

THE CONCEPT OF GOD AS רפא IN THE PENTATEUCH

Authors

Annah Makau⁽¹⁾; Diphus Chemorion⁽²⁾; Zebedi Muga⁽³⁾

Main author email: mthlmr352121@spu.ac.ke

(1.2.3) St Paul's University, Kenya.

Cite this article in APA

Makau, A., Chemorion, D., & Muga, Z. (2023). The concept of God as רפא in the pentateuch. *Journal of philosophy and religion*, 2(1), 191-196. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jpr.v2i1.442>



A publication of Editon
Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 29.09.2023

Accepted: 31.10.2023

Published: 07.11.2023

Scan this QR to read the paper
online



Copyright: ©2023 by the author(s).
This article is an Open Access article
distributed under the terms and
conditions of the Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-
ShareAlike 4.0 International License
(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Abstract

The study sought to discuss the concept of God as רפא in the pentateuch. The research will use a Diachronic/Historical Critical approach, taking Form Criticism as the specific approach. A branch of the historical-critical method pioneered by Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) and developed by Martin Noth and Gerhard von Rad, among other scholars, is applied. The design is appropriate since the research aims to trace the concept of God as the healer and its relevance in the contemporary world's pandemics and sicknesses. The overall theme of this passage is to show God as the healer.

Key terms: Concept of God, diachronic/historical Critical approach, Pentateuch, רפא

INTRODUCTION

When faced with challenges, people become fearful of how they will safely sail through. They, therefore, seek ways of mitigation, hoping that all shall be back to normal. Unless it is spiritual matters, some people do not consult the Bible immediately after falling sick. However, these people seek for medical assistance from health experts to ease their pain and sickness. According to Wilkinson (1998, p. 7), healing is a synonym for quackery. Hope during sickness and pandemics is a God-given gift that keeps people living and giving (Agbo, 2021, p. 33). As usually happens in times of crisis, millions of people all over the world turned to religion for guidance and spiritual comfort during the pandemic. Although there are health centres where people go for help, religious resources, specifically the Bible and churches among Christians, play a key role in people's reactions to the new occurrence. For example, during the Covid-19 times, a study published in June 2020, Bentzen (2020) notes that daily data on Google searches for 95 countries indicated that searches for the keyword 'prayer' increased to the highest levels ever in May of the year 2020. Healing by itself has many facets. God not only restores us physically but also spiritually, mentally and psychologically.

In the Pentateuch, God directly sent plagues for a specific purpose - punishment (Leviticus 26:25). As Grossman (2007, p. 59) records, it is hard to differentiate the purpose of any plague by human knowledge. The Pentateuch mentions various plagues, pestilence, or pandemics that killed people. For example, in Leviticus (26:25), when Israel fell into covenant violations, God said, "I will send pestilence among you." In Deuteronomy 30:1-3, it is stated that when there were misfortunes like pestilence, famine, or blight, the people should repent and obey the Lord's voice for restoration of all that is lost. God instructed the people to be humble whenever they realised all was not well and all would be restored.

Health is paramount to all human beings. In the occurrence of diseases and pandemics, people are filled with fear and unrest. The text addresses Yahweh as רפא (healer) and the one with the ability to give out health, wholeness and ultimate peace. In today's healing context, Christians are caught between seeking medical assistance and simply relying on faith-based solutions when struck by pandemics and diseases. This research aims at discussing the concept of God as רפא in the Pentateuch. Form criticism will help to know how the word was used in ancient times and its mutation through the ages.

God the Healer in the Pentateuch

Moses, during his leadership, was greatly used as far as healing and wholeness were concerned. He is seen performing both natural and supernatural healing through God's guidance (Darling, 1989, p. 6). A crucial concept of the healing process started in his encounter with God at Mt. Horeb is that the evil soul's power in the restoration of health and wholeness comes from God. The first incident where God revealed Himself as רפא־יהוה (Yahweh Ropheca) to the Israelites was after their Exodus out of Egypt. They had already experienced plagues attacking the Egyptians, and Yahweh used that as an example to warn them about

Journal of Philosophy and Religion

what would befall them if they became disobedient (Adamo, 2021, p. 18). In addition, the ten plagues had the aim of showing the supremacy of Yahweh over the Egyptian gods. It was after three days of wandering in the Desert of Shur when the Israelites were desperately in need of water to quench their thirst. Fortunately, they discovered an oasis but had the challenge after finding the waters unfit for drinking (Harris, 1993, p. 587). God was to intervene divinely when he cleansed the waters by instructing Moses to throw a piece of wood into the water, thus making it drinkable. God then declared Himself as Jehovah Rapha to His people by promising health and peace if they were obedient. The word used in Exodus 15:26 suggests that the giver of the diseases is still the giver of health.

In some instances, Moses uses words to cure, as in the case of Miriam being healed from leprosy. In this, Moses appeals to God on behalf of others to initiate healing. Moreover, some actions, like the making of the fiery serpent and the healing of water at Mara, involve the use of tangible things incorporated with faith (Hasel 1985, P. 139). However, Yahweh is actively involved in both forms of healing. For instance, looking at the use of the same word in 2 Chronicles 7:14 gives a glimpse of how people differ in their view of the word. In 'I will heal their land' phrase, some contend that healing the land in its literary context refers to national healing, spiritual renewal, and restoring shalom on earth; others assert that Yahweh's healing in Chronicles 7:14 refers not to healing the land politically or morally, but to 'the physical healing of the land of Israel' symbolising that the land, which might be unproductive will be restored again, as well as their sick bodies healed (Darling, 1989, p.18).

According to MacLaurin (1962, p. 439), the phrase used in Exodus 15:26 is רפא יהוה (the Lord, 'Yahweh' your healer). The Biblical tradition depicts that YAHWEH was worshipped in Moses' family before His Name was introduced to Israel. In the Masoretic Text, the word Adonai is used as a substitute for Yahweh since the people could not pronounce the name of their God. On the other hand, the Hebraic translation of the word רפא means to restore or to heal. However, the warning followed a warning and a promise (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1935, p. 45). Meaning that the people will have peace as long as they obey their god. This promise is seen in 2 Chronicles 30:18–20, where the same word רפא is used to depict Yahweh's healing of the people of Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun in response to Hezekiah's prayer. This then has a further meaning that if the people realise their sins, they can still be forgiven and healed (Adamo, 2021).

In Leviticus 13:37, the word רפא is used (Niphal). Perfect 3rd person singular to mean healed. These were the regulations given to the Israelites regarding skin diseases. The Israelite's healer was God, but there were other regulations to be observed (Anderson, 1977:46). This is different from the other versions of the word. For example, the healing of the water of the unproductive water in 2 Kings (2:22) is used to mean to bring it back to life, like to repair something that was not right. Other texts that have used God as the healer in the Old Testament include Psalms (41:3), the healer of sickness and infirmity; Psalms (147:3) pointing

Journal of Philosophy and Religion

Him as the healer of emotional struggles; Jonah (2:5-7), shows God is the healer of mental affliction, and Psalms (23:3) points Him as the healer of spiritual fatigue. All aim at explaining why God is the source of healing in all dimensions of life (Anderson, 1977, p. 46). In Exodus 15:26, the word is used רפאך, and it is in Qal, simple active participle, verb, singular suffix, masculine with 2nd person singular. It can be translated as “because I am the Yahweh your healer” or “because am Yahweh the one healing you.” The one who makes everything work out towards bringing peace to the people.

Understanding the Concept of Healing from the Old Testament View

Throughout this research, it has been clear that since the Old Testament times, people were filled with awe whenever they were faced with challenges like pandemics and diseases. However, people always sought for remedy in order to be whole and healthy. In the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East, the people believed that there was always a cause to any misfortune, and every occurrence was handled uniquely according to its cause. The Ancient Near Eastern people believed that there was a deity responsible for their health, and they always sought solutions from their gods. El was a name given to the most superior deity and was the name given to the Israelites. This was because they were among the people who lived in the Ancient Near East and were greatly influenced by their culture. 'Sara', as discussed earlier, means supremacy and when El was added to the name, the aspect of superiority came out clearly. The word used in the Pentateuch for healing literally means binding, restoring or stitching together a wound. In the Old Testament, the priests were not physicians but were tools for healing. They interceded on behalf of the people whenever things were not right, and restoration was realised.

The plagues were still witnessed in the Pentateuch, and most of them were believed to have been directly sent by God for a specific purpose of punishment (Leviticus 26:25). In the Ancient Near East, there were physicians who took care of the well-being of the people. These physicians were not only capable of treating the living sick people but also the dead by embalming them for proper preservation of the corpse. This then meant that it was not only the living that needed care but also the dead because the person was believed to still be part of the community even at demise. The physicians used different methods, either physical medicine, whether scientific or herbal or even incantations, where they used consultation of spirits for healing. This was done following the cause of the disease.

The priests in the Pentateuch were caregivers but not necessarily physicians. For instance, if someone was termed unclean, he/she was to present themselves to the religious leaders for cleansing after getting cured in order for them to receive a holistic healing and be acceptable amongst the people. The priests pleaded with Yahweh for the victims to get healed, as in the case of Miriam. It was not for the priest to think about whether he had to intercede or not because that was his line of duty. Therefore, the people with the knowledge of healing should not put it as a condition for the people who require to be healed because it is a free gift from God.

CONCLUSION

Science and faith healing have a notable gap that has been increasing by the day. Isaiah 48:17 states that God is the giver of knowledge and the one who directs people on the way to follow. He is the giver of knowledge and life. He is the one who gives the doctors the ability to treat and cure. Exodus 15:26 talks about the 'the Lord, your healer' and not the Lord your curer. Doctors use scientific knowledge to prescribe a dosage for curing a disease, but God heals the people. From our discussion, the other word that equates to healing is shalom, which is much deeper than curing. This is because one can be relieved from a disease that had given them problems but still lack peace, or can lack literal curing but be healed. This is because healing is much deeper than curing since its healing is ensuring peace.

Exodus 15:25 indicates that out of many trees, Yahweh showed Moses one which would heal the water and make it fit for the people to drink before proceeding to make a suzerain-vassal covenant. The use of wood for healing may be symbolic of the other curative medicine taken from plants. Similarly, in 2 Kings 6:6, the son of the prophet had no peace because of the lost axe head. Elijah, in turn, used a piece of wood to restore the lost axe head. However, in 2 Kings 2:20-21, Elijah uses salt to heal the water. This was not a simple cure, but the land was healed, too and peace was restored in that city.

REFERENCES

1. Adamo, D. T. (2021). I Am the Lord Your Healer' Exodus 15:26 (אנייהוהרפאך): Healing in the Old Testament and the African (Yoruba) Context. *In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi*, 55(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2689>
2. Agbo, P. O. (2021). *Blame-Game Politics: Re-Evaluating Incongruent Leprosy and Covid-19 Policies in the Old Testament and Nigerian Societies*. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 42(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2370>
3. Anderson, A. (2004). *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Bentzen, J. (2020). *In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic*. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3615587>
5. Darling, F. C. (1989). *Biblical Healing: Hebrew and Christian Roots*. Vista Publications.
6. Grossman, J. (2007). Mayo Clinic Internal Medicine Review 2006-2007. *JAMA*, 298(6), 685. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.298.6.685>
7. Harris, R. A. (1993). *The Linguistic Wars*. Oxford University Press.
8. Hasel, G. F. (1985). Major Recent Issues in Old Testament Theology 1978-1983*. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 10(31), 31-53.
9. Jewish Publication Society of America (1935). *The Holy Scriptures: According to the Masoretic Text: A New Translation with the Aid of Previous Versions and with Constant Consultation of Jewish Authorities*.

Journal of Philosophy and Religion

10. MacLaurin, E. C. (1962). YHWH, the Origin of the Tetragrammaton, *Vetus Testamentum*, 12(4), 439.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1516934>
11. Wilkinson, J. (1998). *The Bible and Healing: A Medical and Theological Commentary*. Eerdmans Publishing Co.