

INDIGENOUS HEALTH CARE PRACTICE IN GHANA: INSIGHTS FROM THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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Abstract: *Indigenous health care system is holistic. For several reasons, however, it has been underestimated and viewed as a barrier to good health care delivery. Even though the existing scientific and technological innovations used for the treatment of diseases seem to be more effective than the indigenous procedures, this paper seeks to suggest that they cannot claim superiority over indigenous health care practices. Using the Book of Proverbs with regards to the life and thought of the Israelites, this paper argues that indigenous health practices are efficacious, holistic and resilient and must be encouraged alongside modern health care practice for the enhancement of good health in Ghana.*

Key Words: Indigenous/Traditional Health; Medicine; Old Testament; Proverbs.

Introduction

The Bible is not a health manual. However, as a collection of religious texts which contain aspects of the life and culture of ancient Israel, the Bible provides insight into Israelites' concept of health. But should we pay any attention to what it says about health? As Ralph E. Hendrix frames the questions; "are biblical health guidelines important? Or are they just antiquated notions that mirror the common knowledge and practice of Bible times?"¹ These questions reveal the scepticism with which many approach ideas of health, not only from the Bible, but from other ancient cultures. Indigenous health, however, shares a lot in common with modern notions of health. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as "state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."² This definition accommodates notions of transcendentalism which underlines traditional

¹ Ralph E. Hendrix, "Health and the Bible: Insights from Archaeology," *Journal of Adventist Education*, 53 (1990), 12-17.

² James S. Larson, "The World Health Organization's Definition of Health: Social Versus Spiritual Health," *Social Indicators Research* 38 (1996), 192.

cultures and their understanding of health.³ For instance, in a report on the state of indigenous health in Australia, indigenous health is defined as

not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but is the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community ... there by bringing about the total wellbeing of their community. It is a whole-of-life view and includes the cyclical concept of life–death–life.⁴

As far back as 1978, WHO advocated for the inclusion of local people, their traditions and practices in Primary Health Care.⁵ But such a call has not been fully realised. Indeed, traditional medicine has been considered as a barrier to modern health practice, especially from people who share the ideas of the school of medical materialism.⁶ This tension between modernity and tradition which is sometimes construed as science and religion has a long history.⁷ Without venturing into the nature of this history, it is important to note that traditional notions of health or indigenous health has defied all odds in its resilient battle against the dominant modern medical practice.

In Africa, particularly Ghana, notions and practice of indigenous⁸ health and medicine are an everyday encounter. From homes to the streets, one encounters various aspects of traditional health care practice including the diagnosis of illness to the prescription of drugs. Despite the presence of the regulatory body (Traditional Medicine Practice Council – TMPC), the proliferation of indigenous medicines and health care practices, for many, has been an issue of great concern. Calls have been made from various sectors to bring

³ Darrel W. Amundsen and Gary B. Ferngren, "Medicine," in *The History of Science and Religion in the Western Tradition: An Encyclopaedia*, ed. Gary B. Ferngren (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 556.

⁴ Australia National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989, *A National Aboriginal Health Strategy*, Australia Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 2007; <http://www.health.gov.au/oatsih/pubs/>

⁵ WHO, *Declaration of Alma Ata*, International Conference on Primary Health Care, Alma Ata, USSR, 6-12 September 1978.

⁶ Medical Materialism, as an offshoot of the Enlightenment, perceived humans to be a wholly material being; see, Amundsen and Ferngren, "Medicine," 561.

⁷ See Harold G. Koenig, "Religion and Medicine I: Historical Background and Reasons for Separation," *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine* 30, no. 4 (2000): 386-388.

⁸ Although there is a difference between the concepts 'indigenous' and 'tradition', in this paper they are used interchangeably as reflective of their usage among Ghanaians.

some level of ‘sanity’ within the practice of traditional medicine. Indeed, the establishment of TMPC Act 2000 shows government’s commitment to addressing the fears people harbour over traditional health care practice.

Among the council’s mandate included the need to uphold standards in order to build confidence in the career of the practitioners and build respect and acceptance among Ghanaians and on the international market. However, several factors account for the continuous cautious and sometimes hostile attitude of some Ghanaians towards traditional health care practice. Ranging from the problems of unsafe drugs to the unprofessionalism of some of the practitioners, what for me is a major issue of concern is the oversimplification of the notion of indigenous or traditional health care. To explain further, many have the tendency of reducing indigenous health care practices to a mystical or spiritual experience. There is also the problem of perceiving indigenous health care from a reactive perspective that is how treatment is carried out (especially through administering herbal medicines), instead of its holistic angle which embraces both preventive and treatment measures.

Cognizant of the fact that the Old Testament (OT) has many a time been used to justify traditional health care practices,⁹ I seek to examine notions of indigenous health as portrayed in the OT. Accordingly, this paper uses the book of Proverbs to investigate ancient Israel’s understanding of health. It addresses the negative notion as well as the oversimplification of indigenous health care system by revealing the dynamics which characterised indigenous health practices within ancient Israelite society. Special emphasis is given to preventive dimension of indigenous health which is largely ignored in discourses on indigenous health. By so doing, I hope to call for proper and holistic understanding, articulation, and practice of indigenous or traditional health care in Ghana.¹⁰

⁹ Anecdotal evidence points to this as people narrate their experiences of what they hear on radio and in buses, and at lorry parks of herbalists and traditional drug peddlers who resort to the Bible (especially the Old Testament) to justify the use of herbal medicine.

¹⁰ Although indigenous health care and practice is underpinned by culture and a people’s worldview, therefore different across space and time, this paper takes for granted the differences and rather pays attention to the continuities that exist in traditional health care practices. Thus although there are significant differences between indigenous health in the Old

To achieve the above goals, the paper is structured into two main parts. First, the relationship between proverbs and health is examined, with particular reference to how the book of Proverbs speaks to health issues. Second, the four dimensions of health as inferred from WHO's definition that is physical, mental or emotional, social, and spiritual health are examined from the perspective of the sayings in the book of Proverbs.

Proverbial Sayings and Health

As terse and concise statements purporting to carry truths, proverbs have been one of the dominant mediums used by humans to inform, educate, and transform societies. As assets for the transformation of society, proverbs do not shy away from any topic: rather they cover every aspect of human life, including health. Thus, some scholars have advocated for what they call medical proverbs (that is proverbs that deal with the subject of health and medicine) such as a Tibetan proverb which says, "Medicine that heals is not always sweet and caring words are not always pleasant."¹¹ Others have rejected such designation.

Despite the disagreements, there is the general acceptance that several proverbial sayings across various cultures address issues of health, such as well-being and illness, life and death, ageing, pain, meditation, and unhealthy habits.¹² Representing the worldviews of primal societies, proverbs have served as good counsel for their audience. In modern times, proverbial sayings have proved to be useful for both medical professionals and ordinary people. For ordinary people, proverbial sayings constitute a means to easily remember medical information, such as "An apple a day keeps the doctor away."

Medical professionals, on the other hand, use these sayings to communicate effectively with their patients.¹³ Tim Rogers, for instance,

Testament and what pertains in Ghana, the paper focuses on the continuities and use that as the hermeneutical framework for the dialogue between the two cultures.

¹¹Cf. Larisa Fialkova, "Proverbs and Medicine: The Problem of Applied Folklore," *Folklore. Electronic Journal of Folklore* 46 (2010):112-115.

¹² Fialkova, "Proverbs and Medicine," 113.

¹³ Fialkova, "Proverbs and Medicine," 114.

shows how proverbs are used in therapeutic communities to help deal with addictive behaviours.¹⁴

The association between proverbial sayings and health is also evident in the book of Proverbs of the OT. As a wisdom book, the book of Proverbs is the main repository of ancient Israelite folk saying.¹⁵ Scholars have described its wisdom as practical and anthropocentric.¹⁶ With focus on humans, Proverbs aims to guide individuals to maximise life by adopting the right conduct and proper attitudes (Prov 1:2-4). Thus, it ventures into the realm of happiness and meaning in life; and this is where the intersection between Proverbs and health takes place. Conceptualised as holistic well-being, health transcends the boundaries of medicine into the transcendental notions of the meaning of life.¹⁷

From the beginning to the end, the book of Proverbs works like a master craftsman shaping one's perceptions and approach to life in a way that benefits the individual and society. It is a pursuit of happiness; not only physical happiness, but also mental or emotional, social, and spiritual happiness.¹⁸ From the perspective of pure medicine (where medicine is reduced to the use of drugs to treat illnesses), Proverbs has very little to offer. However, from the perspective of general health, Proverbs has a lot to give. Many of its maxims are preventive and constrain the audience from making unwise decisions such as engaging in unsafe sexual relationship (cf. Prov. 5 and 7). It is not farfetched to consider the sayings in Proverbs as public health warnings. This explains why in unravelling ancient Israelite understandings of health, the book of Proverbs is part of the few books that are consulted.

¹⁴ Tim B. Rogers, "Psychological Approaches to Proverbs: A Treatise on the Import of Context" in *Wise Words: Essays on the Proverb*, ed. Wolfgang Mieder (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 171.

¹⁵ See F.W. Golka, *The Leopard's Spots: Biblical and African Wisdom in Proverbs* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993) and Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

¹⁶ J. C. Rylaarsdam, "The Proverbs" in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, eds. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (Nairobi: Nelson & Sons, 1962), 444-457. See also R.B.Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 5.

¹⁷ See Amundsen and Ferngren, "Medicine," 556.

¹⁸ James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 43.

Although, seemingly, there is a haphazard arrangement of the sayings as well as the lack of any consistent treatment of the topic of health in any of the collections, a careful observation of Proverbs, however, shows a strong attachment to the subject of health in all its dimensions both explicitly and implicitly. Indeed, the book offers one of the best opportunities to understanding preventive health as conceived within ancient Israelite life and thought.

Indigenous Health as Portrayed in Proverbs

In the following sections, the dimensions of health and well-being (physical; emotion/mental; social; spiritual) will be isolated and discussed from the perspective of how Proverbs treats them.

a. Proverbs and Physical Health: Physical health in simple terms is the absence of illness. It relates to the efficient functioning of the body and its systems, and it includes the physical capacity to perform tasks and physical fitness. It is the most visible dimension of health, because symptoms appear physically. Thus, physical illness, for a long time, has been the focus in health care systems. This is understandable, since apart from the visible signs of ill health, many illnesses place various degrees of limitation on the physical abilities of an individual. Physical health, however, is more than the mere absence of illness. It also includes the fitness level of an individual. Thus, notions of physical health have moved from being negative and reactive, to being positive and proactive. Components of physical health include among others, physical activity, diet alcohol consumption, self-medical care, rest and sleep. In this paper, however, focus will be placed on physical activity, diet, and alcohol consumption.

b. Physical Activity: The link between physical health and physical activity is scientifically well established.¹⁹ Being physically active plays an important role in ensuring physical health and well-being. What is interesting to note is that the benefit of physical activity for health and well-being is not a recent revelation. Primitive societies

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General* (Atlanta, GA: Pittsburgh Superintendent Documents 1996); J.W. Berryman, "Exercise is Medicine: A Historical Perspective," *Current Sports Medicine Reports* 9 (2010), 195.

had long recognised the enormous benefits associated with one's health and the level of one's physical engagements. In ancient China, for instance, a book believed to be dated around 3000 to 1000 BCE detailed the principle that humans needed to be in harmony with the world through physical activities in order to prevent diseases and illnesses.²⁰ S. Boyd Eaton, Melvin Konner, and Marjorie Shostak describe the strenuous physical activities that characterised the daily routine of primitive people, thus forming the foundation of their health. They go further to assert that

The exercise boom [today] is not just a fad; it is a return to 'natural' activity—the kind for which our bodies are engineered, and which facilitates the proper function of our biochemistry and physiology. Viewed through the perspective of evolutionary time, sedentary existence, possible for great numbers of people only during the last century, represents a transient, unnatural aberration.²¹

In Ghana, for instance, it is believed that remnants of strenuous physical lifestyle persist in the villages due to the fact that most rural dwellers are farmers, which partly accounts for the notion that people living in the villages and countryside live longer than those in the cities. Ancient Israelite society was not different in recognising the link between physical activity and health. The OT gives many instances where the Israelites engage in strenuous physical activities, especially in their agricultural tasks which were part of their daily lives.²²

In Proverbs, however, the association between the two is treated subtly. There is no overt discussion of the subject of physical activity and its relation to one's health and well-being. What exists in Proverbs, however, is the pursuit of wisdom, where wisdom includes among others the harmony and orderliness in life, with health as an essential element. A hint of the importance of physical health is first encountered in Prov 3:7-8 which reads; "Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to

²⁰ M.A. Shampo and R.A. Kyle, "Nei Ching—Oldest Known Medical Book," *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* 64 (1989), 134.

²¹ S. Boyd Eaton, Melvin Konner, and Marjorie Shostak, *The Paleolithic Prescription: A Program of Diet and Exercise and a Design for Living* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 168.

²² See. Obed Borowski, *Daily Life in Biblical Times* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Carol Meyers, "Women's Lives," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Ancient Israel*, ed. Susan Niditch (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2016), 417.

your flesh and refreshment to your bones.”²³ Here, the sage links three things; wisdom, the fear of the Lord, and health. The addressee of the text, the son, is admonished not to depend on his own wisdom but to rather fear the Lord and eschew evil (v.7).

Heeding such counsel, the sage argues, will result in healing to the flesh (רפאות תהי לשׂרָךְ) and refreshment to the bones (לְעִצְמוֹתַי לְשִׁקּוּי - v. 8). Through the words *flesh* and *bones*, the sage places emphasis on the physical body and physical health.²⁴ The idea projected is that wisdom which includes good relationship with God leads to good health. On the other hand, participation in evil deeds leads to ill health (what constitutes evil and its relationship to health is developed under the spiritual dimension of health). Several other sayings point to an understanding of the link between the physical body on the one hand, and physical health and ill health on the other hand (cf. Prov. 12:4; 14:30)

In Proverbs, physical health is promoted through a lifestyle which demands continuous physical activities. Lifestyle physical activity is a way of living in which one consistently incorporates physical movements into one’s daily activities. It has been found to be one of the most effective ways of achieving optimal physical health.²⁵ A poem which sums up Israelite sages’ position on the interrelationship among physical activity, physical health, and wisdom is Prov. 31:10-31.

Rightly celebrated as the poem of the ‘woman of worth,’ Prov. 31:10-31 typifies the ideal life of married women. Although many have interpreted the poem symbolically, arguing that no woman can assume all the roles mentioned in the poem,²⁶ others posit that the literal sense of the poem cannot be overlooked.²⁷ What is important in the poem, nonetheless, is the picture of a valiant woman who is

²³ All translations are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV), unless otherwise stated.

²⁴ Dave Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*, The College Press NIV commentary. (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub., 2000), 70.

²⁵ L. H. Epstein et al., “Ten-year Outcomes of Behavioral Family-Based Treatment for Childhood Obesity,” *Health Psychology* 13 (1994), 373–5.

²⁶ Cf. T. McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31.” *Revue Biblique*, 92 (1985), 25–46.

²⁷ Bruce K Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 519; See also Jana K. Reiss, “The Woman of Worth: Impressions of Proverbs 31:10–31,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30 (1997), 141–48.

constantly moving and working. The body of the poem (vv. 13-27) describes series of activities undertaken by the valiant woman. She works with her hand in seeking wool for the family (v. 13); she brings food from afar (v. 14); she rises early to do her business (v.15); she engages in farming (v.16); she makes clothes for her family (v.19; vv. 21-22); she goes out to trade (v. 24). These activities cannot be undertaken by one who is weak. Thus in v.17, the woman is described as arming herself with the needed physical strength for the multifaceted tasks she engages in. What this means is that she makes sure her body is strong and powerful enough to endure the tasks.

But this poem is not the only saying that stresses an active lifestyle. Generally, Proverbs condemns idle life and promotes diligence (Prov. 13:4; 27:24-27). Through words such as עָבַד (to labour or work), and עָמַל (to labour or toil), Proverbs communicates that pain associated with physical activities, especially in the area of work, are part of life. Ancient Israelites were mainly farmers engaged in the daily routine of activities revolving around agricultural tasks.²⁸ Due to the difficulty in farming, Proverbs had to encourage its audience to embrace the intensive physical lifestyle, since that was the only way to guarantee the survival of the society through the provision of food.

c. Diet and Alcohol Consumption: Studies have conclusively shown that food and alcohol have a direct impact on one's physical health. Balanced diet, for instance, serves as effective fuel for the body. It provides the body with minimum requirements of the various nutrients needed by the body. On the contrary, an unbalanced diet is a major cause of diseases, including chronic diseases.²⁹ When good nutrition is complemented with physical activity, the body becomes healthier, and is able to prevent the onset of diseases and disability.³⁰ As with food, the intake of alcohol needs to be regulated. Unregulated intake of alcohol increases one's risk of contracting diseases.

²⁸ James Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 52.

²⁹ Aulikki Nissinen and Ken Stanley, "Unbalanced Diets as a Cause of Chronic Diseases" *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 49 (1989), 993-994.

³⁰ Ministry of Health, *Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy Adults: A Background Paper* (Wellington: Ministry of Health, 2003), iii.

Many studies show increase in alcohol related health problems throughout the world.³¹ As a result, alcohol and substance abuse have been a major concern for health care givers.

Ancient Israelite society was particular of its diet, and thus created extensive dietary laws. Food was generally classified under two groups: “clean” and “unclean”. Unclean foods included creatures in the sea that had no fins and scales, such as shellfish, and animals that crawled with their belly (cf. Lev. 11). It appears the consumption of meat particularly was a major concern. Besides the various laws which forbade certain categories of animals, there were also laws which regulated the preparation of the meat dishes. For instance, there were regulations on how the animal was to be slaughtered, and how the blood was to be handled (cf. Lev 17:3-7; 10-13). Although several scholars point out that the rationale behind the dietary rules was to set Israel apart from her neighbours, there were health benefits to the laws which cannot be brushed aside.³² With respect to alcohol, the OT does not abolish the intake of fermented drinks. Rather, it calls for a controlled use of alcohol. Intake of alcohol was part of the social act of celebration in Israel (cf. Deut. 14:23).

Unlike the Pentateuch, Proverbs lacks a body of consistently discussed dietary rules. What it contains, however, are several sayings which give practical advice on conditions which influence the intake of food and the importance of certain diets for good health. Dealing with the latter, Israelite concentration on certain kinds of foods reflects the wisdom of maximising life within one’s environmental context. In Prov. 27:27, for instance, the sage advises his audience to take care of their flocks in order to guarantee continuous flow of milk. As an important source of nourishment, milk is needed by every household.

In ancient societies, however, several categories of milk existed depending on the kind of animal. So there could be cow milk, sheep milk, goat milk, etc. In the text above, however, the sage emphasises goat milk (חֶלֶב עֵיִם) which comparatively has a better nutritional

³¹ See WHO, *Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health 2014* (Geneva: WHO, 2014).

³² Joe M. Sprinkle, “The Rationale of the Laws of Clean and Unclean in the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 4 (2000), 648.

value than cow and sheep milk because it is easily absorbed.³³ Here, we see the conscious effort to settle for the best in the midst of several alternatives. Besides milk, Proverbs also promotes the intake of honey as a food supplement. Honey is sweet and to eat it is good (Prov. 5:3; 24:13), which means that it serves the purpose for which it was made. Its delightful properties were complemented by several healing qualities (cf. Prov. 16:24). However, Israelite sages were conscious of the tendency for individuals to over consume foods like honey; thus, there are sayings which aim at balancing one's intake of honey. Prov. 25:27, for instance, cautions one not to indulge in too much honey. In Prov. 25:16, a similar caution exists, this time with the additional message that it could lead to sick feelings such as vomiting. Moderation emerges as a key principle for the intake of foods that can easily be overconsumed.

Besides specific diets, Proverbs also pays attention to conditions surrounding the intake of food since it has a bearing on the quality of eating, and invariably on one's health. Eating, especially, in the midst of plenty, should not be seen as arbitrary, but an opportunity to demonstrate acumen. Eating demands courtesy to self and others. One needs to think before eating: what one feels and how much food one needs to take are important considerations which positively affect one's health. In Ghana, for instance, public exhibition of gluttony abounds. This is the situation where people clamour for food at parties and gatherings where food abounds. Prov. 23:1-3 cautions against such practice, especially when one is among dignitaries. It calls for a controlled appetite, with the reasons that the food served under those conditions is deceptive (לֶחֶם כְּזָבִים – *food of deceits*). According to Waltke, among the several meanings the phrase לֶחֶם כְּזָבִים projects is also the nuanced meaning that the food served under those conditions could lead to minor complications such as vomiting and stomach aches.³⁴

³³ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 349.

³⁴ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 239. Several nutritionists and dieticians promote the intake of homemade food as against fast foods, which have been proven to be hazardous to people's health. See S. Ashakiran, and R Deepthi, "Fast Foods and their Impact on Health," *Journal of Krishna Institute of Medical Science University* 1, no. 2 (2012), 7-15.

Prov. 23:6 cautions the reader to be circumspect of conditions surrounding meals. With an imperative tone, the sage counsels complete rejection of food from one who has ill-intention or who genuinely does not want to stretch the hand of hospitality. The Hebrew phrase used to describe such an individual is עֵינַי עָרִיב, which literally means *evil eye*. Although scholars generally agree the phrase means one who is stingy,³⁵ McKane hints that the phrase could also mean one who wishes to cause harm, either magically or physically.³⁶ The saying then cautions one to be circumspect of conditions surrounding a meal. In Ghana, for instance, people have the belief that one can be harmed with magic or witchcraft through the food one eats. Partaking in meals with others in traditional settings has to be done with caution because of the belief that some evil people might harm others through the sharing of meals.

Regarding alcohol consumption, Proverbs recommends moderation. Wisdom seeks to bring happiness to humans, but also cautions against indulgence. Two types of alcoholic beverages are identified in Proverbs: *wine* (יַיִן) and *beer* (שֵׂכָר). For Proverbs these beverages have the ability to positively affect human life, especially during times of joy and excitement. Possession of wine was a sign of prosperity and good life (cf. Prov. 3:10). One of the pleasures Woman Wisdom promises is wine (Prov. 9:6). But the danger or risk connected with overindulgence in wine and beer was well too known.

The first hint is given in Prov. 20:1, where the sage personifies wine and beer into a mocker and a brawler respectively. Any person who allows himself or herself to be influenced by these beverages is an unwise person. A more dramatic fate lies ahead for one who overindulges in wine: according to Prov. 21:17, such a person ends up poor. Direct relationship, however, between alcohol and health is presented in Prov. 23:29-35, where a graphic picture of the effect of alcohol on one's physical health exists. Bland explains it as follows; "The drink releases deadly venom into the bloodstream, and the individual experiences hallucinations, motion sickness and

³⁵ Rowland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 175; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 242.

³⁶ William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 383.

disorientation. All the while, the drunkard remains oblivious to the dangers. Such persons find themselves caught in a vicious cycle: *when will I wake up so I can find another drink?*³⁷

Proverbs and Emotional Health

Emotional health is difficult to define. In simple terms, it refers to a positive state of being. However, emotional health is not the mere absence of negative emotions. It primarily involves two important competencies: emotional regulation and emotional intelligence. Thus, emotional health is one's ability to influence the emotions one portrays as well as the ability to understand and learn from one's emotions.³⁸ As feelings and moods, emotions have long been associated with health.³⁹ They have variously been viewed as a predictor, as an outcome, or as a mediator for other dimensions of health. In whatever way they are conceived, emotions are essential for achieving holistic health.

In the OT, emotions play important roles in the lives of the biblical figures. Biblical authors were aware that an optimal life included the good use of emotions. For instance, on the one hand, a positive value is placed on emotional characteristics such as compassion, love, and pity (such as the story of Ruth and Naomi – cf. Ruth 1-4), while on the other hand, a negative value is associated with certain emotional displays such as anger, jealousy, and hatred (the case of Saul and David – 1 Sam. 18). Although all the books in the OT deal with emotions one way or the other, it is Proverbs which treats the subject of emotions within an educative or instructive framework. Despite this observation, it has to be cautioned that Proverbs is not primarily concerned with psychological or emotional well-being of its

³⁷ Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*, 213.

³⁸ Kojo Okyere "Emotional Resilience and Mental Health: Perspectives from the Book of Proverbs" in *Communication, Culture and Health*, eds. Joseph B. A. Afful et. al. (Cape Coast: Faculty of Arts, 2015), 140-141.

³⁹ Cf. Sheldon Cohen and Sarah D. Pressman, "Positive Affect and Health," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 15, no. 3 (2006), 122-125; D.D. Danner, D.A. Snowdon, and W.V. Friesen, "Positive emotions in early life and longevity: Findings from the Nun Study," *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 80 (2001), 804–813.

audience. Rather, with the general aim of imparting wisdom for good life, Proverbs ventures into proper management of emotions.⁴⁰

The importance of emotions to health, especially physical health has gained popularity in recent times.⁴¹ Norman Cousins, for instance, argues that emotional and mental state of mind affects physical health.⁴² Not surprisingly, Israelites sages recognised that the foundation of good physical health lies in a healthy frame of mind. There are two ways in which Proverbs associate emotions with health: covert and overt. Covertly, Proverbs touches on the danger of negative emotions and the need to avoid them. In Prov. 5:12-13, for instance, the father advises the son to listen to his counsel and avoid adultery since it could lead to feelings of regret. Regret is a destructive emotional force which is well associated with suicide.⁴³

Similarly, Prov. 14:29 juxtaposes the emotions of patience and anger when it counsels that; “He who is slow to anger has great understanding; but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.” Inability to restrain emotions has consequences including health complications. Apart from unrestrained anger being linked to physical injuries, there have been several studies which link anger to complications including emotional abuse and mental illnesses.⁴⁴

Overtly, Proverbs highlights the health benefits of positive emotions. Modern studies such as that of H. Leventhal and L. Patrick-Miller point out that emotions can be the cause of health states as

⁴⁰ Bland, “The Formation of Character in the Book of Proverbs,” *Restoration Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1998), 227.

⁴¹ See Bill Moyers, *Healing and the Mind* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

⁴² Norman Cousins, *The Healing Heart* (New York: Avon Books, 1983).

⁴³ Wändi Bruine De Bruin et al., “Late Life Depression, Suicidal Ideation, and Attempted Suicide: The Role of Individual Difference in Maximizing, Regret, and Negative Decision Outcomes,” *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 29, no. 4 (2015), doi: <http://doi.org/10.1002/bdm.1882>.

⁴⁴ See Irina Radu Motataianu, “The Relation between Anger and Emotional Synchronization in Children from Divorced Families,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 203 (2015), 158-162; B. Andrews et al., “Predicting PTSD Symptoms in Victims of Violent Crime: The Role of Shame, Anger, and Childhood Abuse,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 8 (2000), 75-90; Jeffery W. Swanson et al., “Guns, Impulsive Angry Behavior, and Mental Disorders: Results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R),” *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 33, no. 2-3 (2015); doi: [10.1002/bsl.2172](https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2172)

well as indicators of health.⁴⁵ Though crudely intimated in Proverbs, emotions are significant in influencing health. For instance, Prov. 17:22 reads: “A cheerful heart is a good medicine; but a down cast spirit dries up the bones.” Internal psyche, according to this saying, has the power to heal or destroy. Similarly, Proverbs counsels that contentment leads to health and healing. Thus, Prov. 14:30 says: “A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh; but passion makes the bones rot.” The benefits of positive emotions for health has been tested in the area of how emotions help fight against diseases. It has been proven that negative emotions militate against the body’s ability to fight infections.⁴⁶ Ancient Israelite sages had a sense of this understanding when they advised; “A glad heart makes a cheerful countenance; but by sorrow of heart the spirit is broken” (Prov. 15:13). There are other sayings which communicate similar ideas (cf. Prov. 15:4; 15:30; 16:24).

Proverbs and Social Health

WHO’s definition of health makes social health an important component of holistic health. Social health involves the ability to form and maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships. It also relates to the ability to adapt comfortably to different social situations and act appropriately in a variety of settings. This means that social health is aligned with physical and emotional health. Physical illnesses or conditions which limit the ability to function within the society affect social health. Equally, emotional displays such as anger, envy, and withdrawal can negatively affect the ability to maintain relationships. Underlying the concept of social health is the understanding that human beings are social beings who need to relate with each other for their well-being.

Relationship is a prominent theme and it lies at the foundation of the OT message. Through creation, God established a relationship with the rest of creation, embracing both animate and inanimate objects. He also initiated the relationship between humans and the rest of

⁴⁵ H. Leventhal and L. Patrick-Miller, “Emotions and Physical Illness: Causes and Indicators of Vulnerability,” in *The Handbook of Emotion*, eds. Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones and Michael Lewis (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 523–537.

⁴⁶ Sheldon Cohen and Thomas A. Wills, “Stress, Social Support, and the Buffering Hypothesis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 98, no. 2 (1985), 330-357.

creation, when he gave humans the responsibility over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:28-30). Thus, the creation stories provide the basis for the tripartite relational concept between God, humans, and the rest of creation. As a wisdom book, Proverbs places premium on this central message of the OT because relationship is at the heart of its goal of promoting optimal life. Several sayings spell out the need to maintain good relationship with God (Prov. 3:5-10), fellow humans (Prov. 17:17; 27:9), and the rest of creation (Prov. 12:10). Since the last dimension on health to be discussed deals with spirituality, the relationship between humans and God is considered under that topic below.

On the relationship between humans, Proverbs is forthright in projecting the image of a positive relationship as a medicine for the soul. It does this at two levels: within family (the concept of family here extends beyond the nuclear family) and outside the family. Beginning with the former, the saying that “there is no place like home” is amply supported by Proverbs. Prov. 27:8 carries this thought as follows: “Like a bird wondering from her nest, so is a man wondering from his home.” Although the condition for which the bird strays from its nest is not stated, the crux of the metaphor is about the loss of security and the sense of belonging faced when one is cut off from the home.⁴⁷

The home is foundational to one’s existence: it is where identity is created. Being cut off from the home, therefore, isolates an individual from his/her roots, leaving him/her alone to face the perils of the outside world. Mere presence in the home, however, does not guarantee successful relationship. Efforts need to be put into creating a peaceful home for good health. For instance, in the lectures (instructions) of Prov. 1—9, fidelity in marriage is extensively promoted as essential for one’s well-being. Among the benefits of being faithful to one’s partner is good health. In one of the admonitions for the son to stay away from the strange woman, the father says,

⁸ Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house; ⁹ lest you give your honor to others and your years to the merciless; ¹⁰ lest strangers take their fill of your strength, and your

⁴⁷ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 377.

labors go to the house of an alien;¹¹ and at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed.

Of interest is v.11 which explicitly links sexual promiscuity to health. Fox explains that venereal diseases were not uncommon in ancient Near East (in Lev. 15:1-15, there is a hint of a disease like gonorrhea).⁴⁸ Apart from avoiding venereal diseases, sexual faithfulness has been proven to strengthen relationship between partners and is a source for good social health. Again, Proverbs recognises that healthy relationship does not thrive in constant conflicts. Thus, it counsels that, “A brother helped is like a strong city, but quarrelling is like the bars of a castle” (Prov. 18:19). The closer the family members, the more difficult it is to repair broken trusts.

This message does not mean that conflicts should not occur within families, after all conflicts sometimes may be positive. Rather, the saying cautions against people who deliberately and continuously offend their family members, as that can wreck the relationship. Families have broken up because of the breach of trusts and constant strife. Too often some members end up with social and psychological difficulties as a result of the estrangement within the family.

A healthy relationship is the basis for general societal well-being, hence Proverbs moves beyond the family to the entire community. An important Hebrew word which captures the spirit of ancient Israelite healthy relationship is אָרֵךְ, commonly rendered as *friend*. As projected by the Hebrew word, the idea of friendship is not equal to the modern sense of a friend, where it means a personally chosen companion by an individual. Beyond that, the Hebrew word אָרֵךְ implies the broader concept of neighbourliness.⁴⁹ In other words, a friend was anyone one encounters within one’s community. By this definition, friends were numerous and friendship with others was not necessarily by personal choice, but by shared community and the need to help each other within the community.⁵⁰ Prov. 27:10 captures this broad understanding of friendship in the following words: “Your friend, and your father’s friend, do not forsake; and do not go

⁴⁸ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 197.

⁴⁹ Bland, *Proverbs*, 246

⁵⁰ M. B. Compton, “Neighbor,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. N. D. Freedman, C.A. Myers and B.A. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 958.

to your brother's house in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near.”

Although several challenges confront this text, with respect to the kind of reading one chooses or the nature of the relationship between the clauses, the message is clear: a good neighbour (friend) is just as reliable as a blood relation (cf. Prov. 18:24). Central to this message is the phrase “in the day of your calamity” (בְּיַדְּךָ אִיְדָדָה). This phrase represents a time of distress, thus, pointing to the concern of the sage: seek help as quickly as possible when you need it. A lot of harm is caused when there is a delay in granting help to people who have suffered in one way or another. For instance, individuals who suffer some form of trauma can develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the absence of help. As much as calamities are inevitably part of human lives, the sage cannot be far from the truth in calling for prompt assistance to people who have suffered some form of misfortune as a way of dealing with the devastating psychological disorder that may occur.

Healthy relationship that leads to good health is not a one stop event. On the contrary, it is a continuous bond with no end in sight. Such is the message of Prov. 18:24: “There are friends who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

Various readings exist on this text basically due to the verb (לְהִתְרַעֵעַ) in the first part of the saying. As used in the text, רָעַע, a root of the verb, means *to break*. However, it is also possible to have the root רָעָה which means *to associate* (cf. the readings of NIV and NJB). Irrespective of whichever reading is adopted, it is clear there is some form of contrast between the *friends* (רְעִים) in the first part of the saying and the *lover* (אֹהֵב) of the last. The contrast is between the quality of friendship: some friends are casual, while others are close.

The Hebrew word דָּבַק which means *to cling* alludes to the friendship between Naomi and Ruth. The quality of their companionship is what the sage encourages here. Such friends do not abandon one in times of

need. And as some researchers point out there is a link between social capital which involves dependable friends and health benefits.⁵¹

Proverbs and Spiritual Health

Although not an explicit part of WHO's definition of health, spirituality features in the notion of "total well-being". Spirituality is a part of people's lives, whether in the form of organised religion or in the loose forms of having hope and creating a purpose in life.

Unlike traditional societies where health and spirituality are embraced as mutually connected, modern societies think it expedient to separate the two. Thus, although many people are involved in religious practices, they underestimate the importance of their actions to their health. But such an attitude is not difficult to explain; it is an offshoot of the on-going battle between faith and science, of which science seems to have the upper hand. Despite the tension between science and faith, interest in the relationship between spirituality and health is on the increase. As hinted by Larry Dossey, between one third and a half of medical schools in United States of America have a course which deals with religious and spiritual factors in health.⁵²

Undergirding both modern or scientific and traditional or indigenous approaches to health and medicine is the principle of causation. What causes illness? It is the answers to this question which sets science and faith apart. In the OT, diseases are associated with sin and God, thus, illness is very often perceived from the spiritual dimension. For instance, Exod. 15:26 explicitly says,

If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, ... I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians; for I am the LORD, your healer.

However, the issue of God being the source of illness is not as straightforward as it appears. When looked at critically, the connection between sin and illness or sickness seems to operate on the

⁵¹ Jonathan Lomas, "Social Capital and Health: Implications for Public Health and Epidemiology," *Social Science & Medicine* 47, no. 9 (1998), 1181-1188.

⁵² Larry Dossey, foreword to *God, Faith and Health: Exploring the Spirituality-Healing Connection* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), viii.

principle of cause and effect. For instance, the psalmist says, “There is no soundness in my flesh because of thy indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin” (Ps. 38:3). Here, the psalmist understands that it is his/her sin which is the source of his/her ailments.

Assuming that God’s law is based on the good of society, sin or disobedience ushers in chaos and disruption within the society. Von Rad indicates that sin and its consequence are not two separate things, but one process. If sin is a deviation of what is right (God’s law), then its consequence will be the invitation of what is wrong, including diseases. This view significantly tempers with the idea of God being the source of diseases. The role of God reduces somehow to a default: God is responsible in as much as he is the source of all that exists. His agency in diseases then should not always be conceived as the direct inflictor of diseases.

Dynamics of God’s agency in health and well-being come to the fore in Proverbs. Within the lectures or instruction genre, God is closely associated with wisdom, and wisdom is presented as a body of practical knowledge which optimises life. In the third lecture (Prov. 3:1-12), for instance, vv. 5-8 reads:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. ⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. ⁸ It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.

Associating God with wisdom, the sage presents the two as inseparable and the basis for one’s health. The validity of such a claim is not difficult to establish. In the first lecture (Prov. 1:8-19), the son is advised to shun gangs and corrupt companies, who are in haste to shed blood for riches. Clearly, the image given is similar to today’s gangs of robbers. Too often, such people have been the causes of physical and emotional illnesses and stress onto others. On the other hand, as the concluding part of the first lecture intimates (vv. 18-19), but these men lie in wait for their own blood, they set an ambush for their own lives. Such are the ways of all who get gain by violence; it takes away the life of its possessors.

Bad associations, accordingly, do not only affect the victims, but also the culprits who could lose their lives. In Ghana, for instance, lynching of suspected robbers has led to loss of lives of many individuals, while some have been permanently maimed. When spirituality is conceived as the belief in God and the connectedness one feels with God, it may function as check on one's actions.⁵³ In other words, spirituality helps regulate people's behaviour so long as they hold on to the belief that their actions receive approval or condemnation from God. The wisdom here is that one needs to abstain from acts that displease God, and by so doing one avoids acts that could lead to ill-health.⁵⁴

In a similar admonishing in the seventh lecture (Prov. 4:20-27), God, however, is conspicuously absent from the counsel of the sage. This time, the sage presents wisdom as the teachings of a father:

My son be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings.
²¹Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. ² For they are life to him who finds them, and healing to all his flesh (Prov. 4:20-22).

Like the first lecture, health is one of the benefits that await the son if he chooses wisdom. Although presented in a generic form, health is constructed as a morally upright life; one that eschews evil (cf. v. 27). It can be attained only when one chooses the right path. When spirituality is defined as the human capacity to experience self-transcendence and awareness of themselves, which creates greater self-other compassion and love,⁵⁵ then there is still a great inclination to act in a life promoting way by individuals of this persuasion. Whether an overt recognition of the sacred or otherwise, spirituality deals with an individual's quest to live life in harmony with the rest of creation. Thus, the link between spirituality and health is realised

⁵³ Luk Bouckaert and Lazslo Zsolnai, "Spirituality and Business", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Spirituality and Business*, ed. L. Bouckaert and L. Zsolnai (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3-10.

⁵⁴ What we find here is retributive theology in which God exacts punishment on people if their actions are contrary to His will. This is a theme that runs through the OT. This direct agency of God in rewarding good and punishing evil, however, is questioned in the other wisdom books such as Job and Ecclesiastes.

⁵⁵ C.S. Cashwell, and J.S. Young, eds., *Integrating Spirituality and Religion into Counseling: A Guide to Competent Practice* (Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association, 2011), 1-5.

through the thoughts and actions of individuals. This is what some proverbial sayings allude to such as Prov. 14:30: “A sound heart is life to the body; but envy is rottenness to the bones.”

Many a times, when discussions on spirituality come up within the Ghanaian society, some Ghanaians are quick to point to the direct agency of God or the spirits in inflicting diseases and punishment. Others are also fixated on rituals which solicit the help of the supernatural in dealing with ailments or certain problems. This approach to spirituality emphasises the reactive role of the supernatural in health. In other words, God’s role in health is reduced to the onset of ailments. However, there is also the preventive role, where people because of their beliefs and dispositions towards life order their thoughts and actions in a manner that brings them good health. For instance, Proverbs promotes a thoughtful and reflective lifestyle, one that aims at harmony within self, with others, and with nature. This latter role of spirituality should be given attention because it is proactive and leads to a better society.

Conclusion

As a wisdom book, Proverbs teaches its audience how to optimize life. Such an agenda, however, cannot be achieved without attention given to health. The promise of good health, thus, is one of wisdom’s rare gifts. Since proverbs encapsulate a people’s experiences and approach to life, it has been the contention of this paper that the book of Proverbs offers clues to ancient Israelite approach to healthy living, especially in the area of preventive health. Proverbs conceives health in broad terms, embracing any belief or act that improves both qualitatively and quantitatively the life of an individual. Significantly, a healthy lifestyle also demands a proactive response from individuals.

What this paper has established so far is that indigenous health has many facets, and at the same time holistic. Also, indigenous health is not only concerned with curing ailments, but more importantly preventing ailments. This paper, therefore, will help to dispel the notion among many people that indigenous health is about prescribing medicines to strange ailments, or about the use of herbs and strange rituals. Although what we have said about indigenous health comes from ancient Israelite society, in many respects the Ghanaian

society's approach and understanding of indigenous health shares a lot in common with that of the ancient Israelite society. As Kwesi Dickson hinted, "the Old Testament atmosphere ... makes the African context a kindred atmosphere."⁵⁶

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⁵⁶ Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 141-184.