



TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED HEALING TEXTS AND THEIR CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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Abstract

Traditional medicine has remained an integral component of healthcare systems in many societies, particularly in Africa, where herbal remedies and indigenous healing practices continue to complement orthodox medicine. However, the relationship between traditional medicine and the biblical tradition has generated considerable theological debate, with divergent views regarding its legitimacy and relevance within Christian communities. This study examines selected Old Testament healing texts to explore their perspectives on the use of traditional medicine and assess their contemporary relevance. Employing the historical-grammatical and exegetical methods of biblical interpretation, the study analyzes selected passages that reference medicinal plants, healing substances, and therapeutic practices within their historical and literary contexts. Data were obtained from the Hebrew Bible and relevant secondary sources, including books, peer-reviewed journals, and biblical commentaries. The findings reveal that the Old Testament acknowledges the medicinal value of natural resources and presents healing as an integrated process involving divine sovereignty, human responsibility, and the appropriate use of therapeutic agents. The study further demonstrates that biblical healing practices neither dismiss indigenous medicinal knowledge nor detach healing from faith in God. It concludes that a biblically informed and contextually grounded understanding of traditional medicine can enrich contemporary Christian engagement with healthcare. The study recommends a balanced theological approach that promotes responsible use of traditional medicine while maintaining biblical principles, scientific validation, and ethical standards.

Keywords: Traditional medicine, Old Testament, healing, herbal medicine, biblical theology, contemporary relevance.

Introduction

According to Sun (2013), religion and spirituality have a critical role in satisfying the needs and wants of patients. Although the Holy Bible was not authored as a scientific, historical, and medical work, the book has remained an unending source of inspiration to scientists, cosmologists, philosophers, educators, and anthropologists in their areas of investigation. The Bible is very concerned about the patient, the weak and the vulnerable, and this aspect of interest has echoed in the ethos of medicine. In the Old Testament it is seen that God directly reprimanded those in authority in Israel because they were not concerned about the ill, the helpless, the injured, and the lost. This is put in very graphic terms in the prophetic oracle of Ezekiel 34: 4:

"The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them."

To a large extent, it is probable that among the Hebrews of the Biblical period and later, medicine occupied a prominent place. The status of medical arts is generally in proportion to the value set on human life, for which the Bible certainly had a high regard. The fact that both Old and New Testaments are relatively silent about medical phenomena can be explained by the fact that the books focus on law and ethics, and mention medicine only in an indirect way (Sun, 2013). The prophets sometimes refer to physicians: Jeremiah thought it inconceivable that he would see no physician in Gilead; Asa was chastised because he sought healing with physicians on his illness; and Job, whose malady the physicians could find no cure to, gave the name *rophe elil* (physicians of no value).

Crucial to practice of medicine in the Bible is the use of Herbs. As per the textual and archaeological evidence available, the bible is full of reference to many plants and herbs that have been used as traditional medicines over thousands of years. These are Balm (Genesis 37:25; 43:11; Ezekiel 27:17; Jeremiah 8:22; 46:11; 51:8), Bitter herbs Coriander seed, Cilantro root, Wild lettuce, and Wild endives (Exodus 12:8), Cassia (Exodus 30:24; Ezekiel 27:19; Psalms 45:8), Cumin (Isaiah 28:21).

We also have Garlic (Numbers 11:5-6), Hyssop (1 King 4:33, Psalm 51:7), Mandrake (Genesis 30:14, Song of Songs 7:13), Milk thistle (Genesis 3:18), Mint (Luke 11:41, Matthew 23:23), Mustard seed (Luke 17:6), Myrrh (Esther 2:12, Genesis 43:11, Proverbs 7:17), Nard (Song 1:12, Song 4:13, Song 4:14, Mark 14:3, John 12:3), Pistachio nuts and Almond (Genesis 43:11), Saffron (Song of Solomon 4:14), and Turmeric (Song of Solomon 4:14-15) are important medicinal plants which have been mentioned in the Bible. Over the past few decades, the consumption of herbal medicines and natural products has grown at a high rate across the world (Fabricant and Farnsworth, 2001). This study seeks to discuss the curative application of traditional medicine in ancient Israel with special consideration given to some prophetic writings.

Socio-Scientific Analysis of the Use of Herbs in Old Testament

Old Testament prophets played the role of mediators and intercessors between Yahweh and his people. What they had been given by God, they passed on to the people, the called, sent, and commissioned to speak to them words of reprimand, rebuke, and encouragement (cf. Jeremiah 1; 29:19). Chalmers (2015) says that real prophets like in the book of Micah did not preach what the people wanted to hear, but what they comprehended that Yahweh desired to be said. Nogalski (2015) also observes that the prophets gave life-altering messages of Yahweh that were geared towards the future of the community. In the prophetic literature, the metaphoric use of language and various forms and terms was used in expressing prophetic oracles in the manner that was comprehensible and understandable to the audience (Chalmers, 2015).

The use of medical terms and words in prophetic literature where Jeremiah uses the terms that are clearly present in Jeremiah 8:22; 14:19; 30:13; 46:11 are used to highlight the seriousness of the situation of Israel as it pertained to their covenantal relationship with Yahweh. In fact, the medical terminologies also depicted the literary level of the prophets and how much they relied on the common cultural understanding in order to make their message significant. As mentioned above, there is a close interconnection between healing, illness and worship of Yahweh through obedience to his commandments. According to the context of the Torah, it is reiterated severally that obedience to Israel of Israel would result in sickness and disease of all kind (Deuteronomy 28:9ff). According to Hasel (1983), the forgiveness, salvation, and healing themes can never be out of context within Scripture because he claims that healing is not only about the physical healing

but also includes the more important aspect of the forgiveness and the restoration into the fellowship with God (Nogalski, 2015).

Ancient Israel's idea of 'health' is complicated by the fact that the idea interacted with notions of purity and impurity. According to Pilch, (1998, p. 170), the social value of purity guided every member of a given society to respect and conform to the system of space and lines of time that human groups advance to ensure that everything has its place and a place everything. This perception of purity was closely connected with the fact that people were holy and that made them be able to relate to Yahweh. It therefore followed that medical language was a major way the prophets used to express the physical and spiritual state of the people.

It is also noticeable that the prophets were conversant with the use of herbs as a treatment of diseases. The prophet Isaiah, as an example, manages the life endangering disease of King Hezekiah by rubbing figs on his sores-an incidence that has been reported on two occasions, 2 Kings 20: 1-7 and Isaiah 38: 1-21. The Bible narrative is, however, also explicit that the healing of Hezekiah is finally attributed to God finally: when guaranteeing Hezekiah an extension of fifteen more years of life, Yahweh mentions the prayers made by the latter, and not the physical treatment taken by Isaiah. Likewise, Elijah's and Elisha miracle cures are marriages of physical activities and prayer (1 Kings 17:17-22; 2 Kings 4:32-35). The physical action of the prophets in these stories has an element of similarity to that of resuscitation, but might rather be seen as part of the religious ritual. Such a mixture of herbal medicine and spiritual treatment is influenced by the holistic concept of health and healing in the ancient Israel. In a number of oracles Jeremiah uses language that is distinctly medical: in Jeremiah 2:2 he refers to the apothecary, in 8:22 to the well-known balm in Gilead, and in 46:11, to make the point that the cultural knowledge of medicinal herbs was quite familiar.

Finally, it can be said that prophets' knowledge of medicine may be attributed to the fact that they also served as health consultants. Prophets were seen as persons who had special access to a deity and were the natural candidates for consultation by the sick. The Biblical texts are uniform in giving these figures a role as health care consultants. These Figures include Elijah and Elisha who operated outside the ruling political structures in the North and Isaiah who operated within the royal court. In order to define the role and *modus operandi* of the prophet in the health care system. This particular role enables them to know medical terms and further explain the continuous usage of that term in their writings.

Analysis of Selected Passages in Jeremiah Prophetic Oracles

The book of Jeremiah contains the famous passage asking, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has not the health of the daughter of my people been restored?" (Jeremiah 8:22). Also, there are other passages that suggest the use of herbs in Ancient Israel. These texts are Jeremiah 8:22; 46:11 and 14:19. In Jeremiah 8:22, the prophet employed medical metaphors to expose the depth of Israel's depravity. These texts contain some crucial words or phrases worth studying. These are "balm", "in Gilead", and "no physician".

The phrase "is there no balm in Gilead?" according to existing commentaries showed that Gilead was the medicinal hub of ancient Israel. Gilead was eminent for balm, Genesis 43:11, taken for rosin or turpentine, which is a kind of more liquid rosin, and either flows or drops from certain trees of its own accord, or their juice flows from several holes pierced into them, as from the pine, cedar, cypress, or terebinth tree. In fact, the resinous gums of Gilead, identified by some naturalists with those of the terebinth, by others with *mastich*, the gum of the *Pistaccia lentiscus*, were

prominent in the *pharmacopeta* of Israel, and were exported to Egypt for the embalmment of the dead (Genesis 37:25;43:11; Jeremiah 43:11; Jeremiah 51:8). A plaister of such gums was the received prescription for healing a wound.

In the literary background of the book of Jeremiah 8, the prophet raises a rhetorical question: do they have no means of healing, no one to heal the spiritual wounds of Israel? The prophets were assumed the role of doctors of Israel; repentance and righteousness was her balm of Gilead. The implicit query by the prophet in asking; Why has no balsam plaster been spread over the daughter of my people? is the lamentation of Yahweh that his representatives failed to give the due medicine. The relation between balm, physician and restoration of health as the case suggests by Keil and Delitzsch (1996) carries with it the implication of the presence of physicians who employed medicine to achieve the healing though here is mainly to the spiritual healing (Avalos, 1995). This passage therefore shows just how grateful the spiritual state of Israel was and affirms the argument that medical terms in prophetic literature were used mostly to express the fact that the people were exhausted in its covenantal relationship with Yahweh.

The sentiment shared in Jeremiah 8:22 was further repeated in 46:11. The oracle in 46:11-12 was to explain the hopeless situation of Egypt. This text confirms that Egypt was a bastion of medical knowledge and advancement in ancient world. Yet, there was a grievous tone of judgment from Yahweh. Keil and Delitzsch (1996) points out that in this particular text the prophet Jeremiah is saying that the blow which shall there come on the Egyptians is one from which they shall never recover, and the wound shall be one not to be healed by any balm. When there was reference to the balm of Gilead as in 8:22, the case of Egypt is beyond physical affliction and their doom and destruction will be so great and imminent. Though, in the long run the meaning of Jeremiah's message is to point out to the doom of Egypt. Yet, his reference to medial terms and herb showed that there was cultural and scientific appreciation of medicines in Ancient Israel.

From the social scientific analysis, it is clear that ancient Israel (like many other ancient societies) considered illness as a punishment from a deity, in Israel's case from Yahweh (Avalos, 1995). There is also a close link between the people's sin and sickness. The extant of the biblical literatures invariably show that the Yahweh is the ultimate healer. Yahweh declares in Exod. 15:26: "For I, the Lord, am your healer." The term translated "healer" is *rope*; "healer," "doctor," "physician"; the same term employed in Gen 50:2, Job 13:4, Jer. 8:22, and 2 Chr. 16:12, the texts which we have just considered. The fact that the Lord is "your healer" (or better, "your physician") is fundamental to biblical faith. The recurring theme is that the Lord either directly brings about health or provides healing through appointed means (Pilch, 1998).

Significance of the Use of Herbs in Ancient Israel

The Bible has many allusions to a broad range of herbs and most of them were appropriate in the arid and semi-desert climate of the Middle East. However, it is important to note that in various translations of the same passage of the bible, the names of various herbs might be provided, this being an indication of the difficulty in interpreting ancient botanical terminologies. In certain cases one of the translations can be trying to be more particular to the designation of an herb, and the other can be a more general term like bitter herb. Here are a few of the most important herbs, which are mentioned in the bible and which have been approached by scholarly works.

Aloe (*Aquitor asalloche*) is believed to be the only tree descended to man from the Garden of Eden. (Numbers 24:6) Like valleys that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the Lord has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters (Dafni and Bock, 2019).



Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*) is referenced several times in the Old Testament. (Exodus 16:31) Now the house of Israel called its name manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey (Dafni and Bock, 2019).

Cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*) is an herb native to the upper areas of the Nile, mentioned in the Bible, along with Mint (*Mentha* sp.), when Jesus reproved the scribes (Matthew 23:23), (Dafni and Bock, 2019).

Garlic (*Allium sativum*) is mentioned only once in the Bible in Numbers 11:5 as one of the foods that Israelites remembered in Egypt. The ancient Egyptians held it in high regard, and the contemporary research proves it to have strong antimicrobial and cardiovascular effects (Fabricant and Farnsworth, 2001).

Hyssop (*Sorghum vulgare*) is known as the holy herb. Hyssop was used to cleanse the temples and other sacred places of the Egyptians. David mentions hyssop in Psalms 51:7. Hyssop as we know it may or may not be the hyssop mentioned by David. There is some debate since the derivation of the name hyssop is in the Greek word *hussopos* and the Hebrew *esob*, meaning simply, “holy herb.” It is validated by Dafni and Bock (2019) as one of the five plant species with a specific description of being a medicine in the Bible with proven antiseptic use.

Mustard (*Brassica nigra*) is described in Matthew 13:31 as “the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.” Its seeds also were used as medicine and are mentioned in ancient traditions of healing.

Rose (*Rosa* spp) The name for a rose is almost the same in every European language. Dried roses have been found in Egyptian tombs. (Isaiah 35:1) The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the rose.

Rue (*Ruta graveolens*) has long been the symbol of sorrow and repentance, and may have been nicknamed the “herb of grace” in Christian times for the grace given by God following repentance for one’s sins. Brushes made from rue were once used to sprinkle holy water at the ceremony preceding High Mass.

Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*) is frequently mentioned in Scripture, always for its bitterness. According to legend, wormwood grew up in the trail left by the serpent’s tail as it slithered out of the Garden of Eden (Jeremiah 23:15) Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets: “Behold, I will feed them with wormwood, and give them poisoned water to drink; for from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has gone forth into all the land.” *Artemisia* species have been extensively used in medical preparations in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia and this is also documented in Talmudic sources (Dafni and Bock, 2019).

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) is a symbol of fidelity and remembrance once used in the holiest of Christian ceremonies, the wedding and the funeral. For centuries people thought that the rosemary plant would never grow higher than 6 feet in 33 years so as not to stand taller than Christ. Another story tells that the flowers were originally white, but changed to blue when the Virgin Mary hung her cloak on the bush while fleeing from Herod’s soldiers with the Christ child.

Costmary (*Chrysanthemum balsamita*) is also known as Bible leaf because in Colonial times a leaf served as a bookmark in Bibles and prayer books. When drowsiness set in, the sleeper treated himself to the minty leaf to stay awake.

Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) and Dil (*Anethum graveolens*) were carried to prayer meetings in Colonial times in small pouches. The seeds were used to curb the appetite. They were called “meeting seeds”.

A critical review by Dafni and Bock (2019) of previous lists of the biblical medicinal plants (between 55 and 176 species) revealed the high number of botanical misidentifications and translation mistakes of many of the lists. Their work was based on new research on Hebrew biblical philology, the Egyptian and Mesopotamian medical systems, ethnobotany and archaeobotany, coming up with a new and more defensible list of 45 plant species. Few of these are clearly named as medicinal in the bible: Fig (*Ficus carica*), Nard (*Nardostachys jatamansi*), Hyssop (*Origanum syriacum*), Balm of Gilead (*Commiphora gileadensis*), and Mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*). The Bible also references 27 other species, which are testified as having been used as medicine in both Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt, such as Myrtle (*Myrtus communis*), Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*), Cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*), Date Palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*), Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*), Garlic (*Allium sativum*), Black Cumin (*Nigella sativa*), and Cedar (*Cedrus libani*).

It should be mentioned that the major source of medicine in antiquity was herbs. The Book of Jubilees (10:12) shows that the angels presented Noah with different remedies which he wrote down. Some ancient authorities, supposedly writing the name Asaph the physician, say that Noah, having been instructed by the angel Raphael, on the medicinal qualities of trees, plants, and roots, wrote them down in a book afterward given out by Shem, and used by the physicians of the early times. Books of remedies seem to have been quite common in antiquity, as Maimonides notes that one was supposedly written by Solomon, but had to be suppressed by Hezekiah, king of Judah, so that the people would not turn to remedies alone, but instead to God (Pes. 4:9).

Otherwise, the Bible has little explicit mention of medicinal herbs as such, the most attested (with balm, zori, meaning efficacious in treatment of wounds) being Jeremiah 8:22; 46:11; 51:8. The Genesis 30:14-17 account of the mandrakes could be alluding to the so-called fertility-promoting effects of the plant, but the theological meaning in the story is probably that pregnancy is a gift bestowed upon a person by God. Toxic plants were also mentioned in the Bible, such as *rosh* ("hemlock" or "gall" and *la'anah* wormwood), which used in small amounts could have been used therapeutically also (testimony found in Greek and Roman medical texts). The event in 2 Kings 4:39-41 where Elisha counteracts a bowl of colocynth (*pakku'ot*) poison in a famine, also demonstrates the fact that the ancient world knew of the dual toxic and medicinal nature of some plants.

Medical Implications and its Relevance to Modern Medicine

The use of medicinal plants has been exceptionally significant in the history of conserving health and curing disease over the human history. Plant-based medicine is still a controversial topic of interest in the modern world. According to Fabricant and Farnsworth (2001), a significant percentage of the new drugs are based on plant compounds of traditional medicine. The key ones are the rauwolfia, digitalis, cinchona bark and opium poppy, which have been used to extract many clinically valuable alkaloids. Over the past few decades, pharmaceutical firms in the global market have pumped huge resources in the study of active constituents in plants that are used in traditional medicine. Other companies like Merck and Pfizer have invested large sums on botanical research programmes to discover pharmacologically active compounds of natural flora.

Such a study can be well grounded in the biblical pharmacopoeia as it was read in comparison with the ancient pharmacopoeias in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian world. Fernandes (2025) shows that biblical writings are evidence of an advanced, holistic definition of health which involves physical, mental, and spiritual aspects, and that many of the natural substances mentioned in the Bible have antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties which can be verified

empirically. Such ancient knowledge when integrated with the modern pharmaceutical method of research has great potential in the field of finding new therapeutic compounds.

The modern importance of traditional herbal medicine is also emphasized by the trends in the use of it around the globe. According to the estimates made by the World Health Organisation, about 80 percent of the population in the world depends on traditional plant-based medicine in some form of primary health care (Olagunju, 2023). Relatively, in Nigeria especially, there has been a renewed interest in systematic development of traditional medicine and there has been a growing awareness that traditional and orthodox medical systems do not have to be mutually exclusive. This is confirmed by Echeta (2020), who uses the Old Testament ideas to maintain that herb-based food and medicine is a divinely approved method to human wellbeing, which is still practically applicable in the modern African context.

The relationship between Christianity and traditional medicine in the Nigerian and African context is one that has always been strained in the past. The role of early missionary Christianity in suppressing the native knowledge of healing is recorded by Olagunju (2023) and Ottuh and Ottuh (2012), who both confuse herbalism with fetishism and idolatry; a confounding of the Old Testament that is not based on the evidence. The biblical tradition, which was revealed in the examination of the passages in Jeremiah and other literary works, reveals the invariable presentation of herbs as divine gifts whose healing ability is based on the Creator and not the deities of other religious systems. Such difference plays an important role in the renegotiation of relationship between Christianity and traditional healing in the modern Nigerian society.

Conclusion

This study has discussed the Old Testament as the focus of the study on herbs as traditional medicine, especially to the selected texts in prophetic literature, mostly in the book of Jeremiah. With the aid of a socio-scientific analysis of these texts, it has been shown that the use of herbs was not only common in the ancient Israelite society, but entrenched in the daily life of people and in the oracles of the prophets. The prophets have used medical metaphors, which were based on the culture of using herbs to heal illnesses, to communicate the severity of the spiritual status of Israel and the full extent to which Yahweh cared about the wellbeing of his people.

The approach toward medicine and health of the Old Testament is essentially holistic. Health is not just a physical phenomenon, but it is connected with the covenantal relationship of a person with Yahweh. The acknowledgment of herbs as acceptable therapeutic value under the biblical context ought to promote a more balanced approach and enlightened approach to traditional medicine in Nigeria after colonization. The demonization of traditional medicine as something devilish is not founded on the biblical narrative; instead, the Old Testament confirms that the curative value of plants is God-ordained and that it should be used with gratitude.

This study suggests that the renewed academic and pastoral interest in the Torah and its teaching on lifestyle and healing should be resorted to and that the positive approach of the Old Testament towards herbs should be positively used in the discussion concerning the primary health care in Nigeria. It also suggests incorporating traditional herbal medicine into modern medical education, proper documentation of the available herbal knowledge in African societies before it becomes extinct via current oral tradition that is being used, and how structures could be put in place to address the ethical and scientifically sound application of plant-based medicine in conjunction with orthodox medical practice.



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