

## GOD - PHYSICIAN OF BODIES AND SOULS. OLD TESTAMENT AND PATRISTIC PERSPECTIVE

### **Abstract**

The text provides insights into the concept of healing in the books of the Old Testament and the perspectives of the Church Fathers on the matter. In the Old Testament, healing is predominantly attributed to God, who acts as the supreme physician for the people of Israel. Sickness and disease are often associated with sin, and healing is seen as a sign of God's mercy and forgiveness. The Israelites appropriated medical knowledge from other civilizations, but their ultimate hope for healing rested on faith in God and prayer. The Church Fathers, in their homiletical writings, echo the Old Testament view of God as the ultimate healer. They emphasize that healing comes from God's grace and is linked to repentance and the confession of sins. Fasting and prayer are considered effective remedies for both spiritual and physical ailments. The Fathers also highlight the spiritualization of healing, where God's healing power is seen as the restoration of the soul to its original state and preparation for the final judgment. The text underscores the belief in God as the divine physician, both in the Old Testament and in patristic thought. It emphasizes the importance of spiritual healing alongside physical healing and the significance of turning to God in times of sickness and suffering. The concept of healing is intertwined with faith, repentance, and God's benevolent care for His people throughout the ages.



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## Introduction

In the books of the Old Testament, there are several references to the person who brings healing to Israel. Often the healer was not a specific person, a physician or a healer, but God Himself was the one who healed the people of their sickness of body or soul. The presence of sickness was often linked in the Old Testament to the reality of sin, especially in the prophetic books, just as the absence of sickness and disease is a true eschatological symbol of universal restoration when no one will suffer from sickness. The Holy Scriptures, especially the Old Testament, describe numerous occasions when God brought plagues and sicknesses upon His people or upon His enemies “to make you see my power” (Ex 9:14.16). At the same time, God’s healing power is also shown when God’s people or a particular virtuous person were in a state of sickness. In their commentaries the Church Fathers referred to God as the supreme Healer, thus mirrored in the pages of the Old Testament.

The Jewish people appropriated their medical knowledge from the peoples with whom they came into contact, especially the Egyptians and Babylonians, who had much knowledge in this field, even performing surgical operations. The prophetic books mention the physician or healing (Is 3:7; Jer 8:22), but also in the time of King Asa, who is said to have been sick and not to have sought the Lord as a healer, but to have sought the physicians, and there is also mention of healing ointments and spices (2 Pt 16:12,14). However, the people of Israel did not put their hope in men when it came to receiving healing, but most of the time healing came based on faith in God and the prayers that the people offered to the Lord. If sickness was seen because of sin, turning away from God and not keeping His commandments, healing from sickness was brought by God.

Religious terminology has borrowed heavily from medical terminology; parallel to the spiritualization of the notion of illness, in most allusions to healing (*rāfā*), God is the author of healing in a literal or figurative sense.

## References to God as a physician in the Old Testament

The Old Testament noun for physician or healer (*rōfē*) comes from the Hebrew root *rāfā*, meaning to repair, to restore. The etymology is suggestive because it recalls the very modest origins, the primitive condition of medicine in general and Israelite medicine, and immediately makes us think of a quack rather than a medical specialist.

An early text that refers to God as a healer is in Ex 15:26: “If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes,

and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer.” (ESV) In this context, it is related that the Israelites in the land of Marah, having found the water undrinkable, appealed to Moses, to whom God pointed out a wood by which to sweeten the water, and the author of the book adds that God will henceforth bring upon them none of the “diseases” (*mahālā*) with which He had afflicted Egypt because, proclaims Yahweh, “I am the Lord your God who heals you”. This ancient text indirectly attests to the existence of human healers in Israel, but it also reveals the religious connections of Israelite medicine, the power to cause disease and the power to cure it being attributed to divinity. God is the origin of the plagues in Egypt (Ex 7:3ff). It is also He who sends Saul an “evil spirit” of madness (1 Sm 16:14) and it is He who reveals to Moses a way to sweeten bitter water ( a wood thrown into it), as we have seen. So, we find no trace of rational medicine based on objective observation. Also, the passage seems to imply the superiority of the Divine Physician over human healers.

In more recent times, in 2 Kgs 20:1 ff. a dying sickness of King Hezekiah is reported, to whom, at his prayer, God promises an imminent cure by means of a cure, with the help of the prophet Isaiah, namely by applying a “cake of figs” to the king’s skin. Here, God’s healing does not exclude human therapy, even if it was one involving the most basic procedures. In this case, we are not talking about a miracle cure, but an empirical medicine.

Elsewhere in the Chronicles (2 Chr 16:12) it is shown that King Asa, being sick “from the feet up”, made the mistake of turning to “physicians” (*rōfēim*) rather than to God. The chronicler categorically indicts this reliance on human medicine rather than faith in God. It seems that the Hagiographer, in his appreciation of medicine, would count it as opposed to religious faith. One could say that we have here the foreshadowing of a kind of conflict between religion and science, between faith in man and faith in God, a conflict which is no longer relevant today, given the fruitful, constantly updated dialogue between science and religion.

Two psalms from a probably early period (Ps 102:3; 146:3) ultimately proclaim the sovereign excellence of God as the *rōfē* who delivers man from all sickness (the consequence of the sin mentioned in the same verse) and death (Ps 102:4) and, in a spiritual sense, “who heals broken hearts and binds up their wounds” (Ps 146, 3), without containing a condemnation of human medicine, this perspective showing, on the contrary, true esteem for human medicine at the level known at that time

(broken limbs, healing of painful wounds) since they can be translated into the divine plan.

The texts I have just mentioned show that the absolute physician (*rōfē*) is God and that physicians or medicine as a science was of little importance to the Jewish people. No doubt the same anonymity is generally found in the case of the Egyptian physicians, except for the legendary Imhotep, the latter bearing several titles highlighting his special skills (Humbert 1964, 86), but we do not find such a case in the pages of the Old Testament. This anonymity also contrasts with the mention by names of famous physicians in the Iliad: Machaon, Podalire and Paieon; we recall Machaon's care of Menelaus wounded by Pandarus' arrow: removing the arrow, the blood sucked by the practitioner who then applies remedies to the wound (Dumbar 1980, 1-8). Unfortunately, the image of the physician in ancient Israel did not stand out much and was not marked in the Old Testament as a professional specialization.

However, besides therapy as such, in the Old Testament, we also find necromancy (2 Kgs 21:6; Is 8:19), manticism and divination (Is 8:19) or even astrology (Is 47:13), all practices forbidden by divine law (Lv 19:31; Dt 18:9). Elisha is said to have resuscitated the Shunammite's child by lying on his body: "Then he went up and lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands. And as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm." (2 Kgs 4:34 – ESV); and the bones of the same prophet are said to have resurrected a person at his touch: "So Elisha died, and they buried him. Now bands of Moabites used to invade the land in the spring of the year. And as a man was being buried, behold, a marauding band was seen and the man was thrown into the grave of Elisha, and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet." (2 Kgs 13:20-21 – ESV) (Humbert 164, 85).

H. Grapow's history of Egyptian medicine shows the gulf that separates Hebrew therapy from that of ancient Egypt. Moreover, the Israelites had recourse to the power of God several times to combat the harmful influences of disease. The role of fasting and penance in Jewish therapy should be emphasised. After a bloody defeat, all the people underwent a one-day public fast (Jgs 20:26); David fasted to obtain healing for his child (2 Kgs 12:22); in times of epidemic, penitence was resorted to (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:37-38). Baal-Zebub's oracle was consulted to find out whether King Ahaziah would recover from the fall he had from his window (2 Kgs 1:2), and Elijah reproached him for not consulting Yahweh's oracle (2 Kgs 1:16).

“Lamentations” no doubt played a role in the Jewish people’s hope for healing from certain diseases. Cries of pain and collective prayers were common in the event of an epidemic (1 Kgs 8:37-38), and Hosea uses the image of healing a wound in his lament about Israel’s deliverance (Hos 6:1). Individual complaints for salvation are also common, and sickness is one of the predominant themes, at least as an image of misfortune. Often the invocation of divine help for healing is intertwined or even identified with the cry for help in the hope of salvation (Job 6:2; Ps 3:2-3; Jer 15:18; 17:14). It is clear from some texts that the invocation of God’s mercy for salvation has in view the healing of the spiritual or physical sufferings of the Israelite believer, circumscribed by a state of sinfulness (Ps 6:2; 40:4; Jer 17:14).

W. Baumgartner rightly pointed out that the prayers of the Israelites to Yahweh in times of suffering were often not so much for the healing of diseases, but rather for the forgiveness of sin, because sin was considered the cause of disease (Baumgartner 1917, 16-7; Miron 2012<sup>1</sup>, 312). On the other hand, Gunkel believed that in ancient times psalmists were not primarily concerned with whether God was the cause of sickness, but that the connection between Yahweh and sickness was a form of intensifying prayers or deepening complaints (Gunkel 2011, 191).

But a closer philological analysis will make us understand that the term *rāfā* refers to a “healing” by God. Sometimes therapy/healing is understood literally, sometimes figuratively. According to Gn 20:17, Abraham lied to Abimelech that Sarah was his sister. Because Abimelech forgave Abraham and gave him more gifts, God healed Abimelech, his wife and his servants who were unable to procreate, without any indication of a cure. So, we are dealing with supernatural healing (without any mention of human intervention) of disease in the literal and physical sense of the word.

In the account in Nm 12, Mariam is stricken by God with a skin disease (the text mentions leprosy, but some think it was not) (Köhler and Baumgartner 1994) and healed by Him (Nm 12:13), at the prayer of Moses and after a seven-day isolation, with no indication of a cure. Again, we are dealing with a disease in the physical sense, cured with divine help. “There are numerous examples in the sacred history of the Old Testament, in which we are shown that by the sevenfold fulfilment of prayer, God was merciful to men, sending them His grace and blessing. Thus seven priests sounded trumpets and seven times the city of Jericho was surrounded until the Israelites conquered it (Jos 6:13-16); seven times the prophet Elijah prayed on Mount Carmel until God poured rain on the earth (2 Sm 19:42-44); seven times Elisha bowed down

to a dead man until he raised him up (2 Kgs 4:34-35) and Nehemiah the Syrian, at the urging of the same prophet, plunged seven times into the river Jordan to be cured of leprosy (2 Kgs 5:14). The number of seven priests and seven acts of worship in the structure of the ordinance of the sacrament has also been placed in analogy with the symbolic meaning of this number, which signifies the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (Is 11:2-3), for which reason it has been considered a holy number, symbolizing perfection” (Miron 2012<sup>2</sup>, 174).

The passage in Dt 32:39 (the song of Moses) contains a general declaration of God: “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand” (ESV), showing the divine omnipotence over life and death, including punishment against His enemies. God, therefore, appears here as a single all-knowing and all-powerful physician, without mention of any human intermediaries.

In Hos 6:1, on the other hand, we are dealing with a figurative meaning, and it applies to the political situation in Israel. The image of the physician is thus applied to Yahweh, but the evil is political. In Hos 7:1, we have the same general allusion to God’s “healing” of Israel in political circumstances, thus in a figurative sense. It is the same in Hos 14:5. If healing is a preferred term of the prophet Hosea, God is always the healer. In Hosea we find no allusion to human healing and therapy, but a spiritualization of the theme: the physician par excellence is Yahweh.

In 2 Kgs 20:7-8, it is recorded that God tells Hezekiah that He will heal him of his serious illness. At Isaiah’s advice, a compress of figs is applied to the patient’s wound. So here we are dealing with God’s saving intervention in a case of actual illness, but this time without excluding human means. Isaiah undoubtedly intervenes as a healer/therapist to specify what remedy should be used. Healing is therefore in the literal sense and the prophet collaborates with God for successful treatment.

According to Is 30:26 (Eissfeldt 1934, 382), during the political restoration, it is God who “heals” people’s diseases, but they are seen in a figurative sense. The same meaning is also found in Is 6:10, where the impossibility of “healing” the eyes, ears and heart is an image of the spiritual hardening of the Israelite people, and in Is 19:22, “healing” is brought by God following the conversion of Egypt. In the book of Jeremiah, God is the main agent of healing, but again in the sense we find the figurative meaning: to “heal” Israel’s rebellion (Jer 3:22); to deliver the prophet from his inner pain (Jer 17:14); to restore Israel (Jer 30:17).

This spiritualization of God's theme of healing is particularly affirmed in Is 57:18-19, where "healing" represents forgiveness, God's grace for those who humble themselves. In the Psalter, God is always represented as the agent of healing when this theme is used: to him, the psalmist and the believers turn for deliverance from their bodily or spiritual evil (Ps 6:2; 29:2; 40:3; 106:20), or a political defeat (Ps 59:2-5). In 2 Chr 7:14 God is also the subject, the author of a restoration of the land (literally: "I will heal their land"), in case of drought, locusts and plague, naturally on condition that the people repent. Finally, in Job 5:18, God can be understood as the agent of healing both literally and figuratively ("He wounds and he binds up the wound, he strikes and his hands heal"). As for Eccl 3:3 ("It is time to wound and time to heal"), healing is seen in the literal sense (to restore health), and the agent of this healing can be anyone, therefore not necessarily God.

### **God – the Supreme Physician from the perspective of the Church Fathers**

The Old Testament view that God is the one who heals man can also be identified in the writings of the Church Fathers, especially in their homiletical writings. St. John Chrysostom, commenting on the text of Gn 20:17, says that God sometimes strikes certain people with illness in order that, by healing them, his healing power may be shown: "Do you see that the Master wants to make the right Abraham brilliant by all circumstances? That through the prayers of the patriarch God gives salvation to the king and to all in his house! [...] Abimelech was without sin; but the good Master brought this punishment upon the king, that through the prayers of Abraham, he might lift his punishment, and thereby make him more famous and more brilliant. Yes, God does and orchestrates everything and so arranges everything, that those who serve Him may shine like stars, so that their virtue may be known everywhere" (St. John Chrysostom 1989, 136-7).

Origen, commenting on the text of Jer 17:16-18, associates healing from God with the salvation of the soul. "Whoever wishes to have his soul healed from sickness, let him turn only to Him who came as a physician for the sick and said, 'The healthy have no need of a physician, but the sick'. Let us say to him with confidence: 'Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed'. But you cannot say this unless you can also say the following, denying all foreign praise: For You are my praise. Then I will fulfil the next commandment, which says: Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom, nor the mighty man of his strength, nor the rich man of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this,

that he understands and knows that I am the Lord”. Blessed, therefore, is he who has put off all earthly boasting, the so-called good, beauty and things of the flesh, riches and glory. Happy is he who is content to say, My praise is You, Lord” (Origen 1981, 434-5).

The psalmist says that his healing was the result of his prayer to God and that this is nothing more than the answer to his prayer: “Lord my God, I cried to you, and you healed me”. In this verse, David thanks God for the healing he has given him, that he says, “Lord my God”. God is not the God of all, but of those who, through love, have brought God near, that He is the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. There was no interval between my cry and Your grace, but as soon as I cried out, healing came to me. So, when we pray to God, we must say the prayer aloud, so that healing may come quickly. “Lord, bring my soul out of hell”. For this healing, the psalmist thanks God. David, because of his sickness, went down to hell, but he was brought up out of hell by the power of Him who overcame in our place the one who has the power of death (St. Basil the Great 1986<sup>1</sup>, 238-9).

Fasting also plays an important role in the healing process because if sin entered the world through food, it can also be forgiven through food. The law of fasting was given in paradise. Adam was first commanded to fast: “Eat not of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. The word “Do not eat” is a law of fasting and abstinence. If Eve had fasted and not eaten from the tree, we would have no need of fasting now, for “the healthy have no need of physicians, but the sick”. We have made ourselves sick by sin, let us be healed by repentance! And repentance without fasting is powerless. But repent before God through fasting. Moreover, the image in which the first men lived in heaven is an image of fasting, not only because, by leading an angelic life, they had, through moderation, come to resemble angels, but also because all the things that man later devised were not known to the inhabitants of paradise: neither the drinking of wine, nor the cutting of animals, nor all the things that trouble the human mind (St. Basil the Great 1986<sup>2</sup>, 349).

St. Basil also, commenting on the text “Heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled” (Ps 6:2), sees the health of man as the permanent manifestation of divine mercy towards the crown of his creation, man: “And when the bones keep their own bond because they are kept by the Lord, not one of them will be broken, but they are worthy to magnify the glory of God” (St. Basil the Great 1986<sup>1</sup>, 281).

Healing comes from God through the word, as the psalmist David says: “For he says: and he sent his word and healed them and brought them out of their wickedness



(Ps 106:20)”. Saint Gregory of Nyssa interprets this text as messianic, foreseeing the Saviour Christ as the physician of bodies and souls: “Do you see the living and breathing Word sent to save the perishing who have been delivered from their wickedness? What Evangelist expresses the mystery so simply? He says, therefore: blessed be the grace of those who have had the blessing, and let it be a hymn to the blessings of God. For it says: Let them offer to Him a sacrifice of praise and proclaim to Him with gladness” (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1998<sup>1</sup>, 156).

Healing involves a restoration of the body to its original, pre-sin state in preparation for the universal judgment. “Just as there are many kinds of illnesses, bodily some of which are more easily cured, others more difficult, and in such cases, recourse is had to operations, burnings, cauterizations with red iron or drinks of bitter medicine in order thus to root out the evil that has become encrusted in the body, so also the future judgment provides for the healing of the soul from its infirmities. For the light-hearted, this judgment is a threat and a corrective, so that for fear of a painful atonement man may flee from evil and be pacified, while for the wise, I believe it is a way of healing and healing that God has decreed to restore this creature of His to its original beauty” (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1998<sup>2</sup>, 303). In this context, healing is brought about by God when He wills: “Only he who has known the weakness of human nature has experienced the power of God. And one such as this, succeeding by it in some things and striving to succeed in others, will never despise any man. For he knows that as he has helped him and delivered him from many and grievous afflictions, he is able to help all if he will, and especially those who are in need for his sake, though for certain judgments he does not at once deliver all from afflictions, but, like a good and loving physician of men, he heals each one who strives in his own time” (St. Maximus the Confessor 1997, 99).

It is God who healed Job’s suffering: “For the wounds and binds up the wound, he strikes and his hands heal” (Job 5:18). “If He is the One who loosens torments and the One who leads you to the opposite and makes you enjoy the deepest peace, He does not do these either with a different intention, but with the same purpose” (St. John Chrysostom 2012, 98). Healing is done with the help of God’s grace: “Rest is the Lord, as the One who delivers from the burdens of virtue; “God’s healing, as the Physician who heals the wound that comes through death; God’s grace, as the One who brings redemption; and, God’s travail, as the One who receives our passions” (St. Maximus the Confessor 1994, 447).

In the Old Testament, healing takes place because of God's power through the prayers of the suffering man. Healing is also the result of repentance, the confession of sins. "However, if the sinner would make proper use of the help of conscience, if he would confess his deeds and show the Physician the wound, the Physician who heals and does not heal, if he would receive His cures, if he would speak to Him alone, without anyone knowing, if he would tell everything in detail, he will quickly right his wrongs. That confession of sins is the remission of sins. The Master bestows the cure of wounds according to the strength of the devotion of the one who approaches Him. He, therefore, who wishes to be made whole more quickly and to heal more quickly the wounds of his soul, let him approach the Physician with a broken heart, putting away from him all worldly thoughts! Let him shed hot tears, let him show great steadfastness, let him confess righteous faith, and so let him trust in the Physician's knowledge and he will take swift healing! Hast, thou has seen that the Physician's generosity overshadows the love of any parent. Does He ask something heavy and burdensome of us? No! He asks for a broken heart, a humble mind, confession of sins, and great perseverance; and He gives us not only healing of wounds and cleansing from sins, but He also makes righteous the one previously burdened with thousands and thousands of burdens of sins" (St. John Chrysostom 1987, 239).

### Conclusions

The Old Testament says little about the art of healing the body, and reveals two strands of opinion in Israel about medicine: the uncompromising attitude to healing as strictly the prerogative of divinity (2 Kgs 20:5: Yahweh is Hezekiah's physician; Ex 15:26: Yahweh is the physician of Israel) and the broad attitude of those who gave credit to human medicine, but saw it as instituted by God (Sir 38:12, where God is said to have instituted the physician), the two currents finally culminating in a synthesis essay found in Sir 38:1-15.

It was God who played the leading role in healing people in general (Ex 15:26; Dt 7:15) or specific individuals, with human intermediaries taking a back seat, minus the intervention of the priest who had the right to declare a man medically clean or unclean (Lv 13:37; 14:3). We can say that in Israel the divine physician eclipsed the human healer: Yahweh was man's supreme healer.

In many cases, where the use has been extended to the moral and not only the physical realm, the concept of healing has thus been enriched with a spiritual and

religious value: the spiritual and moral man has been conceived as a sick person, but also as a person healable by God. In the Old Testament, there is a unified conception of man, subject in his spiritual and physical wholeness to the beneficent action of God, and Yahweh is the “healer” and “saviour”, the divine physician of the soul and body.

The same view of man being healed by God is also contained in patristic thought when referring to Old Testament texts, healing often being associated with the salvation of the soul. In the teaching of the Church Fathers, prayer and fasting and confession of sins are considered effective medicines for healing and cleansing the soul and body of the suffering person. Seen from an eschatological perspective, healing also implies preparation of man for universal judgment.

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