



THE DIVINE ROOT

Ramifications of Biblical Medicine

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MIAN KIRSHON, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*

WE USUALLY TRACE THE ROOTS OF western medicine through the rationalists of the Renaissance and Reformation, past the Middle Ages (quickly for fear of contamination with their superstitions), back to the early days of Greek medicine. There we erect our academic alters and offer our oaths in reverence for Aesculapius and Hippocrates. By doing so, we declare ourselves heirs of the medical guildsmen and the Aesculapiads. What I suggest now is that we need not stop there, that Aesculapius and Hippocrates themselves looked back on a long tradition of medical practice, and that this tradition has important biblical connections.

Some may think biblical medicine, specifically Old Testament medicine, is too restricted an area, too esoteric, to be fruitful of useful concepts and information. That may be true if we limit ourselves to the Bible itself. A survey of that text yields an assortment of stories. It is well known, for instance, that Moses led the children of Israel to freedom only after the Lord afflicted the Egyptians with plagues, including lice, boils, and a rapidly fatal illness of Egyptian firstborn. God earlier defeated Jacob in a wrestling match by causing him to have a "dislocation" or cramp in his thigh. Israel's enemies were struck blind in the midst of an attack and were destroyed by plague. The Hebrews themselves suffered many kinds of illness, not only in the wilderness, but after settling in Canaan as well. We read of fever (perhaps malaria), gastroenteritis, dysentery, bubonic plague, polio or some other paraplegia, tuberculosis, and other diseases.

As a text of religious history and doctrine, the Bible rarely gives specifics of ancient illness. Thus, King Asa was "diseased in his feet until his disease was exceeding great," but it is not clear whether this was gout (the traditional interpretation), or gangrene, or perhaps something else. Job's disease is described in scripture as "sore boils" and one modern author suggests it may have been a case of yaws, but its precise etiology remains unknown. The Pentateuch makes elaborate differentiations between ritually clean and unclean skin eruptions, but these are hardly satisfactory from a medical standpoint—the term "leprosy" appears to have applied to a variety of conditions of which the modern disease was but one. Equally scanty discussion is given to therapy. It apparently consisted of a folk medicine that included bandages, splints, oils, poultices, and a variety of herbal remedies, including the hyssop plant. This, incidentally, is commonly colonized by penicillium mold, which perhaps accounts for its effectiveness. Isaiah healed King

Hezekiah of boils with the aid of a poultice made of figs, a treatment resembling one prescribed for horses in the Ras Shama texts, except that the horses were supposed to receive their medicine by inhalation. (Hezekiah should be grateful for the poultice!)

Some of the practices described in the Old Testament sound remarkably familiar, as when Elisha healed the Shunammite boy. He placed "his mouth upon his mouth" (2 Kings 4:34) in a manner reminiscent of today's artificial respiration, which, in fact, was known for centuries as the "biblical method" of resuscitation. Elijah may have used this method as well.

We so far have mentioned specific accounts of illness, healing, and therapeutics, but many of Israel's health-related beliefs were institutionalized in the Law of Moses—213 of the 613 laws have to do with health in one way or another. Instead of promoting curative medicine through magical superstitions and bizarre practices like those of contemporary nations, Moses focused on prevention in a manner fundamentally rational, as in his emphasis on cleanliness. This was expressed in frequent washing, especially before meals, all with appropriate accompanying symbolism of ritual purity. Vessels, too, were to be cleansed, and if they could not be made clean they were to be destroyed (Lev. 11:35). Sanitation and proper waste disposal were extensions of the same principle; the camp was to be kept clean, "for the Lord thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp" (Deut. 23:14). Later, houses were to be kept clean from mildew or dismantled (Lev. 14:35-48).

Other regulations included isolation of the sick and quarantine. The latter term, incidentally, has an interesting history. It seems the Italian authorities noted during the great plague that the Jews in the ghettos were not so severely afflicted as their gentile counterparts. Upon investigation, they found that the Jews observed the Mosaic Law of 40 days isolation of the gravely ill. This made sense to the Italians, who instituted the law throughout their cities with favorable results. Our word is derived from the Italian word for "forty."

The Hebrews are famous for their many dietary laws, especially regarding meat. Offerings were to be eaten the day of sacrifice or the next but no later; carrion was forbidden; consumption of blood was not allowed. Although the Mosaic prohibitions against pork and eating meat cooked in milk are sometimes interpreted as health related, there is no indication in antiquity of any conscious association between these practices and illness. Since pork figured prominently in Egyptian

and Babylonian sacrificial meals, and since the Canaanites seethed their sacrifices in milk and drank blood, it seems more likely that these laws were meant to separate Israelites from their idolatrous neighbors.

A modern rabbi lists spiritual health, holiness, and purity as secondary reasons for keeping a kosher diet, the primary one being to keep Israel "separated . . . from the nations." He then notes among the benefits not only physical health, but also subduing of desires, acknowledgement of God's goodness, and sensitivity to cruelty. The issue of sensitivity is of particular importance. For the Jew, the living always have precedence over the dead, for life is sacred. Thus, a funeral cortege must wait at an intersection for a wedding procession to pass. Likewise, the Sabbath may be broken to save a child, but not to bury King David—he can wait! The Talmud says, "He who saves the life of a single person, it is as though he has saved the whole world."

The Sabbath is another spiritual law with medical benefits. It is the turning from the mundane to the spiritual—something modern doctors applaud as a means of relieving tension and preventing stress-related disease. The care with which the Jewish Sabbath was and is observed is well known, and one of the favored Sabbath activities is to visit the sick. And again, the rabbis concluded that in time of illness, therapeutic measures took precedence over other laws, even laws of the Sabbath and diet. The scriptures teach man shall live by the law, to which the Jews add, "and not die by it."

Fascinating though all this may be, it provides a limited view of ancient medicine. Indeed, the Bible gives but a tiny peek at a whole world full of richness and color and touches on medicine only incidentally to the story of God's covenant people. Rather than view biblical medicine as a box with rigid boundaries containing a few interesting if obscure stories and odd rules, it may be more useful to think of it as one locus in the larger field of history. We then can trace myriad connections from the medicine in the Bible to other loci on the same field.

One important connection brings us forward in time to the Talmud, a collection of rabbinical essays and decisions written between 200 B.C. and 600 A.D., partly in Babylon and partly in Jerusalem, and to the Mishnah, a legal code which emerged from Jewish tradition about 200 A.D. These texts are meant both to amplify and to clarify the teachings of Moses and the prophets, as well as to incorporate the oral tradition, believed to be derived from Moses and to have force of law equal to the Pentateuch. Written and oral traditions together comprise the Torah.

This leads us to the great Jewish physicians of the Middle Ages who helped preserve and transmit both Hebrew and Greek medicine, as well as to more recent and modern Jewish colleagues, whose contributions are too numerous to list. Half of medieval rabbis earned their living as physicians, achieving much notoriety in the process. There is the story of the French King Francis I, who, suffering the effects of a prolonged illness, wrote to the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, to send his Jewish physician. The man appeared, but responded to a racial slur by saying he had been converted and baptized a Christian. "Take him away," shouted the ailing king. "Bring me a real Jewish physician."

Medicine was a preferred occupation not only because it was permitted by their often hostile gentile neighbors, but because it was a natural scholarly accompaniment to study of the Torah. Consider Moses Maimonides, the great physician of the 12th century and personal physician to Saladin. Of him the rabbis said "from Moses to Moses, there was not a man like Moses." In addition to translating many important works—including the aphorisms of Hippocrates—he wrote treatises on poisons, diabetes, and sanitation. He said, "Man is obligated to keep himself in good health . . . for a healthy body pleases the Creator."

"His whole concept of medicine is based on the conviction that a healthy body is the prerequisite for a healthy soul. This enables a man to develop his intellectual and moral capabilities and leads him toward the knowledge of God and thus to a more ethical life. He regards healing as the art of repairing both the defects of the body and the turmoil of the mind. A physician must therefore have not only the technical knowledge of his profession, but also the intuition and skill to understand the patient's personality and environment."

Indeed, Maimonides' greatest work was not medical at all but a philosophical treatise reconciling his religion with Greek philosophy. He called it a "Guide for the Perplexed." (I understand the BYU administration may use that as a subtitle for next year's course catalog.)

Maimonides' medical practice reflected his belief in the value of reason. Combating the quackery and superstition of his age, he wrote, "The healing power of a given remedy must be proved by scientific or empirical means, otherwise it is a form of Magic and as such prohibited by the Law," meaning the Torah.

The ninth-century physician Isaac ben Solomon Israeli made a similar judgment, teaching (1) never rely upon wonder-working cures—these depend mostly on

superstition and ignorance and (2) too large a practice confuses the judgment of the physician and causes him to give mistaken directions.

In this latter principle he may have been paraphrasing Ben Sirach: "The wisdom of the scribe depends upon the opportunity of leisure, and he who has little business may become wise." Brigham Young expressed a similar sentiment when he said, "Work less, wear less, eat less, and we shall be a great deal wiser, healthier, and wealthier people."

The blending of medicine with other scholarly pursuits is typical of the Jewish physician. So in the sixth century, before the Islamic expansion, we have Asaph ben Berechiah teaching that medicine is the perfect mixture of science, art, and ethics. Together with his colleague Johanan ben Zayda, he founded a medical school based on the old Hebrew traditions but incorporating learning of the Greeks, Babylonians, Egyptians, Persians, and Indians. The Oath Asaph administered to his students, though clearly reflecting Hippocratic influence, represents also Hebrew ethics. It is too long to print in total here, but the following will illustrate:

"Take heed that you kill not any man with a root decoction; do not prepare any potion that may cause a woman who has conceived in adultery to miscarry; and do not lust after beautiful women to commit adultery with them; and do not divulge a man's secret; . . . do not harden your heart against the poor and needy; rather have compassion upon them and heal them. Do not speak of good as evil nor of evil as good. Do not follow the ways of soothsayers to enchant by magic and witchcraft . . . Do not covet . . . Do not make use of any manner of idol worship . . . now trust in the Lord your God, the God of truth, the living God, for He puts to death and brings to life. He smites and He heals. He bestows understanding to man and teaches him to serve . . . He causes healing plants to grow and puts skill to heal in the hearts of sages by His manifold mercies to declare His wonders to the multitudes and to understand all living things for He was their Creator and that apart from Him there is no Savior" (Muntner: 928).

After administering this oath, Asaph further admonished his disciples, "Do not mix poison . . . to kill . . . [Do not] disclose [a patient's] constitution . . . [Do not] give any devious advice. Do not cause the shedding of blood by essaying any dangerous experiment . . . Do not cause a sickness . . . Do not hasten to maim . . . Guard against haughtiness and conceit. Do not bear a grudge . . . Do not set upon those that hate the Lord, but keep His . . . commandments."

The tradition that led to Asaph and Maimonides goes back to the rophe of ancient Israel. The rophe, which means "healer," probably was a lay practitioner, while rophe umman, "learned healer," may have corresponded more to what we know as a doctor. The rophe umman was called by town leaders to render "expert" testimony in court and to treat the poor at community expense. Distinction was made between physicians who were theoreticians, arriving at their medical principles by deduction, and those who were natural scientists, employing empiricism and experimentation. There was no specialization, not even a separate military physician, nor was there any division between medicine and surgery, otherwise universal in antiquity. The rophe was also not a priest and was actually called upon to care for sick Levites.

It is noteworthy that the word rophe is derived from a root meaning to alleviate or assuage. Elsewhere the physician's title was related to words meaning magic or knowledge. The Israelite doctor made medicine more than a craft or a solitary pursuit of obscure and esoteric learning. It was a calling in which he became God's substitute in the relief of his afflicted children.

As today, physicians were regarded anciently and in Talmudic times with mixed feelings, depending on their success and on the prejudices of their critics. Ben Sirach, himself a physician, may have been a little partial in saying, "Honour a physician with the honour due unto him for the uses which ye may have of him: for the Lord hath created him; . . . give place to the physician. There is a time when in their hands there is good success" (Eccles. 38:1,12-13).

Authors of the Mishnah were not so kind, excluding physicians from the resurrection and saying, "the best physicians are destined to go to hell." Even the author of 2 Chronicles says King Asa "sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians," implying condemnation (2 Chron. 16:12). The truly faithful, it was thought, ought not to become ill, and if they did they should be healed without human intervention.

But the majority opinion of the Talmud (the one that nudged so many Jews toward the profession) approves of medicine. Physicians are a necessity for decent living and one is forbidden from living in a town without one. Maimonides extended this to include not only a physician, but a surgeon and a bathhouse as well. Furthermore, physicians, though they were expected to donate their services to the poor or adjust fees to the economy of the patient, were expected to charge something, for "a physician who heals for nothing is



1878/1879, *Moses and the Deafening Serpent*

worth nothing." This was usually paid in advance, by the way. (Some might call that a "prepaid" health plan.)

It is true that people were advised not to have a physician for *mayot*, but that was for fear that duty to patients would prevent him from giving adequate attention to civic matters. Socrates, recall, said that every man should be able to play the flute—but not too well! The time needed to learn it well should be spent in politics.

The tension that exists between those who rely on faith-healing alone and those who seek human help also goes back to very early times. The Mishnah praises King Hezekiah for eliminating "The Book of Remedies." Nevertheless, it was generally considered normal to be seen by doctors—"he who has pain should consult a physician."

Sanction for medical practice was derived from scripture. Under Mosaic law, if one inflicted harm, "he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall cause him to be thoroughly healed" (Exod. 21:19). This was taken as divine authorization to practice medicine. A parable from the Midrash further supports the principle:

"Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiba were walking through the streets of Jerusalem in the company of a peasant. A sick man approached them, and they responded to his request for medical advice. The peasant said: 'You are dealing in a matter which is not your concern. God afflicted him with illness and you wish to heal him?' They answered him: 'Don't you as a farmer do the same? Although God created the earth, you have to plow and till and fertilize and weed if you

wish it to yield produce. Don't you know what is written: As for man, his days are as grass. The body is the tree [the grass], the medicine is the fertilizer, and the physician is the tiller of the earth.' The physician, therefore, is considered to be the messenger of the Lord, the one who accomplishes the Divine will" (Preuss: 27).

The calling of physician was more than a business such as among the Greeks or Babylonians. Hammurabi required cutting off the doctor's hands if the patient died, or putting out his eyes for a failed cataract operation. In Israel quacks could be punished, but no such punishment existed for the qualified physician, for he was God's servant, standing in the place of the Master Healer. Numerous scriptures confirm God's role: "I kill and I make alive; I wound, and I heal; neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand" (Deut. 32:39). "For he maketh sore, and bindeth up; he woundeth, and his hands make whole" (Job 5:18). "If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord that healeth thee" (Exod. 15:26). "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:13-14).

As these scriptures imply, sin was clearly accepted as a possible cause for illness, particularly for widespread disease and epidemics. At the same time, agencies other than God's wrath were also recognized. Job firmly rejected sin as the cause of his boils, and the rabbis generally rejected the notion of individual cases being caused by sin. When guilt was present, it was felt to consist of a deviation from the normal regimen of health—a change in one's usual habits. In fact, physicians were forbidden from saying that a patient's illness was caused by sin since this may increase the patient's distress. Natural consequences were recognized in cases of contagion and other settings. Ben Sirach writes, "Do not be carried away with food, for sickness comes with excessive eating, and greediness leads to severe illness." Indeed, excess of any kind was believed harmful.

Intentional illness was also condemned. Thus, tattooing was forbidden, voluntary martyrdom was to be avoided, and patients could be compelled if

necessary to accept lifesaving treatments. Excessive fasting was considered a sin. The Jew is a survivor. (One bit of advice, by the way, was against kissing on the mouth. This is a hot topic these days, at least in some locales.)

One criticism leveled against Moses is that he stole (nice people say "borrowed") monotheism and much of his law from the Egyptians. Like similar complaints against Joseph Smith, this may end up being more of a compliment than anyone has realized, which brings me to another very important "connection," namely the one between biblical and Egyptian medicine.

It seems whenever topic we study, if we pursue the source of it, eventually the trail leads to Egypt. The Nile culture was for the whole world a continuing font of knowledge and belief, a model of behavior. Right into the Christian era, true scholars made their pilgrimages to Thebes and Alexandria and other centers of Egyptian learning. Plato, Thales, Eudoxos, Diodorus, Hippolytus, Democritus, Solon, Pythagoras, Abrahah, and most likely Hippocrates—all went to Egypt. (Aesculapius was called by Homer only "a blameless leach." I don't know if he studied in Egypt as well, though he may have.)

Nibley goes so far as to say, "all the basic knowledge of the Greeks comes from them—it all goes back to the 'Hermetic' books, for Hermes (Thor) as the scribe of Osiris was privy to all the knowledge and secrets" (Nibley, 1981:108). The hermetic connection is also interesting because many doctors use the two-snake, winged caduceus of Hermes as their symbol, while others—the purists, I think—prefer the one-snake staff of Aesculapius.

In nothing was Egypt's fame greater than in medicine. As recently as Dickens' time, quacks could attract crowds by claiming the title, "Doctor of Egypt." Even now, physicians adorn their prescription pads with Rx, meaning "take thou," a symbol identified with the Roman Jupiter, but ultimately derived from the "Eye of Horus," another early symbol of healing.

Egyptian physicians flourished and created numerous specialties and subspecialties. Not content with being simply "internist" or "surgeon," the doctors specialized in particular diseases or individual organs—Pharaoh even had separate physicians for the right and left ears! Theories of disease etiology centered on a poisonous substance believed to emanate from decaying fecal material and other waste products. This led to the invention of the enema; purges were common remedies; fastidious cleanliness was routine, including daily baths and washings, sanitation services, and the

use of soaps. Egyptians had a complex pharmacy which included herbs, minerals, and numerous animal substances. They knew the usefulness of yeasts and molds on wounds, and used opium, hemlock, castor oil, and copper salts.

National interest in medicine resulted in world-wide acclaim for health and long-life. Nevertheless, autopsies of mummified remains reveal such diseases as rheumatoid arthritis, spinal tuberculosis, bladder and kidney stones, arteriosclerosis, and a variety of parasitic infections.

While some Egyptian medical practices have rational foundations by modern standards, others do not appear so well founded. The familiar sleep rituals of Greece were first performed in Egypt and may have been derived from the "Sem" sleep of initiation rites. This represented passage through the veil that separates one creation from another, hence one awakens, as Adam in the Garden, as a new creature. Often the awakening occurs in association with the appearance of a Sent One who gives instruction (religious instructions in the initiation rites or a secret cure in incubation sleep). All this goes back to the earliest times.

Peering through the mists of millennia, we dimly discern near the beginning of recorded history a colossal figure of a man, one of the great ones by the name of Imhotep. Imhotep lived in the second dynasty, about 2700 B.C. He was a real man, a "historical figure whose existence is attested in many monuments and documents, including highly personal portrait statues." He was a great-hearted human being "whose beneficent labors like 'the works of Abraham' were held up as examples to be equaled and, if possible, surpassed by others of their fellow mortals." His name, appropriately, means "he who comes in peace."

He was the "patron of intellectuals and scribes," often portrayed reading a book . . . the keeper and transmitter of the ancient records . . . the Chief Scribe, improving the writing system, searching out and restoring the holy books of the past, "the explainer of books," seeking to grasp the wholeness of man's existence through pure science . . . the great teacher . . . Prophet, giver of oracles, greeter in the temple, supervisor and researcher of genealogies; temple guide and instructor . . . restorer of temples and rites . . . Chief ritualist . . . Minister of Mines and Building, Minister of Science . . . Master Architect . . . founded the schools of science at Memphis . . . master calculator . . . noted for his astronomical interests and achievements . . . unassuming, pleasant, mild and engaging in manner . . . advocate for the common

people with Pharaoh . . . reliever of famine, giver of life . . . Chief Administrator . . . (and) Great physician" (Nibley 1981:102-104).

There is in this list of Imhotep's accomplishments a connection between temple work, education, and healing. I suspect that this is more than coincidental.

"One of the great hopes of the Egyptians was to be united with Amenhotep (another popular hero) and Imhotep in the after life . . . safe in their companionship." Hugh Nibley says this is "for us the plain equivalent of going to 'the bosom of Abraham.'" So great was the influence of this physician that the school he founded lasted centuries and his precepts were quoted for millennia. As recently as the nineteenth century, his disciples venerated him at Saqqarah, near the Step Pyramid he designed.

It is thought that Imhotep may have been the author of the Edwin Smith papyrus, a rational document that avoids magic, describes diseases through case histories similar to those of modern physicians, and emphasizes manual therapy, rest, diet, and the judicious use of medicines. Nevertheless, witchcraft, sorcery, and magic flourished side by side with more rational practices.

One chief theme of the Old Testament is the condemnation of these tools of ancient quackery, namely magic, astrology, and witchcraft. "There shall not be found among you any one that . . . useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer" (Deut. 18:10-11). This and other commandments were directed against Israel's association with Babylon and Canaan as well as Egypt, for in those lands the black arts flourished. Disease was believed caused by demons and witchcraft and therefore was treated with magic and idolatry, including human sacrifice.

In the Near East's ancient world of demon-filled belief, the leaders of Israel were peculiar in asserting that illness involved simply the patient, God, and the natural world of mortality. Nevertheless, belief in demons as disease etiology was widespread among the people, particularly after the Babylonian captivity. The Evil Eye, amulets, incantations, all were practices properly belonging to the traditions of heathen neighbors rather than to Moses.

Jewish physicians upheld the theological view. Ben Sirach wrote, "The Lord hath created medicines out of the earth; and he hath given men skill, that he might be honored in his marvelous works . . . for of the most High cometh healing" (Eccles. 38:2-7). It is true Tobit and Josephus mention exorcism, Jesus cast out evil spirits, and John 5 records belief in a pool of healing

water. Still, as a prominent Jewish physician notes, compared with other cultures, "Jews have evinced little interest in irrational treatments such as the exorcism of demons and healing shrines, waters, and relics" (Levin 1973:929).

There are other "connections" that could be followed, other biblical roots that could be traced. In the end they lead back to prophets who gained their fundamental knowledge from the One Great Physician. And more than knowledge, they gained attitudes and basic values. Nibley observed once that there are no original civilizations, that all are mediators (1972). Our oldest records point back to earlier sources. "The ancient bibliographies," writes Preuss, "list a large series of medical writings which are even traced back to the progenitors of the human race. The episcopal library of Mayence is said to contain *ampli de Medicina Commentarii* of Shem, son of Noah." Adam himself, when instructed in all things necessary for surviving in the lone and dreary world, was probably given some medical information. Certainly he gained such knowledge with time. But of course, everyone was a generalist in those days, and we do not know when the first professional doctor may have appeared. What we can say is that the first ones we know about appear to have been noble and good people who labored diligently in the service of their fellow man.

We have reviewed briefly some of the most important stories and concepts of biblical medicine, including certain aspects of the Law of Moses. We have observed a relationship between biblical medicine and the medicine of Egypt and between Egyptian and the somewhat more familiar Greek medicine. We have seen the firm rejection of quackery by Hebrew authors. And we have noted among the Jews a strong tradition of compassionate service in the healing arts that has continued through Talmudic times to the present day. We have also suggested that the tradition extends back to the beginning of mortal existence. Despite the growth of sometimes conflicting schools of thought, the bulk of this tradition reaffirms the goodness of life and emphasizes faith and trust in the Lord with the provision that logic, reason, and experience must also be applied, not faith alone. Our heritage includes all of this, as well as that of Aesculapius and Hippocrates.

The solutions to life's problems—medical ones included—lie not in a fatalistic divine absolutism, but in a divine-human interplay where human actors and actions are crucially important.

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