

# Stuttering in antiquity - Moses and Demosthenes

Assi Cicurel and Shifra Shvarts

## Summary

Two famous stutterers from history are considered, Moses and Demosthenes, from historical accounts. Different ways of dealing with the problem and various etiological theories are discussed. The modern relevance of these examples is reviewed.

## Résumé

L'histoire de deux célèbres bègues, Moïse et Demosthenes, encore présente dans toutes les mémoires, est ici rapportée. La façon différente dont ces deux bègues utilisèrent leur infirmité pour mieux la surmonter et les théories étiologiques variées mises en avant pour expliquer leur symptôme sont discutées. La pertinence que représente, de nos jours, ces deux cas historiques de bégaiement fait également l'objet d'une discussion.

## Introduction

The word stuttering, (also stammering or logospasm) comes from the gothic *stautan* - to strike,<sup>(1)</sup> Stuttering is a disturbance in the fluency and time patterning of speech that is inappropriate for the person's age. Stuttering consists either of repetitions, prolongations, pauses within words, observable word substitutions to avoid blocking, or audible or silent blocking, all of which disrupt the rhythmic flow of speech.<sup>(2,3)</sup> The individual knows precisely what he or she wishes to say, but at the same time may have difficulty saying it.<sup>(4)</sup>

The prevalence of stuttering in the general population has been estimated to be between 1 and 5 %.<sup>(4,5,6)</sup> It is likely that the condition of stuttering has been known since humans first began to speak. Indeed, evidence of stuttering can be inferred from ancient written records in Egypt, Mesopotamia and China.<sup>\*7,8)</sup>

There are many theories as to the reasons for stuttering, in fact, the disorder has been called 'the disorder of many theories', (Jonas Gerald 1978). But to this day, no theory has been indisputably proven,<sup>\*6,9)</sup> and more importantly, no treatment for the disorder has been fully effective.<sup>\*9,10)</sup> These facts emphasize the relevancy of a discussion of the problem from the historical point of view. Perhaps some insights might be gained by re-examining historical accounts of the disorder. In addition, historical examples of coping with stuttering might have therapeutic value as bibliotherapy.<sup>\*\*12)</sup>

This article will present two cases of famous stutterers from antiquity - Moses and Demosthenes. In each case a description of the person and his stuttering will be given. Then the different ways of coping with the problem and the various etiological theories that can be derived from the text will be considered and finally modern relevancy will be discussed.

## Moses

Moses - the leader and liberator of the Hebrews from slavery, suffered probably, from stuttering. This can be inferred from the first time stuttering is mentioned in the Bible, in the following verses.

As Moses stands in front of the burning bush, the Lord commands him to lead his people to freedom and Moses responds:

*'And Moses said unto the LORD, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou has spoken to thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. And the LORD said unto him, who hath made man's mouth?*

*Or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the LORD?*

*Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth and teach thee what thou shalt say.*

*And he said, O my Lord, send I pray thee, by the hand of him who thou wilt send.*

*And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know that he can speak well And also behold, he cometh forth to meet thee: and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart.*

*And thou shall speak unto him, and put words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do.*

*And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people; and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shall be to him instead of GOD.'(Exodus 4,10-16).*

Moses gives a different description of his speech difficulty in another verse :

*'And Moses said before the LORD, Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips, and how shall Pharaoh hearken unto me?' (Exodus 6,30).*

These verses contain a large amount of information about the proposed etiology of Moses' stuttering, its duration and his ways of contending with the problem.

In the first text Moses states that he is '*not eloquent*', and, '*slow of speech and of a slow tongue*', (the Hebrew original uses the expression *heavy mouth [kevad-pe]* instead of slow of speech). In the second text Moses describes his stuttering as '*uncircumcised lips*'.

*'Neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken to thy*

*servant*'- Moses testifies that he suffered from the disorder for a long time. Stuttering usually appears in childhood; therefore it is possible to view this description as a reliable portrait of a continuing long-term chronic problem rather than an acute problem caused by temporary excitement.

The descriptions 'slow tongue', 'heavy mouth', 'uncircumcised lips' suggest a perception of stuttering as an organic disorder of the upper, (and most visible), speech organs - the mouth, tongue and lips. Similar theories recur throughout history until the turn of the nineteenth century, with surgery on the tongue being performed by respectable surgeons. Today, stuttering is also perceived, (by some researchers), as a biological, organic, and partially genetic disorder.

God himself declares that he is the cause of stuttering as well as other disabilities. It is interesting that stuttering is mentioned here by God, together or in comparison with dumbness, deafness and blindness.

It is notable that God's promise to be '*with the mouth of Moses*,' does not satisfy Moses. Moses' reaction shows the degree of his fear, his view of the severity of the problem and his lack of confidence, caused by years of speech difficulties. Moses' claims to be '*not eloquent*' may be seen as a strategy for avoiding speaking. Avoidance, the use of another person for speaking, is a common strategy for stutterers dealing with the disorder<sup>6</sup>, and interestingly enough this is the only solution that satisfies Moses.

Another account of the cause of Moses' stuttering is the interpretation of the text of Exodus [*Midrash of Shmot Rabah*]. Moses was raised by the daughter of Pharaoh in the Palace. One day, when Pharaoh had the little child in his lap, little Moses took Pharaoh's crown and put it on his head. The King's counsellors were shocked and feared that the foreign boy wanted to steal the kingdom, and so they constructed a test: two bowls were put in front of the boy. One with pure gold and the other with sizzling coals. If Moses was to take the gold, the greedy boy would be killed. If he touched the coal then only the sparkle attracted him and he would be pronounced innocent. When the bowls were set, Moses reached for the gold, but the angel Gabriel directed him to the coal. The little boy put the coal in his mouth and thereupon became a stutterer.<sup>(13)</sup> Again we find a theory that suggests a physical (organic) origin of stuttering. Certain researchers suggest that, if the story really happened, the stuttering of Moses could have developed from the trauma of such a test.<sup>(14)</sup> Some modern researchers think that Moses did *not* suffer from stuttering but from a more apparent physical defect - cleft palate for example, owing to the use of the expressions '*heavy mouth*' and '*uncircumcised lips*' that may describe a physical flaw and not a problem with

speech itself. To our mind, this disposition seems untenable. A cleft palate is a physical imperfection, a defect. A cleft palate would be evident from birth and would cause the child to appear deformed, contradicting the fact that the Pharaoh's daughter saw a perfect baby and adopted him. It would have been unlikely for her to adopt an imperfect child. In fact, Moses was considered by many authorities to be a beautiful perfect child, so beautiful that everyone that saw him was astounded.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, a cleft palate is a 'lack' of tissue, a gap in the whole, while the expression uncircumcised, suggests that something is added, *or* untouched, and not missing.

#### Demosthenes

Demosthenes (384-322 B.C.), the Athenian recognized as the greatest Greek orator of ancient times, and perhaps one of the greatest orators ever, also stuttered.<sup>16</sup> His life was described by Plutarch. He was born to an honourable and rich family near Athens - 'Demosthenes the father of Demosthenes, belonged to the better class of citizens... He had a large factory and slaves...'<sup>17</sup> His father died when he was seven years old and left a considerable inheritance. However, the inheritance was stolen by his guardians, and Demosthenes was forced to live in poverty, pampered by his mother, deprived of the education usual for his class, and lacking physical activity and discipline.<sup>18</sup> He was feeble and unhealthy and children mocked him for his stuttering and called him Battalus or Argas.<sup>18</sup> The term Battalus was used as a nickname for stutterers, and was used as a scientific term describing stuttering for many years. The name Argas was given to him either because of his manners, which were harsh and savage, (Argas being one of the poetical names for a snake), or because of his way of speaking, which was distressing to his hearers, (Argas being the name of a composer of vile and disagreeable songs).<sup>17</sup>

As Demosthenes grew up, he left his studies, abandoned youthful games and devoted himself to the study of oratory. He stuttered badly when beginning his oratorical career, as Cicero humorously describes - 'at first stuttering so badly as to be unable to pronounce the initial R of the name of the art of his devotion (Rhetorica).'<sup>9</sup>

The first time he addressed the people was a total failure. Demosthenes was interrupted by their clamours and laugh... he had a weakness of voice and indistinctness of speech and shortness of breath which disturbed the sense of what he said by disjoining his sentences.<sup>17</sup> Later, he met Eunomus, the Thracian, then an old man, who praised his speech, comparing it to that of Pericles. Eunomus claimed that Demosthenes' troubles as a speaker arose from cowardliness, weakness of spirit and neglect of the body.

On another occasion, following a further disgrace in the assembly, Demosthenes met an acquaintance- the actor Satyrus. Demosthenes complained that despite the tremendous effort he had invested in preparing and delivering the speeches -even fools and sailors received more attention when talking. Satyrus convinced Demosthenes to practise by reciting with him using proper expressions, pronunciation, mimicry, and emotion. Under Satyrus' encouragement Demosthenes started a relentless program to defeat stuttering. Every day he practised his voice in the basement of his house. Sometimes he stayed there for months, shaving half of his head to prevent himself from going out. Even small-talk became an exercise. Every speech he heard was dismantled into tiny fractions and repeated over and over, pronounced differently each time. It was said that: 'For his bodily deficiencies he adopted the exercises... taking pebbles in his mouth and then reciting speeches. His voice he used to exercise by discoursing while running or going up steep places, and by reciting speeches or verses at a single breath... He had in his house a large looking glass, and in front of this he used to stand and go through his exercises.'<sup>201</sup>

Demosthenes succeeded in his endeavour and transformed himself into a great and famous orator. His adversary Iscines called him 'the greatest in his speeches,' saying, when he had recited one of Demosthenes' speeches in Rhodes and received applause 'what can you say if you heard the beast itself?'<sup>201</sup>

In spite of his tremendous success, he was probably not cured from stuttering. He avoided speaking spontaneously, all his speeches being meticulously prepared and rehearsed well in advance. Those who opposed him mocked him for that, while even those who supported him complained, Dimades his ally, complaining that Demosthenes never spontaneously defended him in a debate. Demosthenes responded by saying 'He who rehearsed his speeches was a true man of the people.'<sup>201</sup>

The story of Demosthenes raises a number of points for consideration. There is the connection between physical flaws or weaknesses of the body and stuttering - Demosthenes grew up as a feeble and sickly child. There is the view of Eunomus, citing fear of an audience, lack of courage, and lack of preparing the body for the speech. This suggests a more complex theory of stuttering - a connection with fears and mental weakness, and a relationship of body and speech). From the way Demosthenes confronted his stuttering, and from the way Satyrus practised with him, it appears that Demosthenes and Satyrus believed that stuttering, (and fluency), was a learned behaviour.

There is the duration of the disorder to consider,

Demosthenes is clearly described as stuttering from childhood. There is the use by Demosthenes of a speech pathologist / therapist - Satyrus, perhaps one of the first speech therapists in all history,<sup>221</sup> with a method of therapy that could be implemented today. Demosthenes recited from Euripides and Sophocles, and Satyrus recited after him, in a different (correct) manner. An example of a similar valid method of treatment today is the Shadow method, where 'the stutterer follows/repeats the words spoken by a speech therapist.'<sup>41</sup>

There is the fact that Satyrus was an actor and not a man of medicine. Although Greek philosophers and doctors, like Aristotle and Hippocrates, did discuss the problem at length, it seems that stuttering and speech pathology throughout history has been treated by non-medical therapists.<sup>81</sup> To this day, treatment is generally given by speech pathologists and not by medical doctors, an interesting and puzzling fact.

Demosthenes developed a 'self help' extensive therapy plan, which focused on relentless practice to try to make the rebellious organs of speech work properly. He also meticulously prepared his speeches, and avoided speaking spontaneously, an anxiety decreasing technique. His methods are surprisingly similar to current speech therapy, which essentially views stuttering as a learned behaviour.<sup>61</sup> Therapy changes the maladaptive behaviour by reconstructing the respiratory, phonatory and articulatory gestures which generate speech. Some therapies strive to reshape completely the speech of the stuturer, making it sound fluent. Rate reduction, easy onset of voice, and smooth transition between sounds are all achieved by repetitive pronunciation, and practice.<sup>101</sup>

Plutarch compares the efforts and success of Demosthenes to Laomedon the Orchomenian, who 'practised long distance running by the advice of his physicians, to ward off some disease of the spleen, and then after restoring his health, entered the great games and became one of the best runners.'<sup>201</sup> This comparison raises the interesting question- to what degree did victory in the relentless battle with stuttering, contribute to the making of the orator? Demosthenes probably believed that fluency was a learned behaviour, and that through exercise he would achieve fluency. This interesting theory of speech and stuttering as a learned behaviour, and therapy with reciting and practice, remains popular today.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusions

We have presented two case studies of stutterers, Moses and Demosthenes. They both grew up in respectable families and stuttered from a very early age. In both stories there is reference to the mother's role.

Moses was raised by the Pharaoh's daughter with no mention of a father figure, Demosthenes' father died in his childhood and his mother pampered him. The two suffered from a severe stutter (Moses declared that he refrained from speaking, Demosthenes was mocked and called by names because of his stuttering). Whatever the inspiration, and despite the severity of their stuttering, they assumed a position in society that required an exceptional ability to speak and communicate - an ability unexpected from a stutterer. In discussing the two cases, we can see etiological theories that are still relevant to the theoretical debate concerning stuttering, (organicity in stuttering in the case of Moses and stuttering as a psychological or neurotic problem in the case of Demosthenes). Ancient therapies are largely still relevant today.

Discussing the history of stuttering is, as Van Riper eloquently wrote, a humbling experience for the contemporary scholar. 'We see concepts born, revised, and reborn...we also see that most of our present beliefs were formulated, at least in germinal form, and even discarded long ago...<sup>(7)</sup> All this serves to emphasize the relevancy of the historical view of medicine in general and of the riddle of stuttering in particular. Finally, the cases discussed are examples of success in the face of mockery, lack of belief, and insecurity. The stuttering of Moses and Demosthenes did not limit their advancement to power and to careers in which the use of speech was so important. In our view, both cases are as relevant today as they were 2000 years ago, and just as inspiring. Therefore there is great potential in these stories as a bibliotherapeutic aid in the treatment of stuttering.

#### The Authors

Assi Cicurel MD and Shifra Shvarts PhD  
Address for correspondence:  
Prof Shifra Shvarts  
Chair Department of health systems management  
Faculty of Health Sciences  
Ben Gurion University, Beer Sheva 84105 Israel  
Email; [shvarts@bqumail.bgu.ac.il](mailto:shvarts@bqumail.bgu.ac.il)

#### Bibliography

1. Hensyl W.R (ed.). Stedman's *Medical Dictionary* 25th Edition. Baltimore:Williams &Wilkins, 1990.
2. American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*. 4th Ed. Washington:The Association, 1994.
3. World Health Organization. *The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioral Disorders Clinical Descriptions and Diagnostic Guidelines*. Geneva:WHO, 1992.
4. Lawrence M & Barclay D.M III. 'Stuttering: A Brief Review.' In: *American Family Physician* (May 1998).
5. Andrews Gavin . 'Chapter on Epidemiology of Stuttering.' Chap, in *Nature and Treatment of Stuttering New Directions* (ed. Richard f. Curlee & William H Perkins). 1-12: London, Taylor & Francis 1982.
6. Kaplan H.I. & Sadock B.I., Textbook of psychiatry. *Synopsis of Psychiatry*. Baltimore, Maryland, USA: Williams &Wilkins, 1998.
7. Van Riper Charles, book. *THE NATURE OF STUTTERING*. Illinois:Waeland Press, 1992.
8. Bobrick Benson, historical book. *KNOTTED TONGUES*. New York: Kondasha,1996.
9. National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, National Institutes of Health. 'NIDCD Health Information. Stuttering.' [Http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/textonly/health/pubs\\_vsl/stutter.htm](http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/textonly/health/pubs_vsl/stutter.htm): NIDCD, NIH, 1997.
10. Daniel Costa, Robert Kroll.'Stuttering: an Update for Physicians' In *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)* (Canada) 162, 13 (June 2000): 1849-55.
11. Duncan M. 'Clinical Use of Fiction and Biography Featuring Stuttering.' *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders*, 10 (November 1945): 205-210.
12. Emerick L. I. 'Bibliotherapy for Stuttering - Four Case Studies.' *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (74-79) (1966).
13. Julius Preuss. *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine* (tr. & ed. Rosner F.). New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1978.
14. Garfinkel, H.'Why Did Moses Stutter and Why Was Moses Left Handed?' *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (England) 88, 5 (May 1995): 256-7.
15. Flavius Josephus. *The Complete Works* (translated byW. Whiston.).Thomas Nelson, 1998.
16. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2001.
17. Plutarch, translation of work. *Plutarch's Lives* (Translated by Bernadotte Perrin) Vol. VII. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1928.
18. Herodotus, historical book. *History* (tr. A.D. Godley). London:William Heinemann, 1924.
19. Marcus Tullius Cicero, translation of work. *De Oratore, Book I* (Translated by E.W.Sutton, H.Rackham). Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988
20. Plutarch, translation of work. *Plutarch's Lives - The Lives Of The Noble Grecians and Romans* (tr. John Dryden). New York: Random House (The Modern Library).
21. McQueen E.I, book. *DEMOSTHENES OLYNTHUIACS*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.
22. Klingbeil G.M. The Historical Background of the Modern Speech Clinic' *Journal of Speech Disorders* 4 (1939): 115-132.