

## The COVID-19 Virus, Illness, and Biblical Interpretation in Its Ancient Context

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### 1. Plagues in Hittite and West Semitic Contexts

While there is a significant amount of literature on the subject of sickness, plagues, and healing in the ancient Near East, the focus here will be on two examples from the immediately surrounding culture of the Hittite and West Semitic worlds and of illnesses that befell multiple victims.<sup>1)</sup> Closely related to the West Semitic world is that of the Hittite world that flourished in the region of modern Turkey from the sixteenth century to the beginning of the twelfth century BC. As a result of the chronological and geographical proximity of the Hittites to the West Semitic world of the Bible, there is evidence of much influence and of many parallels with Old Testament practices.<sup>2)</sup>

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- 1) For the broader ancient context, see Roland K. Harrison and Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Medicine & Physicians," in *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical & Post-Biblical Antiquity: Volume III I-N*, ed. Edwin M. Yamauchi and Marvin R. Wilson (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2016), 3:250-73; J. V. Kinnier Wilson, "Medicine in the Land and Times of the Old Testament," in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays*, ed. Tomoo Ishida (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1982), 337-65.
- 2) Billie Jean Collins, "The Hittites and the Hurrians," in *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and Brent A. Strawn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 197-228, esp., 226-27; Itamar

This is especially interesting because of an event and its response that dates to the fourteenth century BC. At that time a plague ravaged the capital and the land of the Hittites for decades. The king at that time, Suppiluliuma I, died of the plague as did some other members of the royal family. It remained to the successor king, Mursili II, to deal with the plague. Tracing either to Egyptian prisoners of war brought or to earlier sources in the land of the Hittites, the plague led the king to compose prayers for its divine removal. Divine causes were attributed to the sins of Mursili's predecessor, Suppiluliuma. These were mentioned as the neglect of offerings, the invasion of Amqa that violated their treaty, and the murder of an heir. Mursili begs for the plague to stop so that there might be people left alive to perform the rituals. He also argues that forgiveness of a slave who confesses their sins provides a model and basis for the forgiveness that Mursili by means of propitiatory sacrifices and by means of the prayers that he composes:<sup>3)</sup>

Or if some servant has committed a sin, but he confesses the sin before his lord, his lord may do with him whatever he wishes; but since he has confessed his sin before his lord, his lord's soul is appeased, and the lord will not call that servant to account. I have confessed the sin of my father. It is so. I have done it. If there is some restitution (to be made), then there has already [been paid (?)] much for this plague [caused be (?)] the prisoners of war who were brought

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Singer, "The Hittites and the Bible Revisited," in *"I Will Speak the Riddle of Ancient Times": Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Aren M. Maeir and Pierre R. de Miroschedji (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 723-56; Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., "Hittite-Israelite Cultural Parallels," pp. xxix-xxxiv in *The Context of Scripture: Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 3.xxix-xxxiv.

3) Cf. Itamar Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, SBL Writings from the Ancient World 11 (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 47-69.

back from Egyptian territory and by civilian captives who were brought back. [And] since Hatti has made restitution through the plague, it [has made restitution] for it twenty-fold. Indeed, it has already become that much. And yet the soul of the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord, and of all the gods, my lords, is not at all appeased. Or if you want to require from me some additional restitution, specify it to me in a dream, and I shall give it to you.<sup>4)</sup>

Eight prayers are known, coming from later copies. They are addressed to different deities. One contains a colophon that notes how the “the scribe presents daily a plea on behalf of the king before Telipinu.”<sup>5)</sup> While the king notes the reasons already mentioned and attempts the remedies, he seeks further divine either by a dream (as above) including sleeping in a holy place, or an oracle, or a pronouncement from a man of god.<sup>6)</sup> The plague eventually subsided, as we do not hear about it in later texts. Despite similarities with the biblical accounts below, the great uncertainty as to the origins of the plague and the means of finding divine guidance to address it contrasts with the biblical witness for ancient Israel.

A second source comes from the thousands of texts found in the Mari archives of the eighteenth century BC. Hundreds of letters composed by the king of Mari and his officials were also preserved as part of this treasure. The dominant presence of Amorite personal names, the location of the site on the bend of the Euphrates at the border of modern Iraq and Iran, and the many examples of similarities with biblical and other West Semitic customs and vocabulary, all point to a West Semitic population and cultural world that provides for close connections with the world of early Israel and its antecedents.<sup>7)</sup> Of special

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4) *Ibid.*, 60 CTH 378 II rev. 20'-36', §9.

5) *Ibid.*, 56.

6) *Ibid.*, 60 CTH 378 II A rev. 41'-44'-C iv 14'-22', §11.

interest for this topic are a small collection of letters that refer to plagues in towns and regions.<sup>8)</sup>

In one letter (ARM 26.259) an official by the name of La'um writes to Mari's king Yawmah-Addu noting how the town of Dunnun has become a morgue or pile of corpses, depending on how one defines kurullum.<sup>9)</sup> Twenty troops died there. Many citizens of the town fled to a mountain. Nearby towns have been unaffected. This whole description is introduced with the phrase, "concerning the devouring of a god," implying a religious motivation for the plague.<sup>10)</sup> In ARM 26.260, the same author indicates that "the hand of the god has abated" in areas of the infection.<sup>11)</sup> Where before five or ten died daily, now only one.<sup>12)</sup>

Iksud-Appašu writes his lord that he has become sick (ARM

7) For examples of this connection with early Israel, see Richard S. Hess, "The Ancestral Period," in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, eds. J. S. Greer, J. W. Hilber, and J. H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 187-93; Idem, review of *Letters to the King of Mari: A New Translation with Historical Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, by Wolfgang Heimpel, *Denver Journal: An Online Review of Current Biblical and Theological Studies* 8 (2005), <https://denverseminary.edu/the-denver-journal-article/letters-to-the-king-of-mari/>; Adam E. Miglio, "Mari Letters," in *The Context of Scripture: Volume 4: Supplements*, ed. K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 225-58.

8) Collections of these letters in translation can be found in Wolfgang Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari: A New Translation with Historical Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* Mesopotamian Civilizations 11 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 277-79; Jack M. Sasson, *From the Mari Archives: An Anthology of Old Babylonian Letters* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 333-34. For transliterations and translations, see the *editio princeps*, Jean-Marie Durand, *Archives Épistolaires de Mari 1/1*, Archives Royales de Mari XXVI. Paris : Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1988), 541-84, with microfiche photos of the tablets.

9) Heimpel, *Letters*, 277 and n. 312 on 278-79.

10) Line 6, *aš-šum ú-ku-ul-ti AN-lim*.

11) Line 5, *qa-at A[N-li]m [a-n]a a-a[ḫ]*. A similar phrase occurs in ARM 26.264.

12) The text is broken here so this reading is a reasonable conjecture. See Durand, *Archives*, 562; Heimpel, *Letters*, 277-78.

26.261). He observes an infection in the town of Zurubban that “a god has spread.”<sup>13)</sup> It now extends beyond that town. In ARM 26.265 there seems to be a plague that results in the deaths of domestic slaves, weavers, prisoners, and farmers.<sup>14)</sup>

Of special interest is ARM 26.265 where the officer writing Yasmah-Addu describes how the plague was dealt with:<sup>15)</sup>

I had extispicies done for the burying of the corpse heap on the 10th day of the month of Tirum. The god has answered. All of them were viewing (the corpses). He (i.e., each) buried the corpse belonging to him. The exorcists and cantors cleansed the city thoroughly on the 14th of the month of Tirum. The god has become reconciled with the land. My lord must know this.

We see from these texts that the leaders of Mari did not address the origins of the plague beyond acknowledging a divine cause. Nor does that recognition identify the particular deity. Like the Hittite plague prayers, the blame is placed not on a person or people, but on the divine world. The Mari letters add to the Hittite texts by declaring how the plague was dealt with. While the Hittite king remains bewildered and awaits some divine revelation as to what to do, the Mari officials records the deaths, employ sacrifices as well as exorcists and cantors to drive out evil spirits and to appease the gods, and bury the dead. Of course, this may have been done by the Hittite king, but they do not mention it.

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13) Lines 17-18, AN-*lum i-na zu-ru-ba-an<sup>ki</sup> ú-l[a-a]p-pí-it*. See Durand, *Archives*, 563; Heimpel, *Letters*, 278.

14) Heimpel, *Letters*, 278.

15) Heimpel, *Letters*, 178-79; Durand, *Archives*, 564-65.

## 2. The Value of the Human Person

The Hittite and ancient Near Eastern legal collections suggest that the value of humanity was ranked according to status. Not so the Bible.<sup>16)</sup> The Bible teaches the immeasurable value of each and every human life. This occurs on its first page, in Genesis 1:26-28 (NIV here and throughout):

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

The image and likeness of God may be understood in a variety of ways.<sup>17)</sup> The context here defines it as the unique

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16) See further discussion on the contrast in Richard S. Hess, “The Value of Human Life and Capital Punishment,” in *Exploring the Basis and Ethical Implications of Capital Punishment*, ed. Dieumeme Noelliste and M. Daniel Carroll R., Denver Seminary’s Vernon Grounds Institute of Public Ethics Monograph Series 8 (Denver: Denver Seminary’s Vernon Grounds Institute of Public Ethics, 2015), 1-21; idem, “The Distinctive Value of Human Life in Israel’s Earliest Legal Traditions,” in *The Ancient Near East in the 12<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> Centuries BCE: Culture and History: Proceedings of the International Conference Held at the University of Haifa, 2-5 May, 2010*, ed. Gershon Galil, Ayelet Gilboa, Aren M. Maeir, and Dan’el Kahn. *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 392 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012), 221-28.

17) David J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968),

role of humanity in rulership on the earth. While other parts of creation also receive the command to be fruitful and to fill the earth (v. 22), only humanity is given the charge to rule creation. The immediate context of this provides examples in chapter 2 of Genesis. There in verses 15 and 20, the man has two tasks. The first is to take care of the Garden of Eden. God had created the Garden, just as he had created the entire world in chapter 1. The man was to continue the work of God's life-giving creation to maximize the life-giving potential of the Garden. Through his service there, the Garden would continue to bear fruit. Verse 20 indicates that the man named the animals whom God brought to him. This likely involved identifying their purpose and function. The activity of naming may have continued the acts of dividing and distinguishing begun by God in the first days of creation (Genesis 1:4-10). Again, this describes the role of humanity in continuing God's acts of creation.

The image of God passed down the genealogies. Genesis 5:1-3 reaffirms the image of God in the first generation and notes how it continued down successive generations:<sup>18)</sup>

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53-103; Phyllis A. Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them': Genesis 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981): 129-59; reprinted in *"I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood": Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study Volume 4 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 329-61; A. A. Hoekma, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); G. A. Jönsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a Century of Old Testament Study*, Coniectanea Biblica 42 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988); Catherine L. McDowell, *The Image of God on the Garden of Eden: The Creation of Humankind in Genesis 2:5-3:24 in Light of the mis pî pit pî and wpt-r Rituals of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt*, Siphrut 15 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

18) For the parallel with Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:4, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco: Word, 1987), 126; Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001),

This is the written account of Adam's family line. When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them "Mankind" when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.

Even after the early and sadly increasing sin that the Bible describes in the first six chapters of Genesis, and the judgment of the Great Flood described in the following chapters, God again affirms the presence of His image in Genesis 9:6:

Whoever sheds human blood,  
by humans shall their blood be shed;  
for in the image of God  
has God made mankind.

The continuing presence of the image of God is explicit here.<sup>19)</sup> The context of this text, along with the use of capital punishment for murder (Exodus 21:11; Deut 20), point to the nature of each human as of such great value that no amount of gold or silver is sufficient to buy back the human person. Rather, the value of a person who is murdered can only be repaid by the life of another person, specifically the life of the murderer.

The Bible views all of humanity as coming from a common

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113-14; Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 84-86.

19) Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 193-94; Waltke with Fredricks, *Genesis*, 145. See also Arnold, *Genesis*, 110, who rejects the application of this verse to capital, contrary the majority of interpreters. He argues that "modern nation states are incapable of serving as infallible executors of God's will." On this basis it would seem that none of God's laws could be enforced by "modern nation states." Cf. Waltke with Fredricks, *Genesis*, 157.

ancestry.<sup>20</sup>) This is clear in both the genealogies of Genesis 1-11 and especially in the “Table of Nations” in chapter 10. Drawing upon the human author’s knowledge of all peoples of the known world, the text explicitly traces this to the parentage of Noah and his wife. Thus, all people are equal before God and of equal worth. Unlike other ancestries of the ancient world, that of Genesis 10 is unique in confirming the single and equal worth of each person and the people group that they find themselves a part of.<sup>21</sup>)

It is extremely important to understand this positive message. The Bible does not begin with a story of divine struggle and killing, unlike other ancient Near Eastern accounts. It begins with God’s gift of life. The Bible does not privilege one part of humanity in its perspective. Certainly, Israel is specially chosen by God but the divine revelation sees that purpose as one of blessing and intercession for the needs and wellbeing of the rest of the world. Abram’s descendants, the people of God, are promised to be a blessing to all peoples of the world (Genesis 12:1-3). The whole nation of Israel is described by God to be a royal priesthood (Exodus 19:6) through whom God would work so as to make known his great deeds of salvation to the

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20) Dennis R. Venema and Scot McKnight, *Adam and the Genome: Reading Scripture after Genetic Science* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Baker, 2017), exemplify the attempt to analyze modern genetic evidence and draw conclusions about human origins. McKnight’s theory that argues for a kind of symbolic view of the early chapters of Genesis is a good example of one approach. This author, however, is not convinced that the final statement has been made on this relatively recent area of scientific research.

21) Attempts to argue comparative literature in the ancient world are not sustained under careful evaluation. See Richard S. Hess, “The Genealogies of Genesis 1-11 and Comparative Literature,” in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura, *Sources for Biblical and Theological Study* 4 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 58-72, especially 69-71.

people of the world (Joshua 4:24). Then all peoples would turn to God in prayer and receive answers to their prayers (1 Kings 8:41-43), confessing as Naaman did that (2 Kings 5:15), “Now I know that here is no God in all the world except in Israel.”<sup>22)</sup> Nevertheless, Israel should not see God’s choice (or election) of their nation as a cause for pride. Amos 9:7 reminds God’s people that in His eyes they are not different from other nations:<sup>23)</sup>

Are not you Israelites  
the same to me as the Cushites?”  
Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt,  
the Philistines from Caphtor  
and the Arameans from Kir?

This returns to the teaching of the fundamentally equal worth of all peoples before God, where each person possesses a value that transcends the rest of the material world. The New Testament affirms this message by valuing people so much that the Son of God (John 1:14) should be crucified and die for the world (John 3:16). Thus, Christianity has broken down all barriers between Jew and Gentile and between all other groups (Isaiah 60: 3-16; Ephesians 2:13-22; Galatians 3:28).<sup>24)</sup>

The value and equality of humanity is so important when considering the COVID-19 virus. It confirms that we are not ranked so that some are more worthy of medical treatment and others are less worthy. It also removes special consideration of

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22) Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Biblical Theology for Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 132-34; Stephen L. McKenzie, *1 Kings 16 - 2 Kings 16*, International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhamer, 2019), 314.

23) Gary V. Smith, *Amos: A Commentary*. Library of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 269-71.

24) Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 141-43, 191-93).

a few selected people. Human wealth and political power may assume and grasp at these privileges, but they do not reflect the fact that the image of God is a gift to everyone. Further, the Creator has not placed limits on the grace and mercy that he can and does give (Psalm 24:1).<sup>25)</sup> His healing is available to all (Exodus 15:26; Psalm 103:1-3).<sup>26)</sup>

Therefore, it is contrary to the Bible and to historic Christian and Jewish teaching to deny life and value to any individual or group of people simply because of their identity. Likewise, it is wrong for one group of people to force another to do what they do not wish to do, whether by making people commodities that can be owned (as in slavery) or by insisting that one group of people has a higher value and somehow matters more than another group. Finally, the Biblical expression of this powerful teaching is not found in protests and marches that result in the killing of innocents, and the destruction and theft of property. In the words of Jesus (John 10:10): “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” The purpose of the Christian value of human life, and of all life, is to redeem it so that it might flourish with blessing as God intended.

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25) C. Hassell Bullock, *Psalms Volume 1: Psalms 1-72*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 174-81; Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms. The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 75-76.

26) Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 270; Rolf A. Jacobson, “Psalm 103: God Is Good!,” in Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 759-68.

### 3. The Bible and Epidemics and Illnesses

It is worthwhile to consider characters in the Bible who experienced the sort of widespread disease that we are faced with today.

One can find biblical examples where sickness grips many people or even a whole nation. One of the first examples of this appears in Genesis 20.<sup>27)</sup> There Abraham takes his wife Sarah to visit Abimelek the king of Gerar. He presents Sarah as his sister and Abimelek takes Sarah with an intent to marry her. Before this happens, God appears to Abimelek in a dream and warns him that he will die unless he returns Sarah to Abraham. Earlier in Genesis 12 a very similar story took place with the pharaoh of Egypt in place of Abimelek. In both cases sickness came upon the entire household of pharaoh and of Abimelek (12:17; 20:17). Healing occurred only after Sarah was returned. A similar story is told of Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac and his wife Rebekah in Genesis 26. However, there sickness is not mentioned.

In the case of Abraham and pharaoh, the pharaoh repents of his course of action and returns Sarai to Abram as soon as he learns that they are married. The same happens with Abimelek but there God reveals this in a dream to the king of Gerar. Thus the sickness was removed from those who knew they were doing wrong and changed their course of action.

A major series of plagues takes place when Moses asks pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt and pharaoh refuses (Exodus 7-10). In many ways this is much more dramatic as these plagues affect the entire population of Egypt. The turning of the Nile's water into blood constitutes the first plague. As the primary source of water for Egypt, the loss of the Nile would lead to

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27) Waltke with Fredricks, *Genesis*, 282-89.

suffering and death. There follow frogs, gnats, flies, death of livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness. These would also bring sickness and death. However, the worst plague was the last one. In it the firstborn of every family, whether human or animal, would die. Some have noticed that many of the plagues challenge the powers of some of the leading gods and goddesses that were worshipped in ancient Egypt.<sup>28)</sup> The pharaoh himself was also regarded as one of these deities whose propaganda presented him as the life giver of his people.<sup>29)</sup> This tenth and final plague challenged his provision of life for his nation and for his own family. He could not preserve any of them against the effects of the plague. If the pharaoh of Exodus 1 had tried to kill all male newborns from among his Israelite slaves and failed (Moses was preserved), the pharaoh of Exodus 11-13 faced the death of all firstborn of his population from a God who did not fail. However, everyone in Egypt could escape this judgment by observing the Passover. Those who did not, including the pharaoh, suffered the loss of their firstborn. This defeat of pharaoh struck him where he claimed the most power, as a giver of physical and spiritual life to all his people.

Thus, the picture of God's salvation of his own people involved these plagues. However, the plagues were not random acts of judgment but an attempt to challenge Egypt and its gods and to give people the opportunity of escape; if only they would release Israel from slavery. Some believed and acted to preserve themselves (Exodus 9:20; 12:38). This was a minority. Nevertheless, the plagues served less as some sort of judgment for sin and more as an opportunity to see the reality of the

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28) See the summary in Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 152-54.

29) Mario Liverani, *Prestige and Interest. International Relations in the Near East ca. 1600-1100 B. C.*, History of the Ancient Near East / Studies 1 (Padova: Sargon, 1990).

true God and to turn to him. As noted, some did so and left Egypt with Israel (Exodus 12:38).<sup>30)</sup> Israel was preserved from bad effects of the plagues and given its freedom from enslavement.

In the book of Numbers God turns to strike his own people with sickness and plagues. When the people of Israel complain of the lack of meat and God provides it, those who consume the raw quail in the greediest possible manner are struck with a plague and die (Numbers 11:33). When the twelve spies return from their exploration of Canaan and the people choose not to enter the country because ten of the spies report that the land is too difficult to conquer, God sends a plague against the ten (Numbers 14:37) and condemns the remaining people of Israel who agreed with their report. They died in the wilderness and never entered the Promised Land (Numbers 14:26-35).<sup>31)</sup>

In the wilderness, when the people murmured against the leadership of Aaron and again at Baal Peor when the Israelites worshiped another god with the Midianites, God's sent plagues that were averted only by the intercession of Aaron and of his successor Phinehas (Numbers 16:46-50; 25:8-9; Psalm 106:29-30). In all these cases the plague came as a sign of God's displeasure and judgment upon his people who had vowed to follow him (Exodus 24:1-11) and then broken that vow. God turned against his people as a response to their having turned away from him.

This sort of plague appears in two other narratives. In 1 Samuel 6 the Philistines have taken the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD as a war trophy from Israel. After moving it about

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30) Some traditions numbers these in the tens of thousands. Cf. William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 2 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1999), 414-15.

31) Not much discussion is found concerning the briefly mentioned plagues. Cf. Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary 5 (Waco: Word, 1984), 124-26, 129, 159.

they try to settle the Ark in the city of Ekron. However, the LORD afflicted the Philistines with a plague for which they could only find relief by returning the Ark to the Israelite with compensation or reparation (1 Samuel 5:6-6:18).<sup>32)</sup> The Ark was not a war trophy. It was not a box that one could put the LORD God of Israel in and control him. This was a lesson that the Philistines needed to understand.

In 2 Samuel 24 (and in a slightly different version in 1 Chronicles 21) David takes a census to learn how strong his army is and perhaps to prepare for the *corvée* labor necessary to build the Temple.<sup>33)</sup> Although warned not to do so, he numbers the Israelites. He receives condemnation for this through Gad, a prophet, who indicates that God has given him choices for punishment. David chooses a plague that devastates Israel for three days. David buys a threshing floor from Araunah, likely a pre-Israelite prince in Jerusalem<sup>34)</sup> who owned this property at the highest point of ridge on which Jerusalem was built. With the purchase of this property and in anticipation of Solomon's erection of the Temple upon it, David built an altar

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32) David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 207-24. Tsumura notes that this is an offering to repair or restore. On the discussion as to whether there is a sense of guilt or not, see pp, 214-15.

33) So Kyle R. Greenwood, "Labor Pains: The Relationship between David's Census and *Corvée* Labor," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20 (2010): 267-77. Greenwood reviews the major suggested reasons for the plague and concludes that disobedience to God's prohibition for him to prepare for building the Temple, especially by creating a census, was a big part of it.

34) This would be a non-Hebrew Hurrian name or even dynastic title used by pre-Israelite (Jebusite) inhabitants of the city. See Benjamin J. Noonan, *Non-Semitic Loanwords in the Hebrew Bible: A Lexicon of Language Contact*, Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic 14 (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2019), 27; Richard S. Hess, *The Old Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 324.

there and offered burnt offerings and fellowship offerings on it. God stopped the plague (2 Samuel 24:21).<sup>35)</sup>

The prophetic books continue the theme of plague as a coming judgment against God's people (e.g., Jeremiah 21:6-9; 24:10; 29:17-18; 32:24, 36) and against other people (Isaiah 19:22; Zechariah 14:12-18). This prophetic perspective moves forward into the New Testament where the discussions of plague occur as a prophecy of the future in Revelation 6:8; 11:6; and 16:21. There, however, it always applies to the enemies of God and His people.

Widespread disease and plague are attested from the beginning until the end of the Bible. These come as a judgment of God upon people, whether His own people or others. In some cases, God clearly states how to stop the plague. In others it is not so easy to understand. God uses plague to benefit his people as well, by visiting on their enemies a just response for what they have done to Israel or His people. The biblical text, however, does not teach that every plague comes as the will of God or as an act of His judgment. It does serve as a reminder for God's people and for others who may listen that freedom from disease, like everything else in this life, is not a guarantee. Health is a gift from God that He may allow to wane for a time. This may serve to awaken His people from their lethargy, to bring them to repentance, and to encourage them to rededicate themselves to God and to His service.

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35) P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 9 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 512-14, connects the plague with the lack of a proper observance of purity rituals and maintenance of that purity by those numbered who had now entered into military service with all its obligations (cf. e.g., 1 Samuel 21:4). David Toshio Tsumura, *The Second Book of Samuel*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 346-48, emphasizes the purpose of the plague to propitiate God.

The contrast with the Hittite and Mari texts is significant. Except for the case of the Philistines, God makes clear the reason for the plague through direct revelation or through a dream. Unlike the ancient Near Eastern texts, and perhaps the Philistines, there is a certainty as to the cause and it has to do with the sin of the people being so plagued. Normally this is a moral sin. The solution is regularly found in confession and repentance. This is rarely mentioned in the Hittite plague prayers and never in the Mari texts. More than rituals or ceremonies, the confession and repentance of God's people Israel brings restoration.

#### 4. Health and Healing

How is God's sending of a plague related to his value of human life? These is a major question and it introduces our third topic, the teaching of health and healing in the Bible. This is a huge topic that has had much study devoted to it.<sup>36</sup> Illnesses abounded in the ancient world of the Bible. Treatment and recovery usually took place at home. The Tabernacle and Temple could be a place for seeking healing from God and for giving praise to God for healing. Prayer was the main treatment. Psalm 38:3-4 addresses God: "Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin. My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear." God's intolerance of sin may have allowed the illness but the immediate cause was the sin itself. Contrast this with the story of Job's suffering where Job's sin

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36) Cf. e.g., Hector Avalos, *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East: The Role of the Temple in Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel*, Harvard Semitic Museum Monographs 54 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995); Michael L. Brown, *Israel's Divine Healer*, Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

is not the main cause, despite what his friends say. To the contrary, the cause of Job's suffering lies beyond his understanding. Job 42:7 indicates this as it indicates how Job had spoken well of God. Human healers included prophets in the Old Testament, figures such as Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah. Medications such as "love plants" were used for fertility in Genesis 30:14-16. David played the harp to bring calmness to Saul in 1 Samuel 16:23. In the New Testament Jesus and the apostles performed miracles of healing.

To understand healing better it is helpful to review the use of the term in the Old Testament. The verbal form, "he healed," is *rāphā'*. The form for "healer, doctor" is *rōphē'*. There are seven general points that can be made about the use of these expressions in the Bible.<sup>37)</sup>

(1) All healing comes from God. He alone is the successful subject of the verb in every case in which it is used in the Bible of healing having taken place. For example:

Deuteronomy 32:39: "See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand.

The leaders of Israel attempt to bring healing but they fail:

Jeremiah 8:11: They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. "Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace.

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37) Richard S. Hess, *The Old Testament*, 471-74; Brown, *Israel's Divine Healer*. For further study on this root, see Michael L. Brown, "rāpā'," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H.-H. Fabry, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 13:593-602.

They are false shepherds:

Ezekiel 34:4: You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

Other than God, the only “healers” or “doctors” are the embalmers of Genesis 50:2.

(2) Intercessory prayer is a means to provide healing. The first occurrence of this term, “to heal,” appears in the story from Genesis 20 discussed above. After Abimelek returns Sarah to Abraham, the man prays:

Genesis 20:17: Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave girls so they could have children again.

This first use of healing in the Bible points to the importance of prayer and interceding. God does great miracles in response to the prayers of those who follow Him. Nor is this something limited to the Old Testament. James 5:14-16 continues the same theme:

Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

(3) Healing can be part of God’s blessing for obedience or faithfulness. This is promise that God makes to His people

as a whole. It is not a something that individuals have as a guarantee. Job eventually received healing but went through many trials. The apostle Paul sought God for his own healing but did not receive it (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Nevertheless, God brings healing as a gift to His people:

Exodus 15:26: He said, "If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you."

Malachi 4:2: But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.

Conversely, the lack of healing for a people or nation can be judgmental. Consider Isaiah 6:10:

Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

(4) Healing is more than a physical act. It is connected with repentance and it also applies to the community.

Jeremiah 3:22: "Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding." "Yes, we will come to you, for you are the LORD our God."

Jeremiah 8:22: Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?

(5) Healing can be a sign of God's love, as in Hosea 14:4:

I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them.

(6) In the Psalms healing is associated with God 's forgiveness:

Psalm 41:4: "O LORD, have mercy on me; heal me, for I have sinned against you."

Psalm 103:3: who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,

(7) The role of healing in the Old Testament is intimately connected with God. He is the only successful healer. However, the book of Proverbs invites others to heal through the use of authentic and comforting words:

Proverbs 4:22: for they (words of the teacher) are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body.

Proverbs 12:18: Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Proverbs 13:17: A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a trustworthy envoy brings healing.

Proverbs 14:30: A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.

Proverbs 15:4: The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.

Proverbs 16:24: Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

Healing come from God and repentance is a part of it in the Old Testament. In the Gospels there is nothing like an epidemic. Nevertheless, Jesus alone heals (his disciples also do when commissioned by him) and he heals frequently. In Matthew alone this occurs multiple times: 4:23, 24; 8:7, 8, 13; 9:21, 22, 35; 10:1, 8; 12:10, 15, 22, 13:15; 14:14, 36; 15:28, 30; 17:18; 19:2; 21:14.

Although not the most common Greek word for healing, the verb, "to save" (sōzō; as in John 3:17) is used in the Gospels with the sense of healing, for example:

Matthew 9:21: She said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.”

Matthew 9:22: Jesus turned and saw her. “Take heart, daughter,” he said, “your faith has healed you.” And the woman was healed from that moment.

In contrast with this emphasis on God’s healing, faith, and good words, the Hittites called upon their gods to heal in a manner that lacked conviction. They could never be sure of identifying the root cause and it seems that they were often unsuccessful. While the people of Mari attribute plagues and healing to unidentified deities, their solutions with sacrifices, exorcisms, and cantors seemed to come after many had died. Perhaps the plague had run its course. In any case, God’s healing and personal faith did not play a significant role.

## Conclusion

One of the most important texts discussing healing that has not yet been mentioned is that of Isaiah 53:5. Here the Servant of Israel suffers and dies for the sins of his people: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” The word for healing used here is the same one found in all the above Old Testament texts that were cited. It most often refers to healing from illness or sickness. In the New Testament, 1 Peter 2:24 quotes this text and connects it to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The reference to healing is related to the forgiveness from sins: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” Physical healing appears in this text but is overshadowed

by spiritual healing, most often in the forgiveness of sins.

The COVID-19 virus was not present in biblical times. The closest parallels lay with plagues that were sent against peoples. There the judgment of God was involved. We cannot assume that such is the case with COVID-19. However, it is a time to search our hearts and repent. It is also important for us to value all other people as created in God's image. COVID-19 should not be used as a biological weapon, as a political tool, as a way of gaining power or fame or influence. None of these are worth more than the value of each and every human life.

The Bible teaches that intercessory prayer is an essential component of fighting plagues such as COVID-19. All healing comes from God. As Creator he has given to humanity the ability to investigate such a disease and to identify ways to treat it and ultimately to prevent its spread. However, all such investigations are undertaken by fallible and fallen humanity. We see how all the special interests already mentioned can be involved with distorting the statistics and the altering the reporting of information, as well as the with the changing health analysis and with recommendations that may or may not be helpful. Unfortunately, it is not possible to point to one source or another as a reliable guide. Each person needs to study and evaluate the information for themselves. At the same time, those who follow the Bible do so with love for God and for our fellow humanity. It is this that returns us to the practice of Abraham in Genesis 20 and of early Christians in James 5. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Christians have the opportunity and calling to pray for those who are ill, to intercede for the effects of this virus, and to minister the gospel in word and deed by doing all we can to assist in fighting it.

<주제어>

코비드-19 바이러스, 전염병, 질병, 하나님의 형상, 기도, 히타이트, 마리

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<초록>

## 코로나-19 바이러스, 질병 그리고 고대 근동 아시아 콘텍스트에서 본 성경적 해석

Richard S. Hess  
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성경적 전통에서 생명과 건강은 중요한 가치를 지니고 있다. 그러나 온 세상에 질병과 죽음을 가져온 코로나 19로 말미암아 생명과 건강의 가치는 직접적으로 도전을 받고 있다. 한 세기 전만 해도 전염병으로 말미암아 사망한 사람은 육천 만 명을 넘지 않았지만, 이와 같은 질병으로 생명을 잃는 일은 항상 적지 않았다. 우리는 이 글을 통하여 이와 같은 대규모의 전염병 현상에 대하여 고찰하고자 한다.

이 논문의 제 1부는 고대 세계에 있었던 재앙들을 검토할 것이다. 특히 고대 이스라엘과 밀접하게 연관된 문화에서 일어났던 현상들로서 특히 주전 2천년대의 고대 아나톨리아의 히타이트와 고대 마리아에서 일어났던 재앙들을 검토할 것이다. 고대 근동아시아의 콘텍스트에서 본 성경적 가르침을 검토함에 있어서 우리는 개인의 가치, 전염병과 질병, 그리고 건강과 치유의 자리에 대한 성경적 언급들을 살피는 과정에서 하나님의 형상으로 창조된 인간의 존엄성에 대한 성경적 가르침을 볼 수 있을 것이다. 성경은 사람의 신분이나 출생의 장소에 상관 없이 그들의 건강과 치유는 중요함을 말하고 있다. 성경에 나타난 여러 재앙의 예들을 살펴 보면 성경의 인물들이 이와 같은 위기에 대하여 어떻게 응답하였는지 알 수 있다. 그들의 응답은 그들을 둘러싼 서부 셈족 세계와 비교되며 또한

대조된다. 이어서 우리는 성경의 건강과 치유에 대하여 고찰하면서 하나님께서 그를 믿는 자들을 어떻게 치료하시는지, 그리고 그들의 책임이 무엇인지 살필 것이다. 결론적으로 우리는 구약과 신약은 (하나님의 형상대로 지음 받은) 인간의 고유한 성격을 강조하고 있음을 볼 것이다. 이와 함께 대규모의 질병이 가진 의의와 그 치유에 대한 성경의 가르침을 보면서, 오늘날 우리가 코비드-19의 재앙에 대하여 어떻게 응답해야 하는지 교훈을 얻고자 한다. 결론에서 우리는 성경 본문에 근거한 구체적인 방안들을 제시할 것이다.

(Prof. JWK translation)

<Abstract>

## The COVID-19 Virus, Illness, and Biblical Interpretation in Its Ancient Context

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Life and health are important values in the biblical tradition. These are directly challenged by the COVID-19 virus that has created disease and death around the world. While the death toll has not reached the more than sixty million estimated for the influenza epidemic a century ago, there is always too much loss of life from any disease such as this. This essay will evaluate the phenomenon.

The first part of the study examines plagues in the ancient world, especially those that occurred and were recorded in cultures closely related to ancient Israel. This includes the plagues that the Hittites of ancient Anatolia experienced and those in the correspondence from ancient Mari, both occurring in the second millennium BC. By examining the biblical teaching in its ancient Near Eastern context, it is possible to consider humanity and the value of the individual, biblical references to epidemics and illness, and the place of health and healing. Thus, work turns to examine the biblical teaching of the value of the human person as created in God's image. This emphasizes the importance of health and healing for people, no matter what their status or place of origin. Examining examples of plagues in the Bible considers how biblical characters responded to this crisis. It compares and contrasts these responses to those of the surrounding West Semitic world. Health and healing in the

Bible are then considered; noting how God works to heal and the responsibility of those who follow him. Conclusions summarize the work with importance on the distinctive nature of the Old and New Testaments view of the human person, the significance and treatment of largescale illness in the Bible, and what this may teach about responses today. In this regard, some specific directions arising from the biblical text are discussed in the conclusion.