

When I Was Young....

Excerpts From Ibn Zuhr (Avenzoar)'s *Kitab al-Taysir*

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Summary

Kitab al-Taysir, a rather dense manual of therapeutics, contains scattered anecdotes and vignettes that recount Ibn Zuhr's medical experiences when he was still an adolescent under the wings of his father and mentor 'Abu al-'Ala'. These experiences, including his ordeals under "the tyrant 'Ali," portray a self-assured and remarkably scrupulous young man who outlived some serious illnesses, any one of which could have prematurely killed him. He miraculously survived an environment full of violence, rebellion and harem intrigue. Altogether, Ibn Zuhr stands out not only as a gifted and courageous physician when very young but also as a talented raconteur and an astute observer of the society of his time.

Key words: Ibn Zuhr (Avenzoar), *Kitab al-Taysir*, Arabic-Islamic Medicine, Muslim Spain, medicine and society

Abu Marwan 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Zuhr or Avenzoar of Seville (ca. 487H/1094-557H/1162) is the most renowned member of a medical dynasty of *al-Andalus* that included six successive generations of physicians. His major work, *K. al-Taysir* (Book of Facilitation), translated into Latin and Hebrew, was composed near the end of his life long after he endured a difficult ordeal under the Almoravid 'Ali Ibn Tashifin who exiled him to Marrakesh (1). The following excerpts of his candid writings, buried among long, dense sections of *K. al-Taysir*, should provide an insight into the young Ibn Zuhr and his time. Although we are not given specific ages, we surmise he was then an adolescent of perhaps eighteen or slightly less. His father was watching over his shoulders, yet he was old enough to be entrusted with important medical responsibilities. He was old enough to be sent to Morocco to practice medicine on his own and to write a book, albeit he later seemed to regret doing it (2). He was also old enough to have a son (3). Ibn Zuhr's adolescence was spent during the rule of the Almoravids and the "tyrant" 'Ali. He miraculously survived in an environment full of violence, rebellion and harem intrigue. He also survived a number of serious illnesses, anyone of which could have prematurely ended his life.

Management of an abscess of the ear canal

"I remember when I was young I was summoned by the tyrant 'Ali ibn Yusuf to Cordoba because of a swelling that was inside his ear. I reached him at dusk as the pain had become sharp. I found him wishing himself to be dead, even by being slain. Such was his pain. This was because the swelling was without doubt at the end of the ear deep next to the junction to the nerve that carries the sense of hearing. He started to have a disguised, faint spasm. I decided to fill his ear with tepid egg yolk and leave this for a long hour. The pain eased. After two or three hours the swelling burst out and its pus flowed out. Then I continued to clean [the ear] with honey water in which water was cooked, before its mixing, with acorn and horsetail. His ear was then washed with soft feathers of chicken tails that were twirled in his ear. What was in his ear was drained out once or twice. The pus stopped for four days and it was possible to cure him"(4).

This detailed and dramatic narrative indicates an unusual self-assurance and bedside ability. Then, the young Ibn Zuhr appears to have successfully treated

a excruciatingly painful and delicate lesion of the ear canal. It is quite possible that he was simply fortunate to arrive at a time when this apparent abscess was ready to burst out spontaneously. He stated on more than one occasion that medicine was guess and intuition (5). He should have also added the important ingredient of luck.

A case of “obsession”

“I remember, when I was a youth practicing medicine under the supervision of my father, God have mercy on him, I was called one day upon his recommendation to [treat] Tamim, brother of the tyrant `Ali, and he was the governor of Seville. I found him pretending he was dead and unable to speak, not even to move from place to place. His pulse did not indicate anything of the sort, except that he had a disturbance of a hot temperament or a hot humor in his stomach. I made him drink rose water and apple juice with some mint water, and crushed in it sandalwood and mastic. His condition improved. Then I visited him another day with my father, God have mercy on him, and he was in his [former] state of obsession. I had to stay and be quartered with him. His condition at times improved and at other times worsened. It occurred to me that this was due to an intrusion (an external factor). We remained not knowing what caused this until I asked one night for water [for him] to drink. It was poured from the vessel Tamim drank from. I found the water to have a foul taste, with a barely discernible fragrance and unpleasant odor, that I deplored. I did not drink from it and I could not but shout: “How would he get cured and you are making him drink something that is destroying him and what is this?” One of his slaves warned me but I could not remain silent. I continued to speak out. The anger of his wife Hawwa and of her servants became apparent. This led to my slander and humiliation, but all this did not stop me for telling the truth. Some friends advised me to be silent and recover my good fortune, but I considered this a form of fraudulence and I did not resort to it. It was found later that he was made to drink

dried meat that had rotted in the worst way; dried and minced then forcefully introduced into the vessel. The observant physician would have known that the bad meat had putrefied and dried and that putrefaction can cause havoc. As long as the man had this in his stomach and its surroundings, bad vapors would ascend to his brain causing him to be obsessed. All the physicians then in the city, who attended him, failed in their treatment and cure. He did not get well until the tyrant, his brother, deposed him from his position, denied him from enjoying his revenue and capped all this evil act by cutting him off from his money. I saw him after this in Morocco—his brother had imprisoned me [there]—and he was weak [but] without obsession” (6).

Sigmund Freud may have argued whether Tamim’s case represented a severe case of hypochondria, neurasthenia or hysteria, or whether, as suggested by Ibn Zuhr, it was simply a case of food poisoning affecting his mental behavior, a form of “intrusion.” Also of note is Ibn Zuhr’s refusal to dissimulate what he believed to be true no matter the consequences.

Treatment of a hernia

“I saw a man, who was my friend, who had a hernia that had incapacitated him for some time. I was then in my youth. He had acute pains that affected all his body and he could not move except with great difficulty. I continued to treat him for his pains and I forbade him all foods except a bit of fermented bread soaked in a stew of white little birds so well cooked that the flesh of birds had dissolved in it. The man remained on his back for nearly twenty days, imagining the rituals of prayer [without actually genuflecting]. After this [regimen], the pains totally subsided and he was totally cured” (7).

The young Ibn Zuhr resorted in this case to a simple method, prolonged bed rest and a soft diet, to manage a painful incarcerated hernia. Here again, the physician and his patient had a lot of luck on their side. Regrettably, we do not have a follow-up.

A case of suppurative chest disease and phlebotomy

"It is possible to manage suppuration as in my case when I was a youth. I became very depressed because of our bad treatment by `Ali resulting from a word for which he blamed my old father, God had mercy on him. He ordered that he be avenged in every possible manner. I developed a most unusual severe depression. I started behaving in a manner I was not accustomed to. When I wanted to sleep, I felt prolonged pain. I did not leave my bed as my condition worsened and I was seized with a persistent cough. I found my pulse to be stronger. During this time I developed an acute fever. I was referred to a phlebotomist and I was bled close to the next evening about a rotl [more than a liter?] of blood. I remained that night in great distress, feverish and coughing. I was forced to leave the next day and I left riding, still depressed, filled with terror and apprehension. I reached the place I moved to and, because of fatigue and lack of sleep, I fell asleep and the blood started flowing spontaneously from my arm. When I woke up, I found myself to be very weak and the blood had spilled over the place I was sleeping. I placed my hand over the place [I was bleeding from] and called for someone to tie my arm. I remained like this the rest of the day and my condition remained the same. The next morning I expectorated pus of good quality and color. Then I received some news that added to my fear. My mind got blurred and could not understand what happened to me. I remained in this condition not taking care of myself and not talking any meals except for some medicated water. I asked for it and I was given it because my thirst was strong. After seven days I [partly] recovered my memory. I remained not knowing who I was and what happened to me, and at times I somewhat recovered my senses. Then I started wondering who from my family was taking care of me, [thinking she was] my mother, God have mercy on her, until I remembered she had died. Then I remembered my situation and asked about what happened to my father and

son. I was told they were both in foreign lands. I was saddened and said that they were probably killed at the time when I was beaten on my chest and was stricken with a blow on my head because of which I could not lift it. Then I became overcome with terror about `Ali and feared I would be killed and urged that my condition be hidden and that no one should know I was alive. After much effort and the passage of many hours of time, my confusion stopped. It was as if part of my chest stopped sending to my head vapors that caused my memory to be taken over by their turbulence. One of the membranes there had started to swell acutely and after its swelling I did not grasp anything of my situation. I continued to expectorate pus from my chest and head and the pus run from them the way of a catarrh. However, I sensed my situation and what was the cause of my illness after I regained my consciousness. I continued to treat myself with that water for a while and the pus did not stop until it somehow dried up. I started feeding myself with barley water and after a long time I started drinking water. Then I kept on improving little by little until I returned to my condition" (8).

This complicated story tells about Ibn Zuhr's ordeal under `Ali. He was beaten over the chest and head, developed a purulent upper respiratory infection that healed after the expectoration of a copious amount of pus. We also learn that he was orphaned of his mother and that he had a son when a youth. He developed shock after phlebotomy followed by additional blood loss from his arm, presumably at the site of the phlebotomy. This accident did not seem to have dampened his enthusiasm for bloodletting that he continued to advocate in similar "hot" (sanguinous) and bilious conditions (9).

Follow Galen's advice

"I saw this condition, when I was young, in a villager who had drunk some very cold water when the weather was very hot. His stools could not come out and he felt a strong pain he could not bear. The condition baffled me and I discussed it with physicians who were [there] at that time. None of them provided me with

much except for confusion. I walked to my father, who was then at his land, and informed him about my quandary asking him to advise me. He moved his hand to a book and took from it an excerpt of Galen he passed to me telling me to go without adding more. Each time I would ask him to teach me, he would say: 'Memorize this page. Be happy if you succeed in his treatment. And if you were to treat him differently than this, be careful about undertaking anything that deals with medical practice.' I left him reading that excerpt [of Galen] and repeating it to myself. What I memorized became clear. I undertook to treat the patient accordingly and he was cured. After a while, I saw my father, God have mercy on him. He asked me [about the patient] and I answered him. He became happy and quit being angry at me" (10).

Ibn Zuhr was trained under his father as an apprentice. This account shows a glimpse of a relationship that must have been on occasion tense. It also illustrates the importance of Galenic teaching to both father and son. Next to his father Abu al-'Ala', Galen is the most frequently quoted authority in the *Taysir*.

A poisoned maiden

"The tyrant `Ali ben Yusuf had a maiden by the name of Al-Thurayya who developed an ailment of the small intestine followed by severe diarrhea and twisting (severe colicky) pains. He called for me each time she discarded her medication until this [condition?] lasted for over forty days. I was puzzled by her illness but I had a good idea (I became suspicious) [about its nature]. The inner coat of her gut had sloughed off entirely—meaning [up to] the place of barrenness [anus and gluteal region]. With the diarrhea came out a piece [the sloughed material] with the span of more than two hands. The Slavic [eunuch] informed me about her. I was amazed about the acuteness of the humor that led to this and produced such a great effect so rapidly. Later, I discovered that Qamar, his [`Ali's] favorite concubine and one of her entourage, had poisoned

her. There was no doubt about this and she died of this condition. Everything is ordained and to the living much glory" (11).

This is a most informative report on a case of acute poisoning of the gut. All that is missing is the identity of the potent poison used by the jealous Qamar to kill her cohort Al-Thurayya under the watchful eyes of the Slavic eunuch (12). What a unique insight into a gruesome aspect of life within the harem of an Almoravid prince!

Of a poisonous plant, poisons and covenants

As a sequel to the tragic story of the poisoned maid, Ibn Zuhr offers us, under a chapter on "Lesions of the intestines" other accounts regarding poisons and poisoning, and reminding us about Hippocrates, his Oath and injunctions, and about the physician's strict code of honor. Ibn Zuhr does not equivocate about these matters (13).

"I found that emerald has a marvelous property, if hung over the belly, in twisting pains and diarrhea. As for me, upon my departure to Seville following my trials under `Ali and whoever was responsible for this, I saw on my way something I imagined to be wild radish. I did not doubt this and I ate a little bit of it. I developed a severe diarrhea and severe pain in the intestine. I arrived to Seville and the condition persevered. I suspended an emerald over my abdomen and held a solid one in my mouth above the last one. There are many repulsive medications. This is why a person should not taste some plants except with theriac or emerald in his possession. The populace and old women, may God rebuke them, excel in the knowledge of drugs not known to physicians. The physician's knowledge does not harm because he is a physician. Because of his honor, he would not acquiesce to [such] demands if he is [truly] a physician, a believer in his laws, not reneging them, and not doubtful about anything regarding this matter. If he had retained the oaths and covenants of Hippocrates and read his books regarding this [matter], he would have undertaken a pact

with God. He would have been also obligated towards God to require from his students that they take [the same] oaths and covenants. My father, God have mercy on him, made me take them when I was a lad as I started learning medicine under him” (14).

This segment of the *Taysir* is immediately followed by another account of a request for “a pleasant and swift poison” made by a rebel, when Ibn Zuhr was roaming the countryside as a fugitive. He first refused the request and then delayed his answer for fear of being killed. He later decided to run away. When forced to see the rebel again, he found him very ill, “not able to understand or to make himself understood except with difficulty.” Ibn Zuhr ended this account as follows:

“I treated him and counseled him the way Hippocrates ordained it and trusted God about this matter. After a few days of his illness, God took him away with his power and I was freed from his evil. Thanks to God, Lord of the Worlds.”

Realizing that he has strayed away from his main subject, “in a way that was not anticipated,” Ibn Zuhr returned to the topic of lesions of the intestines and their treatment.

Lesions of the uterus

Ibn Zuhr described both in his *Iqtisad* and the *Taysir* a number of gynecological diseases and appears to have personally seen and treated women, probably without the benefit of a pelvic examination—This would have been both unseemly and immoral to him. He did not discuss obstetrical conditions. These would have been the realm of a midwife. He mentioned in the *Taysir* two female patients with advanced gynecological conditions he saw in his youth.

“Know that when I was young, early in my years, I was visited by an old man, one of the great fortunetellers, called Al-Tamati, who informed me that someone he had who was dear to him was stricken with this condition [akila or gangrene of the uterus]. I worked hard at finding out [what I could do] until I

gave up. I informed my father, God have mercy on him, about his (sick) problem and that I lost hope in a cure. He prescribed a drug and said that the disease was fatal by its very nature. Her condition deteriorated, then her pain increased and she bled profusely; all this as a result of what gangrene does to the organ. Finally, one of the major branches [of a vessel] burst out and she bled to death” (15).

It is interesting to note that Ibn Zuhr dealt with this unfortunate woman only through her man, the fortuneteller. He considered this patient’s misfortune to be primarily the man’s problem. We know neither the patient’s age nor the circumstances of her disease. We surmise, as the term *akila* indicates, that this was a disease that “ate” her uterus and finally killed her by exsanguination. Was it tuberculosis? A cancer? We will never know.

Ibn Zuhr refers to another gynecological condition he saw in his youth. On this occasion, it seems that he did actually “see” the patient.

“There occurs in the uterus a relaxation. Its suspensions undergo humidity and the uterus protrudes through the vagina. This could have been precipitated by a jump, a [heavy] meal, or carrying a heavy load. Know that, when I was a youth, I saw a woman who had this condition. Her uterus was like a small bracelet (?) that emerged from her vagina. It remained there for a long time and then I did not know what happened to her. Should this condition occur at its beginning, the physician would be able to push it and return it to its place with God’s permission” (16).

In this case, we are certain of the diagnosis of prolapse of the uterus. Among the precipitating factors of a “relaxation,” Ibn Zuhr failed to mention difficult or multiple childbirths. But then how this could occur to her. It had been ordained after all that women shall have as many children as possible. That Ibn Zuhr got to observe this woman in some detail would suggest although we will never be certain that he perhaps knew her not just as a physician. Let us remind ourselves that Ibn Zuhr was a youth at the time of this gynecological examination. Contrast this behavior

with that of the much older Ibn Zuhr. When alluding to bladder stones that required cutting a procedure we call lithotomy (cutting for the stone), Ibn Zuhr, now old and under different religious and political circumstances, vehemently vented his repulsion about barring the lower parts. He considered such actions to be “disgusting and foul,” and a taboo condemned by religious laws (17).

What else do we know about the young Ibn Zuhr? Additional snippets appear here and there in the *Taysir*. For example, we learn that it was difficult then to escape from having smallpox and measles (18). Ibn Zuhr had smallpox when he was “very little.” His father was then absent. His old folks presumably his indulging grandparents gave him honey so as to console him and quiet him down. Nothing tragic happened as a result as this extravagance (19). As a youth, he had a prolonged burning fever perhaps what we would call now typhoid fever. He then ate the core and choice parts of watermelon, splurged in smelling *nenuphar* (a water lily) and camphor perhaps sprinkled over apple. When he finally recovered, he became a father. We are left in the dark whether this child was sired just before this illness or whether the illness exceeded nine months. He also fell once from his mount while in the company of his father and broke a bone in his right forearm, probably a fracture of the lower end of the radius or Colles’ fracture. This occurred between two of their villages. No one was in sight except for some rough bedouins. The father, a famous physician in his own right, was forced in the absence of skilled servants to set this fracture with his own hands. This was the first time he had to perform such a plain manual act. He gathered some branches, cut his mantle and secured a piece of it with ties (or ligatures) obtained from some of his retinue. Then he made his son remount. After this he took good care of him until the fracture healed by the mercy of God (20). Ibn Zuhr wanted to impress us with the fact that his brilliant father was unfamiliar with trivial manual things that were best left for servants of physicians; but duty calls at most unexpected times.

It is interesting to note that Ibn Zuhr’s youth was spent during a period of internal revolts and *reconquista* wars. Except for alluding to an obnoxious poison-seeking rebel, probably a Muslim, there was no mention of wars, Christians, *Rums* or Castilians. There is a segment of the *Taysir*, however, dealing with wounds caused by irons, stones and sticks (21). Ibn Zuhr seemed to have had no noteworthy contact with them.

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ibn Abi Usaybi`a, *‘Uyun al-Anba’* (Beirut: Dar al-Hikmat, 1981), Part III, v. 2, pp. 106-109; also, Henry A. Azar, *Ibn Zuhr (Avenzoar), “Supreme in the Science of Medicine since Galen”* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 1998), pp. 90-96.
2. Ibn Zuhr, *Kitab al-Taysir*, ed. By Michel al-Khoury (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1983) [subsequently referred to as *Taysir*], pp. 5-6. This is in reference to *K. al-Zina*, which is probably the same as *K. al-Iqtisad*:
3. *Taysir*, p. 285.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 290.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 97-99.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 233-225.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
13. The Hippocratic Oath has undergone a considerable transformation during the past two or three decades. Consult Plinio Prioreschi, *A History of Medicine, Vol. 3: Roman Medicine* (Omaha: Horatio Press, 1008), Foreword, and Elizabeth Griffiths, “The Hippocratic Oath: Searching for an Ideal,” *North Carolina Medical Journal* 61(2000): 136-140.
14. *Taysir*, pp. 250-251.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 308-309.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 338.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 319-329.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.