

SACRED LANGUAGES, CONVULSING BODIES: EPILEPSY, BIBLICAL PHILOLOGY, AND NEUROPHOBIA IN MEDICAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical philological analysis of representations of epilepsy in the original languages of the Bible – Hebrew, Greek, and Latin – with the aim of understanding how these linguistic constructions have historically shaped the religious, medical, and social imagination regarding this neurological condition. This study employs a contemporary philological method that integrates textual criticism, genetic criticism, and the sociology of texts to examine canonical passages involving figures such as Saul, Ezekiel, the epileptic boy, and the apostle Paul. Terms such as רֵעָה רָעָה (evil spirit), σεληνιάζεται (to be moon-struck), and *stimulus carnis* (thorn in the flesh) reveal a symbolic framework in which epilepsy is conceived as a spiritual, social, or cosmological rupture. By contrasting these formulations with the foundations of modern neurology and classical medical works – especially the Hippocratic treatise *De Morbo Sacro* – the study proposes an ethical and integrative re-reading of these narratives. Finally, it addresses the persistence of these symbolic meanings in contemporary medical education, through the lens of the neurophobia phenomenon, suggesting interdisciplinary approaches for more humanized neurological care.

Keywords:

Epilepsy. Medical Education. Social Stigma.

RESUMO

Este artigo oferece uma análise filológica crítica das representações da epilepsia nas línguas originais da Bíblia Social Stigma. hebraico, grego e latim Social Stigma. com o objetivo de compreender como essas construções linguísticas moldaram historicamente o imaginário religioso, médico e social a respeito dessa condição neurológica. Este estudo emprega um método filológico contemporâneo que integra crítica textual, crítica genética e sociologia dos textos para examinar passagens canônicas envolvendo figuras como Saulo, Ezequiel, o menino epilético e o apóstolo Paulo. Termos como רֵעָה רָעָה (espírito maligno), σεληνιάζεται (ser atingido pela lua) e *stimulus carnis* (espinho na carne) revelam uma estrutura simbólica na qual a epilepsia é concebida como uma ruptura espiritual, social ou cosmológica. Ao contrastar essas formulações com os fundamentos da

neurologia moderna e das obras médicas clássicas *Social Stigma*. especialmente o tratado hipocrático *De Morbo Sacro Social Stigma*., o estudo propõe uma releitura ética e integrativa dessas narrativas. Por fim, aborda a persistência desses significados simbólicos na educação médica contemporânea, sob a ótica do fenômeno da neurofobia, sugerindo abordagens interdisciplinares para um cuidado neurológico mais humanizado.

Palavras-chave:

Epilepsia. Educação Médica. Estigma Social.

1. *Introduction*

Epilepsy is one of the oldest neurological conditions documented in the history of medicine and culture, appearing from Mesopotamian records to Hippocratic treatises. Its description permeates myths, sacred texts, medical treatises, and popular narratives, and is often associated with spiritual possessions, divine punishments, states of insanity, or manifestations of holiness. Long before the consolidation of neuroscience as a scientific field, the names attributed to epilepsy – such as “evil spirit”, “lunatic”, and “possessed” – were expressions loaded with religious and moral symbolism, which contributed to a historical legacy of stigmatization and social exclusion.

Some of the most emblematic records are biblical texts from both the Old and New Testaments, where manifestations compatible with epileptic seizures are described within contexts of demonic possession, prophetic rupture, or spiritual disorder. These reports, written and preserved in their original languages – Hebrew, Greek, and Latin – constitute a semantic field whose influence extends beyond the theological realm, shaping social representations that persist in clinical and educational settings. A literal or uncritical reading of these texts can reinforce moralizing interpretations of epilepsy, making it difficult to understand it as a legitimate medical condition, especially in the context of professional health training.

In this scenario, the phenomenon of neurophobia, described as the emotional and cognitive rejection of neurology by students and physicians, gains prominence. This aversion, as pointed out by Gama (2018) and Gama et al. (2023), does not originate only from the technical complexity of the neurological field, but also from a collective imagination historically permeated by narratives of fear, mystery, and misunderstanding – many of which have their origins in deeply rooted religious and cultural traditions. The persistence of terms such as “lunatic” in clinical, legal, and social lexicons highlights the permanence of this symbolic imaginary in contemporary language.

Based on this issue, this article proposes a critical philological analysis of biblical passages that describe episodes compatible with epilepsy, us-

ing the contemporary philological method as an instrument to reveal the historical, semantic, and hermeneutical meanings associated with the disease. The hypothesis is that the words used in the original texts not only describe neurological symptoms but also construct symbolic and social identities – such as impure, crazy, possessed, or cured –, with direct implications for the way epilepsy is understood and treated in current clinical and educational contexts.

The objective is, therefore, to examine how the original languages of the Bible participated in the symbolic construction of epilepsy, relating these formulations to classical medical interpretations – especially Hippocrates' treatise *De Morbo Sacro* – and to contemporary scientific studies on spirituality, stigma and medical education. With this, we seek to contribute to more critical, humanized, and integrative training, which recognizes the role of the humanities in overcoming stigmas and promoting comprehensive care for people with epilepsy.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and hermeneutic approach, based on the contemporary critical philological method, as described by Borges (2022), with articulation between philology, biblical theology, and historical neurology. The research was organized into three main methodological axes:

2.1. Application of the critical philological method

The philological method used comprises three interdependent dimensions:

2.1.1. Textual criticism

The main versions of the Bible were surveyed and compared: The Masoretic Text (Hebrew), the Septuagint (Greek), the Greek New Testament (Nestle-Aland 28th ed.), and the New Vulgate (Latin). Morphological, semantic, and etymological aspects of words associated with states of possession, healing and suffering were analyzed. Among the terms studied are:

- רוּחַ רָעָה (ruach ra'ah): evil spirit.
- רָפָא (rapha): to heal, to restore.
- σεληνιάζεται (selēniazetai): to be affected by the moon.

- πνεῦμα ἄλαλον (pneuma alalon): mute spirit.
- σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί (skólops tē sarki): thorn in the flesh.
- *stimulus carnis*: thorn in the flesh (Latin translation).

It is important to emphasize that the Hebrew terms analyzed here belong to the Masoretic biblical text and reflect a theological worldview specific to that corpus. They should not be confused with the vocabulary developed in later rabbinic tradition, such as that found in the Talmud or among the *Rishonim*, which includes distinct designations for epilepsy such as נכפה (*nikhpeh*) and חולי הנופל (*choli hanofel*). This distinction is crucial to avoid anachronistic or homogenized readings of Hebrew terminology, acknowledging that different historical periods and intellectual traditions produced diverse understandings of the epileptic condition. In this regard, terms such as רֵעָה רָעָה (“evil spirit”) are interpreted within their ancient symbolic context, not as valid medical or theological explanations today, but as linguistic expressions that historically contributed to the moral framing and stigmatization of epileptic conditions.

2.1.2. Genetic criticism

The processes of composition, translation, and stabilization of the studied passages over time were examined. Textual variations (for example, the omission of Matt. 17:21 in certain manuscripts) and interpolations with potential theological and clinical impact were identified. The editorial genesis of expressions such as *lunaticus* was also investigated, with emphasis on their lexical and doctrinal circulation.

2.1.3. Sociology of the texts

Based on the sociology of the texts, the analysis was made of how these expressions circulated in different historical and social contexts, with emphasis on their presence in Catholic and Protestant biblical translations, legal devices (such as canon and criminal law), liturgical practices, and popular representations of epilepsy as possession or impurity.

2.2. Retrospective clinical interpretation (Historical neurology)

The biblical passages analyzed were interpreted in light of modern neurological semiology, in a retrospective and symbolic manner, as suggested by authors such as Budrys (2007), Ross (1978), Lewin and Altschuler

(2002), Janz (1986), and Landsborough (1987). This reading did not seek to establish diagnoses, but to identify plausible clinical correspondences with epileptic seizures, states of stupor, mutism or chronic pain. The following were analyzed:

- 1Sam 16:14 -23 (Saul): possible partial epilepsy or affective-epileptic disorder.
- Ezek 1-3 (Ezekiel): temporal lobe syndrome (ecstatic visions + mutism).
- Matt. 17; Mk. 9; Lk. 9 (lunatic boy): generalized tonic-clonic seizure.
- 2 Cor 12:7 (Paul): possible focal epilepsy or chronic pain with theological significance.

2.3.Sources, documentary corpus and validation

The following were used as the main corpus:

- Biblical texts: Masoretic Text; Septuagint; Greek NT (NA28); New Vulgate;
- Specialized lexicons:

The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (BDB).

The Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.

The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (BDAG).

The Louw & Nida's Lexicon of Semantic Domains.

Triangulation with theological, historical, and medical scientific literature ensured the validation of the analysis and the semantic consistency of the words studied.

2.4.Scope definition

The research was limited to biblical passages that describe episodes that can be interpreted as epileptic or related manifestations. The interpretative proposal is based on a historical-hermeneutical bias, with no direct clinical intention, but with implications for medical teaching and practice. Analyses of apocryphal texts or extra-biblical traditions were not included.

2.5. Expected product

The expected result of the analysis includes:

- A critical interpretative edition of relevant biblical passages.
- A theoretical essay on the role of the original languages in the construction of the imaginary about epilepsy.
- Support for the interdisciplinary teaching of neurology, based on the integration between medical sciences and humanities.

3. Results

The application of the critical philological method to biblical passages in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin allowed us to identify linguistic and symbolic structures that influenced the historical and cultural construction of epilepsy in the Judeo-Christian context. The findings are organized into four interpretative axes:

3.1. Key words and semantic transformations

Textual analysis revealed that the terms used to describe epileptic manifestations in the Scriptures varied across linguistic and translation traditions:

a) Hebrew

- רוּחַ רָעָה (ruach ra'ah) – translated as “evil spirit” (1Sam 16:14) → Indicates states of psychic disturbance attributed to a punitive spiritual force¹.
- רָפָא (rafá) – “to heal”, “to restore”, “to reconcile” → Present in contexts of symbolic reintegration of the subject into community life.

¹ In addition to the Hebrew terms found in the Masoretic biblical text, it is important to note that in later rabbinic tradition – especially in the Talmud and among the *Rishonim* – other designations were applied to epilepsy. The masculine term נִכְפָּה (*nikhpeh*) and the feminine נִכְפִּית (*nikphit*) derive from the root כָּפָה (*kafá*, “to force”), evoking the idea of involuntary movements during a seizure. Another designation is חוּלִי הַנוֹפֵל (*choli hanofel*, “the falling sickness”), which similarly describes the convulsive episodes. These expressions reflect an attempt to empirically describe the condition, distinct from the possession-related language found in some biblical texts, and they demonstrate the development of a distinct semiological framework within halakhic and Jewish medical thought.

b) Greek (New Testament)

- σεληνιάζεται (Matt. 17:15) – “to be affected by the moon” → Points to an etiology associated with lunar cycles and behavioral instability.
- πνεῦμα ἄλαλον / πνεῦμα ἀκάθαρτον (Mk. 9:17, 25; Lk. 9:39) – “mute / unclean spirit” → Associated with symptoms of convulsions, rigidity, mutism, and foaming.
- θεραπεύω and ἰάομαι – “to care for / treat / cure” → They suggest a relational conception of healing, which involves not only the body but also the social and spiritual context of the subject.
- σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί (2 Cor 12:7) – “thorn in the flesh” → Ambiguous term, with potential association with chronic neurological suffering.

c) Latin (New Vulgate)

- *lunaticus est* (Matt. 17:15): maintains the idea of lunar influence.
- *curatus est puer*: reinforces the reading of explicit physical healing.
- *stimulus carnis*: Latin version of σκόλοψ, with connotation of spiritual trial and persistent suffering.

3.2. Convergences and divergences between textual traditions

The comparison between the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the Vulgate indicated:

- A tendency towards an intensification of the demonic character of the manifestations in Greek and Latin.
- Ambiguity between spiritual and physical healing, depending on the word and the theological context.
- Persistence of stigmatizing expressions – such as *lunaticus* and *possessus* – in the Latin versions and their translations, with an impact on secular medical and legal system.

3.3. Clinical reconstruction of the conditions described

Based on specialized medical literature and contemporary neurological semiology, retrospective interpretations were reconstructed for the biblical episodes analyzed:

Table 1. Possible clinical hypothesis for biblical episodes analyzed.

Character	Base text	Possible clinical hypothesis
Saul	1 Sam 16:14-23	Focal epilepsy with affective manifestations
Ezekiel	Ezekiel 1-3	Temporal lobe epilepsy
Epileptic boy	Matt. 17; Mk. 9; Luke 9	Tonic-clonic seizure of unknown onset; or focal seizure evolving into bilateral tonic-clonic
Paul	2 Cor 12:1-9	Focal epilepsy

4. *Permanence and impact of terms on culture and stigma*

The trajectory of translations and interpretations revealed that:

- Expressions such as “lunatic”, “possessed by demons” and “evil spirit” were maintained or adapted for centuries, reinforcing social constructions of fear and exclusion.
- The absence of biomedical categories in older translations made it difficult to recognize epilepsy as a clinical entity.
- The language used acted as a mediator of stigma, influencing the way people with epilepsy were understood and treated in religious, legal and clinical contexts.

5. *Discussion*

5.1. Biblical representations: illness, spirit and rupture

The analyzed biblical passages do not use the term “epilepsy” as defined by current medical nosology but instead describe clinical manifestations compatible with epileptic seizures through language imbued with spiritual and moral categories. Terms such as רִיחַ רָעָה (“evil spirit”, 1Sam 16:14); σεληνιαζεται (“lunatic being”, Matt. 17:15); and πνεῦμα ἄλαλον (“mute spirit”, Mk. 9:17) illustrate how these texts link neurological suffering to possession, disruption of divine order, or spiritual contamination.

This language not only describes symptoms but also establishes symbolic identities—such as impure, demon-possessed, lunatic, or cured—that imply moral and social positions. Even in the New Testament, where acts of healing appear linked to compassion and restoration, the ambiguity between spiritual liberation and physical treatment remains.

The persistence of terms such as *lunaticus* in Latin translations and their derivatives in modern languages confirms the durability of this symbolic field and its influence on the contemporary medical, legal, and educational imaginary.

5.2.Hippocrates: epistemological rupture and desacralization

In opposition to this symbolic-religious model, the Hippocratic treatise *De Morbo Sacro* offers one of the first attempts at an epistemological rupture. In it, Hippocrates argues that the so-called “sacred disease” is no more divine than any other, being caused by natural causes, particularly those linked to the brain:

“...it (this disease) appears to me to be nowise more divine nor more sacred than other diseases, but has a natural cause from the originates like other affections. Men regard its nature and cause as divine from ignorance and wonder, because it is not at all like the other diseases. And this notion of its divinity is kept up by their inability to comprehend it, and the simplicity of the mode by which it is cured, for men are freed from it but purifications and incantations”. (Hippocrates, [n.d.])

This critique of supernatural etiology marks the birth of a rational and secular medical approach. The doctor rejects purifications and sacrifices as methods of healing and proposes the observation of symptoms and physiological understanding as the basis of therapy. In epistemological terms, this transition inaugurates the dissociation between disease and sin, between body and demon.

However, despite Hippocratic rationalization, symbolic representations have resisted over the centuries, sustained by power structures and cultural tradition.

5.3.Contemporary reading: between metaphor and clinical practice

Modern authors revisit the ambiguity between mystical and clinical interpretations of epilepsy. Ross (1978) highlights the semiological richness of the Gospel narratives, noting that the Gospels offer descriptions that are surprisingly compatible with generalized tonic-clonic seizures. Lewin and Altschuler (2002) propose that Ezekiel's ecstatic episodes and visions could correspond to temporolimbic seizures with psychosensory manifestations. Landsborough (1987) interprets Paul's “thorn in the flesh” as a possible allusion to a persistent neurological disorder, possibly epileptic.

Janz (1986), in turn, interprets epilepsy biblically as a metaphysical rupture that suspends chronological time and introduces the sacred. The seizure, in this case, becomes an opening to the transcendent, and the convulsive body assumes an ambiguous symbolic value: simultaneously suffering and a sign.

Complementing this approach, Mameniškienė *et al.* (2022) demonstrate that the epileptic was historically situated between the cursed and the mystical, being sometimes marginalized, sometimes canonized.

Contemporary Jewish sources continue to reflect this tension between medical and symbolic interpretations of epilepsy. For example, the Yeshivá.org portal – a digital repository of rabbinic teachings – describes epilepsy (nefilut) both in biomedical terms and through references to traditional beliefs, such as the association between parental behavior and epileptic outcomes in children, as found in Talmudic literature¹. This exemplifies how ancient interpretive frameworks persist and are recontextualized within modern Orthodox discourse, reinforcing the importance of critically engaging with the full historical and cultural breadth of epilepsy representations.

5.4.Symbolic persistence in contemporary cultures

Contemporary anthropological studies confirm the persistence of spiritual interpretations of epilepsy. Cavanna *et al.* (2010), for example, documented in Haiti the belief that epilepsy represents possession by loa – Haitian voodoo entities – requiring offerings and rituals to “pacify” the spirits. Although these beliefs attribute a sacred status to the condition, they can also delay access to evidence-based medical interventions. The same applies to several African, Latin American, and Asian contexts (Doss, 2020), where epilepsy is understood as a spiritual, magical, or ancestral phenomenon.

5.5.Implications for medical education: neurophobia and the humanities

This symbolic-religious imaginary remains active in clinical language and in the formative imaginary. The phenomenon of neurophobia – understood as an affective-cognitive rejection of neurology – is widely documented among medical students (Gama, 2018; Gama *et al.*, 2023). Fragmented training, the scarcity of significant clinical experiences, and the persistence of cultural stigmas contribute to this aversion.

The philological approach adopted in this study allows us to reconnect clinical practice with the humanities, offering tools for criticizing the dis-

courses that still influence the way people view epilepsy today. The analysis of words in their original languages reveals how language acts in the production of meaning, in the reinforcement of stigmas, and in the construction of clinical and social identities.

6. *Final considerations*

The philological analysis of representations of epilepsy in the original languages of the Bible reveals a complex and enduring symbolic field, where the disease is conceived not merely as a physiological dysfunction but also as a spiritual, moral, or cosmological rupture. Terms such as רֶעָה רָעָה (“evil spirit”); σεληνιαάζεται (“lunatic being”); πνεῦμα ἄλαλον (“mute spirit”); and *stimulus carnis* (“thorn in the flesh”) express this ontological ambiguity, attributing to epilepsy an identity that transcends the body and enters the realm of the sacred, the impure, or the transcendent.

The permanence of these meanings throughout history – consolidated by translations such as *lunaticus* and reinforced by legal, religious and cultural traditions – has contributed to the stigmatization of people with epilepsy, hindering their social inclusion and the recognition of the condition as a legitimate neurological pathology. This symbolic legacy is not only historical: it still echoes in the contemporary imagination and, as demonstrated by recent studies, even influences medical training. In this sense, the phenomenon of neurophobia, characterized by the affective and cognitive rejection of neurology, can also be understood as the heir to narratives of incomprehension and fear.

The residual presence of terms such as “lunatic” and “possessed” in clinical and social lexicons reveals that medical language still bears marks of this symbolic matrix. As demonstrated by Gama (2018) and Gama *et al.* (2023), the dissociation between theory and practice, combined with the lack of significant formative experiences, reinforces students’ evasion in the face of the complexities of neurology. By proposing a critical philological reading of biblical texts, this article not only revisits the meanings historically attributed to epilepsy but also proposes a strategy for symbolic and pedagogical confrontation of neurophobia. The incorporation of humanities—particularly philology, history, and hermeneutics—into medical education can foster the construction of knowledge that is more reflective, integrative, and sensitive to the diversity of experiences and meanings attributed to neurological suffering.

In this way, revisiting sacred texts with the tools of contemporary criticism is not an anachronistic exercise, but an ethical and formative gesture. It

allows us to denaturalize historical stigmas, recognize the plurality of meanings attributed to the convulsive body, and, above all, promote more welcoming, culturally sensitive, and humanely informed neurological care.

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