

## 9. Physical illnesses

Both al-Dhahabī and Ibn al-Qayyim discussed a number of physical ailments and their treatments, but when compared to the voluminous classics of Graeco-Islamic medicine, their selection of illnesses is rather modest. Both authors presented sixteen to seventeen diseases in chapters of their own, whereas more diseases were mentioned either in the lists of drugs and foodstuffs or in passing elsewhere in the book. Ibn Mufliḥ's selection of illnesses was smaller: he presented only eleven ailments in some detail. Just like al-Dhahabī and Ibn al-Qayyim, Ibn Mufliḥ also referred to a greater number of diseases but only by name.

The diseases that Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Mufliḥ presented in detail were all ones that had been mentioned in the hadith material. In Ibn al-Qayyim's book the chapters dealing with the diseases were given headings starting with the words "The Prophet's guidance", e.g. "The Prophet's guidance on dropsy (*istisqā'*) and its treatment". The illnesses that the Prophet had not known or mentioned were excluded by Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Mufliḥ except for the occasional inclusion of their names. al-Dhahabī's grounds for choosing the diseases to be discussed are less obvious. His selection shows that he exceeded the bounds set by the hadith material, but still kept the total number of illnesses more or less the same as Ibn al-Qayyim. It seems that al-Dhahabī wanted to concentrate on common, generally known illnesses presenting them in greater detail, regardless of whether they were mentioned by the Prophet or not.

All the diseases that Ibn Mufliḥ discussed were also presented by Ibn al-Qayyim. They were epilepsy (*ṣar'*), ophthalmia (*ramad*), sciatica (*'irq al-nasā'*), headache (*ṣudā'*), throat disease (*'udhra*), tumours (*aurām*), dropsy (*istisqā'*), diarrhoea (*istiqlāq al-baṭn*), fever (*ḥummā*), pleurisy (*dhāt al-janb*) and lice (*qamal*). Ibn Mufliḥ's descriptions of these diseases were very similar to those of Ibn al-Qayyim. They often followed Ibn al-Qayyim's text word for word. Only in the cases of lice and the throat disease, *'udhra*, did Ibn Mufliḥ add details not present in Ibn al-Qayyim's text.

In addition to these eleven diseases, Ibn al-Qayyim also presented five others. These were: pain in the heart (*maf'ūd*), plague (*tā'ūn*), leprosy (*judhām*),<sup>477</sup> itch (*ḥikka*) and paralysis (*khadrān*). al-Dhahabī's selection of illnesses contained ten items that were also presented by Ibn al-Qayyim. These were: diarrhoea (*ishāl*), dropsy, fever, headache, leprosy, pain in the heart, plague, pleurisy, sciatica and *'udhra*. To these al-Dhahabī added nosebleed (*ru'āf*), cough (*su'āl*), colic (*qaulanj*), haemorrhoids (*bawāsīr*), bed-wetting (*baul fī al-firāsh*), small-pox (*judarī*)

<sup>477</sup> Ibn Mufliḥ mentioned both leprosy and plague in connection with his discussion on contagion, but he only referred to these diseases by name and did not give any further details (IM, vol. 2, pp. 376-387).

and measles (*ḥaṣba*).

The lists show that the authors concentrated on diseases that were easily identified and whose symptoms were probably well-known. al-Dhahabī seems to have assumed this, since he did not always describe the symptoms. For example of colic he wrote that it was usually caused by eating too much food that produced air in the bowels, such as chick-peas, beans and lentils, but he did not attempt to define the illness or its symptoms. He did not describe haemorrhoids at all nor did he suggest what caused them, he only gave instructions on how to treat them. Of sciatica he gave a short description: "it is the pain in the hip joint that goes down the backside of the thighs and may reach the heel". A more thorough description was given of various fevers, obviously to enable people to distinguish them from each other and for a similar reason measles and small-pox were described in more detail.<sup>478</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Mufliḥ generally gave a more thorough discussion of the various illnesses than al-Dhahabī. Each chapter in which Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Mufliḥ presented an illness followed the same model: at the beginning of the chapter they quoted the hadiths in which the disease was mentioned. After that they proceeded to give a medical definition of the illness, described its symptoms and gave instructions on its treatment.

The authors also gave brief comments on a number of diseases that they did not discuss in any detail. These diseases were always only mentioned by name and the two authors did not give any descriptions of the illnesses and their symptoms. Also their instructions on the cure were superficial and in most cases there were no references to authorities to support them. The majority of these diseases were mentioned in the lists of drugs and foodstuffs. For example, under ambergris (*'anbar*) Ibn al-Qayyim gave the explanation:

Its temperament is hot and dry. It strengthens the heart, brain, senses and organs of the body. It is effective against semiparalysis (*fālij*), facial paralysis (*laqwa*), phlegmatic illnesses, cold pains in the stomach and boiling winds. As a drink or ointment it is effective against obstructions (*sadad*). When used as a fumigant, it is effective against cold (*zūkām*), headache (*ṣudā'*) and cold migraine (*shaqīqa bārīda*).<sup>479</sup>

In this manner the authors mentioned approximately 100 diseases. Also the lists of drugs in the Graeco-Islamic medical books were compiled in the same manner. Ibn Sīnā's *al-Qānūn* contains a list of several hundred simple drugs and foodstuffs, in which the medical properties of each item are described and the names of relevant diseases are mentioned. However, in contrast to the texts of al-Dhahabī, Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Mufliḥ, the voluminous *al-Qānūn* also contains a description of each of these illnesses and detailed instructions for their treatment.

<sup>478</sup> DH, pp. 172-176 (fevers), 178 (colic), 179 (haemorrhoids), 180 (sciatica) and 190f (small-pox and measles).

<sup>479</sup> IQ, p. 265. Ibn Mufliḥ has a very similar description (IM, vol. 2, p. 419). al-Dhahabī has: "It is hot and dry. It strengthens the heart and brain and sharpens the senses. Together with an ointment of rose it is effective against pain in the heart" (DH, pp. 110f).

### 9.1. Diseases and treatments mentioned by the Prophet

If there existed a hadith in which the Prophet had recommended a specific treatment for an illness, al-Dhahabī and Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Mufliḥ presented it and explained in medical terms why the proposed treatment was effective. For example a tradition reported that a man had come to the Prophet and told him that his brother suffered from diarrhoea. The Prophet recommended that the patient should eat honey and the man left. Later he returned and complained that the treatment did not have any effect. The Prophet repeated his instructions to give the patient honey and the man left again. The man came back two or three times and each time the Prophet repeated his instructions. On the last occasion the Prophet said: "God speaks the truth, the stomach of your brother lies". After this the man once again gave his brother honey and he was cured.<sup>480</sup>

This tradition required some explanation, because honey was known as a laxative not as a constipative medicine. In the view of Graeco-Islamic medicine there were, however, particular types of diarrhoea, where the purpose of the treatment was to expel the harmful substance from the stomach and bowels. This could be achieved by either making the patient vomit or by giving him laxative medicine to increase the flow. The authors of the Prophet's medicine found it necessary to define what type of diarrhoea the patient in the hadith had suffered from in order to find the reason behind the Prophet's choice of treatment.

There were several alternatives to choose from. Ibn Sīnā mentioned a type of diarrhoea that was caused by an obstruction either in the liver or between the liver and stomach. If this illness was treated by constipative medicaments, the obstruction would only become worse. Therefore the only correct way to cure the illness was to open the obstruction and this could sometimes be achieved by administering strong laxative drugs.<sup>481</sup> Evacuation of the harmful material by purges was recommended by Ibn Sīnā also in case of a diarrhoea caused by yellow bile and in case of slippery diarrhoea (*al-istiḥlāq al-zalīqī*), which was caused by humidity.<sup>482</sup> al-Kaḥḥāl Ibn Ṭarkhān, an earlier author of the Prophet's medicine and a physician, had written that if the diarrhoea was caused by indigestion (*tukhma*) resulting from overeating, the correct treatment was to expel the waste material that had collected in the stomach and the bowels. For this purpose honey mixed in hot water was an excellent cure and one that, according to al-Kaḥḥāl Ibn Ṭarkhān, was recommended by doctors.<sup>483</sup>

Ibn al-Qayyim, Ibn Mufliḥ and al-Dhahabī accepted al-Kaḥḥāl Ibn Ṭarkhān's diagnosis that the case of diarrhoea the Prophet had treated was caused by overeating. In addition they also presented as an alternative that the diarrhoea could as well have been the slippery diarrhoea mentioned by Ibn Sīnā, and which had to be treated by purges. The reason why the Prophet had said that the patient's stomach lied, was that

<sup>480</sup> IQ, p. 25. DH, p. 107. IM, vol. 3, p. 80.

<sup>481</sup> Ibn Sīnā, al-Qānūn, vol. 2, pp. 434 and 444.

<sup>482</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 435f.

<sup>483</sup> al-Kaḥḥāl Ibn Ṭarkhān, al-Aḥkām al-nabawīya, p. 28.

he knew that the dosage had not been sufficient, because it had not staunched the diarrhoea, and the Prophet wanted to stress that honey was the correct cure but in this case it had to be administered several times.<sup>484</sup> The authors' explanations for the use of honey were obviously motivated by a desire to defend the Prophet's choice of medication, but in addition the explanations showed that the authors did not consider the Prophet's instructions as applicable to all forms of a disease regardless of the actual cause.

This is even more clearly expressed by Ibn al-Qayyim in connection with the treatment of ophthalmia (*ramad*). The Prophet had recommended that this should be treated by dropping cold water in the eye. In Ibn al-Qayyim's opinion cold water was a good medicine for hot ophthalmia, but he claimed that the Prophet's words on ophthalmia applied only to some types of eye diseases and they should only be followed in certain surroundings.<sup>485</sup> Here Ibn al-Qayyim referred to the Graeco-Islamic theory that climate and physical surroundings affected the character of the illness and he implied that the Prophet's instructions were applicable only in climatic conditions that were similar to those of Mecca and Medina.

This idea was again presented by Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Mufliḥ, when they discussed the treatment of sciatica (*'irq al-nasā'*). The Prophet had said: "The medicine for sciatica is the fat tail of a bedouin sheep. It is melted and divided into three portions. One portion of it is drunk on an empty stomach each day." Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Mufliḥ then maintained that the Prophet had directed his words at the Arabs of al-Ḥijāz area and especially at the bedouins. Because the habits of these people were simple, the illnesses they suffered from were simple too, and therefore a simple medicine such as the fat of a sheep's tail was a sufficient treatment for the type of sciatica that troubled the inhabitants of al-Ḥijāz and the bedouins. More complicated forms of the disease required more complicated cures.<sup>486</sup>

Generally the authors followed the views of the established Graeco-Islamic medicine in their description of the individual diseases, but their explanations were usually shorter and less detailed than the ones in the classical medical books. For example dropsy (*istisqā'*) is explained by the three authors—in complete agreement with the Graeco-Islamic view—to be a disease that was caused by a cold substance that permeated the organs and made them swell. Actually, the short general description given by Ibn al-Qayyim is a word by word reproduction of Ibn Sīnā's text in *al-Qānūn*. The same applies to Ibn Mufliḥ's text. al-Dhahabī's description is very laconic, but his choice of words shows that here too the source was Ibn Sīnā's *al-Qānūn*, either directly or through a secondary source.<sup>487</sup>

<sup>484</sup> IQ, p. 27. DH, p. 107. IM, vol. 3, p. 83. al-Dhahabī mentioned slippery bowels (*zaliq al-am'ā'*), whereas Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Mufliḥ spoke of the sticky mixture that covered the inner surface of the stomach and prevented the food from staying in it. It seems certain that the three authors referred to the same disease, namely slippery diarrhoea.

<sup>485</sup> IQ, pp. 86f. Also Ibn Mufliḥ limited the treatment with water to hot ophthalmia (IM, vol. 2, p. 378).

<sup>486</sup> IQ, pp. 56f. Ibn Mufliḥ, vol. 2, pp. 429f.

<sup>487</sup> IQ, p. 36 (lines 6-8). IM, vol. 2, p. 486 (lines 12-14). DH, p. 124 (line 9). The same wording is

Ibn al-Qayyim and al-Dhahabī also gave the names of the three varieties of dropsy: hydrops anasarca (*lahmī*), ascites (*ziqqī*) and tympanites (*ṭabalī*).<sup>488</sup> They only repeated the names of these three types of dropsy, but they did not offer any explanation as to how they differed from each other and what their individual characteristics were. They did not even mention the various substances that were considered to be their causes: hydrops anasarca was caused by phlegmatic substance, ascites by watery and tympanites by an airy substance.<sup>489</sup>

Similarly the treatment of the illness was presented in a cursory manner. The three authors quoted a tradition according to which the Prophet had recommended the drinking of camel's milk and urine. Ibn al-Qayyim and al-Dhahabī then explained that the Prophet's suggestion was medically correct, because in dropsy the liver was damaged and it was known that milk, especially camel's milk, could be used for curing the liver. Ibn al-Qayyim further explained that camel's milk together with its urine were an effective medicine against dropsy owing to their hot nature and ability to soften the bowels and expel waste material. Also according to Ibn Mufliḥ, the way to cure dropsy was to increase the evacuation of waste material and this could be achieved by the intake of camel's milk and urine.<sup>490</sup>

When these instructions are compared to the information given in Ibn Sīnā's *al-Qānūn*, it can be concluded that the treatment suggested by the Prophet finds some support therein. In contrast to the short presentations given by the authors of the Prophet's medicine, Ibn Sīnā treated the subject more thoroughly and discussed each of the three types separately. In ascites (*ziqqī*) the purpose of the treatment was to expel the waste matter and this could be done by purges such as camel's milk and urine combined with other medicaments. In the case of hydrops anasarca (*lahmī*) Ibn Sīnā accepted the use of moderate drugs to soften the bowels, but he did not mention camel's milk and urine among the list of useful drugs for this type of dropsy. Neither did he mention them in connection with tympanites (*ṭabalī*), but advised that the use of purges should be minimized and that the patient should avoid drinking milk.<sup>491</sup>

Ibn Sīnā did in fact agree with the Prophet on the treatment of dropsy, but only of one type of dropsy, and even then the drugs recommended were not to be used independently but as parts of a combined treatment. In prescriptions for the two other types of dropsy, these drugs were not mentioned and in connection with tympanites the drinking of milk, doubtlessly also including camel's milk, was even discouraged. It seems that the authors of the Prophet's medicine either did not know these details or ignored them and contented themselves with presenting the parts that tallied with what the Prophet had recommended. On the other hand, camel's milk and urine could have

found in Ibn Sīnā, *al-Qānūn*, vol. 2, p. 384 (lines 1-3).

<sup>488</sup> al-Dhahabī used for ascites the name *mā'ī* (watery) instead of the standard term. It may have been an alternative term for the disease and can be considered appropriate, because ascites was caused by a watery substance.

<sup>489</sup> Ibn Sīnā, *al-Qānūn*, vol. 2, p. 384.

<sup>490</sup> IQ, pp. 36f. DH, p. 124. IM, vol. 2, p. 486.

<sup>491</sup> Ibn Sīnā, *al-Qānūn*, vol. 2, pp. 390f (*ziqqī*), 398 (*lahmī*) and 398f (*ṭabalī*).

been considered as moderate or mild purges, and therefore their use may have been acceptable also in the cases of hydrops anasarc and tympanites. Ibn al-Qayyim actually stated that these drugs were moderate purges and caused the flow that was needed in each case.<sup>492</sup> Therefore the authors' recommendation to use camel's milk and urine for dropsy regardless of its type may not have been in conflict with the current medical views.

In one case the authors of the Prophet's medicine had to redefine the drug mentioned in the hadith in order to bring the message in line with the Graeco-Islamic view. The hadith in question was: "Treat pleurisy (*dhāt al-janb*) with marine costus (*qusṭ baḥrī*) and oil (*zait*)". The authors explained that the pleurisy the Prophet referred to was not the true pleurisy but the false one (*ghair ḥaqīqī*). They accepted the medical view that true pleurisy was a hot tumour in the side and that this caused the characteristic pain. Also in accordance with the current medical view a similar pain could be felt in the same region, but the pain was caused by a boiling wind.<sup>493</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, al-Dhahabī and Ibn Mufliḥ claimed that the pleurisy the Prophet spoke about was the one caused by wind and that the cure for it was costus, which was identical with Indian aloe (*ʿūd hindī*).<sup>494</sup> According to Ibn al-Qayyim, the view that these two drugs were identical was based on another hadith which said: "Use Indian aloe, because it includes seven cures, one of which is a cure for pleurisy".<sup>495</sup> Obviously the reason why they claimed that the drug in both cases was aloe, was that the medical books credited aloe with the ability to dissolve wind, whereas costus did not possess this quality.<sup>496</sup>

## 9.2. Diseases and treatments not mentioned by the Prophet

Usually the authors of the Prophet's medicine confined themselves to explaining and justifying the treatments that the Prophet had recommended. However, occasionally they included alternative treatments that the Prophet had not mentioned. Of the three authors, al-Dhahabī was most willing to complement the relatively sparse medical information that could be obtained from the hadiths with additions and alternatives. For example, in his discussion of headaches he mentioned henna as the cure recommended by the Prophet, but added special instructions for the treatment of a cold headache: the smelling of musk (*misk*), ambergris (*ʿanbar*) and black cummin (*ḥabba saudāʾ*/*shūnīz*) and the eating of honey (*ʿasal*). He even gave instructions on how to prepare a pill (*ḥabb*) that could be used as a purge in this type of headache.<sup>497</sup>

<sup>492</sup> IQ, p. 36.

<sup>493</sup> Ibn Sīnā described the false pleurisy: "In this organ there is also a pain that is not caused by a tumor but by a boiling wind. It can be thought to be pleurisy but it is not" (Ibn Sīnā, al-Qānūn, vol. 2, p. 238).

<sup>494</sup> IQ, pp. 64f. DH, pp. 115f. IM, vol. 2, pp. 433f. Ibn Mufliḥ mentioned that according to some doctors costus (*qusṭ*) could be used even to cure true pleurisy (IM, vol. 2, pp. 434f).

<sup>495</sup> IQ, pp. 65 and 273.

<sup>496</sup> Ibn Sīnā, al-Qānūn, vol. 1, pp. 399 (*ʿūd*) and 420 (*qusṭ*).

Also Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Muflīḥ considered henna to be only one alternative for treating headache. Because headache had various causes, its cures were in the authors' opinion likewise manifold:

... some types are treated by purges, some by food, some by quiet and calm, by poultices, by cooling, by heating or by avoiding noise and movement. When this is known, it becomes obvious that the treatment of headache by henna—as in the hadith—is only one treatment and not the only treatment. It is a treatment of one of the many types of headache.<sup>498</sup>

Neither of them gave any prescriptions for the headaches that were not susceptible to the curing effect of henna in this context, but they gave some alternatives in their lists of drugs and foodstuffs: a hot headache could be treated by a draught of squash (*yaqṭīn*) or the smelling of sweet basil (*raiḥān fārisī/ḥabaq*), whereas the fragrance of narcissus (*narjis*) soothed a headache caused by phlegm or black bile, and ambergris (*ʿanbar*) used as incense helped against a cold migraine.<sup>499</sup>

The alternative treatments recommended by the authors usually complemented the instructions given by the Prophet. For example, in the paragraph about the treatment of haemorrhoids (*bawāsīr*), al-Dhahabī listed a draught of violet (*banafsaḥ*) and nutritives such as Jew's mallow (*mulūkhīya*), mallow (*khubbāzī*) and spinach (*isfānākh*) as suitable treatments. The purpose of this treatment was to soften the bowels and this could be effected by these laxative substances. Further, in his list of drugs and foodstuffs he mentioned figs (*tīn*) as a treatment recommended by the Prophet.<sup>500</sup>

There was no contrast between the advice given by the Prophet and the one given by al-Dhahabī that was not supported by the authority of the Prophet. All the substances recommended were considered laxatives and as such had the same effect, even though some of them may have been considered more potent than others. Therefore, al-Dhahabī's recommendation can be seen as an alternative or supplement to the one made by the Prophet. The view that in this case al-Dhahabī only supplemented the Prophet's instructions without adding anything new to it is supported by the fact that both recommendations were dietary, whereas in Graeco-Islamic medicine, dietary rules formed only a part of the treatment of haemorrhoids. Ibn Sīnā, in full agreement with al-Dhahabī and the Prophet, recommended laxatives, but in addition to these he had a lot to say about the external treatment of the haemorrhoids. All the ointments, poultices and other methods of treatment that occupied a much more prominent place in Ibn Sīnā's discussion than the use of laxatives, were omitted by al-Dhahabī.<sup>501</sup>

al-Dhahabī also presented diseases that were not mentioned in the hadiths. As

<sup>497</sup> DH, pp. 176f.

<sup>498</sup> IQ, p. 69. Ibn Muflīḥ expressed a similar opinion in IM, vol. 2, p. 437.

<sup>499</sup> IQ, p. 317 (*yaqṭīn*); p. 243 (*raiḥān*); p. 312 (*narjis*); p. 265 (*ʿanbar*). IM, vol. 2, p. 419 (*raiḥān*); p. 427 (*narjis*) and p. 419 (*ʿanbar*). Ibn Muflīḥ did not mention *yaqṭīn*.

<sup>500</sup> DH, pp. 67 and 179.

<sup>501</sup> Ibn Sīnā, al-Qānūn, vol. 2, pp. 479-482 haemorrhoids, p. 479 laxatives as their treatment.

can be expected, the influence of Graeco-Islamic medicine is obvious in these presentations. There were no hadiths mentioning small-pox (*judarī*) and measles (*ḥasba*), but al-Dhahabī devoted a relatively long chapter to these diseases.<sup>502</sup> His description of small-pox followed closely Ibn Sīnā's exposition of the disease.<sup>503</sup> al-Dhahabī's explanation of the various forms and colours of the spots and their significance to the seriousness of the disease was in agreement with Ibn Sīnā's opinion. As regards measles, al-Dhahabī only stated that it was caused by yellow bile, which was a statement that was in accordance with the Graeco-Islamic view. al-Dhahabī's suggestion for treatment of the two diseases consisted of purges, venesection and cupping. The purpose of the treatment was to expel the harmful substances—corrupted blood in small-pox and excessive yellow bile in measles—from the body. Also this was in accordance with Ibn Sīnā's instructions.

Some of the ailments such as nosebleed, colic and bed-wetting that were not mentioned in the hadiths, were given only a short paragraph each and the scantiness of the information given in them makes it difficult to determine its source, even though it can be assumed that al-Dhahabī in these cases, as in the chapter on measles and small-pox, relied on the established medical views.

As has been mentioned above, the authors of the Prophet's medicine also referred to several illnesses that they did not discuss in any detail. Most of these diseases mentioned in passing were illnesses that were recognized by Graeco-Islamic medicine but had not been spoken of by the Prophet. The cures the authors recommended for these illnesses were in agreement with the opinions of the Graeco-Islamic authorities as is shown in the following examples.

Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Muflīḥ mentioned a disease called *rabw*, which was an ailment of the lungs and its symptom was difficult breathing. They both said that cress (*ḥurḥ/ḥabb al-rashād*) could be used to cure it. Ibn Sīnā mentioned cress in his list of simple drugs and considered it effective against *rabw*.<sup>504</sup>

al-Dhahabī mentioned that apoplexy (*sakta*) could be treated with the same cure that was used for cold headache. The cure consisted of eating honey and smelling musk, ambergris and black cumin. For the same disease Ibn Sīnā recommended venesection, the drinking of barley water (*mā' sha'ir*) and the smelling of substances that strengthened the brain. al-Dhahabī's advice lacked venesection, but included the smelling of substances, two of which—musk and ambergris—were also by Ibn Sīnā considered beneficial to the brain.<sup>505</sup>

Even though the cures recommended by the authors of the Prophet's medicine were not in all cases exactly the same as Ibn Sīnā's, they were close enough to prove

<sup>502</sup> DH, pp. 190f. The chapter also includes a disease called *ḥumaiqā* that is described as a disease between small-pox and measles. The dictionaries define it as either a synonym of *judarī* (small-pox) or a disease resembling it. Elgood translated it as chicken-pox (Elgood 1962, pp. 176f).

<sup>503</sup> Ibn Sīnā, al-Qānūn, vol. 3, pp. 67-69.

<sup>504</sup> IQ, p. 232. IM, vol. 3, p. 19. Ibn Sīnā, al-Qānūn, vol. 1, p. 314.

<sup>505</sup> DH, p. 176. Ibn Sīnā, al-Qānūn, vol. 2, p. 88 (*'ilāj saktā*). Ibn Sīnā said that musk strengthened the brain and ambergris was beneficial for the brain (Ibn Sīnā, al-Qānūn, vol. 1, p. 360 (*misk*) and p. 398 (*'anbar*)).



that the authors followed the principles of the Graeco-Islamic medical system. It is probable that Ibn al-Qayyim, Ibn Muflīḥ and al-Dhahabī had used medical books as their sources. In those cases where the names of illnesses were listed in connection with the various drugs, it is obvious that the three authors had copied the information from the lists of simple drugs included in the books of Graeco-Islamic medicine, disregarding the fact that they did not describe these illnesses elsewhere in their books. The fact that al-Dhahabī, Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Muflīḥ included all this information that had no basis in the hadith literature in their books, shows that they did not want to reject the Graeco-Islamic medicine. Quite the contrary, they were willing to accept its achievements and include them in the medicine of the Prophet.

### 9.3. *The influence of the spirits: plague and epilepsy*

In the treatment of physical illnesses the teachings of the Prophet were utilized in administering divine cures. When using these cures the patient turned towards God, the ultimate healer of all illnesses. Further, the theological views of the authors affected their attitude towards spirits as agents of illnesses. The three authors of the Prophet's medicine recognized the influence of evil spirits in diseases that were caused by witchcraft or the evil eye. Ibn al-Qayyim discussed the influence of spirits also in connection with epilepsy and plague. I will here concentrate on Ibn al-Qayyim's presentation, because he described the actions of the spirits more thoroughly than the others. Ibn Muflīḥ shared Ibn al-Qayyim's views on spirits as agents causing epilepsy, but his discussion is not as detailed as Ibn al-Qayyim's.<sup>506</sup> al-Dhahabī did not mention evil spirits at all, but only discussed their influence, i.e. the evil eye and witchcraft.<sup>507</sup>

According to Ibn al-Qayyim, God had created both good and evil spirits. These spirits resided within the human being and could affect the physical well-being of the body. Ibn al-Qayyim claimed that the influence of evil spirits (*arwāḥ khabītha*) was apparent in diseases such as plague and epilepsy. As to plague, he accepted corrupted air as a cause of the illness, but he did not consider it to be the sole cause. Evil spirits were an important factor in the outbreak of the disease. When the air became putrid it corrupted the humours of the people. The corruption of the humours then damaged the soul (*nafs*) and the evil spirits gained influence.<sup>508</sup> It was an ancient belief in the Near East that demons were the agents of plague. In popular Muslim tradition it was the *jinn* who pierced (*ṭa'ana*) their victims with poisonous arrows and caused the plague (*ṭā'ūn*). This belief found confirmation in the hadith in which the Prophet had explained the plague as the pricking by the *jinn*.<sup>509</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim's view differed from this popular belief in that he saw the spirits that God had created and placed

<sup>506</sup> IM, vol. 2, pp. 366-368.

<sup>507</sup> DH, pp. 193f and 198.

<sup>508</sup> IQ, pp. 30f.

<sup>509</sup> Dols 1977, p. 117 and Sublet 1971, p. 145.

within each man to be the cause rather than the *jinn*.

Spirits were also a factor in epilepsy (*ṣarʿ*). Ibn al-Qayyim divided the disease into two types: one type was caused by evil spirits and the other by humours.<sup>510</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim blamed the heretic doctors (*zanādiqat al-aṭibbāʿ*) for only accepting humoral epilepsy and failing to recognize the type caused by spirits. In this type of epilepsy the evil spirits had, as in plague, taken over control of the human body. In epilepsy the reasons for this take-over were the lack of faith and the desolation of the soul. Similarly, the spirits that were active in cases of witchcraft could influence the victim only if his soul was not filled with faith in God.<sup>511</sup>

Ibn al-Qayyim saw the reasons why the evil spirits were able to take over as partly religious and partly humoral. If a person's soul was fortified with strong faith, the evil spirits could not gain influence. But as important was the humoral balance: the spirits could not gain influence in persons, whose temperament was balanced.<sup>512</sup> In this he underlined the connection between the body and soul. The well-being of the soul depended on that of the body and vice versa. This interdependence of body and soul was also an important factor in the Graeco-Islamic medical theory, but here Ibn al-Qayyim gave it an Islamic content by stressing the role of faith.

If a disease was caused by spirits, ordinary medical therapies were insufficient. The curing effort should concentrate on putting an end to the spirit's influence. According to Ibn al-Qayyim the epilepsy that was caused by an evil spirit could only be cured by driving the spirit out. This could be achieved by strengthening the epileptic's faith, by making him understand the teachings of the prophets. As his soul got stronger, he was able to fight against the evil spirit. In this fight he needed help, a person who would finally exorcise the spirit by asking it to leave.

Ibn al-Qayyim claimed that he had himself seen an exorcist cure an epileptic. In that case the exorcist had addressed the spirit and said to her: "Get out, this is not lawful for you". The spirits were not always willing to obey words only, and then the exorcist had to resort to heavy-handed methods, but because the robust methods were directed only at the spirit, the epileptic himself did not feel any pain or suffer any damage.<sup>513</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim gave a story told by an exorcist as an example:

... Then I took a cane and started to beat the neck veins of the epileptic until my hands wearied. The people who were present were sure that the beating would kill the patient. While I was beating him the spirit said: "I love him". I said to her: "He does not love you". She said: "I want to make a pilgrimage with him". I said: "He does not want to make a pilgrimage with you". She said: "I shall leave him for your sake". I said: "No, you will leave him for the sake of obedience to God and his Prophet". She said: "I am coming out of him". The epileptic sat up and looked around. Then he asked: "Why am I here in the presence of the *shaiikh*?" The others asked him: "How do you feel after all this beating?" He said: "Why should the *shaiikh* beat me? I have not done anything wrong." He had not felt the beating at all.<sup>514</sup>

<sup>510</sup> IQ, pp. 51-54 (epilepsy caused by spirits) and pp. 54f (humoural epilepsy).

<sup>511</sup> IQ, p. 101.

<sup>512</sup> IQ, p. 31.

<sup>513</sup> IQ, pp. 52-54.

In Ibn al-Qayyim's view, the doctors revealed their ignorance when they rejected the influence of spirits on the human body. He admitted that Galen did not accept the theory that spirits could cause epilepsy, but he claimed that older masters, such as Hippocrates, had accepted the theory. Ibn al-Qayyim even quoted the words of Hippocrates, which stated that the treatment prescribed to cure humoral epilepsy was ineffective if the epilepsy was caused by spirits.<sup>515</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim's assumption that Hippocrates had recognized spirits as a cause of epilepsy was in fact erroneous, and his quotation from Hippocrates must therefore either be false or based on a misunderstanding of the source. The Hippocratic texts dealing with epilepsy actually dispelled the ancient belief of gods seizing the person and instead presented epilepsy as a disease caused by phlegmatic humours.<sup>516</sup>

Why did Ibn al-Qayyim stress the role of the spirits in the cases of plague and epilepsy? I believe that he supported the theory of their influence in order to explain the shortcomings of the established medicine. Obviously a therapy based on the humoral theory could not be effective in all cases of epilepsy. Similarly the theory of putrid air as a cause of plague had its weaknesses. An additional problem of the established medicine was the incurability of plague. According to Ibn al-Qayyim the doctors had no means to cure the plague,<sup>517</sup> even though the Prophet had said that God had not sent down a disease without sending down a cure. If these words were true, there could be no incurable diseases. The reason why the doctors could not cure a disease could be that they had not yet found the right cure, but it could also be that they were ignorant of the true character of the disease and were therefore unable to choose the correct cure. In Ibn al-Qayyim's opinion the doctors did not recognize the complete aetiology of plague and epilepsy and therefore they could not cure them. If the doctors admitted the influence of the spirits, they could explain why some epileptics did not respond to the humoral treatment and why their drugs were useless in cases of plague. They could then also explain why plague seemed to select its victims. After recognizing the spirits as an aetiological factor, the doctors would then be able to find the right cures, namely prayer, mentioning the name of God, reading the Koran and other religious methods.

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<sup>514</sup> IQ, p. 53.

<sup>515</sup> IQ, p. 51.

<sup>516</sup> Siegel 1968, p. 309.

<sup>517</sup> IQ, p. 30.