



Medicine and the Hebrew Bible

By Marian Broida

During the period when the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was being written, there was no organized medical system in the lands of Israel and Judah. Most illnesses were probably treated at home, as several Bible stories illustrate, such as Elisha's healing of a child in 2 Kings 4:32-36. Physicians existed (the word literally means "healer"), but biblical writers mention them rarely and with some disdain. Instead, biblical texts refer to a single true healer—God.

It is important to remember that the Hebrew Bible is a collection of religious texts, and was not intended as a record of daily life, a sociological study, or a scientific treatise. Even as a religious work, it does not reflect the views of all the Israelites, Judeans, or Jews who lived during the time of its writing (a period spanning about a thousand years). Nonetheless the Bible can teach us a bit about ancient treatment of illness and injury, and even more about how biblical writers understood them.

Reading the Hebrew Bible, we see conceptions of health and illness that are quite different from modern scientific understandings. Biblical writers held archaic views of human physiology. For example, they knew nothing about germs, and believed that people thought with the heart and felt emotions in the liver. Throughout the ancient Near East, people did not distinguish medicine from religion or what we might call magic. In Mesopotamia and Egypt, people went to exorcists and priests as well as to doctors for treatment, to placate or otherwise render harmless the god, demon, or sorcerer believed to be causing the ailment. Some treatments no doubt had a positive physical effect, but often a treatment's main effectiveness would have resulted from the patient's belief in its power. To a certain extent, the same is true today, as research into **placebos** indicates.

Rarely does the Hebrew Bible use the word "healer" to refer to a human, and never as a compliment. The book of Chronicles criticizes King Asa for putting his trust in healers instead of God (2 Chronicles 16:12). The book of Job compares liars to worthless physicians. Perhaps the Bible is so disparaging of healers because they engaged in techniques of which the biblical writers disapproved, such as invoking other gods, or magic; or biblical writers may simply have viewed physicians as distractions from the patient's relationship with God, which they considered far more important. In the biblical verse most sympathetic to doctors, the prophet Jeremiah asks, "Is there no balm [ointment] in Gilead? Is there no healer there?" (Jeremiah 8:22.) In this case, however, Jeremiah attributes the people's suffering to sin. Jeremiah is really saying that only if the people turn back to the Lord will their suffering end, because only the Lord can truly heal.

The Hebrew Bible usually presents sickness as God's punishment for straying from his commandments. Exodus 5:26 presents a common biblical view: "If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his eyes, and pay attention to his commandments and his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I am the Lord your healer." This view of illness is part of a broader biblical belief called "retributive justice"—the idea that God punished wrongdoing and rewarded righteousness. The Bible shows the Lord punishing individuals and even entire nations by

sending illness or other misfortunes. A corollary of this view is that God's forgiveness brought healing. Psalm 103 asks the Lord for both forgiveness and healing in the same verse. Such psalms were probably sung by the sick, or used in healing rituals on their behalf.

Nonetheless, the Hebrew Bible does not show all those needing treatment as sinners, by any means. Biblical laws penalize humans whose actions result in injury to others. Nowhere in these laws is there a claim that the person gored by an ox or injured in a fistfight must have sinned. The book of Job attacks the very notion of retributive justice. Job, a righteous man, suffers horrible sores and other miseries. His friends think he must have sinned to deserve such suffering, but Job is portrayed as innocent.

Once in a while, the Bible provides hints of what we would consider medical treatments—for example, bandaging injuries or applying ointment to wounds—but only in the context of divine-human relations. The prophet Isaiah treats King Hezekiah's life-threatening illness by pressing figs on his sores (the story is told twice, in 2 Kings 20:11-7 and in Isaiah 38:1-2). But the Bible makes it clear that Hezekiah owes his recovery to God: the Lord refers to Hezekiah's prayers, not to Isaiah's action, when he promises Hezekiah fifteen more years of life. Miracle cures by prophets Elijah and Elisha also combine physical actions with prayer. Although the prophets' acts resemble artificial respiration, they may simply be parts of a religious ritual.

Some biblical texts resembling medical diagnosis or treatment actually provide instructions for religious purification by priests. Priestly writers believed that certain conditions or behaviors caused impurity, such as touching a dead person, giving birth, or developing a scaly rash (inaccurately translated as "leprosy"). The presence of impurity within the settlement was thought to provoke divine wrath, endangering the entire community. The book of Leviticus directs priests to prescribe sacrifices or ritual washing and have affected individuals live outside the settlement until the condition changed. We do not know how closely these directions were followed, however.

Overall, the Hebrew Bible provides glimpses of a world in which ailments were often treated at home by family members, prophets, or healers, using a combination of prayer and other remedies. It is possible that certain remedies had genuine medicinal effects. In general, however, the Hebrew Bible presents the view that medical treatments were a distraction at best, and that the real healing power rested with God. With the influence of Greek philosophy and science, this view gradually changed, so that in the **apocryphal** book of Ben Sira (180-200 BCE), physicians were portrayed as God's creations whose skill should be valued. Nonetheless, the older view persisted into New Testament times, as shown by Mark 5:25-26. According to this perspective, the sick should seek divine forgiveness and healing.

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Glossary

Apocryphal: considered to be part of the Bible by Catholics, but not by Jews or Protestants.

Placebo: a sugar pill or other treatment that works only because the patient believes in its effectiveness.

For further reading:

Hector Avalos. *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East: The Role of the Temple in Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel*. Harvard Semitic Monographs 54. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995.

Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager. *Life in Biblical Israel*. Louisville: John Knox, 2001, 68-84.

Lawrence E. Sullivan and Susan Sered, "Healing and Medicine: An Overview." Pages 3808-16 in vol. 6 of *Encyclopedia of Religion*. 2d ed. Edited by Lindsay Jones et al. 15 vols. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005.

[for a recent online reference on placebos, <http://www.radiolab.org/2007/may/17/>]

<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>