

HEALING IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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EARLY CONSIDERATIONS:

- What is a Healing text?
 - Individual Bodily healing?
 - Watch for assumptions about what constitutes healing (work of disability studies)
 - Community healing?
 - Need for shared resources and shared actions





- **Shalom:**

Peace, wellness,
wholeness, harmony

- **Communal Mindset:**

Concern for the Greater
community as well as the
individual

EXAMPLE: LEVITICUS 13:2-8

Lev. 13:2 When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. ³ The priest shall examine the disease on the skin of his body, and if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; after the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean. ⁴ But if the spot is white in the skin of his body, and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall confine the diseased person for seven days



⁵ The priest shall examine him on the seventh day, and if he sees that the disease is checked and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall confine him seven days more. ⁶ The priest shall examine him again on the seventh day, and if the disease has abated and the disease has not spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only an eruption; and he shall wash his clothes, and be clean. ⁷ But if the eruption spreads in the skin after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest. ⁸ The priest shall make an examination, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is a leprous disease.



RITUAL FOR CLEANSING OF LEPROUS PERSON: LEVITICUS 14:1-11

1. Brought to Priest
2. Priest out of the camp and examined
3. If healed, a ritual: “⁴ the priest shall command that two living clean birds and cedarwood and crimson yarn and hyssop be brought for the one who is to be cleansed. ⁵ The priest shall command that one of the birds be slaughtered over fresh water in an earthen vessel. ⁶ He shall take the living bird with the cedarwood and the crimson yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the fresh water. ⁷ He shall sprinkle it seven times upon the one who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease; then he shall pronounce him clean, and he shall let the living bird go into the open field.
4. Wash clothes, shave off hair, and bathe, and he shall be clean.
5. Back into the camp but outside tent 7 days.
6. On 7th day shave his hair: of head, beard, eyebrows; wash his clothes, and bathe his body, and it clean
7. 8th day sacrifice of 2 lambs without blemish, grain offering
8. The priest cleanses again at entrance of tent of meeting...



THE CASE OF SPOTS: LEVITICUS 13- 14

- Leprosy could be anything- not likely Hansen's Disease (tsara'at)
- Laws recognize contagion and need to quarantine
- Sacrificial options for the poor
- Concern for greater community and Healing
- **Deut. 24:8** Guard against an outbreak of a leprous skin disease by being very careful; you shall carefully observe whatever the levitical priests instruct you, just as I have commanded them.



■ Exodus 15:26: “... for I am the LORD who heals you.”

Psalm 103:3 “...³ [God] who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases...”

ELIJAH AND ELISHA

1 KGS 17-

2 KGS 13

■ **Healers**

- Raised children from dead-
 - Elijah the son of the Widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17)
 - Elisha the Shunnamite Woman's son (2 Kgs 4:18-37)

ELISHA- WHOLENESS OF HEALING

- Heals Shunnamite's son (4:8-67), unknown man (13:20-21), **Naaman (5)**
- Clean water for Jericho (2:19-22)
- Safe food (4:38-41) and plenty (4:1-7; 42-44)
- **Empowers vulnerable widow (4:1-7)**
- Protects member of guild who loses borrowed axe head (6:1-7)
- Diverts bloody war between Israel and Aram (6:8-23)
- Joins prophetic guild (4:38) and servant Gehazi (4:12)

Note: I highlighted two we will look at today:



THE HEALING OF NAAMAN 2 KGS 5

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ² Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵ And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."



He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶ He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, “When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.” ⁷ When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.”



5:8 But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, “Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” ⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”



¹¹ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants approached and said to him, “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” ¹⁴ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.



- Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.” ¹⁶ But he said, “As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!” He urged him to accept, but he refused. ¹⁷ Then Naaman said, “If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD. ¹⁸ But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count.” ¹⁹ He said to him, “Go in peace.”



HEALING METHOD IN ANCIENT NEAR EAST

- Process in Mesopotamia: (“hierarchy of resort”)
 - Popular health care →
 - Petitioning king for healing → professional
 - Prophet not hands on (Elisha doesn’t lay hands on Naaman, not present) →
 - Bathing in river (for Israel- a concern for purity)

Laura M. Zucconi, “Aramean Skin Care: A New Perspective on Naaman’s Leprosy,” in *Sacred Literature: Essays On Ancient Israel, the Bible, and Religion* ed. S Dolansky (Penn State Press, 2008), 169-177.



OTHER TAKE-AWAYS

- God is the one who heals
- Hope and Faith in a God who heals
- God's healing extends beyond the Israelite community
- Servant girl, Naaman's servants, Elisha are vessels of healing. Without them-no healing?
- Naaman has expectations about his healing that didn't happen-no direct meeting with Elisha or special medicine. Had to go to the Jordan himself.
 - When is it difficult to take healing advice from others?
- God allowed him to respect his King's tradition (Rimmon)



AFTERWORDS

- Gehazi, Elisha's servant sneaks off to Naaman, says Elisha sends him, and he asks for money
- Naaman is happy to give it to him
- Elisha asks Gehazi where he went; "nowhere" he says
- Elisha calls him out and Gehazi gets leprosy:
"27 Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you, and to your descendants forever." So he left his presence leprous, as white as snow."



THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- Does it mean that if you are not faithful enough you won't suffer or be healed? (see the book of Job)
- How might Gehazi represent the brokenness of community? (greed, concern for self)



**PROPHET'S
WIDOW 2 KGS
4:1-7**

Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves."² Elisha said to her, "What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?" She answered, "Your servant has nothing in the house, except a jar of oil."³ He said, "Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbors, empty vessels and not just a few.



⁴ Then go in, and shut the door behind you and your children, and start pouring into all these vessels; when each is full, set it aside.” ⁵ So she left him and shut the door behind her and her children; they kept bringing vessels to her, and she kept pouring. ⁶ When the vessels were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel.” But he said to her, “There are no more.” Then the oil stopped flowing. ⁷ She came and told the man of God, and he said, “Go sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest.”





THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

The health and welfare of the widow and her children are in danger (back to shalom)

Elisha does not work the miracle

Helps the woman see options

With faith and hope she calls for community help for vessels

They bring them

She and her children work the miracle