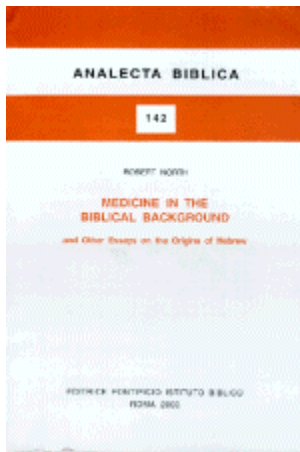


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**North, Robert**

***Medicine in the Biblical Background: and Other Essays on the Origins of Hebrew***

Analecta Biblica 142

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This is an anthology of Robert North's updated articles that have appeared previously in other venues. The topics are quite varied, and speak to the diverse interests of North, whose principal academic career has centered on teaching biblical archaeology at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome.

"Medicine and Healing in the Old Testament Background," an updated discussion of the Alcala-Almeria Conference on biblical studies in 1992, constitutes the first chapter of the book. It includes a sumptuous bibliography. The second chapter ("Did Ancient Israelites Have a Heart?"), which adapts two earlier articles, continues North's interests in medicine. In the third chapter, "How Loud was Jesus' Voice?" North attempts to infer the volume of Jesus' voice when speaking to some of the large crowds described in the Gospels. Another question, "Could Hebrew have been a Type of Cultic Esperanto?" forms the basis of Chapter 4. The final two chapters (5 and 6) examine, respectively, the nature of "Civil Authority in Ezra," and "The Ezra-era Origins of our Bible."

Since about half of the book is devoted to various aspects of biblical medicine, I shall concentrate most of my remarks on this section. In general, I agree with most of his twelve specific conclusions that he draws concerning biblical medicine. For example, I agree that "Any actual ointment or potion is very rarely attested either in the Bible or in relevant excavations" (p. 34). We can also agree that the Hebrew word for "heart" did not correspond to our organ for pumping blood, but rather to a group of organs that were thought to be the seat of the emotions.

On the other hand, and despite his rich bibliography, North does not avail himself of recent work in medical anthropology that might have provided him with a more systemic and cross-cultural view of Israelite health care. North's approach focuses on establishing the meaning of basic terms, and making brief observations about physicians, hospitals, and malpractice. Some of these observations provide the impression of notes linked together to form a section. For example, his discussion of "Hospitals: public and preventive medicine" extends to only four brief paragraphs.

At the same time, some of those brief observations apply modern categories to ancient institutions that have no real equivalent sometimes. For example, rather than searching for the modern "hospital" in ancient Israel, one should look for therapeutic loci, where patients might have gone for rituals that did not require a lengthy or overnight stay typical of modern hospitals. He never notes that 2 Kgs 18:4 states that, prior to its expulsion by Hezekiah, the metal serpent made by Moses may have been used for therapy in the temple. The metal serpent was explicitly manufactured as a therapeutic device (Num 21:6-10), and so we can infer that therapeutic rituals were associated with this device while in the temple, at least as portrayed by the biblical author. Related examples include Hannah going to a shrine at Shiloh to reverse her infertility (1 Samuel 1), and Ahaziah seeking a temple at Ekron to cure his malady (2 Kings 1).

Likewise, the discussion of "The doctor" (pp. 28-33) is limited by North's view of "doctor" as a virtually a western styled technician. In fact, that term is nearly useless when dealing with the ancient Near East. In the ancient Near East what North calls "doctors" were more akin to "health care consultants" that provided healing or advice about maintaining or restoring one's health. As such, the main healing consultants, as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, were probably "prophets" and midwives, and not some professional "physician." Some of these consultants may have had healing as their primary vocation, but most may have practiced "healing" when they were not engaged in their normal vocations. Some may have been priests in temples (e.g., as in Asclepius traditions). It is not until we come to Sirach 38 that we even approach anything akin to a professional physician that is regarded as legitimate by a Hebrew author.

North's discussion of Hebrew as an "invented" language moves to a very different topic. North uses Chapters 4-6, which include the discussions of Ezra and the origins of the Bible, to explore the idea of Hebrew as a type of Esperanto. His point of departure is an article by E. A. Knauf ("War 'Biblich-Hebraisch' eine Sprache?" *ZAH* 3 [1990] 11-23), which suggests that Hebrew was an invented literary language never spoken by the general populace in any period.

North's own answer to the question of whether Hebrew is an invented language is never quite clear. Moreover, North does not give due consideration to Hebrew inscriptional materials. Whatever attention he does show seems dismissive, as in his

following statement: “Moreover the Canaanite inscriptional materials in part show closer relations with Aramaic than with biblical Hebrew” (p. 103). Yet, the work of, among others, Sandra Landis Gogel (A Grammar of Epigraphic Hebrew [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998]) indicates that the grammar of epigraphic Hebrew is not substantially different from biblical Hebrew. Gogel’s conclusion poses serious difficulties for the idea that biblical Hebrew is a distinct and invented language. Thus, a more thorough comparison of Masoretic/Biblical Hebrew with epigraphic Hebrew might have been very useful in any updated discussion.

In sum, North’s book is an attempt to update previous articles on very disparate subjects. On the one hand, it attests to the diversity of the author’s interests. On the other hand, the book would probably have been more useful and successful if it concentrated on one topic (e.g., medicine or biblical Hebrew) and treated this theme more exhaustively and with more attention to the work of scholars with alternative views.