

Ancient Physicians and Their Art

Brendan McConvery C.S.S.R.

Comparatively little is known about the practice of medicine in Israel before the Exile. It was probably, for the most part, what might today be called "traditional medicine," or the application of simple remedies tried and tested over generations. The prophet Isaiah describes a manner of treating wounds involving squeezing out infection, softening the skin with oil, and then applying a bandage (Isa 1:6). He later prescribed a fig poultice for Hezekiah with successful results (Isa 38:21). For those who could afford them, imported remedies were available (Jer 8:22). Foreign physicians may have treated members of the royal family or nobility. The Chronicler, for instance, who has little love for King Asa, condemns him because "even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but sought help from physicians" (2 Chr 16:12).

Physicians in the Old Testament

There was a theological aspect to Israel's distrust of doctors. The biblical tradition claimed that Yahweh was the healer of Israel. "If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians; for I am the LORD, your healer" (Exod 15:26). The story of Tobit, who complains that physicians were no help to him in his blindness (Tob 2:10), is a particularly graphic illustration of this truth. In the book's happy ending, his sight is restored by Raphael ("God is my healer").

The only text in the First Testament to demonstrate a thorough-going acceptance of medical aid is the "poem in praise of the physician" (Sir 38:1-15). In it the wise teacher recommends that his students "make friends" with the physician, and attempts to prove that medical expertise has its origins in God's wise design of creation, which included healing herbs. For Ben Sira, the physician is a partner with God in the work of healing,



Illustration: The healing of Tobit, 13th c. English manuscript.

not a competitor, and his endorsement of medical science may reflect Israel's encounter with the growing professionalism of medicine which spread outward from the medical schools of the Greek islands in the wake of the conquest of Alexander from 330 B.C. onward.

The Egyptian Connection

Alexandria became the center of medical research in the third century. Its great library included many writings of medical interest, and it soon led the world in medical research, attracting students and teachers from abroad. One method of study which helped advance medical knowledge was dissection. Greek respect for the dead had outlawed such research, but it may have been more acceptable in Egypt in view of its ancient custom of embalming.

Among the writings which made their way to the Alexandrian library was the collection known as the Hippocratic Corpus, which takes its name from Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.), founder of a medical school on the island of Cos in the eastern Mediterranean. It was probably assembled between 430 and 330 B.C. Its best-known text, the Hippocratic Oath, has become synonymous with the Western medical tradition. Although it is disputed whether Hippocrates wrote any of the treatises which bear his name, the collection contains over sixty treatises on various topics including biology, dietetics, epidemics, and the management of common disorders such as ulcers and fractures.

Beginning a Career in Ancient Medicine

The Hippocratic Oath assumes that medical skill was learned through a system of apprenticeship which lasted several years. The aspiring doctor was taken into the home of his master and gradually initiated into the art of healing. The first step in building a career entailed a temporary period journeying from city to city before settling down. The student who wished to specialize in military medicine was advised to join the army and accompany it on campaigns abroad. To help the young physician get established, the Corpus contained a treatise called *Airs, Waters and Places*. This might be described as the first attempt in history to compile a treatise on environmental medicine. On arrival in a new city, the young doctor was advised to spend time taking stock of the environmental conditions, particularly its position relative to the prevailing wind and the quality of its water supply, as well as the lifestyle of the inhabitants:

The effect of any town upon the health of its population varies according as it faces north or south, east or west. This is of the greatest importance. Similarly, the nature of the water supply must be considered. . . . [Think of the soil, whether it is bare and waterless or thickly covered with vegetation and

well-watered. . . .] Consider the life of the inhabitants themselves; are they heavy drinkers and eaters, and consequently unable to stand fatigue, or being fond of work and exercise, eat wisely and drink sparingly?

—*Airs, Waters and Places* (chap. 1)

Attracting patients was the next challenge. Setting up a surgery may have entailed little more than hiring a booth in the marketplace or finding a room in a private house. The doctor's appearance was his best advertisement:

The dignity of a physician requires that he should look healthy, and as plump as nature intended him to be; for the common crowd consider those who are not of this excellent bodily condition to be unable to take care of others. Then he must be clean in person, well-dressed, and anointed with sweet-smelling unguents that are not in any way suspicious.

—*The Physician* (chap. 1)

The prudent doctor was also expected to be a gentleman in character, graceful and kind to all. Although the advantage of a ready wit was recognized, the beginner was urged to cultivate a serious, but not harsh, countenance and to avoid the vulgarity of uncontrolled laughter and excessive gaiety.

In *the Surgery* described the ideal surgery setting as well: sheltered from the wind and from direct sunlight, yet bright enough to allow treatment to be carried out properly. It condemned bronze furnishings as vulgar, yet considered this metal the most appropriate for medical instruments. Plenty of water and linen swabs and sponges for cleansing were required.

The physician also made house calls. As well as his case containing drugs and instruments, a good bedside manner was indispensable. Frequent home visits were recommended. The doctor was to ensure that the bed was located in the most advantageous and comfortable position. Since many of the herbal remedies were disagreeable to the taste, it was to be presumed that patients would avoid taking them. If necessary, a doctor could leave one of his students to act as a kind of nurse. Under no circumstances was a lay person to be left in charge lest allegations of professional negligence should arise (*Decorum* xiii-xvii).

The Art of Diagnosis

The reputation of ancient doctors, like that of their modern counterparts, depended on their ability to diagnose the disease, forecast its course, and prescribe and administer appropriate treatment. The Hippocratic Corpus contains several works on the art of diagnosis. The author of the *Prognostic* realistically assumed that it was impossible to restore every patient to health, and *The Art of Medicine* even regarded willingness to recognize one's inability to treat a patient adequately as the sign that a doctor had acquired the true art: "[In general terms, [the art of medicine] is to do away

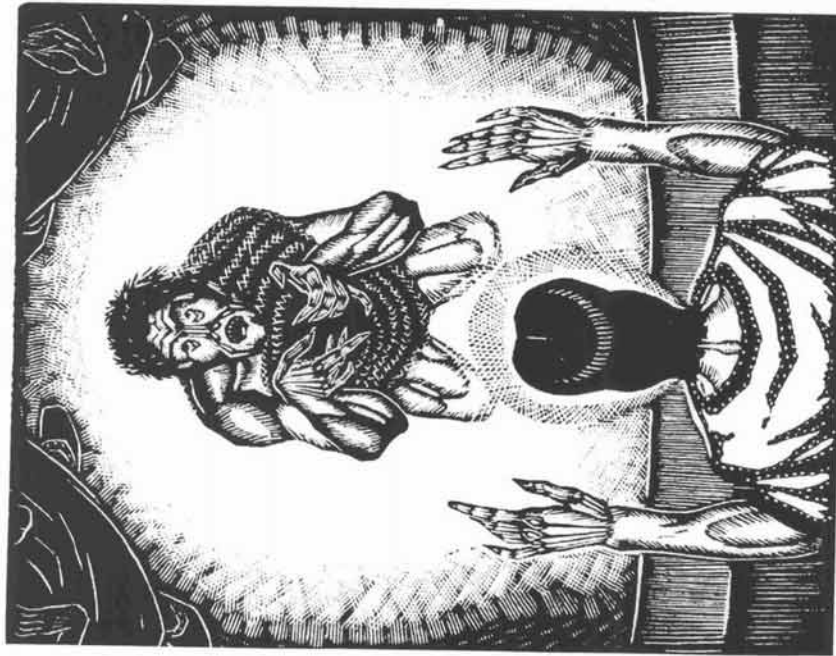


Illustration: Jesus heals a man with a withered hand, woodcut by James Reid.

with the sufferings of the sick, to lessen the violence of their diseases, and to refuse to treat those who are overmastered by their diseases, realizing that in such cases, medicine is powerless." This refusal to treat desperate cases distinguished ancient medicine from modern, and may have come from a desire to avoid criticism or even a charge of causing the patient's death. Accurate diagnosis was the key to successful treatment. The *Prognostic* urged the novice doctor to begin by a careful consideration of the patient's face, noting symptoms such as sharp nose, hollow eyes, cold ears, and the general condition of the skin, then to inquire about sleep patterns, bowel movement, and appetite.

The treatments most often referred to in the Hippocratic Corpus are herbal remedies, embrocations, firm bandaging, minor surgery, bloodletting, and cauterizing or treatment with a hot iron.

Insulting the Physician

There are many ironic and sarcastic comments about doctors in the literature of antiquity. Negative views about doctors are implicit in the story of the woman who found a cure by touching the robe of Jesus, having "wasted her entire income on doctors" (Mark 5:26 and parallels). It should not be concluded, however, that the practice of medicine in Roman Palestine was of a particularly low quality, or that all the doctors were either quacks or unscrupulous sharks.

Abuse of the physician was a common theme in the literature of antiquity. The Roman epigrammatist Martial (ca. A.D. 40-104) quipped to his doctor: "I was sickening, but you at once attended me, Symmachus, with a train of a hundred apprentices. A hundred hands frosted by the north wind have pawed me. I had no fever before, Symmachus, but now I have." The relative success and self-confidence of Hellenistic medicine went some distance towards generating a healthy skepticism toward some of its practitioners. For all their stress on observation, the medical writings did contain a good deal of guesswork, as well as good old-fashioned prejudice which was passed on to subsequent generations.

The writers of the medical treatises presumed that their colleagues would meet with misunderstanding and ridicule, and so they prepared arguments for counterattack. Many of the practitioners were serious-minded people, aware of their limitations but with a passion for healing. They challenged, above all, superstitious ideas about the nature of disease. Epilepsy, for example, was regarded in the ancient world with a certain degree of religious awe. The sudden onset of an attack, and the patient's equally speedy recovery without any apparent organic damage, were considered to be proofs that it had a divine origin, and so it was commonly known as "the sacred disease." The Hippocratic treatise, *The Sacred Disease*, declares it to be no more sacred than other diseases, and that, like them, it must have a physical cause. It would be more than two millennia before the precise nature of epilepsy was fully understood, yet the intuitions of the Hippocratic physicians were along the right lines. That is not to say that they denied a religious dimension to the mystery of healing. Most would have agreed with the view of the author of *Decorum*, for example, that "the gods are the real physicians" (chap. 6). The Oath begins, too, by invoking Apollo, Asclepius, Hygeia, and Panacea, the gods of healing.

Conclusion

Israel's earliest encounter with the Greek medical tradition may have taken place about the time of Ben Sira. The physicians celebrated in his poem may have been influenced by the Alexandrian medical tradition, since Judea was at that time under Egyptian control. Health is so essential to the human story that it is scarcely surprising that accounts of health recovered

should, in the symbolic world of Christians, represent such powerful metaphors for salvation. Yet, despite the foundational importance of the stories of Jesus' healing miracles or the early Christian practice of praying and anointing for the recovery of health attested by the letter of James (5:14-15), the contemporary Christian attitude to caring for the sick has more in common with Ben Sira than with any other text in the tradition. Ben Sira was able to integrate Israel's claim that God was the author of all healing with an increasingly sophisticated medical practice in which humans became partners in healing. The words of the Bible's last sage are seldom found written at the entrance of Catholic hospitals or clinics. They have a claim to be there, since they are the most succinct statement in the Scriptures of the values which have shaped those institutions:

Make the physician your friend, for he is essential to you. It was God who called him to his profession, and from God comes the doctor's wisdom.
(Sir 38:1-2)

Suggestions for Further Reading

The Hippocratic Corpus

- ▶ *The Writings of Hippocrates with an English Translation*. Lobe Classical Library.
- ▶ G.E.R. Lloyd, *The Hippocratic Writings*. Penguin Classics 1978. This contains a representative selection of the more important writings, but few of the treatises discussed here.

On Medicine in Antiquity

- ▶ Ludwig Edelstein, *Ancient Medicine: Selected Papers of Ludwig Edelstein*, edited by Owsei Timkin and Lilian Timkin. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press 1967.
- ▶ Ralph Jackson, *Doctors and Diseases in the Roman Empire*. London: British Museum Publications 1988.
- ▶ James Longrigg, *Greek Rational Medicine: Philosophy and Medicine from Alcmaeon to the Alexandrians*. London and New York: Routledge 1993.
- ▶ Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (SNTS Monograph Series 55). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986.
- ▶ Henry E. Sigerist, *A History of Medicine*. Volume 1: *Primitive and Archaic Medicine*. New York: Oxford University Press 1967.

Brendan McConvery C.S.S.R. is a native of Belfast and a member of the Irish Province of the Redemptorists. He studied at the Pontifical Biblical Institute and the Ecole Biblique. He teaches at both the Holy Ghost Missionary College (Dublin) and Saint Patrick's College (Maynooth).