Prophet Moḥammad. It is noteworthy that some of the his instructions, such as drinking three sips of hot water of the reservoir of a public bath wherein one enters (‘Aqil, p. 468, quoting Majlesi, LXIII, p. 451), are common among Muslims where public baths are still in use.



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