Physiognomy, Chiromancy and Metoposcopy

In our discussion of Shiʿur Qomah, we noted the possibility that underlying it was a certain theory regarding the ideal proportions of the human body. Presumably, these proportions are shared by God and man alike. Naturally, man, who was created in the image of God, reflected the same ideal physical proportions as God. Mutatis mutandis, those who engaged in speculations regarding the anthropomorphic features of God could use their observations about the structure of the human body in relation to what they believed were the corporeal features of God. However, the human body was not only conceived as revealing a secret mystical doctrine of the “Corpus Dei”, but it also supplied necessary information about a man’s character and future fate. This information was gained by examining the shape and relative size of several parts of the body.

The earliest Jewish source known to us that refers to the examination of the human body in order to define the moral and spiritual qualities of a person is a cryptic document from Qumran now published as 4Q 186. The quintessence of this document is that a man’s moral and spiritual qualities can be defined through an examination of the size and shape of his thighs, toes, fingers, hair, eyes, beard, teeth and height. Even the quality of his voice has something to tell about his righteousness or wickedness. When the information gained through such an examination is added to the zodiacal sign of a man’s birth, a perfect sketch of the moral and spiritual qualities of that man may be drawn. According to the theory maintained in that document, man has a share in either the House of Light or the House of Darkness. That share is determined by a proportional nine points scale. The ratio of 4:5 is always critical in determining to which of the two Houses he belongs. As J. Licht rightly observed, the information gained by such an examination, together with the annual tests of a man’s intellectual accomplishments, helped the leaders of the Qumran sect to decide who was worthy of sharing the sect’s lot and who had to either quit or be rejected.

Another document found at Qumran (Cave 4), written in Aramaic, possibly defines the corporeal features of the future Messiah. Since these Qumran texts

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2 In Tarbiz XXXV (1966), pp. 18 ff.
were preserved in a rather fragmentary condition, much that could help us in defining the scope and origin of their underlying theory is missing. However, we know that similar theories were spread in the ancient Near East, and since it has recently been argued that at least a certain fraction of the Qumran sect came from Babylonia, it is quite likely that the Qumranites adopted, in this case, an ancient Babylonian theory and practice. Unfortunately, no traces of such a theory are preserved in either the pseudepigraphic corpus of writings or the rabbinic writings. Admittedly, there are a few instances in these writings that could be interpreted as indicating a similar theory, but their true meaning could also lie elsewhere. To begin with, *Ben Sira* xix, 29–30 says, “A man is known by his appearance, / And the wise man recognizeth him by his look / . . . / And his gait shoveth what he is”. Indeed, these verses from *Ben Sira* can only be a paraphrase of Isaiah 3, 9, but the words *hakarat panim* mentioned in this verse became a technical term for metoposcopy, the art of reading the lines of the forehead specifically and for the art of reading special signs on one’s face in general. In addition, we find in Testament Shim’on v, 1 the notion that the face manifests some of the troubles of the spirit. Of course, this notion may be a general psychological observation with no technical implications of the kind dealt with here.

In rabbinic writings, we find at least two cases in which certain corporeal features were singled out to determine particular halakhic problems. In the first case, we have the abortion of an embryo. The degree of development is determined by the possibility of recognizing on the embryo what the Mishnah calls *Ẓurat Adam*, the shape of a human being. Referring to the same Mishnah, the Tosefta uses the term *Ẓurat Panim*, the shape of the face, and the *Talmud* Yerushalmi uses the term *Hakarat Panim*, i.e., that by which the individual features of the face are recognized. In another case, the finding of a corpse, the *Hakarat Panim* is determined by means of the nose, the cheekbones, and the

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5 The text was preserved only in Greek. The English translation is that of Box and Oesterley in Charles, *Apocrypha*, p. 384. See the translators’ note *ad locum*.
6 It should, however, be noticed that the Greek of *Ben Sira* does not repeat the LXX of Isaiah 3, 9.
7 Mishnah Niddah iii,2. Compare Mishnah Bekhorot viii, 1.
8 Tosefta Niddah iv,6–7; see also Bav. Niddah 25/b.
9 Yer. Niddah 20/c. The terms *Hakarat Panim*, *Parzuf Panim* (Mishnah Yevamot xvi,3) and *Qelaster Panim* (*Wayyikra Rabbah*, ch. xviii, ed. Margalioth, p. 391), all belong to the same semantic field.