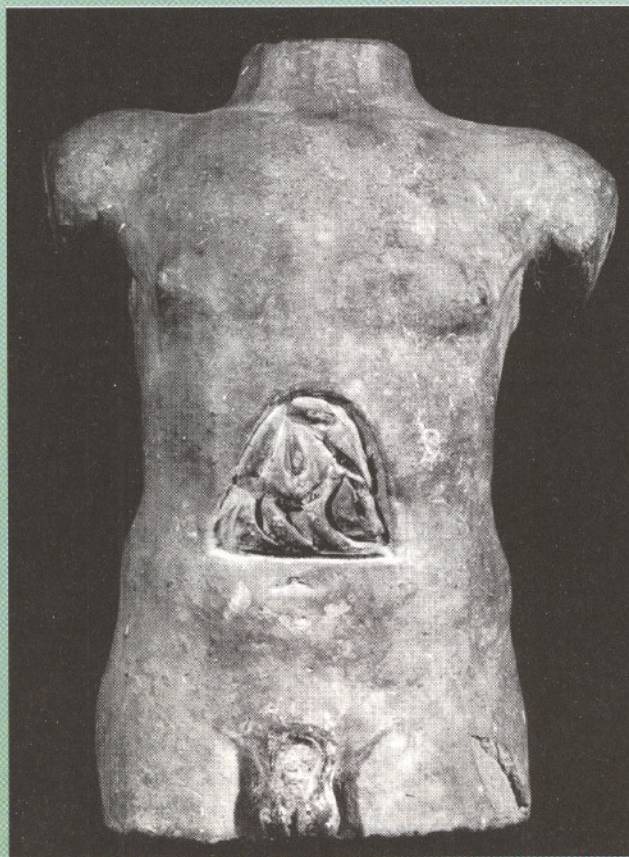


Did Ancient Israelites Have a Heart?

To the ancient Israelites, the *leb*, often translated heart, was the seat of the emotions. The heart could be “gladdened” (Proverbs 27:11) or glum—“Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart” (Nehemiah 2:2); “trembling” (1 Samuel 4:13) or courageous—a brave man has “the heart of a lion” (2 Samuel 17:10); full of love—“Love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:5)—or full of hate—“[Michal] saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart” (2 Samuel 6:16).

But the Israelites also associated the heart with knowledge, meditation and morality. The Bible speaks of “the thoughts of the heart” (1 Chronicles 29:18) and “great searchings of the heart” (Judges 5:16), and includes instructions to “commune with your own heart” (Psalm 4:5). The heart can plan wicked deeds—“a heart that hatches evil plots” (Proverbs 6:18)—and can become hard—“The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (Exodus 10:27). The heart can turn away to follow other gods (1 Kings 11:2) or can remain “true” (Nehemiah 9:8).

These varied meanings have led some to interpret *leb* as the “mind.” Proverbs 6:18, for example, is variously translated as “a mind that hatches evil plots” (Jewish Publication Society Version) and “a mind given to forging wicked schemes” (Revised English Bible) as well as “a heart that devises wicked plans” (New Revised Standard Version). But this distinction between mind and heart is a relatively modern one. Ancient Israelites had no word for brain and did not associate thinking with the head.¹ Instead, thought and will were entwined with what we call emotions. The biblical *leb* corresponded largely to the functioning of the nervous system, which the ancients identified as the internal organs of the torso.² The seat



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of intelligence and emotion lay in what we refer to as the stomach. Although the term *leb* (and its variant form *lebab*) occurs more than 850 times in the Bible, it never refers specifically to an organ pumping blood. Ancient Israelites were apparently unaware that the blood circulated throughout the body.

A second-century B.C.E. Etruscan statue (above), now in the Museo Arqueológico of Madrid, illustrates what ancients really meant by the *leb*.³ Both the Etruscan statue and the biblical word share a common heritage: medical knowledge from Egypt transmitted by the Greeks. Medicine flourished in Egypt during the early biblical period, and after Alexander the Great conquered Egypt and founded Alexandria in 331 B.C.E., this city became the world-center of medicine. From here, medical knowledge spread to Rome, where for many years all doctors were Greek. The Etruscans, who at this time were well attested from Rome to Florence, would certainly have interacted

with the Romans in matters of such importance as medical care. At the same time, the prominence of the now-Greek medicine of Egypt reached Israel, where it is perceptible in the apocryphal, Hellenistic book of Sirach (38:1-3), which praises physicians:

“Honor physicians for their services,
for the Lord created them;
for their gift of healing comes
from the Most High,
and they are rewarded
by the king.
The skill of physicians makes
them distinguished,
and in the presence of the
great they are admired.”

An arched panel of “skin” has been cut out below the lungs and heart of this sculpted male torso, creating a window through which we can observe the internal organs of cognition. Although the components seem

a jumbled mass to the untrained eye, experts have distinguished various organs and variously identified them by modern medical terms. The large, teardrop-shaped organ at center, for example, is thought to be the liver. Apparently this torso was offered with a prayer that the relevant organ would be healed, or with thanks for a cure.

—Robert North

(For an extended treatment of this subject, see Robert North, “Medical Discoveries of Biblical Times,” in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994].)

¹See my “Brain” and “Nerve” in the *Biblical Outlook*, *Biblica* 74 (1993), pp. 577-597.

²See Angel Gil Modrego, *Estudio de leb/ab en el Antiguo Testamento: Analisis sintagmático y paradigmático*, dissertation, Universidad Complutense, Madrid.

³See Antje Krug, *Heilkunst und Heilhalt: Medizin in der Antike*, 2nd ed. (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1993).