**FURTHER TARGETS**

**BABAK MAHDAVIAN DELAVARY**

ABOUT HIDING THE SCARS

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cars ruin lives. Especially after major trauma or serious burns, they remain a very visible and often painful reminder of tragedy. As doctors learn more about how they form, however, hopes are increasing that science can mitigate the disfigurement.

One of those working towards this goal is Babak Mahdavian Delavary, a qualified medical doctor now engaged in PhD research at VU University Medical Center.

Mahdavian Delavary’s work is homing in on the macrophage, a form of white blood cell that plays an important role in healing wounds and the formation of scars. In particular, he is trying to understand more about their physical and behavioural characteristics, or functional phenotype, since this appears to play a major part in causing the excessive or hypertrophic scarring so characteristic of patients with second and third-degree burns.

“When the skin is damaged,” he explains, “the body sends in macrophages to orchestrate the healing process. But for reasons we don’t yet fully understand, in certain situations - with burns being typical - they seem to stimulate the creation of more scar tissue than is necessary simply to heal the wound. That is one of the functions which this study is trying to elucidate. If we succeed in that over the coming two years or so, then we will already have made a great deal of progress. The next step will be to try to intervene in the process, in the hope that we can disrupt hypertrophic scarring. In other words, by modifying the phenotype it may eventually become possible to normalize the healing of burns and so tone down the kind of disfigurement they cause.”

“Totally scar-free recovery is a long way off, indeed, but I think that within ten years or so we will be able to make a real difference for burns patients. That’s a realistic ideal. And one I believe is worth pursuing. My current study will be completed by then, but I hope to remain involved after that. When you invest four years of your life in a project, it’s a shame just to turn your back on it at the end.”

Mahdavian Delavary is conducting his research at the VUmc’s department of Molecular Cell Biology, in close collaboration with the department of Plastic, Reconstructive and Hand Surgery. The Iranian-born scientist was able to set up his project thanks to a €200,000 grant from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. That money came from its Mosaic fund, which supports ethnic-minority students in postgraduate higher education, where they remain underrepresented.

The award was a major boost, says Mahdavian Delavary. “I’m sure I could have found the backing I needed from other sources, because this study is so important. Indeed, there are additional contributors since the Mosaic grant doesn’t cover its full cost, which could have delayed the process by months. I’m also grateful for the support I received from the talent programme of the university. This was my first ever grant application, and my supervisors put a lot of effort into helping me write it. They’ve backed me all the way.”

**HAGIT AMIRAV**

A TALE OF TWO TESTAMENTS

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or Christians today, it goes without saying that the Bible is divided into an Old Testament - the ancient Jewish scriptures - and a New Testament relating the life and message of Christ. For the Fathers of the Church, however, it was no easy matter reconciling these very different bodies of work. Did they even need the Old Testament? Or was it a vital source of their own religious authority? And if so, how could they interpret it to reinforce the emerging Christian identity in the multicultural Roman Empire? With funding from the European Research Council, Hagit Amirav of the Faculty of Theology is examining the early Church’s appropriation of the Jewish Bible. A process that resonates to this day.

Hagit Amirav is very clear about her motivation for studying Christianity, despite her own roots in Israel and the Jewish faith. “Early on in my own development I identified Christianity as the most important cultural development in the cultural and intellectual history of mankind. I’m interested in a very simple question: how did it succeed? I can’t point to any phenomenon which has had the same impact. You can see the writings of the Church Fathers and their contemporaries as the elitist musings of a bunch of intellectuals but there was a reason for all that frenetic intellectual activity - the sermons, the interpretation, the exegesis. They were so busy explaining the Bible, defending the Bible. You can’t just dismiss their work by claiming they had nothing better to do. They were on a mission.”

**COMPLEX DEBATE**

The inclusion of the Old Testament in the Bible is self-evident to modern-day Christians but it was a matter of intense debate in the Ancient World. Amirav sees this process as central to Christian identity: “Christians had trouble accepting the angry, arbitrary God portrayed in the Old Testament.
Amirav is keen to point out that this Christian debate cannot be seen separately from the Pagan heritage and the Classical world to which the Christians owed such a great debt. "There's no issue more sensitive than the appropriation of someone else's authoritative text. The Old Testament was strongly associated with the Jews, and its appropriation implies suppression and claiming the title of 'the true Israel' for themselves." Yet in order to make this appropriation work, the Christians had recourse to the traditionally Pagan method of allegorical interpretation to connect the Old Testament with the New. However, Pagans contended that their method could not be applied to all genres. They deemed the Bible unfit for allegorical interpretation.

"My work at present focuses on the later adoption of Paul as a model exegete who provided a key to unlocking the moral message of the Old Testament. I think this was the Christian answer to Pagan criticism." While drawing on existing traditions, the Christians were eager to distinguish themselves.

**MODERN RELEVANCE**

"People hear the words 'biblical exegesis' and the automatic reaction is 'yeah, whatever' but that's because it's not part of our world anymore. But the fact that it's not part of our world doesn't mean you should discount it when looking at the Ancient World, because that was all they had. And it's only in the past 100 years or so that it has stopped being a part of modern society at large. These things are very much part of identity formation, so from the beginning I've always assumed that the issues involved were much larger. That was the argument I took to the European Research Council and I'm happy to say they were convinced."

"I'm not one of those people who lament the death of religion, something you often hear nowadays. I switched on CNN the other day and saw an American preacher who had sold out a football stadium that seats 10,000 people. That's quite an audience! There's such a huge market for religion, for culture. People are searching for meaning in their lives and we universities haven't managed to pick up on this renewed interest in culture and the arts in order to cement the bond between academia and the public - a bond which is bound to yield extra sources of funding for research in this area in particular, and in the humanities in general."

**IDENTITY AND AUTHORITY**

Looking to the future, Amirav is keen to initiate an international research project looking at what happens when traditional figures of authority fall away. "What do we replace them with? It seems to me we are always defining and redefining our own identity, and we do so in relation to others. Why else would we Europeans be so preoccupied with minorities today? And why are Muslims returning to their authoritative sources and why now in the European context? These are interesting questions and there are fascinating parallels with the sudden revival of Hebrew in the polyglot Bibles after centuries of being kept at arm's length. Polyglot Bibles are Bibles in which the text, rendered in different languages, is laid out in parallel columns."

"The key issue is the search for authority: looking for authoritative figures, authoritative texts," Amirav argues. "I believe that the search for identity and authority is a deep-seated human activity. We couldn't change it if we tried. If the queen were to walk through that door now, even the most fervent republican would get flustered. We're social animals with a strong sense of hierarchy. We can't escape our social structure, our social context. We academics are a prime example," she smiles. "What do you think all those footnotes are for?"