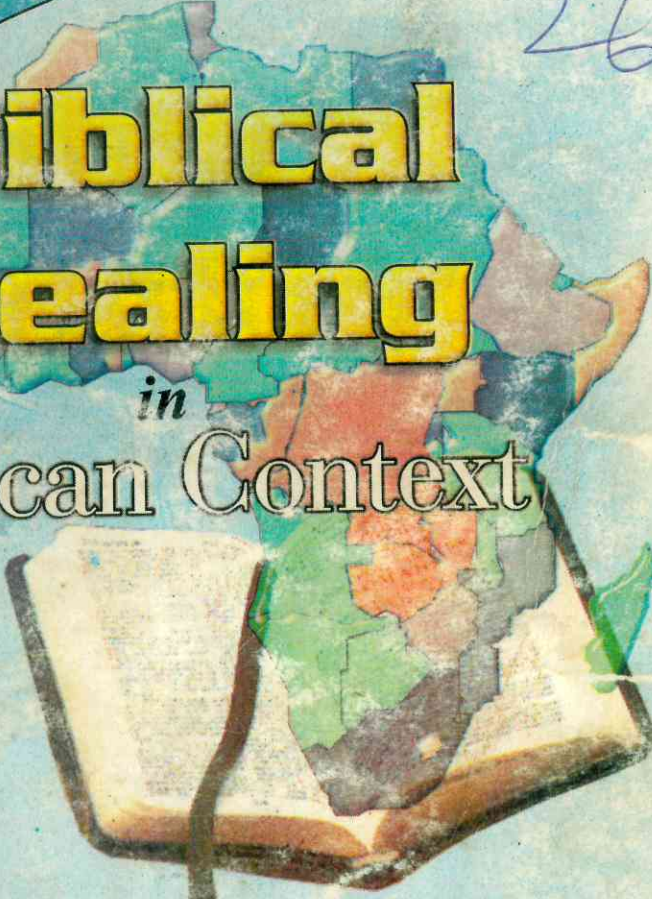


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Biblical Healing

in
African Context



Edited by:

S. O. Abogunrin
J. O. Akao
D. O. Akintunde
G. N. Toryough
P. A. Oguntoye

**Biblical Studies Series
No. 3**

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For Biblical Studies (NABIS)*

Ogunkunle, C.O.

BIBLICAL HEALING IN AFRICAN CONTEXT

26

Revd. Dr. C.O. Ogunkunle
Sign.
Date

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PROPHET ISAIAH AND THE HEALING OF KING HEZEKIAH IN THE YORUBA CONTEXT

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A. INTRODUCTION

Living in good health is a legitimate concern of people, especially, in Africa. In fact, many people regard illness as a misfortune. Speaking of the importance of good health and medicine among the Yoruba, P.A. Dopamu says:

The Yoruba know that to be healthy is to live. Without life, there is no man. And since illness or disease is an indication that the means of existence or life itself is being threatened, and the gate to quietus is being gradually opened, man must of necessity find a means of combating it, and this means is adequately found in medicine. Medicine is used against diseases, ailments, or illness of all categories.¹

In light of the importance of good health as shown in the above statement, this paper examines the ministry of prophet Isaiah to king Hezekiah who was threatened by a sickness that was going to claim his life. Attempts will be made to do an exegesis of the passage and this will be related to an African situation.

The multiple historical, exegetical method is adopted. The records of the healing as recorded in the books of Kings, Chronicles and Isaiah will be compared while the findings will be compared with some healing in contemporary Africa.

B. KING HEZEKIAH

The story of Hezekiah is recorded in three different books of the Old Testament: II Kings 18-20; II Chronicles 29-32 and Isaiah 36-39. A careful study of the three books shows that II Kings stresses the political reforms, of Hezekiah. The Chronicler concentrates on religious reforms while Isaiah gives emphasis to the divine intervention on the king.

Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz and Abijah was the best king of Judah after David (II Kgs. 18:1-3; II Chro 29:1). He was an astute statesman, great orator revivalist, architect, poet, philosopher, composer of liturgical songs (Isa. 38:9-19), compiler and contributor to the Psalms of David, and wisdom literature of Solomon (Prov 25:1; II Chro 31:21). Hezekiah was a sound administrator with people oriented, but God focused, programmes, including agriculture and special water supply through the rock (II Chro 30:24; 31:4-41).

Hezekiah, a godly king of Judah ascended the throne at the age of 25 years and he reigned for 29 years (II Kgs 18:1; II Chr 29:1). He was the only king of Judah who trusted God completely and followed strictly David's pattern of high-class religious and political reforms for Judah and Israel (II Kgs 18:3,5-7).² Hezekiah crushed the spirit of apostasy of Judah by reopening and restoring temple purities for best worship of Yahweh (II Chro 29:4-11). He was the first king to face and overcome the toughest crisis caused by his pagan predecessor (II Kgs 18:4).

The religious reformation of Hezekiah could be said to have had its origin at the time of Ahaz when the prophetic words of Amos and Hosea were fulfilled in the destruction of the Northern kingdom. The fall of the Northern kingdom was used powerfully by prophet Isaiah and Micah to point out the importance of returning to the worship of Yahweh. Hezekiah removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and put down the Asherah (II Kgs 18:4). He destroyed the bronze snake 'Nehushtan' which had been preserved in the temple.³

Hezekiah reopened, refurbished and reorganized the temple and its worship (II Chro 29:2-3). He had high regard for Yahweh's priesthood as one of the divinely instituted instruments of pure worship. Hezekiah, unlike Ahaz, restored the dignity of the priests and Levites and encouraged them to be totally focused and devoted to the study of law and sustenance of pure worship (II Chro 29:4-11,17). He assigned the Priests and Levites to 24 divisions for orderly worship like David so as to offer burnt offerings and fellowship offerings and to give thanks and sing praises at the gates of the LORD'S dwelling (II Chro 31:8).

Hezekiah reintroduced the great Passover feast of unleavened bread (II Chro 30:13,15). This epoch making celebration was a long - lasting legacy in which people of the Northern kingdom participated. He cleansed the whole land, including Ephraim and Manasseh of idolatry (II Chro 31:1).

Politically, Hezekiah had great concern for the nation of Judah in general and the city of Jerusalem in particular. He strengthened the defences of Jerusalem. He cut through the solid rock in order to bring the water of the Gihon spring to the city (II Kgs 20:20; II Chro 32:20). The death of Sargon in 705 BC led to the accession of Sennacherib after which there developed a new situation. Hezekiah took advantage of the new development and he rebelled against the king of Assyria (II Kgs 18:7). He recovered the cities seized by the Philistines in the days of king Ahaz (II king 18:8).

Hezekiah faced a number of difficulties during his reign but he also witnessed God's power as he trusted him for deliverance. It was during Hezekiah's reign that Assyria invaded Judah and an angel of the LORD killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers who were camped around Jerusalem (Isa. 37:36). Also, Hezekiah experienced healing from a terminal illness and he lived fifteen years longer than he would have otherwise lived.

C. CAUSES OF SICKNESS

The Hebrew verb *kalakh* has two meanings: one, it means to become weak as in the case of Samson in Judges 16:7,11,17 cf. Isaiah 57:10; Ezekiel 34:4,16. Two, the word means "to become sick or ill" as Jacob (Gen 48:1); Abijah (I Kgs 14:1,5); Ahazia (I Kgs 1:2) etc. The phrase *halakh lamuth* is used in II Kgs 20:1; II Chro 32:24, and Isaiah 38:1 in reference to the sickness of Hezekiah, which was unto death.⁴

Several individuals and scholars have given various causes for sicknesses that are plaguing men in our society. Charles C. Ryrie gave five points as to why people become sick. These include sickness that comes for the purpose of glorifying God (John 11:4); sickness which Jesus healed in order that men might believe (John 9); illness that comes as an activity of demons (Mark 5:4-5); sickness that comes as a result of sin; and sickness that comes as a result of overwork.⁵ Also, writing from an ecclesiastical perspective, an unidentified writer in the Life Magazine listed causes of sickness as follows: transgression and iniquity (Psalm 107:17); rejecting God's word (Psalm 107:20); misuse of the tongue (Numbers 12:2,9,10); touching the Lord's Anointed (Psalm 105:12-15); refusal to worship the Lord in the beauty of his holiness (Zechariah 14:18-20); and marital infidelity (Numbers 5:27).⁶

P.A. Dopamu argues that disease can be caused by any of these three ways; (1) natural or physical causation which include cough cold, fever, etc. (2) supernatural causation which is caused by a witch or sorcerer. This is manifested in serious and protracted illness. Finally, (3) mystical causation which is caused by spirits, divinities, and ancestors as a punishment for offences against them.⁷

It is difficult to group the sickness of Hezekiah into any of the above proposals. One thing is certain, however, Yahweh was aware of the sickness and that He allowed it probably to demonstrate His power and sovereignty in the affairs of King Hezekiah.

D. THE SICKNESS AND HEALING OF KING HEZEKIAH

It is of interest to note that the account in II Kings 20:1-11 is more comprehensive than the Isaiah account where some phrases are omitted.

John N. Oswalt observes that:

Almost all commentators, whatever their critical persuasions agree that II Kings 20:1-11 preserves a better account of the story in that it is fuller and has a more logical sequence of events. It appears that the writer of the Isaiah account, abridging the original (perhaps to gain room for the Psalm he wished to include), inadvertently left out the reference to Isaiah's poultice and Hezekiah's request for a sign (II Kings 20:7-8). He then added there on at the end of the account.⁸

One thing is certain with the three accounts, and what is, they all present Hezekiah in two lights: positive and negative. On the one hand, he is still the King Hezekiah who can turn to God in submission and trust in a moment of necessity. But on the other hand, he is Hezekiah who is distinctly mortal.⁹

Bayu mim hehem (in those days), this phrase is used for both past and future events. Also, the phrase forms the basis of the various dates given to the incident.¹⁰ It is obvious that the sickness afflicted King Hezekiah during or shortly after the invasion of Judah. Hezekiah was sick to the point of death. This serious sickness is identified as boil (II Kgs 20:7 and Isa 38:21). The Hebrew word *sthukh* is a masculine noun which means boil or eruption.¹¹ It is the same word used in Exodus 9:9-11 to describe the boil that plagued men and beasts in Egypt.

God sent prophet Isaiah to inform Hezekiah that he would die. Hence, the Prophet instructed him to prepare for his death by setting his house in order. The word *bayith*, which is a masculine noun, means

house. But in this context, it means household affairs, persons, property, etc.¹² Prophet Isaiah functions here as a royal adviser to ensure a proper and orderly succession. Therefore, putting the house in order would avoid any unnecessary strife after the death of the reigning king. This type of announcement of impending death is seen as a judgment cf. I Sam 2:31-34; I Kgs 14:10; II Kgs 1:2-4. The only thing here is that there is no hint that the king is being punished for any misdeed.¹³

Hezekiah responded positively to this bad news. He prayed earnestly to Yahweh *wathupalel* in Isaiah 38:2 is *hithpael* imperfect third person masculine singular from *palel*. The word means 'and he prayed'.¹⁴ King Hezekiah reminded God of his faithfulness to Him, his whole hearted devotion, and his good behaviour as the representative of God. He wept bitterly (Isa 38:2; II Kgs 20:2). He was completely devastated. Various reasons have been suggested as to why king Hezekiah should weep profusely and bitterly: (1) It was suggested that he wanted to continue living and reigning, especially as he was still relatively young, being only 39 years.¹⁵ (2) It was suggested that he felt his death would give Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, something to boast about.¹⁶ (3) Another suggestion is that he was sure of this life but not certain of what lay beyond the grave.¹⁷ Finally, (4) It was noted that king Hezekiah had no heir at that time. Manasseh who ascended the throne at the age of 12 (II Kgs 21:1) was born three years after the incident. Therefore, the king must have thought that being cut off without an heir in his midlife was a severe judgment from God cf. Gen 15:2,3; Lev 20:20; I Sam 1:10-11; Prov 30:15-16; Isa 53:8;54:1; Jer 22:30; Luke 1:7, 25.¹⁸

The fact is that Hezekiah poured out the feeling of his wounded heart to God who was moved to heal him. Incidentally, this is not the first time Hezekiah would pray to Yahweh. He had earlier on turned to God in prayer when he received a letter of threat from the Assyrian king (II Kgs 19:15). The only difference is that the king in II Kings 19:15 concentrated on the greatness and majesty of Yahweh whereas in II Kgs 20:2, he concentrates on his own party.¹⁹ The king's appeal to his

previous righteous conduct as Israel's leader has been called 'relative righteousness'.²⁰ This appeal is in line with that of David in Psalm 18:20-28 where he points to his godly living as the cause for his victory over his foes.²¹

God sent his message to Hezekiah through Prophet Isaiah in the similar way He (God) did to king David, through Prophet Nathan (II Sam 7:3-4). The references to *mahi* "prince of my people" in II king 20:5 which is omitted in Isaiah 38:5 and 'Elohe Dawid abona' "God of your father David" in Isaiah 38:5 are clear indications that Hezekiah was healed as a result of God's favour to him. John. Oswalt observes that;

*Hezekiah's recovery is not merely because God had changed his mind but because of his willingness to keep faith with those to whom he has committed himself in the past (Deut 4:37, 38). But it also evokes that memory of the impact to the faithful life. There is no limit to the effect of such life.*²²

It is obvious from II Kings 20:7 and Isaiah 38:21 that Hezekiah's sickness involved some kind of skin disorder.²³ Prophet Isaiah in this passage functions like Elisha, who had to deal with issue of life and death. (II Kgs 2:20-22). He gave Hezekiah treatment for his sickness. Two key words are used to drive home the nature of treatment given by Isaiah. What Prophet Isaiah prescribed, was a common treatment for boils and ulcers in the ancient world to promote healing. It was specifically noted that figs were used for toothache in Mesopotamia and it was used for constipation in Egypt.²⁴ One wonders why Hezekiah's physicians had not prescribed poultice of figs? It is possible that this was designed to demonstrate God's supernatural power at work in granting the king's recovery.²⁵ The healing of Hezekiah is an example of healing which occurs because of a combination of prayer, medicine and God's work.

E. HEALING IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

People all over the world believe that healing is of Yahweh as demonstrated in one of His names "aniYaweh rophekha" I am the Lord your Healer" (Exodus 15:26). Also, the Yoruba believe that healing is from the Lord as they greet a sick person as "Olorun yoo fun o ni alaafia" or "Olorun yoo mu alaafia wa"; the statement literally means "God will grant you (the sick person) a sound health."²⁶ But then, the Yoruba after greeting and praying for the sick person, would ask "iru oogun / egbogi wo lo ti lo?" meaning 'what type of medicine have you used or taken?' This means that the Yoruba believe in the use of medicine to aid the healing process. Indeed, the Yoruba are well aware of various diseases that attack men and they also know the various means by which diseases can be cured.³⁷ For a natural disease such as headache, boil, fever, etc. its treatment can be carried out by the patient himself or an elder in the family. P.A Dopamu gave the description of how his father treated him of koto (a chronic abscess in the flesh). The treatment was in three stages:

The first stage was to make the koto break. The fresh fruit of lara plant and the excreta of hen were ground and mixed with ori (shea-butter). The ori was applied on the koto and it broke the second day. The second stage was to remove one solid white patch that appeared on the ulcer. To this end, the leaves of ewuro (vernonia Amygdalina) were boiled, and some of the boiled leaves together with black soap were used to clean the ulcer, using the infusion. Within three days, the white patch came out, leaving a very deep hole in my thigh. The third stage was to heal the ulcers through flesh filling the 'hole'. This time, the dried fruit of lara plant was burnt together with dried hen's excreta, and the powder was applied on the ulcer. Before long, the koto was finally healed.²⁷

The treatment of diseases attributed to mystical or supernatural causation is not as simple as the one described above. It involves sacrifices and rituals so as to remove the supernatural cause of the sickness. Some of the ailments attributed to supernatural causations include 'were' or 'asinwin' (madness or insanity), 'abiku' (born to die child) etc.²⁸ The Babalawo (Ifa Priest) is usually involved in the treatment of diseases that are of supernatural origin. He mixes various natural herbs together and gives the content to his ailing client. On several occasions, the mixing together of herbs is done with certain prescribed incantations.²⁹

Incidentally, the use of medicine is not limited to the African society; it is equally found among the African Christians, especially, in the African Indigenous Churches which include Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Celestial church of Christ, and Nabii Christ Church of Kenya among others. These Churches are charismatic in nature and much emphasis is given to healing ministry. Writing on healing in the Nabii Christian Church of Kenya, Philomena Mwaura states that:

*Healing plays a major part in the Nabii Christian Church of Kenya belief and practice. It takes place in churches and in the homes of the prophets. Healing is seen as part of the much wider need principle source in the word of God.*³⁰

The prophet healers in these indigenous churches use various objects, such as, consecrated water, olive oil, candle, etc., as they pray for their sick clients. The use of objects for healing which has been referred to as "means" is very prominent among the Aladura churches, notably, the members of Celestial Church of Christ, the Cherubim and Seraphim, and the Church of the Lord Aladura.³¹ O.E. Alana states further that:

The commonest of such means are consecrated water ("Omi- iye") and olive oil or holy oil ("ororo"). Water becomes 'holy or life- giving water' after prayers had been said upon it by the prophet, and apostle; it becomes sanctified and efficacious. Once water has been sanctified, it is believed to have become a destroying agent against all forces of evil. Thus, the Aladura use it to treat diseases of various kinds. Similarly, consecrated oil is used as a therapeutic "means". It is used as a balm for soothing broken or infected parts of the body. It is sometimes given orally, especially to children as a remedy for feverish conditions.³²

CONCLUSION

Our findings in this paper have shown that sickness has no respect for any man. As king Hezekiah fell sick to the point of death despite his highly exalted position and contribution to his nation; so also every person is liable to fall sick today. In fact, we live in a day when people are exposed to various kinds of sicknesses than at the time of Hezekiah. Also, we have discovered that healing is of two types: the one with a prescribed medication as in the case of king Hezekiah. This is very common in our contemporary society with use of traditional and modern medical facilities. The other type is healing without any prescribed medication as in the case of Miriam in Numbers 12:10-15. This is the type that some of the African Churches subscribe to.³³ The important thing is that both healings are of divine origin. This point is made succinctly by John Oswalt as he argues that:

All healing is of God. Sometimes he intervenes directly to produce health. At other times he works through intervening means, as here (the healing of Hezekiah). But it is misleading to limit divine healing to those instances where no intervening means appears. If the

poultice was instrumental in Hezekiah's healing, it was still divine providence which brought Isaiah to Hezekiah's bedside with the remedy at that moment.³⁴

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19. Hobbs, *II kings*, 290.
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21. Ibid.
22. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39*, p.677.
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31. O.E Alana, "The Impact of the Healing Miracles of Jesus on the Aladura Healing Methods in Yorubaland" *Journal of Arabic & Religious Studies* Volume 11 (December 1994):19
32. Ibid.
33. Two examples of such Churches are: The Apostolic Church and The Christ Apostolic Church. See, S.G. Adegboyegba, *Short History of the Apostolic Church in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Rosprint Industrial Press, 1978), pp. 6-7; and Adewara Alokun, *The Christ Apostolic Church CAC1928-198*. (Akure : Ibukunola Printers, 1991), pp. 302-3.
34. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapter 1-39*, p. 691.