

Diseases and Healing (1)

Disease and sickness have plagued man since God cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden (cf. GEN 2:19). The Hebrews believed that illness was caused by sin in the individual, which God had to punish (GEN12:17; Prov. 23:29–32), the sin of a person’s parents (2SA 12:15), or seduction by Satan (MAT 9:34; LUK 13:16). However, some scriptures show that there is not always such a simple explanation for disease (cf. Job 34:19–20).

Even in Old Testament times, the Hebrews associated healing with God. For example, Malachi spoke of the Sun of Righteousness rising with healing in his wings (Mal. 4:2), and David praised God as the One “that healeth all thy diseases” (Ps. 103:3).

I. TYPES OF DISEASES, AILMENTS, AND MEDICAL PROBLEMS

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- B. Apoplexy**
- C. Blains**
- D. Blemishes**
- E. Blindness and Hearing Loss**
- F. Boils**
- G. Cancer**
- H. Consumption, or Tuberculosis**
- I. Dysentery**
- J. Edema (“Dropsy”)**
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- L. Epilepsy**
- M. Female Disorders**
- N. Fevers**
- O. Gangrene**
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- Q. Lameness**

- R. Leprosy**
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- T. Mental and Nervous Disorders**
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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION & INSIGHTS: The Leper

I. Types of Diseases, Ailments, and Medical Problems. Here we will review some of the diseases and related problems of Bible times. An understanding of these problems is important for every Bible student, because they often affected the course of Israel’s history, and Jesus’ ministry emphasized the healing of the sick.

A. Aphasia. This is the temporary loss of speech, usually caused by a brain lesion but sometimes attributed to an emotional upset. This happened to the prophet Ezekiel (EZE 33:22). When an angel told Zechariah that he was going to be the father of John the Baptist, the old man came out of the temple and could not speak (LUK 1:22).

B. Apoplexy. This term refers to a rupture or obstruction of a brain artery, causing a stroke. When Abigail told Nabal of his insult to David and its dire consequences, Nabal’s “heart died within him, and he became like a stone”; 10 days later he died (1SA 25:37–38). These symptoms suggest that he suffered an attack of apoplexy. The same fate may have befallen Uzzah, who touched the ark of the covenant (2SA 6:7), as well as Ananias and Sapphira (ACT 5:5, 9–10).

C. Blains. This term from the KJV probably refers to anthrax, a disease that can be transmitted to humans by cattle, sheep, goats, and horses. The disease is caused by a rod-shaped bacterium that forms spores. These spores, in turn, can infect humans, who develop a boil-like lesion with a *pustule* (blain). In the infective stage, the blain is called a *malignant pustule*. Blains are mentioned only once in the Bible (EXO 9:9–10). God inflicted them on the Egyptians when the pharaoh refused to let the Hebrews go to the Promised Land.

D. Blemishes. This general term refers to any bodily defect such as blindness, lameness, a broken bone, extra fingers or toes (*polydactylism*), a humped back and so on. A person with blemishes could not offer sacrifices to God (LEV 21:16–24), nor was he permitted to go beyond the veil of the temple or come near the altar, for this would defile the sanctuary. Imperfect animals could not be used for sacrifices (EXO 12:5).

E. Blindness and Hearing Loss. Three types of blindness are mentioned in Scripture: sudden blindness caused by flies and aggravated by dirt, dust, and glare; the gradual blindness caused by old age; and chronic blindness. Paul suffered temporary blindness on the road to Damascus (ACT 9:8). Scripture often refers to old persons whose eyes “grew dim” (cf. GEN 27:1; 48:10; 1SA 4:15). But the Bible more often refers to chronic blindness.

1 JAM I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., editors, *Nelson’s illustrated manners and customs of the Bible* [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.

The Israelites had compassion for the blind. In fact, God placed a curse upon those who made the blind wander out of their way (DEU 27:18). Jesus ministered to many people who were blind. He said, “[God] hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind” (LUK 4:18). Jesus healed a man born blind (John 9:1–41); a blind man whose healing was gradual (MAR 8:24); two blind men sitting by the wayside (MAT 20:30–34); and a great number of others (MAR 10:46–52; LUK 7:21).

Blindness was often understood to be a punishment for evil-doing. We find examples of this at Sodom (GEN 19:11); in the Syrian army (2KI 6:18); and in the case of Elymas at Paphos (ACT 13:6–11).

The New Testament occasionally refers to persons who had lost the ability to speak (cf. MAT 9:32; 15:30; LUK 11:14). This often was the result of hearing loss.

F. Boils. This term refers to any inflamed ulcers on the skin, such as those caused by a staph infection. They may have been confused with “blains” or anthrax. Boils (“shechin” in Hebrew) are first mentioned in Exodus 9:9, when the pharaoh refused to let the Israelites leave Egypt, and boils broke out upon the people. Satan was permitted to afflict Job with boils from the top of his head to the tip of his toes (Job 2:7). King Hezekiah also was afflicted with boils (2KI 20:7), which Isaiah cured by applying a poultice of figs. A fresh fig poultice has a drawing effect. Before the advent of antibiotics, this type of treatment for boils was common.

G. Cancer. Hezekiah was very sick and the Lord told him to prepare to die (2KI 20:1). The Lord inflicted an incurable disease upon Jehoram, and after two years his bowels fell out (2CH 21:18–19). Bible scholars believed these men may have suffered some type of cancer, though chronic dysentery would also have produced Jehoram’s symptoms. However, the Bible does not refer to the cancer by name because the disease had not been identified in biblical times.

H. Consumption, or Tuberculosis ISA Moses warned the rebellious Israelites, “The LORD shall smite thee with a consumption, and with a fever, and with an inflammation and with an extreme burning ...” (DEU 28:22). The KJV uses the word *consumption* to refer to tuberculosis, a consumptive infection of the lungs.

I. Dysentery. This is a disease that in its advanced stage, rots the bowels (2CH 21:15–19). The fibrine separates from the inner coating of the intestines and is expelled.

The New Testament refers to a severe form of dysentery as the “bloody flux.” The father of a Christian named Publius lay sick with the bloody flux (ACT 28:8). Paul came in and prayed for him and the man was healed.

J. Edema (“Dropsy”). This describes an abnormal accumulation of serous fluid in the body’s connective tissue or in a serous cavity and is a symptom. The accumulation causes swelling. Jesus met at least one victim of edema in a certain Pharisee’s house. Asked by Jesus if he thought it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, the Pharisee declined to answer. Jesus thereupon healed the sufferer (LUK 14:1–4).

K. Endocrine Disturbances. The Law of Moses did not permit a dwarfed person to enter the congregation of God’s people (LEV 21:20). Modern science has shown that dwarfism is caused by disturbances in the endocrine glands.

The Bible also mentions a number of giants, such as Goliath (ISA 17:4). True giantism is caused by excessive secretions of the pituitary gland. However, many tall persons inherit their tallness from their forebears.

L. Epilepsy. This is a disorder Marked by erratic electrical discharges of the central nervous system and manifested by convulsive attacks. A certain man brought his epileptic son to Jesus for help (MAR 9:17–29). The KJV says that the boy had a “dumb spirit.” Jesus healed him.

An ancient theory held that epilepsy was caused by the moon; people referred to epileptics as being “moonstruck.” PSA 121:6 may reflect this idea when it says, “The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.”

M. Female Disorders. According to the Mosaic Law, a woman suffering from menstrual disorders was to be considered unclean (LEV 15:25). One such woman who had suffered for 12 years (LUK 8:43–48) touched the hem of Jesus’ garment and, because of her great faith, was healed immediately.

N. Fevers. The KJV uses the word *ague* to describe a burning fever. Moses warned the rebellious Israelites that “I will ever appoint over you terror, panic, consumption and the burning ague that shall consume the eyes” (LEV 26:16). DEU 28:32 also refers to ague.

When Jesus found Simon Peter’s mother-in-law ill with this symptom, He rebuked the fever and she was able to rise from her bed and wait on the disciples (LUK 4:38). On another occasion, Jesus healed the feverish son of a government official (John 4:46–54).

Many diseases in ancient Palestine would have been characterized by high fevers, the most common of which were malaria and typhoid. A plague broke out when the Philistines placed the ark of God in an idol’s temple (ISA 5:2, 9, 12). The outbreak was associated with mice.

O. Gangrene. This disease is mentioned only once in the Bible: “And their word will eat as doth a canker” (2TI 2:17). Here the KJV translates the Greek *gaggarina* as *canker*. It refers to the circulatory deterioration that we commonly call *gangrene*, which spreads rapidly and eats up tissue.

P. Gout. Excessive uric acid in the blood causes this kidney ailment that manifests itself through painful inflammation of joints. 2CH 16:12–13 says that King Asa had a foot disease, which apparently was gout.

Q. Lameness. Scripture describes many persons who were lame, the most memorable case being recorded in ACT 3:2–11, where we read about a man (born lame) who was carried daily to Jerusalem’s Beautiful Gate to beg. One day the beggar saw Peter and John entering the temple and beseeched them for money. Instead, the apostles invoked the name of Jesus to heal the man. Peter lifted up the beggar, who began to walk. Jesus healed many persons who were lame (cf. MAT 15:30–31).

R. Leprosy. One of the most dreaded diseases of the world, leprosy is caused by a bacillus and is characterized by formation of nodules that spread, causing loss of sensation and deformity. Now treated with sulfone drugs, leprosy is perhaps the least infectious of all known contagious diseases. Hansen’s Disease, as it is more properly known, was often misdiagnosed in biblical times. People believed then that it was highly contagious and hereditary. Leviticus 13:1–17 condemned leprosy as a “plague.”

On the basis of a hair in a scab, a pimple, or a spot on the skin that had turned white, the priest would declare a person to be a leper and would quarantine him for seven days. If no change in the spot occurred by then, the quarantine would be extended another week. At that time, if the spot had started to fade, the “leper” would be pronounced cured and returned to his normal life. However, if the spot remained or had spread, he was declared unclean and banished.

Leprosy was very common in the Near East. If a Hebrew was healed of leprosy, he was expected to offer certain sacrifices and engage in rites of purification (LEV 14:1–32). Jesus healed lepers on numerous occasions (cf. LUK 5:12–13; 17:12–17).

S. Malaria. This infectious disease was caused by protozoa of the genus *plasmodium*. These one-celled animals can live in the blood of human beings and animals or in the female *Anopheles* mosquito. Once malaria is in the system, it recurs. Paul may have been referring to malaria when he spoke of his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7).

T. Mental and Nervous Disorders. King Saul seems to have had symptoms of manic depression (cf. ISA 16:14–23), and the Bible mentions others who may have suffered from mental or nervous disorders. King Nebuchadnezzar is an example (Dan. 4:33).

U. Palsy. The KJV uses this term to refer to total paralysis. The Gospels record a well-known incident in which Jesus healed a paralyzed man at Capernaum (MAR 2:1–12). The book of ACT describes how the apostles healed people with “the palsy” (ACT 8:7; 9:33–34).

V. Plague. Our English versions may use this word to denote any epidemic disease. It is also used in a general sense in Exodus 7–10, where it refers to the hardships that God inflicted upon the Egyptians.

Epidemics hit the Israelites three times during their wandering in the wilderness. The first time was when they were eating the quail that God sent to satisfy their longing for meat (NUM 11:33). The second time, a “plague” claimed the lives of spies who discouraged the Israelites from entering the Promised Land (NUM 14:37). The third epidemic came as God’s punishment upon the Israelites. Aaron stopped this “plague” by offering incense to God (NUM 16:46–47). On one other occasion, Phinehas saved the Israelites from an epidemic by killing a man who brought a Midianite woman into their midst. Nevertheless, 24,000 people died (NUM 25:8–9).

The Old Testament describes many cases in which God sent “plagues” to chastise His people. One example is found in 2 Samuel, where David says, “Build an altar unto the LORD that the plague may be stayed from the people” (2SA 24:21).

The KJV also uses *plague* to refer to any painful affliction. When the woman with a chronic hemorrhage was healed, she felt that she had been healed of a “plague” (MAR 5:29). We have no evidence that the Bible ever refers to bubonic plague, which would claim millions of lives in medieval Europe.

W. Polio. This is the common name for infantile paralysis, which usually affected children. First Kings 17:17 tells of a woman who brought her son to the prophet Elijah. The boy was so sick that there was no breath in him; this symptom suggests that he may have had polio, although it also may have been a form of meningitis. Elijah revived the boy through the Lord’s intervention in answer to his prayer. However, Scripture does not tell us if the boy was completely cured. The men described in MAT 12:9–13 and John 5:2 may have had polio.

X. Skin Disorders. The Bible refers to many kinds of skin disorders such as the “itch” (KJV) or ringworm (LEV 13:30; 21:20). Leviticus 13:39 probably refers to vitiligo, which was confused often with leprosy.

When the KJV uses the word *scurvy*, it is not referring to the vitamin deficiency that causes the problem known by that name today. Instead, the reference is to an itching or scaling condition caused by a fungus (LEV 21:20, 22).

Y. Smallpox. Some Bible scholars believe that the Hebrew word *maqaq* (literally “waste away”) refers to smallpox. The KJV usually translates this word as “pine away,” which suggests emotional despair: “And they that were left of you, shall pine away” (LEV 26:39). “Ye shall not mourn nor weep, but he shall pine away for your iniquities” (EZE 24:23). In one instance, the KJV understands *maqaq* to denote a “corruption” of the skin: “My wounds stink and are corrupt because of my foolishness” (Ps. 38:5).

Z. Sunstroke. Isaiah may have referred to sunstroke or heat prostration when he said, “Neither shall heat nor sun smite thee” (ISA 49:10). Second Kings describes a young man who was working among the reapers when he

said to his father, “My head, my head.” He was carried into the house, where he died (2KI 4:18–20). We would assume that sunstroke was a common malady in the hot summers of the Near East.

AA. Syncope. Arrested heart action or the sudden lowering of blood pressure is normally called *syncope*. When Jacob learned that his son Joseph was still alive, his heart “fainted” (GEN 45:26)—probably a reference to syncope. When Eli heard that the ark of the covenant had been captured, he fell backwards off his seat, broke his neck, and died (ISA 4:18). This may have been another instance of heart failure or syncope.

BB. Venereal Disease. There is some evidence that venereal diseases were common in Bible times. For example, Zechariah 11:17 warns the shepherd who leaves his flock, saying that his arm will be dried up and his right eye will go blind. These symptoms indicate a disease of the spinal cord, probably a venereal disease. Some believe that Leah had an eye condition that could have been the result of hereditary syphilis (GEN 29:17).

CC. Worms. Isaiah warned that the rebellious people of Israel would be afflicted with worms (ISA 51:8). He also predicted this fate for Babylon (ISA 14:11). This parasitic disease could be fatal because no medical remedies were available.

Scripture says that “an angel of the Lord” smote Herod the Great. Worms ate him up and he died (ACT 12:23).

II. The Use of Medicine. When a person’s body began to deteriorate and suffer pain, the victim would naturally look for a remedy. Thus the people of ancient times developed an extensive knowledge of natural medicines.

Probably the first medicines were introduced to the Israelites through the Egyptian people, especially the priests. Egyptians also embalmed their dead with spices and perfume—a custom that the Israelites soon came to accept.

In Bible times, medicines were made from minerals, animal substances, herbs, wines, fruits, and other parts of plants. Scripture often refers to the medicinal use of these substances.

For example, the “balm of Gilead” is mentioned as a healing substance (JER 8:22). The “balm” is thought to have been an aromatic excretion from an evergreen tree or a form of frankincense. Wine mixed with myrrh was known to relieve pain by dulling the senses. This remedy was offered to Jesus as He hung on the cross, but He refused to drink it (MAR 15:23). The Israelites anointed their sick with soothing lotions of olive oil and herbs. In the story of the Good Samaritan, oil and wine were poured into the wounds of the beaten man (LUK 10:34). The early Christians continued this practice, anointing the sick as they prayed for them (JAM 5:14).

MAT 23:23 mentions certain spices that were often used as antacids. Mandrakes were used to arouse sexual desires (GEN 30:14). Other plants were used as remedies or stimulants. (*See “Plants.”*)

III. Physicians and Their Work. Professional physicians practiced their skills in Bible times, but their work was largely considered to be magical. The Old Testament does not mention the names of any physicians, though it often refers to their work (cf. GEN 50:2; 2CH 16:12; JER 8:22). The deuterocanonical book of Ecclesiasticus (second century B.C.) celebrates the wisdom and skill of physicians (38:1–15). In the New Testament, LUK is mentioned by name as the “beloved physician” (Col. 4:14).

Circumcision is the only type of surgery mentioned in the Bible. This was the ceremonial removal of the foreskin of the male Hebrew child eight days after birth. The practice was begun at God’s command by Abraham (GEN 17:10–14), and God showed anger with Moses for his failure to observe it (EXO 4:24–26). Even Jesus was circumcised when He was eight days old (LUK 2:21).

IV. Ritual Cures and Miraculous Healings. The Bible refers to some cases in which an ailing person performed a ritual washing in order to receive a cure. When Naaman contracted leprosy, for example, the prophet Elisha instructed him to submerge himself seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman did so and was healed (2 Kings 5:10). Jesus applied mud to the eyes of a blind man and told him to wash it off in the pool of Siloam. The blind man obeyed and received his sight (John 9:7).

On many more occasions, God performed miracles through the ministry of His servants. Elijah and Elisha saw numerous cures of this kind (cf. 1 Kin. 17:17–22; 2KI 4:32–37). When Jesus cured people of all manner of diseases, it confirmed that He was the Messiah (LUK 7:20–22).

The temple priests had several medical functions. Leviticus describes seven forms of ritual purification that had medical significance. They deal with: post-childbirth (LEV 12), leprosy (LEV 13), venereal disease (LEV 15:12–15), the male sexual function (LEV 15:16–18), sexual intercourse (LEV 15:18), menstruation (LEV 15:19–30), and dead bodies (LEV 21:1–3).

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