I AM THE LORD WHO HEALS YOU (EXODUS 15:26)

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The fundamental concept regarding health in the Hebrew Bible is that God is the creator of life and the giver of health and well-being. People were created as a total entity in a perfect state.[1] The main source of information about medicine during the Biblical period is the Bible. No general ancient Hebrew medical documents seem to exit, although the Talmud reports that King Hezekiah "suppressed the Book of Remedies."[2]

Among the earliest prayers recorded in the Bible are those for the sick. Moses prayed for his sister, Miriam: *Heal her now, O God, I beseech Thee* (Num. 12:13), and when Hezekiah was gravely ill, he *turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord* (Isa. 38:2). Jewish healing prayers follow a biblical model. Jeremiah is the source of the ancient prayer recited still in daily Jewish liturgy: *Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed* (Jer. 17:14). Psalms are recited daily for someone who is critically ill; the *Mi SheBerakh* prayer is sung for "healing, courage, and faith" in front of the Torah; and late-medieval Yiddish prayers (*tekhines*) written by Jewish mothers ask God for safe pregnancies and well children. Except for prayer, Judaism has no required rite for restoring health. The Jerusalem Temple did not offer treatment directly, as did the contemporaneous healing temples of Asclepios, even though sick people surely must have come there to offer petitionary and thanksgiving sacrifice. After the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, TB *Avoda Zara* 55a declared that there is no healing in shrines, perhaps referring to pagan sites but also precluding Jewish spiritual healing.

The image of God as healer is a central aspect of the relationship of the ancient Israelites and God. Throughout the Bible, healing is the work of God and is part of the God/Israel *brit*: if the people as a whole obey God commandments, the nation will escape all of the Egyptians' diseases because *I am God, your healer* (Ex. 15:26). Thus, Israel's covenantal relationship theoretically acknowledges God alone as healer, source of both health and illness, restorer of body and spirit. Sickness was viewed as a divinely ordained form of individual and/or collective punishment.

The Bible does provide hints of what might be considered 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 (II Kgs. 20:1-7; Isa. 38:1-21). But the Bible makes it clear that Hezekiah owes his recovery to God: God refers to Hezekiah's prayers, not to Isaiah's action, when He promises Hezekiah fifteen more years of life. Miracle cures by the prophets Elijah and Elisha also combine physical actions with prayer.

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Actual medical treatments described in the biblical texts were relatively holistic and included: washing; the use of oils, balsams, and bandages for wounds and bone fractures; bathing in therapeutic waters; sun rays; and natural ingredients such as myrrh, sweet cinnamon, and cassia. Mandrakes were considered to be both a male aphrodisiac (Song of Songs 7:13) and possibly a female fertility drug.[3] The modern method of mouth-to-mouth artificial resuscitation seems to have been known and used by Elijah and Elisha.

The Israelites were probably influenced in their medical concepts and practices by the surrounding nations, particularly by Egypt, where medical knowledge was highly developed. Like their contemporaries, they attributed health and disease to a divine source. However, prevailing superstitions and beliefs in "magic" in healing were far less accepted and practiced in Israel than by their neighbors. The Bible proscribed "magic" in every aspect of life, including those concerned with health. However, there is a sharp distinction in the Bible between legitimate (mostly therapeutic) "magic" rituals performed by "legitimate" ritual "specialists" like Elijah,[4] Elisha,[5] and Isaiah[6] and practices considered "illegitimate" like those mentioned in Deuteronomy[7] and the practices of the female prophets attacked in Ezekiel.[8]

Healing was in the hands of God and the role of doctors was that of helpers or instruments of God. There are numerous references to physicians and men of healing throughout the Bible. It is always implied, however, that although humans may administer treatment, it is God who heals: *I the LORD am your healer* (Ex. 15:26). As Strickman points out,[9] the Talmud is ambivalent on the practice of medicine. On one hand TB *Sanhedrin* 17b prohibits a person from living in a city that has no physician. On the other hand the Mishna (*Pesachim* 4:9) praises King Hezekiah for removing the "Book of Remedies" from circulation. Further, there is a statement in TB *Kiddushin* 82a to the effect that the best of physicians are destined for Gehenna. The same ambivalence is found in the Bible: *When men quarrel and one strikes the other with stone or fist, and he does not die but has to take to his bed, if he then gets up and walks outdoors upon his staff, the assailant shall go unpunished, except that he must pay for his idleness and his cure* (Ex. 21:18-19) implies that human intervention is acceptable in treating illness. In fact the Rabbis say that the above verse gives physicians permission to heal.[10] The prophet Isaiah refers to the treatment of wounds and bruises: *From head to foot no spot is sound. All bruises, and welts, and festering sores not pressed out, not bound up, not softened with oil* (Isa. 1:6).

That said, however, for the most part, the Bible expresses a negative attitude toward physicians. For example, King Asa of Judah suffered from an *acute foot ailment; but ill as he was, he still did not turn to the LORD but to physicians. Asa slept with his fathers* (II Chron. 16:12), and as punishment he died. The title *rofe* ("healer") was never adopted by physicians during the Biblical period; where it occurs it invariably refers to foreign doctors, who were usually assumed to be helpless because they were not aided by God.

Pharmacists are possibly referred to obliquely (e.g., *Some of the priests blended the compound of spices* (I Chron. 9:30), and midwives are mentioned (e.g., *The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live* (Ex. 1:17).

A common belief in the ancient world was that evil demons were a cause of illness. But in none of the languages of the ancient Near East, including Hebrew, is there any one general term equivalent to the English "demon." The notion of a "demon" in the ancient Near East was a being less powerful than a god but more powerful than humans. "Demons" could attack at any time by bringing disease, destitution, or death. For example, the Babylonian Lamastu-demons menaced women during childbirth and were associated with the death of newborn babies. The biblical "demons" were evil spirits sent by God; they lived in deserts or ruins;[11] they caused sickness;[12] they troubled minds;[13] and they deceived people.[14] One example is the mysterious being who attacked Jacob at a river, injured his hip, and left before daybreak.[15] Avoiding demons required forms of "magic." It can be difficult to grasp Ancient Near Eastern "magic" as a religious healing concept two thousand years after the end of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires (ca. 883–539 BCE), but for people living in the Ancient Near East, magic was a part of everyday life and was used to combat illnesses caused by ghosts, demons, and human sorcerers. The responsibilities of an Ancient Near Eastern magician came under the umbrella of a number of specialties including magical, scientific, medical, literary, and religious.

Most of our knowledge of these practices comes from extensive cuneiform records that preserved descriptions of these specialists, their technical knowledge, the spells they recited, the medicinal substances they made, and the knowledge necessary to interpret signs in the natural world. Under the direction of the Assyrian kings, many of these spells and practices became standardized, and texts were formalized into several canonical series referred to as "handbooks," many of which were recovered from the Library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh and from the city of Sippar. The lore of these practitioners was considered secret, but these texts describe how spoken words could be handed down across generations.

In recent years, biblical scholars have studied the nature, role, and content of magic and magical practices in the Bible and have focused primarily on the relationship between magic and religion. Despite the plethora of texts which prohibit the practice of magic,[16] neutral or positive references to a wide range of magical and divinatory practices (dreams, clairvoyance, magic staffs, decisions by lots, juridical ordeals, blessings and curses, apotropaic measures, and so forth) are scattered throughout the text. Divination, magic, and prophecy are concepts that should not be confused with each other, but which nevertheless overlap to some extent. While the conceptual distinction between divination and magic should be upheld, it is evident that the activities of the diviners can sometimes

be characterized as "magical acts." Prophets who are involved in processes and practices of healing operate at the interface of divination and magic. Such cases, even though they are not very common, can be found in Assyrian sources (the Ritual of Ishtar and Dumuzi), in the Bible (Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah), as well as in Greek sources documenting the use of oracles for health issues. While these cases do not turn prophecy into "magic," they demonstrate some flexibility in divinatory roles.

Fertility was a major concern throughout Ancient Near East and Israel was no exception. Although there are significant differences in the fertility role of God vis-à-vis other Ancient Near Eastern deities, there are similarities as well. As in the Bible, Ugaritic tablets describe the activities of the gods and goddesses of the Canaanite pantheon who controlled the fertility of humans as well as the earth; Babylonians worshipped personal gods in their homes who, viewed as divine parents, could intercede to ensure progeny; Sixteenth-twelfth century BCE Mesopotamian period cylinder seals dedicated to Gula describe the goddess's fertility powers;[17] and in ancient Egypt, amulets were carried, used in necklaces, bracelets, or rings to ensure health and safety in childbirth. Some of the most elaborate representations of females in the art of the Ancient Near East are images of divine and cult female figures associated with fertility and procreation, including ancient Israel. A significant number of pillar figurines were produced in great numbers in the kingdom of Judah around the eighth-seventh century BCE and were discovered at Tell Lachish, the major fortified center in Judah that was destroyed by the Assyrian army under Sennacherib (701 BCE),[18] including several nude figurines supporting their breasts in their hands standing on pillar bases. Since they were found in domestic contexts and point to popular cults that coexisted with monotheistic Judaism, this imagery and those on clay plaques with nude female figures might have represented fertility goddesses according to most archaeologists. Certainly, outside influences are evident in the religion of ancient Israel and Judah at this time, and Syrian cults focusing on the worship of Asherah may have been an influence.[19] God's command to be "fruitful and multiply" was a facet of virtually every aspect of life in ancient Israel and the use of "opening wombs" is similar in many respects to that of other Ancient Near Eastern thought.

One of the major differences between God as "healer" and the other Ancient Near Eastern deities is fertility/sterility. The Israelites did not have the same fear of a population explosion described in contemporaneous Ancient Near Eastern literature (such as in the Babylonian Atrahasis Epic (ca. 1600 BCE).[20] Indeed, biblical texts stress the desirability and importance of children: beginning with Genesis, the numerous genealogical lists demonstrate the continued emphasis on the importance of progeny. Procreation was a commandment and God's blessings bestowed on Israel always included fecundity,[21] to the extent that the unusual fertility of the Israelites in Egypt antagonized and worried the Egyptians, *But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the* [Egyptians] *came to dread the Israelites*" (Ex.

1:12). Israelite children were *a heritage of the Lord* (Ps. 127:3), and *your wife will be as a fruitful vine* (Psalms 128:3) was the hope of Babylonian diaspora Jews eager to return to Judea. On the other hand, barrenness was a curse and a punishment.[22] For example, Rachel preferred death to childlessness (Gen. 30:1) since a woman's inability to conceive was a social and religious stigma.[23] Although Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and the Shunamite woman were all barren at first, God, who alone holds the key to fertility, "opened their wombs" and the childless matriarchs became metaphors for consolation and comfort.

Given the emphasis on fertility, it is surprising that references to genitalia are less direct, only metaphors are used. Male sex organs are called "meat": Israel's Egyptian lovers are described as "large of meat" and compared to that of asses and their seminal emission is compared to that of horses in Ezekiel 16:26. Rod, staff, bow, arrow, quiver and other tools and weapons are used as similes for genitals. For example, in the midst of his miseries, Job recalls better days when his "root" was open to the water, the dew spent the night on his "branch," the "bow" in his hand ever ready (Job 29:19ff). The word testicle occurs only once in the Bible, in Leviticus 21:20 which forbids a man with a ruptured testicle (among other physical defects) from officiating as a Kohen.

In conclusion, in Ancient Israel the practice of medicine and the healing arts focused on the importance of good health. The Rabbis' attitude toward the sanctity of human life and the importance of health is expressed in a positive commandment to save the life of a person in danger from illness, grounded in a number of biblical verses, including *You shall restore it* [in this case, life] *to him* (Deut. 22:2). The commandment to save a life is so important almost all other religious obligations were (and are) subordinated to it: the general principle being danger to life and health is of greater religious concern than ritual matters.[24] Overall, the Tanakh 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 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 (200-180 B.C.E.), physicians were portrayed as God's creations whose skills should be valued.

At the heart of the discussions of health and healing in the Bible, all issues return to the Ancient Israelites' fundamental relationship with God: health was a mitzvah to be observed in order to be able to fulfill both the individual's and the community's relationship with the deity. God heals physically, emotionally,[25] and spiritually. While this tenet may run counter to much of contemporary Western medicine, it is an essential foundation to understanding how Ancient Israel approached the interface between itself and health.

NOTES:

1. Genesis 2:7, 21-22.

2. TB *Berakhot* 10b; *Pesachim* 56a.

3. Genesis 30:14-18. See also, May, H, and Metzger, B. eds. 1977 *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*. NY: Oxford UP.

4. I Kings 17-18.

5. II Kings 2:19-22; 2:23-24; 4:1-7; 4:8-37; 4:38-41; 4:42-44; 5:1-27; 6:1-7.

6. II Kings 20:1-11; Isaiah 38:1-8.21.

7. *When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to the Lord, and it is because of these abhorrent things that the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you. You must be wholehearted with the Lord your God. Those nations that you are about to dispossess do indeed resort to soothsayers and augurs; to you, however, the Lord your God has not assigned the like* (Deut. 18: 9-14).

8. *And you, O mortal, set your face against the women of your people, who prophesy out of their own imagination. Prophesy against them* (Ezek. 13: 17).

9. Strickman, H. Norman. *Without Red Strings or Holy Water: Maimonides' Mishne Torah* (Academic Studies Press. 2011), pp. 106-110.

10. TB *Berakhot* 60a; *Bava Kamma* 85a.

11. Leviticus 16:10; Isaiah 13:21; 34:14.

12. Psalm 91:5–6.

13. I Samuel 16:15, 23.

14. I Kings 22:22–23.

15. Genesis 32:25ff.

16. See, for example, Deuteronomy 18:19–21; Leviticus 19:26, 31; 20:1–6, 27; Exodus 22:17 (Eng 22:18); I Samuel 28; Isaiah 8:19; 57:3; Ezekiel 22:28; Malachi 3:5.

17. They were believed to have protective qualities, a function described by the inscription.

18. The city's fate is chronicled in the Bible and represented in wall reliefs from the Assyrian palace at Nineveh.

19. Some literary evidence in ancient Israel speaks of Asherah as God's consort of Yahweh. See, for example, Niehr, Herbert (1995). *The Rise of YHWH in the Judahite and Israelite Religion in The Triumph of the Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 54, 57.

20. In the epic Atrahasis, Enki proposes a solution to the problem of human overpopulation: create new human creatures who will not be as fertile. From now on, it is declared, there will be women who cannot bear children, demons who will snatch infants away and cause miscarriages, and women consecrated to the gods who will have to remain virgins.

21. Exodus 23:26; Leviticus 26:9; Deuteronomy 7:14; Deuteronomy 28:11.

22. Leviticus 20:20–21; Jeremiah 22:30. Abimelech and his wives were punished, though only temporarily, with barrenness (Genesis 20:17–18), and so was Michal, Saul's daughter and David's wife (II Samuel 6:23). The Bible differentiates between accidental sterility and congenital or self-inflicted impotence or barrenness. Deuteronomy 23:2 prohibits an impotent man to marry a free-born Israelite. See Mishna *Yevamot* 8:2 when the impotence is self-inflicted (ibid., 75b), and Josephus, *Antiquities*, 4:290.

23. Genesis 16:2; 20:18; 30:2–3, 9; Perdue, "The Israelite and Early Jewish Family," in Perdue, Leo G., Blenkinsopp, Joseph. Collins, John J., Meyers, Carol L. *Families In Ancient Israel* (Westminster John Knox, 1977), p. 189.

24. TB *Hulin*10; YD 336.

25. The emotional aspects of health and healing have been important since the biblical period. Many current notions of classification and therapy were foreshadowed in biblical and talmudic literature – behavior disorders seem to have been well known to the ancient Israelites and various cases are cited in the Bible such as King Saul's paranoia, depression, and epileptic seizures (treated by music therapy), and Nebuchadnezzar's breakdown in Daniel 4.