

# Health and the Bible

## *Insights From Archaeology*

By Ralph E. Hendrix

**A**re biblical health guidelines important? Or are they just antiquated notions that mirror the common knowledge and practice of Bible times? If we as teachers don't know, how can we teach others? One place to look for answers is in the archaeology of the biblical world. Come along as we briefly study customs relating to the health and hygiene of ancient Israel's neighbors through the eyes of a biblical archaeologist.

### **The Egyptians**

South of the ancient biblical lands, occupying the Nile delta, was the ancient empire of Egypt. Paleopathologists, specialists in ancient diseases, have found that ancient Egyptians suffered from arthritis, scoliosis (curvature of the spine), dental problems, arteriosclerosis, skin disease, hernia, smallpox, poliomyelitis, and even obesity. Curiously, one major disease mentioned in the Bible, leprosy, was all but unknown to the Egyptians.

The dusty Egyptian papyri offer remedies for itching, indigestion, eye infections, and even old age! The perennial cure-all, castor oil, was used for boils, constipation, and to enhance hair growth. It may be surprising to learn that surgery existed in the earliest history of Egypt, even as far back as the age of Pyramid building, around 2800 B.C.!

However, beginning about 1500 B.C. (near the time of Moses), one sees a noticeable shift in the ancient Egyptian medical texts, moving from science toward superstition and emphasizing magic rather than natural cause and effect. As J. H. Breasted states in *A History of Egypt*, "That which precluded any progress toward real science (during the Old Kingdom "Pyramid Age") was the belief in magic, which later began to dominate all the practice of the physicians."<sup>1</sup>

For example, a famous physician named Imhotep, who lived during the Pyramid age, was renowned for his wisdom, particularly in the area of medicine. As time passed, however, he was

forgotten as a historical person, and by Jesus' day, he was actually worshiped in Egypt as the "god" of medicine!

It appears that the ancient Egyptians suffered many "modern" diseases. During the first 1500 years of their civilization, these diseases were treated in surprisingly modern ways. But over the subsequent millennia, Egyptian medical texts began to emphasize superstition and magic. By the time of the Greeks and Romans, Egyptian medicine, like that of the nations around, was almost entirely devoid of scientific cause and effect.

---

## **Are biblical health guidelines important?**

---

### **The Mesopotamians**

To the north of the ancient biblical land lived the Mesopotamians. In contrast to Egypt, surgery was not performed on living persons in ancient Mesopotamia. In fact, Mesopotamian

medicine was considerably less sophisticated than that of Egypt.

The Mesopotamians did have a few physicians. These *Asu* were neither priests nor witch-doctors, but professionals who spent many years studying under a master. Highly respected members of the royal court, these men's diagnoses, though primitive by modern standards, were generally scientific. Their remedies included narcotics, potions, ointments, poultices, and some amazing mixtures. For example, they prescribed myrrh with oil, poppy seeds in beer, and a kidney-dates-turpentine-resin poultice.

Cuneiform texts from early Mesopotamia include a fairly scientific collection of case studies. Typically they begin, "If a man is sick ..." or "If a man suffers from ..." followed by a description of the disease, its symptoms, and a pattern of treatment. These texts indicate that the ancient Mesopotamians were plagued by eye infections, annual epidemics, pulmonary and intestinal disorders, and mental disturbances. Leprosy was also prevalent in Mesopotamia.

Some Mesopotamian medical practices indicate an understanding of infectious disease. Recommendations for treatment of a woman named Nannam, who lived about the time of Joseph, include preventive medicine. This woman was given "severe orders that no one should drink in the cup where she drinks, no one should sit on the seat where she sits, no one should sleep in the bed where she sleeps," for her disease was "catching."

Mesopotamian medical practices of this era were almost completely devoid of magic and superstition. Commenting on a tablet written about 3000 B.C., S. N. Kramer notes in *From the Tablets of Sumer*: "The startling fact remains that our clay document, the oldest 'page' of medical text as yet uncovered (as of

---

## The dusty Egyptian papyri offer remedies for itching, indigestion, eye infections, and even old age!

---

1953), is completely free from mystical and irrational elements."<sup>2</sup>

Though technically simple, the guidelines treated disease as a natural phenomenon of cause and effect. Once a disease was identified, the medical handbook was followed.

Unfortunately, this view of health and nature ultimately passed out of vogue. As time progressed, the ancient sources reflect increasing superstition. About 1500 B.C., about the same time as in Egypt, the *Ashipu* priest-conjurors began rising in status. A. L. Oppenheim observed in *Ancient Mesopotamia* that the *Asu* physician "clearly loses importance in the face of experts in divination." He added that "a similar change of

emphasis seems to have taken place in Egyptian medicine."<sup>3</sup>

The later Mesopotamians believed that disease and health resulted from supernatural intervention, rather than scientific cause and effect. The key to removing the evil was finding the supernatural cause: Which god was irritated and why? What enemy had cast an "evil eye"? Only then could a magical remedy be applied. To discover the cause of the evil, the *Baru* priest-diviner read sheep's livers and cast astrological charts. After thus "diagnosing" the problem, the *Ashipu* priest-conjurer used magical chants, ceremonies, and offerings to appease the gods or overpower the evil magic.

About this time Moses was called to lead the Israelites into Canaan. Into a context of superstition and magic, God injected a fundamentally different view of health and hygiene. He told the Israelites: "I am the Lord your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you" (Leviticus 18:2, 3 NIV).\*

### Among the Ancient Israelites

Everyday Israelite life combined Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures. It was difficult to distinguish an Israelite

by sight. The distinction emerged in the realm of action—in this case, through health guidelines that molded those actions. While the ancient texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia deal mostly with medical diagnosis and prescription, the biblical text incorporates both preventive and prescriptive health instruction.

According to the Bible's internal chronology, its health guidelines were written about the time that the medicinal practices in Egypt and Mesopotamia began moving from scientific cause and effect to supernatural cause and effect. The biblical guidelines demanded a strict reversal of this progression, particularly in the areas of cleanliness and food.

### **Cleanliness**

Explicit instructions were given the Israelites regarding hygienic living in relation to infection control (Leviticus 13, 14), personal hygiene (Leviticus 12, 15), community sanitation (Numbers 31:19; Deuteronomy 23:12-14), and moral cleanliness (Leviticus 18, 19). R. K. Harrison, writing in *Introduction to the Old Testament*, says that originally these laws were not primarily matters of ceremony (as they later are described during Jesus' day).<sup>4</sup> They dealt with prac-

---

## **The biblical text incorporates both preventive and prescriptive health instruction.**

---

tical matters relating to prevention of physical and moral disease by the use of natural cause and effect, rather than by magic or superstition.

The biblical world had no refrigeration, no antiseptics or disinfectants, no septic tanks, and few closed sewers. There was no aspirin, antibiotics, or inoculations. This was the medical world of Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, and even of Jesus.

The biblical guidelines for physical cleanliness were far more practical than can be comprehended by those of us who live in two-shower-a-day, dry-cleaned, homogenized, fortified, sanitized, stainless steel suburbia. Tragically, the health conditions of the biblical world are prevalent in many parts of the world today. Accordingly, it would be reasonable to apply the biblical guidelines wherever conditions warrant this.

### **Food**

A second concern of the biblical guidelines was food. Little mention is made of the original Edenic diet; instead,

emphasis is placed on appropriate animal foods. Guidelines in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 included animals that both chewed the cud and had split

hooves, fish with both fins and scales, and flying insects with jointed legs for hopping (cf. Leviticus 11:4-23). These creatures fed directly on plant matter. Such a precaution eliminated disease and contamination that intensify up the food chain as one animal eats another. In our modern world of insecticides, preservatives, and industrial waste, the biblical guideline is uncommonly appropriate.

### **Ecology**

Leviticus 18:24-29 clearly teaches that not only are the participants in unclean practices defiled, but the land itself is defiled. God warned the Israelites that the land would disgorge them as it had done with the nations before if they chose to ignore His guidelines (Leviticus

### **Did you know?**

During the century just after Christopher Columbus' voyage to the New World, finely ground mummy was prescribed for many ailments. The European health market was the cause of the destruction of many more mummies than the ravages of time through thousands of years. There is even a small market for powdered mummy as a component in witches' brew today!

## Clean and Unclean Foods

Biblical dietary guidance includes some surprises. Among the clean animals mentioned in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are some that seem very strange to Westerners: locusts, katydids, crickets, and grasshoppers.

Note that in each case, the "clean" animal feeds on vegetable matter. Although some of these foods may be culturally repulsive to Westerners, the logic of their inclusion in the "clean" category shows that God's guidance is not designed for only one culture, but for all cultures.

On the other hand, many common Western foods are classified by the Bible as unclean. Popular foods in this category include: rabbit, pig, lobster, clams, crab, shrimp (also prawns), frog legs, snake, bear, alligator, lizard, and escargot (snails). Many of these creatures eat other animals or feed on refuse and are therefore more likely to be exposed to disease and toxic substances.

Pig flesh is more similar to human flesh than that of most other animals, including primates (monkeys, apes, etc.). For this reason, pig skin works well for human skin grafts in burn victims, and for amazingly compatible heart valves. However, diseases and parasites that strike pigs also strike humans. An organism found in pork that causes toxoplasmosis (displaying symptoms similar to pneumonia) seems to survive cooking temperatures and is resistant to freezing or gastric fluids.

18:28; 20:22). Hosea recorded the dismal consequence of their disobedience several hundred years later.

There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying (Hosea 4:1-3).

This connection between moral cleanliness and pollution of the biosphere may seem new in the 20th century but it is the consistent teaching of Scripture.

## Being Separate

In choosing their food, the Israelites were to become holy just as their God was holy (Leviticus 11:44, 45). It is as if God said, "Be unique, be separate, be unlike those among whom you live... just as I am wholly unique, separate, and unlike any imposter-god." The basis for this separation was the "separateness" of

## It would be reasonable to apply the biblical guidelines wherever conditions warrant them.

their God, not human egotism. Separateness included the secular as well, and was manifested in everyday life through life-style practices, including hygiene and diet.

When God said "Be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44, 45), this not only meant "be separate" from the other nations in terms of eating and daily hygiene, but also in terms of the thought processes. God's people were to be intelligently healthy, a separate people defined by their unique life-style and perception of health as a function of natural cause and effect, devoid of magic or superstition.

As our students read these passages, the question arises: What about our day? How should we view health and hygiene? Are the biblical guidelines still valuable to us? As stated above, if contemporary hygienic and health conditions are similar to those in Bible times, then ignoring the biblical guidelines may be risky. However, there is a larger issue

## Amazing Remedies

Some of the Egyptian remedies from about the time of Jacob and Joseph are truly amazing:

- To remedy baldness. Apply a mixture made of the toes-of-a-dog, refuse-of-dates, and hoof-of-an-ass!

- To quiet a child. Mix pods of the poppy plant with fly-dirt from a wall, strain it and give it to the child for four days! (No wonder the child is quiet—he's drugged with opium!)

Along with the application of the prescribed mixture, the suppliant would chant:

As it is to be, a thousand times. May Isis heal me even as she healed Horus of all the pains which his brother Set had inflicted on him when he killed his brother Osiris! O Isis, thou great enchantress, heal me, deliver me from all evil, bad, typhonic things, from demoniacal and deadly diseases and pollutions of all sorts that rush upon me, as thou didst deliver and release thy son Horus!

at stake: namely, our whole philosophical perspective on health.

## Still Appropriate Today?

Human development, as commonly viewed, is linear—progressing from the ancient, primitive, and superstitious toward the modern, sophisticated, and scientific. Archaeology shows, however, that such a view is an oversimplification. The first 1,500 years or so of medical history in both Egypt and Mesopotamia witnessed a decline from science toward superstition. At the time that magical superstition had come to dominate medicine, about the time of Moses, the biblical health guidelines were written.

One significant difference between the biblical guidelines and the cultural norm of the surrounding people was the relationship between health, disease, and magic. The surrounding cultures believed that survival depended upon struggle against fickle supernatural powers. Conversely, the underlying medical philosophy of the Bible stresses cooperation with the supernatural God, and eventually a participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). The biblical guidelines repudiated the role of magic and reinstated the concepts of prevention and cause and effect.

The natural by-product of following the biblical guidelines was a life-filled ecosphere. Ironically, as we enter an era of increased focus on the deplorable condition of humanity and its environment, cause and effect is losing out to the growing tide of magic and superstition.

Modern spiritualism in the form of New Age thinking represents a return to magical prebiblical categories. Some proponents of this view emphasize the magnificence of the human machine as an integral part of nature (wholism), while others concentrate on the subordinate position of humanity to the spiritual "masters" who rule by their own agenda. This is an outright rejection of the biblical teaching against the magic of the ancients, which in the form of crystals, potions, chants, and offerings, plays an increasing role in the modern practitioners' arts.

## Conclusion

Archaeology shows that rather than moving along a progressive course from primitive to sophisticated, the medical practices of the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians actually became less scientific as time went on. God intervened at the very time when the Israelites were confronted with dangerous Canaanite practices that originated in Egypt and Mesopotamia. The Bible presents before us, as it did before the ancients, an elevated understanding of health and hygiene, an understanding that lifts us out of our culture and pro-

*Continued on page 47*

# NEW AGERS INVADE THE CLASSROOM

Continued from page 11

mately come down to a conflict between world-views. Christian teachers have a solemn responsibility not only to recognize but also to reject practices and beliefs that contradict Scripture-based truth.

Thus the challenge is not new. Through the ages, Christianity has faced attack on all sides. Secular humanism dismissed it as superstitious. The New Age lumps it with Western rationalism and scientism. But perceptive teachers experience Christianity in its true character, not in exaggerated caricature.

The comparisons on page 11 between New Age and Christian perspectives may help to dispel the myth of New Age innocence for an increasing number of Seventh-day Adventist teachers. □

---

Dr. Verlie Ward is Assistant Professor of Education at Walla Walla College, College Place, Washington. Dr. Gerry Colvin is Dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Research, and Professor of Education and Psychology at Walla Walla College.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Frances Adeney, "Educators Look East," *Spiritual Counterfeits Journal* (Winter 1981), p. 28.
- <sup>2</sup> George Isaac Brown, *Human Teaching for Human Learning: An Introduction to Confluent Education* (New York: Viking, 1971).
- <sup>3</sup> Adeney, p. 28.
- <sup>4</sup> Lynn Smith, "Adult Type Education for School Children," *Los Angeles Times* [Orange County edition] (June 24, 1982) pt. 5, p. 1.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Bagley and Karin Hess, *Two Hundred Ways of Using Imagery in the Classroom: A Guide for Developing Imagination and Creativity in Elementary Students* (Gr. 1-8) (New York: Trillium Press, ISBN 0-89824-084-0).
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in Russell Chandler, *Understanding the New Age* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988), pp. 154.
- <sup>7</sup> Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy, Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1980), pp. 281, 314.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.
- <sup>9</sup> Fall 1987 calendar, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert J. L. Burrows, "Americans Get Religion in the New Age: Anything Is Permissible If Everything Is God," *Christianity Today* (May 16, 1986), p. 17.
- <sup>11</sup> Celebration of Innovation Workshop, San Francisco, November 7, 1987.
- <sup>12</sup> John Dunphy, "A Religion for a New Age," *Humanist Magazine* (January-February 1983), p. 26.
- <sup>13</sup> Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe-Hexham, "The Soul of the New Age," *Christianity Today* (September 2, 1988), p. 21.
- <sup>14</sup> Louise L. Hay, *You Can Heal Your Life* (Santa Monica, California: Hay House, 1987), pp. 7-9.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

## ADDITIONAL READING

The following books and articles are recommended for further insight into the tenets and insi-

nuations of New Age teachings. Most are written from a Christian perspective, and will be more helpful for Christians than the New Age materials themselves.

- "Empowering the Self: A Look at the Human Potential Movement," *Spiritual Counterfeits Project Journal* Winter 1981-1982.
- Hunt, Dave, and T. A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity*. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1985.
- David Myers, *The Inflated Self*. New York: Seabury Press, 1980.
- Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction*. Nashville, Tenn.: Nelson, 1983.
- Sire, James, *The Universe Next Door*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1976.

## ORGANIZATIONS

Christian Research Institute. P.O. Box 500, San Juan Capistrano, CA 92693-0500. Publishes a quarterly journal, *Forward*, which covers cults and New Age issues.

Jesus People USA. 4707 N. Malden, Chicago, IL 60640. Provides tracts warning about the New Age and publishes the magazine *Cornerstone*.

Spiritual Counterfeits Project. P.O. Box 4308, Berkeley, CA 94704. Publishes informative newsletter and journal. Has done some of the best work on cults and New Age issues.

# HEALTH AND THE BIBLE: INSIGHTS FROM ARCHAEOLOGY

Continued from page 16

vides an inspired guide.

Teaching about biblical health laws in the light of archaeological insights can help us and our students avoid the darkness of selfishness and superstition from which we as God's people are called. □

---

\*Texts in this article are taken from *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Copyright ©1978 by the New York International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

---

*Ralph E. Hendrix has just been named Managing Editor of Archaeological Publications for the Institute of Archaeology at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. A recent graduate of the SDA Theological Seminary, he has served as a pastor and multigrade teacher in the Nevada-Utah Conference of SDA. During the time this article was in process, he was participating in an archaeological dig at Gezer, Israel.*

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> J. H. Breasted, *A History of Egypt: From the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 101.
- <sup>2</sup> S. N. Kramer, *From the Tablets of Sumer* (Indian Hills, Col.: Falcon's Wing, 1956), p. 60.
- <sup>3</sup> A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia:*

*Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964), pp. 295, 296.

<sup>4</sup> Roland K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1969).

## RESOURCES ON ANCIENT HEALTH

The following resources are introductory materials for the upper secondary and college level. Most are common works that can be readily ordered through local bookstores.

- Breasted, J. H., *A History of Egypt: From the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924.
- Harris, J. R., and K. R. Weeks, *X-raying the Pharaohs*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973.
- Kramer, S. N., *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963.
- Oppenheim, A. L., *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. ed. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977.
- Roux, G., *Ancient Iraq*. 2nd ed. New York: Viking Penguin, 1980.

# CREATIVE TEACHING THROUGH COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Continued from page 27

---

**Children will  
have little motiva-  
tion to create if  
they feel no one  
sees their work.**

---

involve your students in the community. They can enter poetry or prose contests, declamation contests, and even building project contests. Two of my students, a second and fourth grader, won \$100 apiece building rockets for a state contest. In a declamation contest one of my students was a finalist for the county.

As you expand your creativity, you will find how much fun and reward these activities offer for you and your students. □

---

*Frieda Mattson currently is Principal and Teacher for grades 3-8 at the High Desert SDA School in Yucca Valley, California, and is working on her Ed.S. degree at Loma Linda University, Riverside, California. She has not only taught every grade from 1-8, but has also been involved in special education programs in denominational and public education in Florida, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ile Ife, West Nigeria.*