

THE
PARABOLA BOOK
OF
HEALING



INTRODUCTION BY LAWRENCE E. SULLIVAN

Healing in Ancient Egypt

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In Ancient Egypt health and equilibrium were thought to be related to the divine and cosmic, as well as the earthly, spheres.¹ To ordinary mortals, health meant more than simply not being ill, and the process of obtaining physical well-being and conquering disease is the subject of most of the surviving texts of pharaonic date. The body needed to be "complete" not only in this life, but, in order to fulfil its functions in eternity, beyond the grave as well. To ensure this "whole" appearance, the Egyptians developed the art of embalming, as exhibited in images of the human body in Egyptian funerary art.

While on earth, the ideal of health was thought to be a happy heart, flourishing limbs, a neck sitting firm under the head, eyes looking into the distance, a nose breathing and drawing in air, ears standing open and hearing, mouth opened and knowing how to make an answer, arms flourishing and capable of working.² The healthy human should be able to eat, drink, copulate, and evacuate the bowels. Such a person would be "like someone with old age yet ahead, who sleeps until dawn, free from suffering, without cough." A state of perpetual youth was not necessarily the sole aim, for the texts often speak of attaining old age, the ideal span being 110 years. But old age is qualified by the word *nfr* ("beautiful" in the broadest sense of the word,

corresponding perhaps to Arabic *hasan*). This rather suggests that physical health alone was not all.

The Egyptians gave the world a comprehensive pharmacopoeia to help cure diseases. Medical papyri written around 1500 B.C., but dating back perhaps another thousand years, abound in prescriptions. The formula was as follows: "If you [the practitioner] examine a patient who suffers from [followed by a detailed description of the symptoms], then you shall say: This is [identification of the disease]. This is a case that I will treat/I will fight [here follows the treatment]." But some cases were untreatable, either because they were hopeless, or because the illness would take its own course. In the latter case, the patient was told to rest in bed until the affliction had passed.

The Egyptians had written treatises on "the vessels" (this term including veins and arteries, as well as sinews) connecting various parts of the body, and there is evidence of their understanding the humors, a fundamental concept of Hippocratic and later Arabic tradition.³ Yet in most cases it is the individual symptoms which command the attention of the practitioner. It was not his task to treat "the whole person."

Apart from accidental injuries, disease was attributed to several factors. Herodotus, the Greek historian who is such a mine of information on life in Egypt in the 5th century B.C., was told that the Egyptians of his day believed all sickness to be caused by the food they ate (a theory reflected in traditional Arab medicine); corrective measures were taken by fasting for three consecutive days every month.⁴ In pharaonic times disease was primarily thought to be caused by putrefaction of food residue. But, in addition to man's own responsibility, dead persons, gods, or demons had the power to single out an individual and cause suffering as a means of revenge. "The one whom god loves, him he shall keep alive," reads the introduction to one of the medical texts, which is otherwise more concerned with sickness than with health.

As in our day, physicians concentrated on their special fields and would tackle the individual symptoms of the patient, no doubt successfully in a great many instances. The fame of Egyptian physicians

reached far beyond the borders of the country: The Persian kings of Egypt in the 6th century B.C. relied solely on Egyptian physicians. But the sick had other options than swallowing pills and potions and applying bandages.

The medical men were closely connected with the temples of learning and knowledge. The House of Life was where scribes were trained and where papyrus scrolls which formed the basis of their knowledge were stored. The duties of members of the clergy would overlap with those of the physician. There is reference to an "overseer of priests of the goddess Sakhmet, overseer of magicians, the king's chief physician who reads the book daily, who treats anyone who is ill, who lays his hand on the patient, getting to know him." The physician used his hand to test the patient's pulse and the temperature and texture of the skin. This, however, was to assist him in diagnosis rather than treatment. A priest reported himself "skillful in judging illness...my magic applies to the sick face, my spells to the [bad] odor."

Whereas the medical texts describe the patient's body as the object of the practitioner's ministrations, the temple offered a treatment which required the patient's mind to be fully present as well. People came to the temple seeking healing from the resident deity and slept in a sanatorium adjoining the temple, where the deity would visit them in their dreams.⁵ They bathed in water which had touched the statue of the god or goddess, and they had facilities for meditation. It was a well-known fact that the psychological frame of mind of the patient had a bearing on his health and on the outcome of any treatment, and incubation in the proximity of the deity would assist in the healing process.

The sacred and the profane united in the use of scent. Recipes were so important that they were inscribed in stone on the walls of the temples. The most legendary scent from Egypt was *kyphi*, which can be traced at least as far back as the 16th century B.C. It was used in fumigation as well as being taken internally, and it served the multiple purposes of aiding communication with the god, uplifting the spirit, and curing ailments. No one has described it better than Plutarch: "Without drunkenness it relaxes and loosens the chain-like sorrows and tensions of daily cares. It polishes and purifies like a mir-

ror the faculty which is imagination and receptive to dreams, like the notes of the lyre which the Pythagoreans used before sleep, to charm and heal the emotive and irrational or the soul. For odors often recall the power of perception when it is failing, while often they obscure and calm it since the exhalations penetrate through the body by reason of their smooth softness."⁶ Although this was written in the beginning of the second century A.D. based on a treatise written some 400 years earlier (now lost), it reflects the fact that the ancient Egyptians had long been aware that scent has a therapeutic effect. Although the ingredients of *kyphi* were recorded, its preparation was shrouded in secrecy. It continued to be made for centuries.

An unguent maker of the Middle Ages revealed that while the ingredients were ground, the seven Greek vowels were to be recited. In view of the fact that Hellenistic tradition assigned a vowel to each of the spheres of the universe, thus achieving perfect harmony, are we to imply that *kyphi* absorbed similar cosmic properties and produced harmony in the soul?

That the image of a god possessed healing powers is demonstrated by the fact that in the reign of Rameses II (c. 1100 B.C.) a statue of the god Khonsu was sent from Egypt to the distant land of Bakhtan to heal a princess possessed by an evil spirit when conventional medicine, also administered by an Egyptian, had failed. Khonsu, originally a moon god, had a following as healer and protector to pious Egyptians. To remove his sacred image from the temple was an extraordinary gesture on behalf of the king.

The art of healing is personified in the ibis-headed god Thoth, who was also lord of writing and magic. In the realm of mythology we witness the contest of the "two divine brothers" Horus and Seth concerning the rulership of the world. They came to blows and Horus tore off his brother's testicles, while Seth extracted the eye of Horus. In popular belief Horus emerged as the hero, while Seth remained the villain. By being the one who healed and restored the eye, Thoth became the great healer, and the eye was seen as the symbol of health, an amulet of universal significance.

Horus appeared as the injured party in another myth, namely as a child wandering in the marshes of the Delta. When a scorpion stung

him, with near fatal consequences, his mother Isis came to the rescue with her knowledge of healing and magic. She became the great healing goddess of later antiquity, her cult spreading as far north as Britain. "The Egyptians say that Isis is the inventor of many remedies for health and that she has vast experience in medical science. That is why, having achieved immortality, she dedicated herself to treating human beings and, during sleep, she gives assistance to those who ask, and manifests herself clearly and reveals her benevolence to those in need... During sleep, in fact, while keeping close she gives help for sickness, and those who serve her are healed against all expectations. Many who were given up by the doctors because of the severity of their illness have been served by her. People deprived of sight, or the use of some member, have been restored to normal after having taken refuge with the goddess."⁷

If it was within the power of the Egyptian pantheon to heal, this was a privilege extended posthumously to certain human beings. Most prominently Imhotep, an architect, magician, and wise man in the reign of King Zoser (ca. 2700 B.C.) near the end of the pharaonic period, was credited with medical skills, to the extent that he was eventually identified with Asclepius of the Greeks. A myth was created around Imhotep's person, and his tomb (as yet undiscovered) in the vicinity of Memphis south of Cairo provided the focal point for pilgrimages. His cult was established in other parts of Egypt, where his healing was sought not only in the temple through incubation, dreams, and oracles, but also by people at home through prayer.

NOTES

1. On Ancient Egyptian healing and medicine among others: S. Sigerist, *A History of Medicine*, vol. I (New York: 1987); H. v. Deines and H. Grapow, *Grundriss der Medizin der alten Ägypter*, vol. 3, *Kranker, Krankheiten und Artz*, (Berlin: 1956); "Medicine" in *The Legacy of Egypt*, ed J.R. Harris, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); L. Manniche, *An Ancient Egyptian Herbal* (London: British Museum Press, and Austin: Texas University Press, 1989).
2. From a scribe's exercise book ca. 800 B.C.: A. Erman, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians* (London: 1927, 174).
3. On traditional Arab medicine see, among others: H.G.M. Chishti, *The Traditional Healer's Handbook* Vermont 1988, 1991; Ibn Qayyim, *The Medicine of the Prophet*, (Cambridge, England: The Islamic Texts Society).
4. Herodotus, II,77 (Loeb edition, 1946).

5. *Lexicon der Ägyptologie*, ed. W. Helck and E. Otto (Wiesbaden: 1972), s.v. "Sanatorium."
6. *De Iside et Osiride* 80. transl. G. Griffiths, (University of Wales Press, 1970).
7. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, I,25 (Loeb edition, 1968).