

BEN SIRA'S "PRAISE OF THE PHYSICIAN" (SIR 38:1-15) IN THE LIGHT OF SOME HIPPOCRATIC WRITINGS

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Ben Sira's poem in praise of the physician (Sir 38:1-15) is unique among biblical texts for the high esteem in which it holds the art of medicine. It casts a faint beam of light on a profession about which the Bible says comparatively little, and about whose role the texts and the world views they represent, seem for the most part, ambiguous.¹ The Gospels record three remarks about doctors. The Q saying (Luke 5:31 // Matt 9:12), "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but only those who are sick," assumes that the services of physicians are available for those who need them. The remaining two are negative, namely, the evangelist's ironic comment on the woman's wasting of her money on useless doctors (Mark 5:26), and Luke's use of the proverb "Physician, heal yourself" (Luke 4:23). The intention of this paper is to explore some aspects of the life and professional practice of the physician in Pre-Maccabean Jerusalem. After a brief survey of the role of the physician in the Hebrew Bible, it will examine some aspects of Ben Sira's poem in praise of the doctor (Sir 38:1-15). It will then go on to consider the role and lifestyle of physicians in this period as represented by some documents from the Hippocratic Corpus.

Introduction: Medical Practitioners and Physicians in the Old Testament

Comparatively little is known about the practice of medicine in Pre-Exilic Israel. It was probably what today would be termed "traditional medicine." Isaiah describes how wounds were treated (Isa 1:6), and prescribes a fig poultice as a treatment for Hezekiah (Isa 38:21). For those who could afford them, more expensive imported remedies such as healing balm from Gilead (Jer 8:22) were available. There is a single reference to court-physicians,

which occurs in the Chronicler's account of the last illness of King Asa. Although Asa receives a fairly clean bill of moral health from the Deuteronomistic historian, who notes simply that he suffered from a complaint of the feet in later life, the Chronicler takes a more negative view of him and condemns him because "even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but sought help from physicians" (2 Chron 16:12). From the evidence of the Amarna Letters and Herodotus that Egyptian physicians were welcomed in the royal courts of Syria and Mesopotamia,² it is probably safe to assume that medicine was not altogether unknown among the upper classes. The Hebrew text of Genesis (50:2) credits Joseph with summoning physicians (פְּרָכִים) to oversee the funeral arrangements of his father. The Septuagint translators, doubtless more acquainted with Egyptian practice, is more precise in calling them οἱ ἐνταφιασταί or undertakers. The LXX translators seem to have been puzzled by the Hebrew word פְּרָכִים (shades), in view of its consonantal similarity with the word for physicians (פְּרָכִים), and occasionally translate it as ἰατροί (physicians) with amusing results. In Isa 26:14, for example, the prophet rejoices that Israel's overlords are now shades (פְּרָכִים) and will not rise; in the LXX this becomes: οὐδὲ ἰατροὶ οὐ μὴ ἀναστήσωσιν ("neither shall the doctors rise from the dead").³

Israel's distrust of doctors was based on a theological conviction 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 Book of Tobit contains a particularly graphic illustration of this belief. Like the woman in Mark's miracle story, Tobit complains of the futility of consulting physicians (Tob 2:10), but in the book's happy ending, his sigh

²On the early rational medical tradition of Egypt as recorded in papyrus sources such as Papyrus Ebers and the Smith Medical Papyrus see Henry E. Sigerist, *A History of Medicine I: Primitive and Archaic Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) 297-359. Herodotus mentions that Darius the Great (521-486 BCE) employed Egyptian physicians at his court: see Herodotus III, 125, 129-137.

³A similar confusion is found in Ps 87:11 and in the Odes of Solomon 5:6.

¹See, for example, the survey articles on "Medicine" in the standard reference works e.g. *DBSupp* and *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. There is an abundant literature relating to healing stories in the Gospels. Most of the issues are surveyed in Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge: University Press, 1986).

is restored when Raphael ("God is my healer") applies to his eyes the gall of the great fish caught by young Tobias. A similar negative view of the healing profession can be heard in Job's complaint that his comforters are "useless physicians" (Job 13:4).

**Ben Sira's Poem on the Physician
I. A Note on the Hebrew Text⁴**

The physician poem survives in Hebrew in its entirety only in Ms B; Ms D contains only the first verse. Some damage to the scroll has resulted in the loss of letters at the beginning of verses 10, 11, 12 but the damage is not so serious as to prevent reconstruction. Here as elsewhere, the increased attention given to the Hebrew text has contributed to a better appreciation of literary and philological aspects of the poem. It has led, for example, to the solution of the troublesome final verse (v.15). Following the Greek, this was traditionally rendered: "he who sins before his Maker, may he fall into the hands of a physician." The element of danger, implicit here in dealings with the doctor, seems to overturn the otherwise favourable opinion of medicine characteristic of the rest of the poem. Following the Hebrew (רופא לפני דוכא), this can now be read: "whoever sins against God will be defiant (act arrogantly) towards the doctor.

2. The Literary Unity of the Poem

Although lacking in any striking subtlety of thought or language, this is nevertheless an elegant little poem. It celebrates a class of people rather than any doctor in particular. Several features contribute to its unity.⁵ It is guided by

⁴I have used the critical editions of Israel Levi, *The Hebrew Text of the Book of Ecclesiasticus*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1969) and F. Vattioni, *Ecclesiastico: testo ebraico con apparato critico e versioni greca, latina e siriaca* (Naples: Istituto Orientale di Napoli, 1968).

⁵The only serious objection to the poem's unity has been raised by P. C. Benjamins, "Jesus Sirach 38:1-15: Problemen rondom een symbol," *Bijdragen: Tijdschrift voor Theologie en Theologie* 41 (1980) 260-265. He has noted the presence of a ⚡-symbol in the text of Ms B between verses 12

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two key terms - רופא and אל. רופא occurs six times as a noun (= physician, or doctor in vv. 1a.2a.3a.7a.12a.15b), once in a slightly different noun form רפאות (= healing art, medical skill) in v.14c, and once in a verbal form (רפא), with God as the subject (v.9b) A cognate form תרופות (= healing herbs) occurs in v.4a.⁶ The second key term is אל, the divine name, which occurs five times (vv. 1b.2a.4a.9b.14a). The pattern of distribution of the two words and their interrelationship is interesting.

i. The Word רופא

• The opening and closing cola form an inclusio to the whole poem: רופא לפני צרכו רעי (v.1a) and יתנבר לפני דוכא (v.15b).

• The word occurs three times in the opening three lines, and a further three in the closing four (if we include רפאות in v.14c) = 7 lines in all.

• The remaining occurrence of רופא is in the mid-line (v.7a) of the poem.

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and 13. As the ⚡ usually indicates the end of a reading section, Benjamins suggests that it marks the original end of the poem, and that what follows is a later intrusion, breaking the positive theological content. Levi, *Hebrew Text*, 45, note b, noted this marker in the apparatus of his edition as "inexact, the previous paragraph is not finished."

⁶It is not attested in biblical Hebrew, although BDB gives the form נרפא from the same root.

- This gives two clusters of the word physician, placed strategically in the opening and closing lines. It can be illustrated diagrammatically as follows:

רעי רופא לפני צרכו 1a
 מאת אל יהכם רופא 2a
 דעת רפא תרים ראשו 3a

בהם רופא יניח מכאוב וכן הוקה עושה מרקחה 7
 וגם לרופא תן מקום 12a
 ורפאות למען מדה 14c
 יתנבר לפני רופא 15b

The mid line of the poem (v.7) contains the only occurrence of the word outside these two framing sections. This line also introduces a minor character, the physician's collaborator, the blender of herbs or druggist. Their activities are complementary as is evident from the parallelism: with them the physician brings relief to pain and the blender makes his mixture. Outside this pattern, the only use of the root is in the verbal form (v.9b), where it refers to God's healing power, not the physician's.

ii. The Word אל

אל occurs as the divine name five times, in three different contexts. The first two and the last two are related, the third being independent (i.e. 2 + 1 + 2).

- In two occurrences, the word אל describes God as the source of the physician's power: "established him in his profession" (v.1b), and wisdom (v.2a). These two lines form a chiasm.

- The third occurrence (v.4a) describes God as the creator of the healing plants.
- The final two occurrences describe God as the object of prayer, to whom the sufferer prays for relief (v.9b), and to whom the physician prays for guidance (v.14a).
- In both cases, the divine name is preceded by the preposition אל immediately before the noun אל (God): the two words have the same consonants, but slightly different vowels.⁷ This has the effect of increasing the presence of the form of the consonants of the word to seven (5 for the divine name, plus 2 for the proposition). Since the eye will not distinguish them, this acts as a kind of visual pun and corresponds to the seven uses of the word physician.
- In the case of both רופא and אל, the middle occurrence of the word refers to the healing plants which God produces from the earth and which the physician uses in his healing treatment.

The occurrences of אל can also be represented diagrammatically:

גם אתו חלק אל 1b
 מאת אל יהכם רופא 2a
 התפלל אל אל כי הוא ירפא 9b
 (+ preposition)
 כי גם הוא אל אל יעזיר 14a
 (+ preposition)

The terms of the poem are defined by the skilful use of these two words. It is not simply an encomium of the physician: it is rather a theological statement about the physician's role in the healing process which remains ultimately and

⁷There are other instances of this phenomenon in, for example, Job 34:23; 38:41; Ps 43:4; 84:2; Isa 10:21; Lam 3:41.

mysteriously in the hands of God. It is through his wise ability to discern the things which God has put at human disposal that the physician channels the power of God latent in creation for healing. God's wise ordering of creation caused them to spring from the earth, while the physician through his wisdom applies their power to the relief of sickness.

iii. Alliteration

Several striking instances of alliteration and assonance occur throughout:

v. 1a רופא לפני צרכו (2 r + 2 f sounds)

v. 4ab אל מארץ מוציא תרופות ונבר מברין (5 m + 3 r sounds)

vv. 7a. 8a בהם רופא יניח מכאוב וכן רוקח עושה מרקחה

v. 14bc פשרה ורפאות (2 r + 2 p sounds) (diagnosis and healing =)

The poem is bound together by several internal liaisons, e.g. the inclusio formed by רופא in the first and final hemistich (vv. 1a. 15b), the occurrence of צרכו (v. 1a) and צורך (v. 12b), the sick person's prayer for healing (v. 9b) balanced by the physician's prayer for help in diagnosis (v. 14a). The presence of the double אל אל should be noted in both cases. If the reconstruction proposed by Di Lella at the end of v 6b is correct,⁸ then the section describing the divine activity works is bracketed by two references to the earth / face of the ground.

I have attempted to set out the poem in a way which might represent the presence of some of these features. The *New American Bible* translation has

⁸See footnote 12 below.

been used, as it reflects more accurately than does the *NRSV* some nuances of the Hebrew text.

- ¹ Hold the physician in honour,⁹ for he is essential to you, and God it was who established his profession.
- ² From God the doctor has his wisdom, and the king provides for his sustenance.
- ³ His knowledge makes the doctor distinguished, and gives him access to those in authority.
- ⁴ God makes the earth yield healing herbs which the prudent man should not neglect.
- ⁵ Was not the water sweetened by a twig¹⁰ that men might know its power¹¹?
- ⁶ He endows men with the knowledge to glory in his mighty works.
- ⁷ Through which the doctor eases pain, and the druggist prepares his medicines.
- ⁸ Thus God's creative work continues without cease in its efficacy on the surface of the earth.¹²

⁹A more accurate translation of the Hebrew might be "make friends with the physician."

¹⁰Literally, "tree."

¹¹The masculine personal suffix is ambiguous: it can refer either to the healing virtue of the tree ("its") or to God's power ("his").

¹²למען ישבות מעשרו והחשיה מבני ארם might be rendered literally "so that his work may not come to an end, nor sound efficient wisdom [depart] from the sons of men." A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (AB Series; New York: Doubleday, 1987) 440, proposes emending the last two words of the verse to read "me' al pene ha'adamia". It is a phrase well attested in biblical Hebrew (fourteen instances) and closer to the Greek (ἐπιπρὸς προσώπου τῆς γῆς). If this suggestion is correct, this phrase forms a neat inclusion with מארץ (v. 4a).

- ⁹ My son, when you are ill, delay not,
but pray to **God** who will heal you:
- ¹⁰ Flee wickedness; let your hands be just,¹¹
cleanse your heart of every sin;
- ¹¹ Offer your sweet-smelling oblation and petition,
a rich offering according to your means.
- ¹² Then give the **doctor** his place
lest he leave, for you need him too.
- ¹³ There are times that give him an advantage,¹⁴
and he too beseeches **God**
That his diagnosis be correct
and his **treatment** bring about a cure.
- ¹⁵ He who is a sinner towards his Maker,
will be defiant towards the **doctor**.¹⁴

3. Literary Structure and Rhetorical Argument

As well as manifesting the poet's delight in word-play, the poem's structure and formal features undergird its rhetorical argument. Ben Sira's praise of the physician takes as its starting point his ideological view of Israel's life and belief. The theme of the poem is in fact the relationship between **נֵסֵי** and the world views they signify. The references to the doctor cluster in two clearly defined sections (vv. 1-3 and vv. 12-15) at the beginning and end of the poem, acting as frames to the central section (vv. 4-11). Two rather abrupt changes of subject occur at v. 4 and v. 9. The first of these, a digression on the usefulness of the healing herbs God has caused to spring from the earth is

¹⁴ [נָוִם מִעֵבֶל לְמֹדֵבֶר פִּינִי] Apart from the damaged initial word in Ms B, the phrase is difficult. Di Lella, *Ben Sira*, 440, following Segal, proposes amending the text as follows *hāser mā' al wehāber kappayim* = "flee wickedness and purify your hands."

¹⁵ אֲשֶׁר חֹטֵא לְפָנֵי עֲשָׂוֹ יִתְבַּר לְפָנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים. Compare the Greek: ὁ ἀεισέβων (= "who ever sins against his maker, let him fall into the hands of the doctor").

framed by the reference to **אָרֶץ** (v. 4) and **הָאֲדָמָה** **עַל** (v. 8c).¹⁵ The second is introduced by the typical wisdom address "my son," and describes religious observances proper in time of sickness. The central section thus falls into two clear-cut units, namely, God's role in healing (vv. 4-8) and the sage's advice on the appropriate religious response in time of sickness (vv. 9-11). The poem is thus organized around four sub-topics:

- "Befriend the physician" - he is honoured by God and humans: vv. 1-3 (3 lines).
- God's role in healing - healing plants from the earth: vv. 4-8 (5 lines).
- The religious response in time of sickness: vv. 9-11 (3 lines).
- The physician's role in time of sickness: vv. 1-15 (4 lines).

i. "Befriend the Physician": He is Honoured by God and Humans (vv. 1-3)

The central theme of this section is the physician's honour. The imperative which opens the poem **רַעֵי** means literally "to befriend" or "to associate with." Most modern translations follow the LXX and render it "honour." In a stratified society, association with someone was the equivalent of granting them equality of status and honour. The use of this verb implies that the poet is encouraging those who belonged to his circle to regard the physician as a social equal. The status of this profession does not depend on its usefulness alone. Ben Sira later gives a list of useful trades (Sir 38:27-31): despite the benefits they bring to civilised living, he does not consider them as occupations which confer or require high status for their pursuit. The higher status of the physician on the other hand is attested by both God and human beings. One motive for holding the physician's profession in honour is that it has been established by God, or at least that the doctor, in following his employment, has had his portion assigned to him by God (**חֵלֶק**). While it is merely asserted at this stage in the argument, the evidence will be presented in the following section. The physician's occupation, like that of the scribe, is a learned one. God is the source of his wisdom (**יְחִכֶּם**). As those most likely to have benefited by the physician's skill probably belonged to a relatively affluent class, his status is attested by the king who provides him with his "present" and

¹⁵ See the proposal for textual emendation in note 12 above.

by "nobles" (נְדִיבִים) who call upon his services. The couplet vv.2-3 is an elegant example of synthetic parallelism:

From God comes the physician's wisdom, he will receive a present from the king.

The physician's knowledge gives him status,¹⁶ he will attend on princes.

Both scribe and physician belonged to the retainer class of Pre-Maccabean Jewish society, and so were dependant for approval and honour on those of higher status.¹⁷

ii. God's Role in Healing: Healing Plants from the Earth (vv.4-8)

Central to Ben Sira's respect for the physician is his acceptance of the traditional assumption that God is the ultimate source of healing. He modifies that assumption somewhat by claiming that the doctor is God's partner in the healing process. The change in theme is signalled by a rather abrupt change of topic - "God brought forth healing herbs from the earth." Although God's role is the explicit theme of this section, it is alluded to elsewhere in the poem (vv. 1b.2a.4a.9b.14b). Since he is the source of the physician's wisdom, his guidance must be sought both patient and doctor if the outcome is to be successful.

The final hemistich of the section (v.8c) is textually difficult. As it stands, it lacks a verb of its own, so one must be supplied from the first colon (לֹא יִשְׁכַּחַת). Translating the noun תושיה as "sound, efficient wisdom,

¹⁶Literally, "lifts up his head."

¹⁷The social location of the scribe in the Book of Sirach has been explored comprehensively by Ciarán O'Callaghan, "A Gleaner Following the Grape-pickers: The Jewish Scribe, Ben Sira as Interpreter of Biblical Tradition in Pre-Maccabean Hellenistic Judea" (Doctoral diss., University of Dublin, Dublin, 1997; Director Séan Freyne) 263.

abiding success,"¹⁸ this might give something like "sound wisdom will not depart from humankind." A marginal correction in Ms B at this point only compounds the difficulty (מִבְּנֵי מִפְּנֵי אֲרֵצוֹ), as it does not make the reading any smoother. Di Lella proposes emending the text to read "me' al pene ha'adama" which is well attested in biblical Hebrew (fourteen instances) and closer to the Greek and Syriac (ἐπι τῆς γῆς). If this suggestion is correct, then אֲרֵצוֹ forms an inclusio with נִאֲרָץ of the first colon.¹⁹

If he is to be consistent to his veneration for Israel's ancient traditions, Ben Sira must prove his thesis by an appeal to the scriptures, but, as we have seen, there were no unambiguously positive references to physicians in the Torah or Prophets. He is forced therefore to move by way of an accommodated reading of the incident of the bitter waters at Mara narrated in Exod 15:24-26. He appears to see a natural explanation for the sweetening of the bitter waters, and from it, he can conclude that the design of creation included the provision of healing plants on earth. What is of religious significance is the divine guidance by which Moses discovered the healing power of the plant. God may be the ultimate source or "final cause" of the physician's ability to heal, Ben Sira argues, but exercises that role through human instrumentality. The incident at Marah thus becomes a paradigmatic instance for the use of herbs and other remedies for healing.²⁰ Physicians continue to use them to relieve pain. Even in the comparatively humble art of compounding herbs, human beings draw upon wisdom.²¹

¹⁸See BDIB, 444.

¹⁹Another possibility which reflects the Greek text is that תושיה is a copyist's error for תושיע.

²⁰According to the Book of Jubilees, it was Noah who first taught the secret of healing herbs by the angels and he wrote it down in a book and passed it on to Shem his son (Jubilees 10:10-14).

²¹A similar combination of words רֶקַח מְעַשֶׂה is used to describe the art of the blender of the sacred anointing oil in Exod 30:25.

iii. How to Behave in Time of Sickness: The Religious Response (vv.9-11)

A further abrupt change of topic is signalled by a characteristic wisdom address כִּנִּי (v.9a) which invites the student to draw practical consequences from the lesson. The first line summarises the argument: "my son, when you are sick pray to God and he will heal you." The verb נִפְתַּח at the end of the line links this new theme to both the preceding sections; it takes up the key root (נָפַח) of vv.1-3 with the theme of God's role in the process of healing just explored in vv.4-8. Ben Sira accepts the traditional Deuteronomist theory of retribution which saw sickness as a punishment for wrongdoing, and advises that the first response of a faithful Israelite should be a religious one, entailing a protestation of moral innocence (clean hands and heart in v.10), along with prayer and sacrifice (v.10). These verses are replete with allusions to the psalms, e.g. Ps 20:2-6, and to the sacrificial law of Leviticus, e.g. Lev 2:1-3.

iv The Physician's Role in the Time of Sickness (vv.12-15)

A religious interpretation of sickness however does not provide the whole answer, so the final returns to a more explicit consideration of the physician's role in time of sickness. If he is ignored or is given the impression that he is only second best, his professional sense may take offence and he will withdraw (v.12b). A more literal translation of v.13 might be "there are times when recovery lies in his hands." If the sufferer is required to pray for health, the physician too should pray for divine guidance in making his diagnosis (פְּטוּרָה = the same word as פָּטַר in the Qumran texts) and in prescribing treatment (v.14a). The poem ends with a warning "whoever sins against God will behave badly towards the physician" (v.15).

Ben Sira's "Praise of the Physician" in the Light of Hellenistic Medicine

The relatively open-minded attitude to the benefits of medicine displayed in this poem and the attempt to prove its compatibility with the religious belief system of Israel, may be indicative of a change in Jewish attitudes towards health in Ben Sira's lifetime and may be a symptom of more radical changes in the social world of Ptolemaic Palestine, as Hellenistic fashions impacted increasingly on traditional Jewish values. Reflected in the

language and thought of the physician poem are aspects of the more sophisticated tradition of Hellenistic medicine which was beginning to penetrate the circum-Mediterranean world at this time.

In his recent history of Greek medicine, James Longrigg notes that "in the third century BC, Greek rational medicine was transplanted into Egypt, and at Ptolemaic Alexandria, it achieved its greatest success."²² It had found a congenial soil in which to flourish. The evidence from mummified bodies and the discovery of a number of surgical papyri (viz. the Edwin Smith and Ebers papyri of the seventeenth and sixteenth century BCE respectively) indicate that ancient Egypt enjoyed a fairly sophisticated medical tradition prior to its encounter with the Greek rational medicine. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, was impressed both by the degree of specialisation and by the number of doctors available in Egypt:

Medicine with them is distributed in the following way: every physician is for one disease and not for several, and the whole country is full of physicians. There are physicians of the eyes, others of the head, others of the teeth, others of the belly and others of obscure diseases.²³

Medical scholars from the Greek islands appear to have been attracted by the growing reputation of Alexandria as a centre of culture and learning during the Ptolemaic period. One factor which may have contributed to this was the open-minded Egyptian attitude towards the dissection of cadavers, which paved the way for a more empirical approach to the study of human anatomy. Celsus, for example, writing in the first century of the common era, claimed that criminals from the royal jails were made available for vivisection.²⁴

It is likely that Greek medical knowledge and techniques reached Palestine via Alexandria during the Ptolemaic period. The physician, whose skill Ben Sira celebrates in this poem, was scarcely a pioneering figure at the forefront of Alexandrian medical research. He is more likely to have been a

²²James Longrigg, *Greek Rational Medicine: Philosophy and Medicine from Alcmaeon to the Alexandrians* (London: Routledge, 1993) 177.

²³History, II, 84.

²⁴Longrigg, *Greek Rational Medicine*, 187-188.

more humble practitioner whom Ben Sira considers his social, if not quite his intellectual, equal.

1. The Hippocratic Corpus

The best-known of the major collections of medical writings in the ancient world is the Hippocratic Corpus, whose Oath has become synonymous with the Western medical tradition as a whole.²⁵ Its some sixty treatises cover a wide variety of topics pertaining to medicine, including major treatises on human biology, dietetics, epidemics and the management of common disorders such as ulcers, haemorrhoids and fractures as well as case notes and matters pertaining to the etiquette of the medical profession. The collection was assembled for the most part between 430 and 330 BCE. It is inevitable that in a collection as large and varied as this, there should be some measure of disagreement about the dates or even the authenticity of individual treatises, not to speak of the extent of its influence in antiquity. The medical historian Ludwig Edelstein, for instance, believes that the ethical code enshrined in the collection reflects the opinions of a relatively small and isolated group of medical practitioners.²⁶ He grants nevertheless that those writings which describe the day to day practice of the physician reflect real life so accurately, that it is possible to reconstruct a reasonably accurate picture of the physician's life from the third / fourth century onwards from the information they contain. These minor treatises are, in effect, handbooks on practical aspects of doctoring intended for young men at the beginning of their medical course and suggesting rules of conduct and practice they might follow to their advantage.²⁷

²⁵See for instance L. Edelstein's study of the Pythagorean traditions of the Oath, "The Hippocratic Oath: Text, Translation and Interpretation," in: Owsel Timkin and Lillian Timkin, eds. *Ancient Medicine: Selected Papers of Ludwig Edelstein* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press Baltimore, 1967) 5-62.

²⁶L. Edelstein, "The Hippocratic Physician," in: *Ancient Medicine*, 87-110.

²⁷Except where explicitly noted, references are to *Hippocrates with an English Translation*, in eight volumes (Loeb Classical Library, London: Heinemann, and Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press). The text numbering of that edition will be followed here. The treatises considered in this paper are *Airs Waters and Places*, vol. I (ed. W. H. S. Jones, 1923), 65-137; *The Oath*, do., 285-301; *Prognostic*, vol. II (ed. W. H. S. Jones, 1923.), 1-55; *The Art of* (continued...)

That is not to imply that Ben Sira knew the Hippocratic Collection first-hand, nor even that his idealised physician was a product of anything resembling a "medical school" as they are known today. The Hippocratic writings are, however, contemporaneous enough to have influenced the practice of medicine in Ptolemaic Palestine, and they can provide us with a fairly homogenous and historically-accurate account of how the healer's art was conducted in this period.

Ben Sira and the Hippocratic Collection share a common outlook on several issues. Moderation as the key to a healthy life seems to have been one of the values which he attempted to integrate into the curriculum of his **בית** **החיים**, and this may suggest some familiarity with Greek educational ideals. He knows, for instance, that a long illness can baffle the physician (Sir 10:10), and insists, like the great schoolmasters of Victorian England, on the development of a healthy mind in a healthy body:

Better off is a poor man who is well and strong in constitution

Than a rich man who is severely afflicted in body.

Health and soundness are better than all gold,

And a robust body than countless riches.

There is no wealth better than health of body,

And there is no gladness above joy of heart.

Death is better than a miserable life,

And eternal rest than chronic sickness (Sir 30:14-17).

He recommends temperance in eating (Sir 31:19-26), and gives similar advice about the benefits of moderate drinking in his discussion of banquet etiquette (Sir 31:27-31). The Hippocratic Corpus devoted several writings to the topic of

²⁷(...continued)

Surgery, do. 185-218; *Law*, do., 255-266; *Decorum*, do., 262-302; *In the Surgery*, vol. III (ed. E. T. Withington, 1928), 53-81; *Regimen in Health*, vol. IV (ed. W. H. S. Jones, 1924) 43-59; *Prorrhetic* vol. VIII (ed. Philip Potter, 1995) 167-293; *The Physician*, do. 297-315; G. E. R. Lloyd, ed., *Hippocratic Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978) offers a useful introduction to the Hippocratic corpus, but the selection contained therein lacks the minor treatises discussed here.

diet and moderation.²⁸ One must ultimately, of course, judge the fit of the comparison of texts such as these to Second Temple Jerusalem. They may shed some light on a small, but humanly interesting, aspect of the encounter between Judaism and Hellenistic culture. Indirectly it may also shed light on aspects of texts relating to the practice of medicine in the New Testament and later Jewish writings.²⁹ I propose to look now at these texts under five headings implied by words or ideas from the poem on the physician: the training of the Hellenistic physician; his manner of life; the question of payment; the role of religion in medicine and, the social status of the physician.

2. The Hippocratic Physician

i. The Training of the Physician: "The Skill of Physicians Makes them Distinguished"

For Ben Sira, the knowledge (ΓΝΩ or ἐπιστήμη) or skill of the physician is knowledge acquired through experience. While its roots are ultimately in God, the source of wisdom, which is found by the study of the Law and prophecy (Sir 39:1), by prayer (Sir 51:3), and comes eventually as a gracious gift to those who seek her (Sir 41:1), it must be nurtured by age and experience.

The word which is most frequently encountered in the medical texts for the physician's work is τέχνη or practical know-how. The Hippocratic Oath assumes that medical skill was learned through a system of apprenticeship, or a personal relationship between master and student. The doctor on admission to the profession swears

to hold him who taught me this art as equal to my parents, and to live my life in partnership with him, and if he is in need of money, to give him some of mine, and to regard his offspring as equal to

²⁸e.g. *Regimen in Health* (vol. IV of the Loeb edition).

²⁹For a lively account of the practice of the ancient physicians which set me following the trail of these minor treatises, see Edelstein. "The Hippocratic Physician," 87-110.

my brothers in male lineage and to teach them this art - if they so desire to learn it - without fee or covenant.³⁰

The short treatise *Law* compares the learning of medicine to the growth of a plant.³¹ The natural ability (φύσις) of the student receives the teachings (διδασκαλία) of the master just as the soil receives the seed. It receives its nutriment from the environment in which the study is carried on, and student's diligence (φιλοπονία) in learning is compared to the labour of the ploughman. Maturity with time is the only other factor required for the seed to produce fruit.³² The student is encouraged to distinguish between genuine science (ἐπιστήμη) and opinion (δόξα), for the one begets knowledge, the other ignorance. For the author of the *Decorum*, "medicine possesses all the qualities which make for wisdom."³³ Ben Sira's physician would probably pass muster.

ii. The Wandering Physician

The treatise *Law* assumes that, on termination of his apprenticeship, the student would travel from city to city, winning a reputation as a physician. Would-be specialists in military medicine were advised to join the army and accompany it on campaigns abroad.³⁴ To help the young physician to get established in an unfamiliar place, the Corpus contained a treatise called *Airs, Waters and Places* (Περὶ Ἐρῶν). Although many of its opinions were based on current prejudices and spurious legends, it might be described as the first attempt in history to compile a treatise on environmental medicine. A young physician was advised when he arrived in a new place to spend time taking stock of the environmental conditions such as the prevailing winds, the nature of the soil, the quality of the water, as well as of the general mode of life of the inhabitants:

³⁰Edelstein, "Oath," 6.

³¹*Law*, 3. See W. H. S. Jones, *The Writings of Hippocrates with an English Translation* vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1923).

³²*Law*, 2.

³³*Decorum*, 5.

³⁴*The Physician*, 14.

When therefore a physician comes to a district previously unknown to him, he should consider both its situation and its aspect to the winds. 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: is it marshy and soft, hard as it is when it flows from high and rocky ground, or salty, with a hardness which is permanent? Then think of the soil, whether it is bare and waterless or thickly covered with vegetation and well-watered; whether in a hollow and stifling, or exposed and cold. Lastly 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?³⁵

The treatise goes on to list common ailments the author believed to be typical of the different environments. Medicine was essentially an urban art. In the light of this, we may wonder whether Ben Sira's physician was a native Jerusalemite who, like the sage himself, had returned home after travelling abroad, perhaps opening a "medical school" with a handful of pupils in Jerusalem, or whether he may have been an Alexandrian Jew who made an astute career which brought him to his traditional homeland.

iii. Establishing a Practice

The wandering physician of antiquity was not a tourist, taking a lively interest in topography and manners. He had a livelihood to earn. Setting up a practice was relatively straightforward, requiring little more than a booth in the marketplace or hired room for use as a surgery. He was recommended however to give serious thought to the location and equipping of the surgery. The ideal surgery was well-sheltered from the wind and from direct sunlight, yet bright enough to allow treatment to be carried out properly. The couch was to be placed in such a way that the direct light would not cause the patient discomfort. Bronze furnishings were to be avoided as vulgar ostentation, although it was considered the most appropriate metal for instruments. Plenty of water should be available both for drinking and for cleansing. The instruments were to be laid

³⁵ *Airs, Waters and Places*, I.

conveniently to hand, unless an assistant was available pass them as required³⁶ and everything was to be well fitted for its use in size, weight and fineness. A supply of linen swabs was required for treatment of the eyes as well as sponges for cleansing wounds. Either those who accompanied the patient or the doctor's own assistant was to present the part of the body for treatment, holding the rest of the body steady, and keeping silence and obeying their superior.³⁷ Particular attention was given to the art of bandaging: graceful and showy bandages were vulgar and a matter of display, and in any case, a sick person was more interested in what is beneficial rather than what is decorative.

Attracting patients was a greater obstacle. Edelstein suspects that getting established probably entailed a fair amount of professional rivalry. "If he begins as an itinerant, the physician, like all other artisans, has to knock on people's doors and ask whether they can use his services."³⁸ It may have entailed keeping a weather eye open for places where competitors were doing business, even forcing a way in and suggesting a different diagnosis or remedy. If the newcomer made a better impression, then that was half the battle.

The physician was his own best advertisement. The literature provided several sketches of the ideal medical persona:

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. This, in fact, is pleasing to patients. The prudent man must also be very careful about moral considerations - not only how to be silent, since thereby his reputation will be greatly enhanced; he must be a gentleman in character, and being this, he must be graceful and kind to all.³⁹

He was advised to cultivate assiduously a serious, but not harsh, countenance, to avoid the vulgarity of uncontrolled laughter and excessive gaiety, although some others recommended him to have at his command a certain ready wit, and

³⁶ *In the Surgery*, 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁸ Edelstein, "The Hippocratic Physician," 89.

³⁹ *The Physician*, I.

to respect the intimacy of his dealings with people, especially with women, maidens and possessions.⁴⁰

Physicians also made house-calls, and as well as a case containing the most drugs and instruments likely to be required,⁴¹ a good bedside manner was indispensable.⁴² Prescriptions for other drugs (ἀναγεγραμμένα) were kept ready to hand. Frequent visits were encouraged, and it was important to see that the bed was placed in the most advantageous position for the patient. Patients were to be suspected of avoiding taking disagreeable drugs and it was presumed that they would lie about it. When necessary, one of the more advanced students who had already been in admitted to the mysteries of the art, was to be left in charge of the case, but in no circumstances was a layman (ἰδιώτης) to be left lest allegations of professional negligence arise.⁴³ Does Ben Sira's advice to be sparing in religious practices and to "give the doctor his place lest he leave," imply that this form of medical care was familiar to his Jerusalem audience?

iv. Payment: "And They are Rewarded by the King"

Ben Sira's doctor appears to derive his income from treating the upper-classes, or at least those sufficiently well off to be able to pay for it. The reference to receiving his reward from the king (Sir 38.2b) is intriguing however. It may simply be used by way of literary parallelism (God // King // Nobles) to enhance the status of the physician as one whose honour is guaranteed by the highest powers on earth and in heaven. Alternatively, although the text is too tenuous to allow any firm conclusions to be drawn, might there be an implication that the physician was in receipt of some form of royal endowment? There was little likelihood of a Jerusalem physician being called upon to minister to the King of Egypt: it may be more plausible to infer that he may have been in service to the members of the Egyptian royal administration in Jerusalem. Although the ancient world did not know of a free health service, there seems to have been some provision for cities to employ doctors.

⁴⁰*Decorum*, 8.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²There is too a Greek term, προσορέϊα, for sitting by a sick-bed.

⁴³*Decorum*, 13-17.

v. Religion and Medicine: "For They Too Pray to the Lord That He Grant Them Success in Diagnosis and His Treatment Bring About a Cure"

The reputation of the ancient doctor depended on his ability to diagnose a disease successfully, to make an accurate prognosis of its course and to prescribe and administer appropriate treatment. The Hippocratic Corpus contains several works on the art of diagnosis, including the *Prognostic* and two books of the *Prorrhetic*.⁴⁴ The author of the *Prognostic* realistically assumes that "to restore every patient to health is impossible," while the author of *The Art of Medicine* considers that the ability to recognise one's inability to treat effectively is among the essential elements of the art of medicine:

In general terms, [the art] is to do away with sufferings of the sick, to lessen the violence of their diseases, and to refuse to treat those who are overmastered by their diseases, realising that in such cases, medicine is powerless.⁴⁵

Accurate diagnosis was essential and the literature contains many instructions on how to proceed holistically in gathering the evidence. The *Prognostic*, for instance, 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, and to inquire about sleep patterns, bowel movement and appetite. For the author of the treatise *In the Surgery* the examination of the patient consisted in noting "what is like or unlike normal, beginning with the most marked signs and those easiest to recognise, open to all kinds of investigation, which can be seen, touched and heard, which are open to all our senses, sight, touch, hearing, the nose, the tongue, and the understanding."⁴⁶

The *Prorrhetic*, nevertheless, urged caution in predicting the course of the illness, for a wrong diagnosis might bring not only hatred in its wake but even the charge that the doctor might be mad. It recognised, no doubt from bitter experience, the importance of clear communication and danger of being

⁴⁴The *Prognostic* has been attributed to Hippocrates himself. See the introduction to it in Jones, *Hippocrates*, vol. II, 1-3.

⁴⁵*The Art of Medicine*, 2.

⁴⁶*In the Surgery*, 1.

misunderstood for "people neither judge correctly what was said and done in medicine, neither report it correctly."⁴⁷

The treatments most often referred to in the Hippocratic Corpus are herbal remedies, embrocations, firm bandaging, minor surgery, bloodletting, and cauterising (the treatise on haemorrhoids, for example, has a detailed description of how this treatment was to be applied in the case of this particular complaint!).

Although Greek medicine attempted to ground itself in empirical principles of careful observation, it was not an exclusively rational tradition.⁴⁸ While it did not share the superstitious awe of the period which regarded epilepsy as "the Sacred Disease," holding it as no more sacred than any other illness and probably having organic causes, it did not altogether dismiss the religious dimension of healing. The author of *Decorum*, for example, declared that "the gods are the real physicians."⁴⁹ Ben Sira presumed that his physician in charting his way through the symptoms of disease would rely also on divine help through prayer to the God who was the ultimate source of his healing skill. Like his patient, he was probably a Jew, since Ben Sira would probably not grant that God listened to the prayers of pagans.

vi. Status: In the Presence of the Great They are Admired

Although the Hippocratic writings commonly use the word τέχνη to describe the physician's art, Ben Sira does not rank them among craftsmen like the farmer, seal-engraver, smith and potter. Despite the utility of such crafts for maintaining a healthy society, the status of their practitioners was minimal. Ben Sira situates the physician both religiously and socially. In religious terms, he derives his expertise from God. Socially, his standing depends on his relationship with the king and the nobility (נְרִיבִים) - Sir 38:3b).

⁴⁷ *Proorrhetic*, II. 2.

⁴⁸ See for example, "Greek Medicine in its Relation to Religion and Magic," in: Edelstein, *Ancient Medicine*, 205-246.

⁴⁹ *Decorum*, 6. Jones *Hippocrates*, vol. II, 269-270, regards it as belonging to a later stratum in the Corpus, and purposely written in the language of a secret society.

Conclusion

This study was prompted initially by an interest in unravelling some motive for the reserve attached to the figure of the physician in the writings of Christianity and early Judaism. If my surmise that Ben Sira's esteem for the physician reflects an increasing sophistication in medical knowledge and techniques in Jerusalem in late third/ early second century BCE, one might ask whether this continued to be the case in the decades and centuries following. If the witness of 1 Macc 1:14-15 is to be trusted, the decades immediately following Ben Sira witnessed not merely a flourishing medical practice in Jerusalem, but even in some "progressive" circles, a readiness to undergo an early form of cosmetic surgery (epispasm) to remove the traces of circumcision. His view that healing is ultimately in the hands of God but that he has arranged that it be discovered by means of human skill enabled him to be open to a new cultural manifestation of healing without compromising his traditional theology.

Mark's ironic comment on physicians was noted at the beginning of this paper. A saying of Rabbi Judah preserved in the Mishnah is even more negative:

Ass-drivers are most of them wicked, camel drivers are most of them proper folk, sailors are most of them saintly, the best among physicians is destined for Gehenna, and the most seemly of butchers is a partner of Amelek.⁵⁰

Yet it does not follow that medical practice in the first century had declined or was exclusively in the hands of quacks. Abuse of the physician was a common topos in the literature of antiquity in Greek and Roman literature. A poem in the *Greek Anthology*, for instance, describes a charlatan who peddled a cure for straightening the spine:

⁵⁰ *Quidd* 4:14. References to physicians in the Mishnah occur for the most part in discussions relating to the application of the rules of purity, which may be an indication of their relative lateness.