

# Diagnoses and Treatments of Diseases in the Old Testament: A Panacea for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians to Emulate to Enhance Healthy Development

Ishaya Mallo, Makpu

Department of Religious Studies,

Nasarawa State University, Keffi

**Email:** makpuishayamakpu@ gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

The research examines the causes, diagnoses and treatment of diseases in the Old Testament Israel. In the pre-scientific societies, diseases which are changes in living bodies of animals or plants that interferes with normal functions were believed to be caused by God and complex interactions between gods, malevolent spirits, witchcraft, offended ancestors, natural phenomenon and poor hygiene. The act of diagnosing in the Old Testament was left in hands of priests and prophets who in turn determine whether or not a person should be quarantined from the community and administered purification rites for the malady. Also there were some illegitimate health care that due to difficulties in obtaining services at the only legitimate temple of God. However, Yahweh was considered the sole healer and prayers to him was probably the most lawful option: petition, therapeutic (that is the use of herbs, mandrakes, figs, balm of Gilead), and thanksgiving. However, those who felt marginalised sort health care from physicians of non-Yahwistic shrines, through a variety of sorcerers. A move condemned by all standards, as being in variance to absolute dependence on God and the use of natural herbs as prescribed in the cult.

**Keywords:** Diagnosis, Treatment, Diseases, Emulate, Healthy Development.

## INTRODUCTION

The early history provides evidence of a combination of healing, arts and magic or religion in most primitive communal situation.<sup>1</sup> King and Slager argue that Mesopotamia and Egypt were advanced in the practice of medicine by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium, but, they reiterated that clinical description of diseases in pre-scientific literature are so inexact that it is impossible to determine the precise

disease being described.<sup>2</sup> They further categorically affirmed that the ancients had nearly everything diseases we have and more, because of lack of sanitation and hygiene.<sup>3</sup> Egyptian medicine included diagnosis, treatment and suggestion of therapy, as well as prognosis, incantation, available prescriptions such as Castor Oil and Tannic Acid and surgical direction, provided by a Shaman or a medicine man whose function was to heal, make new discoveries and passed on the information from generation to generation with the social cult.<sup>4</sup> King and Slager argue that the ancient Israel medical practice was rather primitive throughout the Iron Age, with diagnosis left to the priests and healing rites to the prophets. It was when prophetic office came to end in exilic period did professional physicians become prominent and respected by the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. Such physicians were the primary provider of health care.<sup>5</sup> Ben Sira reflected the attitude of the time in his tribute to Physicians; Honour physicians for their services, for Yahweh created them, for their gift of healing comes from the Most High, and they are rewarded by the King<sup>6</sup>. This paper examines diseases and their treatment in ancient Israel; it will define the term disease, its causes, diagnosis, and treatment. It will proffer some recommendations for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity to emulate to better health development.

### **DEFINITION OF THE TERM (DISEASE)**

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines diseases as a condition of the living animal, or plants body, or of one of its parts that impairs normal functioning. This could be sickness or malady. It is a harmful development (s) in the social institution.<sup>7</sup> So diseases are abnormal conditions in the life of a person or plant, When disease attack people, it makes them uncomfortable, therefore, causing them to live or behave uncomfortable.

### **DISEASES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

It is uncontested as insinuated Johnson argues; the issues of illness and health have a complicated evolution in The Old Testament. Although there are archaeological evidences for healing practices from at least the Neolithic period. But, in any case, the Hebrew Bible remains the most important source for the study of illness and health care in biblical times<sup>8</sup> However, as indicated Old Testament's conception of the etiology of illness was fundamental to its care system and, that for the most part, biblical text indicates what scholars have

identified as a “utopian” position: ‘Any illness has a cause that can be understood by the patient’<sup>9</sup>.

The most distinctive feature of the Israelite health-care system depicted in the canonical text is the division into legitimate and illegitimate options. An ideal quite difficult to elucidate, in so far as illness and healing rest ultimately upon Yahweh’s control, (Exodus 15:26).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in the Old Testament, medical practice was a priest’s function, which is in contrary to the practice of the Greeks, where medicine was associated with the worship of Apollo, and included prescription for diet, rest, exercise and magic<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, the identification of most diseases in the Hebrew Bible is notoriously difficult, especially, in the case of epidemics (Numbers 25, 1sam 5:6-12)<sup>12</sup>. Though, tuberculosis (affecting the urinary system, the lymph nodes and bones) and other diseases are quite common in Israel .<sup>13</sup>

## THE CAUSES OF DISEASE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND AFRICA

King and Slager argue that the most common Hebrew words for illness in general are *holi*, “sickness” and *hala* “to be weak” and that the opposite state or condition is *shalom*, “wholeness, well being”.<sup>14</sup> They further reiterated that diseases for many biblical writers, especially the Deuteronomist, is a punishment for sin .<sup>15</sup> Freeman and Abrams, added that, in the Bible, disease comes from God and sent because of the sin or unrighteousness of the inflicted person (Deut. 28). In the same light, the American Society Dictionary, maintained that, the Hebrews believed that outside natural causes, evil spirits can inflict diseases ( Job 39:9-11, mark 9:17),<sup>17</sup> a position also held among the Mesopotamians, the sources of illness are various: gods, malevolent spirits and sorcerers, the situation kept increasing by the prevalence of corrupts, indolent and luxurious habits<sup>18</sup>. Also, that in many cases special disease could send by God (Ps. 39:9-11, 90:3-12), for punishments of particular sins, examples, Abimelech, Ghehazi, Jehoram, Uzziah, Mirriam, Herod, the philistines, e.t.c.<sup>19</sup>

However, King and Slager, observed that the combination of hot climate, poor hygiene and polluted water created a breeding ground for parasitic disease.<sup>20</sup> And, that human parasites found in coprolites (fossilized excrement) provided valuable information on disease, diet and nutrition in antiquity, while also pointing to a low level, by modern standard, of sanitation and hygiene in biblical times.<sup>21</sup>

The foregoing discourse suggests that in Ancient Israel diseases and/or illnesses are a result of a combination of four forces, namely: God, evil spirits, human hygiene, and climatic conditions.

These causes are not at variance with the supposed causes of illnesses in most African and considered as agents capable of inflicting diseases in the African societies that are absent in the agents of the Ancient Israelite communities, namely: ancestral spirits,<sup>22</sup> witchcraft,<sup>23</sup> and deliberate use of spells.<sup>24</sup> It is a common traditional African believes that spiritual beings, especially ancestral spirits, guarantee and legitimate the ethical code. Hence, when a person lost touch with his ancestors, who ordinarily should protect him, diseases may results or bad luck.<sup>25</sup> Diseases may also come as result of bad will from an enemy, who may introduce a spell or bad germ in the person<sup>26</sup> It could rightly inferred that, in a world that is religious like the Africa traditional world, where there is a complex interaction between mysterious powers and ancestral spirit<sup>27</sup> There exist no single cause of disease but, a combination of environmental and societal causes of minor cases, while serious illnesses may be seen to have come from evil forces, such as witchcraft, evil spirits, or an offended ancestor<sup>28</sup> A report on the witchcraft issue in causing illness, O'Donovan,' said we have been told by the dispenser that our brother died from damage to his liver. We know that he was eaten by witches.<sup>29</sup>

For this reason, when somebody gets sick, the two most frequent questions are 'who did it' and 'why'?<sup>30</sup> This is normally the case, even obvious instances like malaria which is commonly known to be transmitted by mosquitoes that can be diagnosed and treated with orthodox medicine. However, western diagnosis and treatment does not help the affected person to answer the most fundamental questions: who sent the mosquito?<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, remarks such as back to sender or in Jesus name are made by people. This scenario leads the afflicted person to seeking other alternative source beside the clinic to consult for this kind of spiritual and social diagnosis. To the tormented person such diagnoses are necessary in the light of the African concept of disease that suggest disease always affected spiritual identity of the patient<sup>32</sup> This in some is not alien to the ancients, for the American Tract Society Dictionary acknowledged that almost every form of prevalent bodily disease in the Bible land has a counterpart in the maladies in the soul.<sup>33</sup>

From the above examinations, we have discovered that God can inflict diseases on individuals, clan, communities and whole nation to achieve his purpose. However, there are other causes of diseases in the pre-scientific societies, this include: gods, malevolent spirits, witchcraft, deliberate use of spell and offended ancestors, as well as personal hygiene and natural phenomenon can result to diseases.

## **DIAGNOSIS OF DISEASE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND AFRICA**

Diagnosis remains one of most important aspects in health-care service delivery in both antiquity and modern times today. According to Doucette, Larouche and Melchin, the practice of medicine in Egypt included diagnosis and outsiders were discouraged from seeking knowledge of Egyptian medicine.<sup>34</sup> In the Old Testament, King and Slager said the practice of diagnoses was the activity of the Priest, though criticised,<sup>35</sup> Brown argued that there is no suggestion of carrying out without them.<sup>37</sup> Le Marquand said western diagnosis does not help the afflicted person to answer fundamental question. In view of this, the traditional healer, witchdoctor, herbalist, or diviner must do more than imply diagnose the symptom (the disease) but fine the root of social and religious cause disease.<sup>38</sup> Williams argued that, in Africa there are difference categories of medical practitioners: these includes diviners or diagnosticians; healers or doctors; and witchdoctors or native healers.<sup>39</sup> These practitioners are considered genuine "if they have in custody items in antiquity and contemporary times, like the bones of extinct animals and birds, for instance Rhinoceros or the carcass of an owl, or when they appear dirty and horrendous."<sup>40</sup>

The legitimate health consultants mentioned in the Bible are the priests and prophets. But, like many cultures, Africans attempt to live with an eclectic approach that straddles two worlds, the world of the clinic and the world of shrine<sup>41</sup>

The Old Testament Israel probably had its unofficial practitioner of "folk medicine"<sup>42</sup>These legitimate health care provisions were obtained from magicians, prophets or priests of local Canaanite healing gods.<sup>43</sup> Since, in the Old Testament medicine and religion were completely intertwined, it is not surprising that the sick turned to priests and prophets for help. This is more so because the ritual code of Israel linked diseases with ritual impurity. Therefore, the priest diagnosed disease according to a system of purity, which determined

whether or not a person should be quarantined from the community and administered purification rites for the malady.<sup>44</sup>

The act contacting a priest for help by the Israelites, is not different in the African situation, only that they visit medicine –men rather than priests, and such medicine –men will try to tackle the patient’s problems in their totality, therefore, will examine them against the background of clan and the neighbourhood to find out the why and who of the causes of their diseases.<sup>45</sup> Johnson, argues that it should be noted that the prophets who were often in fierce with illegitimate

Consultants are the fore most legitimate consultants in the canonical text. Deuteronomy 18:17 seems to advocate the monopoly, by Yahwistic prophets, of consultation functions, because health was considered to encompass a physical state associated with the fulfilment of the covenant stipulation that are fully disclosed to the members of the society. And, that disease stems from the violation of those stipulations; hence, therapy includes reviewing one’s actions in light of the covenant.<sup>46</sup>

## **TREATMENT OF DISEASE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT THAT ARE IMPORTANCE TO OUR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

According to King and Slager in ancient Israel unlike Egypt medicine as a profession was held in low esteem, because, healing of all form of diseases belong to Yahweh (Ex.15:26), “for I am the Lord, who heals you.”<sup>47</sup> Newman argues that the knowledge that God is the Lord is a cure for maladies of the mind and heart.<sup>48</sup> In respect to healing the common verb is rapa; “to make a whole” and the noun is marpa; “healing”(Jer.8:15). Jeremiah refers frequently to God as a true healer or physician, as in prayer, “heal (Rapa) me, Yahweh and I shall be healed (Rapa)” (Jer.17:14). This idea that regarded Yahweh as the sole healer by the early biblical writers accounted in part for the negative attitude toward human physicians. Though Yahweh is seen as the sole healer; however, as noted earlier disease comes from him and sent as result of sin and unrighteousness of the afflicted person.<sup>49</sup> Freeman and Adams argue that this perspective implies that divine instrumentality in causing disease operates according to a principle of divine justice. Therefore this concept implies that disease is curable, as long as the patient follows a procedure for the cessation of and atonement for sinful behaviour.<sup>50</sup>

The connection of impurity and sin with disease according to Freeman and Slager complicated the way in which health care assistance was delivered in the Old Testament. However, since it was accessible and inexpensive.<sup>51</sup> Prayer to Yahweh was the most common legitimate option of healing.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, delivered from sickness by Yahweh was considered a mark of divine pleasure (Gen.20:17, Ex.15:26), noted, Job's friends interpreted God's failure to deliver Job as a mark of displeasure. The means of healing in the Old Testament was prayer. Prayer for physical healing is linked with the temple cult (Ps.5:3, 28:2, 36:6 etc)<sup>53</sup> There are traces of petitions and thanksgiving prayers, perhaps intended specifically for use by patients, are attested in the Bible (Ps.38,39, Isa.38:10-20). Sira says, the Jews of the Dispersion, developed a more scientific and secular attitude toward medical cure, and this was due to the influence of Greek. "The Lord created medicine out of the earth, and a prudent man will have no disgust at them."<sup>54</sup>

John argues that to this end, modern health care system is more preventive than curative. Mass immunisation campaigns are carried out routinely.<sup>55</sup> The illegitimate options which were probably widely used in the ancient Israel included consultants (2Chr.16:12), physicians, non-Yahwistic shrines, (2Kings1:2-4), and probably large variety of sorcerers, (Deut.18:10-12). But, Freeman and Slager hold that this situation could be said to have resulted from the fact that people with disabilities and blemishes could not come too close to any sanctuary of the legitimate temple of God (the one in Jerusalem), legitimate health care options were often hard to obtain. In many ways as Psalms 88 suggests, people with illness were often marginalised, health care was thus obtained through illegitimate means: by seeking out magicians, false prophets, or priests of local Canaanite healing gods.<sup>56</sup> Adekson says this practice is akin to the African quest for health-care provision, where the traditional healers are believed to answer to the mystical realm.<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, remedies and solutions to all problems including diseases are tied to the act of propitiation to the spirit world, through prayers, sacrifices, righteous living, and fulfilment of obligation and responsibilities to the spirit world.<sup>57</sup>

Mpofu, maintains that though Africans with western education may prefer mostly western modern biomedical health care system, a significant minority of them also consult the indigenous health care system.<sup>58</sup> Freeman and Slager argue that in some instances, health care involves self-help such as

carrying out procedures at home without the guidance of an authorised professional. This possibility can be understood by looking at each of the three steps of healing namely:

Petitionary, where the patient is provided with a set of prayers to be said or ritual to be performed in order to confess sin, beseech forgiveness, and request healing, the was therapeutic, which would have been the one most akin to modern medicine, because it involved physical and the application or swallowing of medicinal substance. The final step is the process thanksgiving, which is often overlooked. In the Old Testament it was probably considered obligatory for a recovered patient to offer prayers and sacrifice at the temple.<sup>59</sup>

Boadt argues that since the ancient people know so little about causes of diseases and death, their medicine and healing depended largely on use of natural roots and plants that had proven useful in the past certain symptoms.<sup>60</sup> Johnson says the following constitutes tangible treatment in the Bible: bandage (Ezek.30:21), mandrakes (purely superstitious).<sup>61</sup> Bromiley says for infertility and boil figs and Balm of Gilead can be used, (Gen.30:14, 2Kings20:7 Jer.46:11).He maintains that a famous therapeutic substance in Palestine was the Balm of Gilead.<sup>62</sup> Easton contracted from Balm of Gilead, a general name for many oily or resinous substances which flow or trickle from certain trees or plants when an incision is made through the bark.<sup>63</sup> The Balm of Gilead, a substance held to be the aromatic resin exuded by the shrub *Balsamodendron opobalsamum* otherwise known as B. Gileadense or *Commiphora*, in antiquity was reputed for its medicinal qualities. It was renowned for its smoothing qualities and for its ability to promote tissue repairs. A less elaborate unguent was the mixture of oil and wine that the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:33 ff used to treat the battered traveller from Jerusalem and in the story of Jesus, the alcohol in the wine would act as an astringent and antiseptic, the oil would smooth and heal tissue.<sup>64</sup>

King and Slager point out that the oldest known remains of head lice (*pedicull capitis*) dates to 7300-6300 BCE, in the Nahal Hemer cave at the southern edge of the Judean Desert. There is evidence of a wide spread of the problem of lice infection in the biblical times. This is confirmed in the fine-tooth combs with eggs of lice clinging to the teeth. These combs were used as delousing implement of removing the lice and another way was smearing the

hair with oil, so that oxygen will not penetrate the hair, this cause the lice to suffocate. Thorkid, Jacobson claims that this treatment is to be the origin of ritual anointing of the heads of Kings, which was available primarily to the wealthy.<sup>65</sup>

Easton claims that the Incense and pomegranate rind were burned as fumigants and disinfectants, while aromatic oil and scents were used for personal hygiene. Olive oil, has curative quality that could be used heal fever.<sup>66</sup> Josephus holds that Herod was given an oil bath in an attempt to cure him of his deadly disease.<sup>67</sup> And Bromiley says it was also used in making all-purposed soap, was also employed widely to keep exposed parts of the skin supple, relieve chafing and to heal bruises and lacerations. Shepherds also used it to treat sheep injured while grazing or travelling.<sup>68</sup>

In the Old Testament, herbs are traditional renowned for promoting health and they constitute part of daily diet- gastric stimulant and tonic such as dill, cumin, garlic, the copper berry, coriander and fennel. Also bitter herbs of the Passover (Ex.12:8) which probably were chicory, lettuce, watercress dandelion and endive, popular culinary herbs- anise, spelt, rosemary, thyme, mint, marjoram, and sage.<sup>69</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In the Old Testament times, where ancient Israel lived, they believed that God can inflict different type diseases in order to achieve his aims and objectives here on earth. God has numerous ways of which he can judge his people. Therefore, it is hazardous, if not insulting to think that every disease comes from God. For personal hygiene, natural phenomenon, and the so - called gods, malevolent spirits, witchcraft, deliberate use of spell, offended ancestor and our imaginations can affect our physic to the extent of causing illness.
2. God's creatures such as human, animals and plants are in every way useful

Herbs should be collected, studied, so as to assert their medicinal value, in order to be used in preparation of conventional medicines and income earner both within and abroad.

3. There were illegitimate or illicit practitioners and diagnosing places in the ancient Israel as well as in our present day, these should be condemned in all its ramification, and return to natural prepared herbs,

as oppose to those concocted by incantations, orthodox medicine, and absolute dependence on God as the sole healer.

## CONCLUSION

The studied has discovered that God can inflict diseases on individuals, clans, communities and the whole nation to achieve his purpose. We have discovered that there are many causes of disease in the ancient times or pre-scientific societies, such as the god's malevolent spirit, witchcraft, deliberate use of spell and offended ancestor. There is also the idea of personal hygiene and natural phenomenon. Furthermore, the studied discovered that in the ancient times, there existed illegitimate and legitimate practitioners and diagnosing places (shrines) in contradiction with Israel's priests, prophets and temple practice. In the Old Testament there existed the use of herbs in folk medicine and cult of Israel, but, God was the sole healer and He is still our healer today.

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