

Dept. / Light From the Past - Dewayne Bryant

## The Necessary Art

For all the splendor of ancient Egypt, health care was one area in which the Egyptians were not to be envied. For instance, if a man had indigestion, he would be instructed to crush a hog's tooth, place it in four sugar cakes, and then eat the cakes over the course of four days. In the case of a burn, a person would have to mix gum, the hair of a ram, and the milk of a woman who had given birth to a male child, then apply the mixture while pronouncing the proper magical spell. In the case of a splinter, the remedy called for dung and worm's blood.

Whatever the cure however, Egyptian physicians were admired. Greek writers such as Homer, Herodotus, Pliny the Elder, and Hippocrates all praised the skill of the ancient Egyptians in medical matters. Greek physicians studied in Egypt, acknowledging the contributions and Egyptian medical practices to ancient Greek medicine. Some of them even wished that they had studied in Egypt. Egyptian physicians had such good reputations that foreign kings would request their services from the pharaohs.

The Egyptians were very concerned with medicinal practices, which they called "the necessary art." Archaeologists have found a number of papyri that discuss medical problems and their treatments. One such example is the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus. Named after the Egyptologist who purchased it in Luxor, Egypt in 1862, this ancient text is the oldest of the known medical papyri. The copy dates approximately to the seventeenth century BC, though some believe the text may date to the age of the pyramids in the Old Kingdom of Egypt (roughly 2800-2200 BC) because many of the injuries listed are the ones a person might expect to sustain while handling heavy stone in construction projects (such as broken bones and severe trauma).

The forty-eight cases of injury listed in the papyrus consist of clinical observation, diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. The examination describes the nature and extent of the injury. Following this were three possible diagnoses. If the patient stood a good chance of survival, the physician was to respond, "This is a wound which I will treat." If the injury was significant and death imminent, the physician was to say, "This is an injury which I will not treat." If survival were possible, though not certain, the physician would tell the patient, "This is an injury with which I will contend." The treatment would entail the steps to be taken by the physician to heal the patient if he or she stood any chance at survival.

In case of injuries such as those listed in the Edwin Smith papyrus, nearly all of the treatments are clinical, practical, and make sense. In other texts, cures are often magical in nature. This kind of remedy appears in another ancient medical text called the Ebers papyrus. It contains roughly 800 magical cures for a variety of afflictions. Although, like the Edwin Smith papyrus, the Ebers papyrus has medical observation and treatment, there is much more by the forehead. For blindness, which the Egyptians called "when the god made me see night during the day," magical spells were prescribed. For a lame foot, the remedy called for deerskin to be wrapped around the foot, which was a case of sympathetic magic (since deer are fleet of foot, then hopefully the deerskin would impart some of the deer's fleetness to the afflicted person). In

another text, the Egyptians had a magical spell and recipe for a treatment they called “How to transform an old man into a youth,” which was an ancient wrinkle cream.

The Edwin Smith papyrus has interesting observations of the human body, including descriptions of the human heart and brain. Forty-seven of the injuries have clinical treatments. In the last case of injury, the papyrus describes a patient suffering from a wound to the forehead that fractures the skull. In this case, the cure is magical. There is a compound to be prepared using a ground-up ostrich egg, which is then applied to the forehead. A magical spell was spoken after the compound was applied. The idea was that the cure would make the person’s head like the ostrich egg: whole, complete, and solid.

Egyptian practices had a distinct influence on the early books of the Bible. From the names of biblical figures to the design of the Israelite camp and tabernacle, the biblical writers show a familiarity with the ancient Egyptian culture. Yet for all their influences, the one area in which the Bible does not follow Egyptian custom is in the area for which Egypt was most famous.

That the Bible does not follow Egyptian medical practices should not be surprising. In Egypt, medicine and magic went hand in hand. While the approach taken by the Edwin Smith papyrus is mostly clinical, other medical texts are much more magical. The Bible condemns all magical practices, whether it is foretelling the future, speaking with the dead, or attempting to manipulate the divine (see Deut 18:10; Jer. 10:2; Eze. 12:24). Magic was thought of as being a power even greater than the gods. The Egyptians believed that a magician could even use magic to steal the glory of a god for himself. This is not the case in Scripture, where the power of magic is not recognized as legitimate.

Contrasted with ancient Egyptian medical practices are biblical laws concerning good health. Many of them have an uncanny knowledge of good health at a time when bacteria, viruses, and the direct causes of infection were unknown. While the Hebrew Bible does not acknowledge microorganisms, it does prescribe some very helpful precautions against them. For instance, the Bible advocates the proper disposal of waste materials by burying them (Lev. 17:3; Deut 23:12-13), which would have drastically reduced the potential spread of harmful germs. Quarantine was the prescription for those who suffered from infectious diseases (Lev. 13). The Bible also addresses the health aspects of treating mold (Lev. 14). Contact with a dead body meant that a person was unclean and had to wash himself as well as his clothes (Num. 19:11-19). This case would have prevented harmful microorganisms acquired from the dead to spread to others.

Humanity has come up with a variety of ways to deal with the natural world, much of which borders on the absurd, as in the case of medical practices in ancient Egypt. The biblical laws concerning sanitation and hygiene are unique in the ancient world. The Bible is radically different in that it avoids the faulty understanding of the natural world in other religious writings. In some cases, they have an understanding that predates modern scientific practices by thousands of years. When one weighs all the evidence, comparing the Bible with the writings of other cultures gives a clear view of the inspiration of God.