

Article

Sickness and the Power of Healing Prayer in 2 Kings 20:1–11 and Isaiah 38:1–22

Michael Ufok Udoekpo 

Faculty of Humanities, Veritas University, Bwari, Abuja 900001, Nigeria; udoekpom@veritas.edu.ng

Abstract: 2 Kings 20:1–11; Isaiah 38:1–22 and 2 Chronicles 32:24–26 discuss Hezekiah’s sickness and the power of healing prayer. They are called Hezekiah–Isaiah narratives since they deal not only with (a) the threats and salvation of Jerusalem from Assyria, (b) the disease and the miraculous recovery or healing (*ḥāyâ/rāpāʾ*) of Hezekiah and description of the representatives from Babylon, but share a common narrative pattern in which Hezekiah is healed with a poultice/lump of fig tree (*dābelet tēʾnim*), having received advise and healing support from God’s messenger, Isaiah. Past scholars have approached this text differently, searching for its dating, literary growths, differences, originality with the desire to reveal the history of the various traditional components and relationship among parallel texts, as well the prophetic and kingly images of Isaiah and Hezekiah. Built on this past scholarship and African cultural perspectives and experiences, this work contextually, historically and theologically study, develop and analyze the story of Hezekiah’s sickness and healing.

Keywords: King Hezekiah; prophets; sickness; prayer; poultice; signs; divine healing

1. Introduction

Both sickness and healing are universal human phenomena. They are basic to human life on every continent, including Africa, where God is the ultimate source of good health. Sickness and healing are also given voice in the Bible, thus providing us, today, with an important resource in our daily quest for a meaningful and holistic life. Biblical and religious people, good and bad, rich and poor, young and old, ordinary people, and kings, like Hezekiah, fell sick. They were like us today in different parts of the world, daily confronted with all kind’s illnesses, diseases, sicknesses, and subsequent search for healing. The Old and New Testament people, like us in Africa and beyond, also “experienced healing—through prayer, through early forms of medicine, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes through a lengthy process” (Gaiser 2010, p. 7). Hezekiah–Isaiah narratives (cf. Wildberger 1982; Panov 2021, pp. 312–28), the focus of this study, are good examples. They narrate, among other things, the threats and salvation of Jerusalem, particularly the recovery (*ḥāyâ/rāpāʾ*) of Hezekiah from illness through prayer and the application of a poultice/lump of fig tree (*dābelet tēʾnim*).

Our colleagues in the past have examined these narratives with a number of approaches. Some paid attention to the authorship and dating of the texts, literary growths, differences, and originality of the texts with the desire to reveal the history of the various traditional components and relationships among parallel texts (Person 1997, p. 252; Kasher 2001, pp. 41–55; Sweeney 1996, p. 496). Others concentrated on the prophetic and kingly images of Isaiah and Hezekiah (Kasher 2001, pp. 48–50). Although this paper’s primary concern is not restricted to such past approaches, occasionally they may prove significant in the following analysis, which basically takes 2 Kings 20:1–11 as its basic exegetical point of departure within the overall context of other related relevant texts (2 Kings 18–19; Isaiah 38:1–22; and 2 Chronicles 32:24–26). With relevance to African cultural perspectives and experiences in mind, this work is designed to contextually, historically, and theologically study, develop, and analyze the story of Hezekiah’s illness and healing. Attention is didactically given not only to OT’s basic understanding of illness and healing and Hezekiah’s



Citation: Udoekpo, Michael Ufok. 2024. Sickness and the Power of Healing Prayer in 2 Kings 20:1–11 and Isaiah 38:1–22. *Religions* 15: 526. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050526>

Academic Editor: Jonathan M. Watt

Received: 15 March 2024

Revised: 16 April 2024

Accepted: 18 April 2024

Published: 24 April 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

text and structure of his socio-political faith story, sickness, and God's response, but also to the role of prayer in healing and the relationship between healing through extraordinary means and healing through ordinary means.

2. Clarification of Terms

To better appreciate the Hezekiah–Isaiah narratives under investigation (2 Kings 20:1–11), it is essential to reaffirm how terms such as sickness, disease, illness, health, and healing are understood in this paper. An illness, sickness, or disease is a “serious affliction of health with special symptoms and a name” (Pretorius 2009, pp. 399–409). They broadly refer to any abnormal conditions that impair normal functioning or conditions that prevent human beings “or animals from achieving their full potential or adversely affect their abilities” (Manser et al. 2017, p. 265). Disease, sickness, and illness, which we shall use interchangeably in this paper, “refer to a lack of health, and point to something faulty” (Pretorius 2009, pp. 399–410; Murray 1970, p. 401). In other words, “disease, sickness and illness describe some form of abnormal functioning of the human body, resulting in a person being described as being unwell” (Pretorius 2009, p. 400).

General or specific examples of diseases, illnesses, and sicknesses, particularly the physical ones mentioned in the Bible, include blindness (John 9:1), depression (Proverbs 13:12), dropsy (Luke 14:2), dysentery (Acts 28:8), epilepsy (Matthew 7:15; Mark 9:17–18), fever (Job 30:30; Matthew 8:14//Mark 1:30//Luke 4:38; Acts 28:8), hemorrhaging (Matt 9:20//Mk 5:25//Luke 17:11–19), inflammation (Deuteronomy 28:22). Others are insanity (1 Samuel 21:13; Daniel 4:33–35), leprosy (Numbers 12:10, 2 Chronicles 26:21; Matthew 11:5; Luke 17:11–19), paralysis (Matthew 4:24; 8:6; 9:2//Mark 2:3//Luke 5:18; 13:11; Acts 3:2; 8:7; 9:33), sunstroke (2 Kings 4:18–20; Psalm 121:5–6; Isa 49:10; John 4:8), tumors (Deuteronomy 28:27; Isa 5:6), and boils and sores, including the type King Hezekiah suffered, as noted in Exodus 9:9; Job 2:7; 2 Kings 20:1–11; Isaiah 38:21 (Manser et al. 2017, p. 265).

In the Bible, disease, illness, and sickness simply mean “lack of health”. This can be viewed spiritually as well (Isaiah 1:5–6; Jeremiah 8:22; 30:12; Micah 1:19; Ps 38; Matthew 9:12–13//Luke 5:31–32). In other words, health in the biblical sense sought for by Hezekiah and others “embraces not only physical well-being, but also the spiritual, mental, and emotional qualities” (Hasel 1983, p. 191). As noted by R. K. Harrison (*IDB*, 2:541), “a person may be described as healthy when he or she exhibits that state of body and mind in which all the functions are being discharged harmoniously”. That is to say, health, as rightly affirmed by many, including William L. Holladay and William D. Mounce, and in *BDB*, is holistic in the biblical sense of peace (*šālôm/eirēnē*). This can conveniently be translated as “prosperity”, “safety”, “wholeness”, “well-being”, “completeness”, “soundness”, “wellfare” and “health” (Holladay 1971, p. 371; Brown et al. 2005, p. 1022; Mounce 2006, pp. 325, 502–3; Udoekpo 2020, pp. 20–21).

In sum, health, in the biblical sense, is multi-dimensional in terms of qualities that pertain to human beings. It is the wholeness, the well-being, and the completeness of being in itself in relation to God, others, and the world. This explains why Hezekiah was not only worried about his individual health but the healing of the city of David as well (2 Kings 20:6).

Healing, on the other hand, especially when understood in different contexts; secular, African, and biblical, may also require our brief clarification. In a secular sense, it is customarily describing a process that often involves “medical, surgical, or psychiatric treatment of a pathological condition...and culminates in the functional repair, and sometimes the actual regeneration, of a previously diseased or damaged part of the body or the mind” (Adolph 1975, 3:57; Hasel 1983, p. 197).

In traditional African cosmology, “God is the ultimate source of sickness and of health...divinities and ancestors are mediators of health” (Gotom 2006, p. 447; Adamo 2021, pp. 5–11). In other words, Africans believe that sickness is caused as a result of disharmony between the physical and the spiritual, and the task of the physician is to restore this disharmony” (Adamo 2021). In fact, health for Africans “has to do with the state of total physical, mental, economic and social well-being as a result of the maintenance of a good

relationship and harmony with nature, divinities, spirits and fellow beings” (Silis 1972). Similarly, the Old Testament meaning of “healing” of which Hezekiah–Isaiah narratives form a part, is related to the broad state of well-being and peaceful relationship of individuals with God, fellow beings, and the community captured earlier in the OT’s holistic understanding of “health” (Hasel 1983, p. 197). Of course, it is worth noting that, irrespective of the means, which could be words, water, sand, herbs, fig poultice, prayer, that is, conversation, dialogue, or communication with God (see Von Balthasar 1986, p. 14), and other agents (physicians, doctors, nurses, priests, and prophets), God is understood in this study as the overall healer. This is aptly expressed in exodus 15:26b: “I am the Lord your healer” or “healing one” or “who heals you” (*kî ’ānî ādōnāy rōpā’ekā*), using the same verb in Hezekiah’s healing story (2 Kings 20:8).

3. Hezekiah’s Socio-Political Faith Story

To get to the limited text and full analysis of Hezekiah’s illness and healing stories in 2 Kings 20:1–11, it is important to briefly appraise his life and socio-political faith story. This is located within the preceding and wider contexts of 2 Kings 18–19, as well as in Isaiah 36–39. Hezekiah became king over Judah at the age of twenty (720–692 BC). This was during the third year of King Hoshea of Israel in Samaria. Hezekiah was the successor of his father Ahaz and governed over the kingdom of Judah during the fall of Samaria (722 BC) and the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem by Shalmaneser V (727–722 BC) and Sennacherib (705–681 BC). Hezekiah was different from his father, Ahaz, who had certainly not served the Lord (2 Kings 16:10–18), but was interested in pleasing the Assyrian Kings and had made many changes in the temple to please them. It is ironic that, with such a father, Hezekiah would have been influenced by him to do worse things. His mother, Abijah, daughter of Zechariah, a God-fearing woman, must have taught him the covenant of Israel (2 Kings 18:1–2). Isaiah of Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:2) and Micah of Moresheth would have been of great help to him (Jer 26:18–19).

Hezekiah received praise that is equal only to that of King Asa (1 Kings 15:11). He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just like his ancestor David (2 Kings 18:3). He trusted in the God of Israel wholeheartedly. There was no past or future king of Israel who followed the Lord as Hezekiah did. He carried out religious reforms and removed the high places; the sacred stones and the Asherah poles were all destroyed, as were the bronze serpent (Num 21:8–9) that Moses had made many years before (vv.4–6). Because of his good rapport with God, the Lord was with him. He has had huge successes in all his endeavors (v.7). He resisted paying tribute to Assyria (v.7b), and defeated the Philistines as far as Gaza (v.8).

He managed the politics and diplomacy of his time well, especially with Assyria, the then-world power (vv.9–16). And he withstood the mockery, scandals, threats, and taunts of Sennacherib’s triumvirate, who were sent to him in Jerusalem (vv.17–37). His only tools for the deliverance of Jerusalem were prayer, absolute trust in the Lord (2 Kings 19:1–19), listening ears to Isaiah’s prophecies and pieces of advice, and messages of hope and promises from the Lord (vv.20–37). In spite of this, it was not long before Hezekiah became sick, as evident in the following text and analysis (2 Kings 20:1–11).

4. Text of Hezekiah’s Illness and Healing (2 Kings 20:1–11)

We may not fully know why bad things happen to good people, such as Hezekiah, but we do know that Hezekiah in the following text was struck by illness (2 Kings 20:1–11).

4.1. Text of 2 Kings 20:1–11

Vv.	Masoretic Text (MT)	Working translation/NRSV
v.1.	(a) bayyāmīm hāhēm hālā hizqīyyāhū lāmūt. (b) wayyābō’ ’ēlāw yāša’ yāhū ben-’āmōš hānnābī’, wayyō’mer ’ēlāw, kōh-’āmar ’ādōnāi šaw, ləbēteḱā kī mēt ’attā wəlō’ tihyē	(a) In those days, Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. (b) The prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz, came to him and said to him, “Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover/live
v.2.	wayyssēb ’et-pānāw ’el-haqqīr wayyīppalēl ’el-’ādōnāi lē’mōr	Then he turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, saying:
v.3.	(a) ’ānnā ’ādōnāi zəḱār-nā ’ēt ’āšer hihallaḱtī ləpānēḱā be’ēmet ūbēlēbāb šālēm, (b) wəhaṭṭōb bə ēnēḱā āšīṭī, (c) wayyībək hizqīyyāhū bəḱī ḡāḏōl.	(a) “Remember now, O LORD, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, (b) and have done what is good in your sight”. (c) Hezekiah wept bitterly/greatly.
v.4.	wayəhī yāša’ yāhū lō’yāsā’ (hāšēr) (hā’ir) haṭṭīḱonā, ūdəḅar-’ādōnāi hāyā ’ēlāw lē’mōr.	Before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court/city, the word of the LORD came to him, saying;
v.5.	(a) šūb wa’āmarttā ’el- hizqīyyāhū, nəḡīd-’ammī, (b) kōh-’āmar ’ādōnāi, ’ēlōhē dāwīd ’ābīḱā šāma’ttī ’et-təphillāteḱā, (c) rā’īṭī ’et-dimā’teḱā; (d) hinənī, rōphe’ lāḱə, (e) bayyōm haššəlīšī ta’āleh bēt ’ādōnāi	(a) “Turn back, and say to Hezekiah prince of my people, (b) Thus says the LORD, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, (c) I have seen your tears; (d) indeed, I will heal you; (e) on the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD.
v.6.	(a) wəhōsaphəttī ’al-yāmēḱā hāmēš e’šrē šānā (b) ūmikkaph meleḱ-’aššūr ’aššīləḱā wə’ēt hā’ir hazzō’t (c) wəḡannōṭī ’al- hā’ir hazzō’t ləma’ānī ūləma’an dāwīd ’abədī	(a) I will add fifteen years to your life. (b) I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; (c) I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David’s sake”.
v.7.	(a) Wayyō’mer yāša’ yāhū, qəḥū dəbelet tə’ēnī. (b) wayyiqhū wayyāšīmū ’al-haššīn wayyehī	(a) Then Isaiah said, “Bring a lump of figs. (b) Let them take it and apply it to the boil, so that he may recover/live”.
v.8.	(a) Wayyō’mer hizqīyyāhū ’el- yāša’ yāhū, mā ’ōt kī-yirppā’ ’ādōnāi lī, (b) wə’ālīṭī bayyōm haššəlīšī bēt ’ādōnāi	(a) Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “What shall be the sign that the LORD will heal me, (b) and that I shall go up to the house of the LORD on the third day?”
v.9.	(a) Wayyō’mer yāša’ yāhū, zeh-ləḱā hā’ōt mē’ēt ’ādōnāi, kī ya’āseh ādōnay ’et-haddābār ’āšer dibber hālaḱ (b) haššēl ’ešer ma’ālōt, im-yāšūb, ’ešer ma’ālōt	(a) Isaiah said, “This is the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that he has promised: (b) the shadow has now advanced ten intervals; shall it retreat ten intervals?”
v.10.	Wayyō’mer Yəhizqīyyāhū, nāqēl laššēl linṭōb ’ešer ma’ālōt lō’, kī yāšūb haššēl ’āḥōrannīt ešer ma’ālōt	Yehezekiah answered, “It is normal for the shadow to lengthen ten intervals; rather let the shadow retreat ten intervals”.
v.11.	(a) wayyīqrā’ yāša’ yāhū hānnābī’ ’el-’ādōnāi; (b) wayyāšeb ’et- haššēl bāmma’ālōt ’āšer yārəḏā bəmma’ālōt ’āḥāz ’āḥōrannīt ešer ma’ālōt.	(a) The prophet Isaiah cried to the LORD; (b) and he brought the shadow back the ten intervals, by which the sun had declined on the dial of Ahaz.

4.2. Textual Issues and Rough Edges

There are few textual issues or minor rough edges in the above text (2 Kings 1–11). It is more noticeable when compared with parallel materials in Isaiah 38. In verse 2, “wayyssēb”

(then he turned), which is the *hiphil* waw consecutive 3rd person masculine singular, is attested in the MT and in all the ancient medieval manuscripts of the Hebrew OT, including the Septuagint (LXX), Peshitta, and the Targums, although Isaiah 38: 2 says “wayyissēb hizqiyāhū” (and Hezekiah turned). Also, “’et-pānāw” (his face) is not attested in the LXX and Syriac texts, while the *qal* infinitive construct of ‘āmar (to say), “lē’mōr” is wanting in Isaiah’s parallel. Verse 4, in Kings, attests, “wayahī yāša yāhū lō’yāšā’ (hāšēr) hattīkonā, ūdabar-’ādōnāi hāyā ’ēlāw lē’mōr” (“Before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him, saying”), while Isaiah’s parallel simply says, “Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah” (wayahī dābar-’ādōnāi ’el-yāša yāhū lē’mōr). Of course, the lō’yāšā’ (not gone out) is absent in the LXX.

The *qal* imperative šūb (turn/return) of verse 5 is rather replaced with the *qal* infinitive absolute of hālak “go, walk” (hālōk) in Isaiah 38:5, where the expression nāgīd-’ammī (prince of my people is also not found). Verse 6a wāhōsaphattī ‘al-yāmēkā hāmēš e’srē šānā (I will add fifteen years to your life) becomes verse 5 in Isaiah’s narrative, while “wā’et hā’ir hazzō’” (and this city) of verse 6b is not attested at all in Isaiah’s LXX; so also is the expression “lāma’ānī ūlāma’ān dāwīd ‘abādī” (for my own sake and the sake of David my servant) which is absent in Isaiah’s text. In verse 7a, the name yāša yāhū is not attested in the LXX. In Kings’ narrative, the lump of the fig tree is placed (šīm/wayyāšīmū) on the boil, while in Isaiah 38:21, the lump of the fig tree is rubbed (mārah/wāyīmrāhū) on the boil or rash. Lastly, in verses 1–7, the King’s name is Hezekiah (hizqiyāhū), while in verses 9–11, he is referred to as Yehezekiah (Yehizqiyāhū). Various opinions have been given by scholars regarding these textual issues and differences in the Hezekiah–Isaiah narratives, including different textual traditions as sources. Some assumed that one of the texts was original while the other was abbreviated, re-edited, or embellished. Others argue that both the Kings and Isaiah texts shared a common source, which can be reconstructed (see [Kasher 2001](#), pp. 41–54; [Panov 2021](#), pp. 312–28 for extensive and impressive scholarly opinions on this subject).

4.3. Literally Structure

Granted that the above textual issues are never our primary focus, the text under investigation, 2 Kings 20:1–11, is approached as a literal unit, beginning with the temporal clause “bayyāmīm hāhēm” (in those days), pointing back to the preceding time of Hezekiah and Sennacherib (2 Kings 18–19) mentioned above, which is loosely connected with the next unit (vv. 12–21), which begins afresh with the temporal phrase “bā’et hahī” (at that time), and links Hezekiah with the Babylonian King. Treating it as a unit with obvious and well-laid narrative sequences, it contextually exegetes Hezekiah’s illness-healing story in 2 Kings 20:1–11 for the situation in Africa and beyond. This is achieved within the broader context of 2 Kings 18–20 and Isaiah 36–38. The later more or less replays the material in 2 Kings and in 2 Chronicles 32:24–24. This paper does not spend much time on the short account in 2 Chronicles because, in the background, one can still note the story as narrated in 2 Kings. It is also aware that in the Chronicler’s revision of the account in Kings, Isaiah is not mentioned since God deals directly with human beings, while Hezekiah’s illness is portrayed as a result of his pride and sins, reflecting the Chronicler’s tradition of reward and punishment. In what follows, this paper specifically exegetes and notes the prophetic words of Hezekiah’s illness, prayer, God’s response, healing processes/means (extraordinary and ordinary), signs, and concluding lessons.

5. Furthering Exegesis of 2 Kings 20:1–11

5.1. Verse 1: Hezekiah’s Illness and Prophetic Pronouncement

Starting with verse 1, Hezekiah’s sickness is the premise of the entire narrative. It is also the motivation for the prophet’s visit and pronouncement “thus says the Lord, set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover/live” (kōh-’āmar ’ādōnāi, šaw, lābētekā kī mēt ’attā wālō’ tihyē). In other words, like Africans, “knowing that the royal illness is in the hands of Yahweh, the prophet declares that it is a terminal illness” ([Brueggemann 2000](#), p. 521). Frederick J. Gaiser rightly suggests that we take “kōh-’āmar ’ādōnāi” (thus

says the Lord) in Isaiah's prophecy seriously. His argument, and rightly so, is that "it is a standard messenger formula, introducing direct citation from God in the mouth of the prophets" (Gaiser 2010, p. 50; Udoekpo 2017, pp. 64–67). This is not to deny prophetic roles and freedom in healing the sick in the Old Testament (1 Kings 14; 2 Kings 5:1–15). The prophets may have freely said something for which they themselves were responsible (see Von Rad 1965, pp. 70–79 on this subject of prophetic freedom). But when they said "*kōh-āmar 'ādōnāi*" they "understood their message to come directly from Yahweh. Faithful Israelites such as Hezekiah would have known this as well" (Gaiser 2010, p. 50; Udoekpo 2010, pp. 197–205). Isaiah's message to someone like Hezekiah, who has been a good and faithful King all along, would have been shocking to ancient Israelites and some modern societies, particularly Africans, who **believe** generally and traditionally that illness comes as a result of sin. This is why, in Africa, especially in Yoruba, Nigeria, "after finding the cause of this disharmony (illness), the person was then treated, which may involve oracular processes such as the consultation of Ifa Oracle, counseling, rituals, dance, prayers, and the confession of guilt" (Adodo 2010). Those who opposed Hezekiah's reforms would also have interpreted "*kī mēt 'attā wālō' tihyē*", that is, his early death and lack of recovery as a punishment from God (Gotom 2006, p. 460). Or, in Africa, he would have been taken from one healing home to the other to seek healing and recovery. Yet, in this context, God is the ultimate healer, and it is important to note the special verbs *hāyā* (live/recover) and *rāpā* (heal), used interchangeably in verses 1b, 7b, and 8a, to express this divine healing story after the initial threat that he will die.

5.2. Verses 2–4: Hezekiah's Prayer

Hezekiah does not take "*kī mēt 'attā wālō' tihyē*", (for you shall die and shall not recover) lightly or as the last word. He responded to this prophetic verdict in two ways in verse 2. He turned away from the prophet facing the wall, and at the same time, he turned to God in prayer. Walter Brueggemann (2000, p. 521) thinks that, as a man Hezekiah was afraid of the prophetic verdict, so he turned away from the prophet facing the wall (*wayyssēb 'et-pānāw 'el-haqqār*), but as a man of prayer all along, he quickly recalculated his approach to the problem. He took his problems and fears to the Lord (*'el-ādōnāi*) in prayer (*wayyitppālēl*). This is what Hezekiah exemplarily does well. In Chapter 19, when confronted and mocked by the Assyrian envoys, he took this threat and mockery to God (2 Kings 19:4, 15–19). This approach would be particularly appealing and relevant to many confronted with all kinds of illnesses and threats to life in Africa and beyond.

In verse 3, and while praying, Hezekiah wept bitterly before the Lord (*hizqiyyāhū bākī ḡādōl*). His great weeping, Brueggemann thinks, "is an acknowledgement of a lack of personal resources, and by implication, an acknowledgement of his unqualified reliance upon Yahweh" (Brueggemann 2000, p. 522). Frederick J. Gaiser (2010, p. 50), thinks it is "reminiscent of the weeping Jerusalem when overcome by the Babylonian armies (Lam 1:2,16)". He further observes that, in the Old Testament, such weeping is often associated with impending death (Gen 21:16; 23:2; 37:35; 2 Sam 13:36), which would make sense, although the content of Hezekiah's prayer retains an element of audacity of hope (Gaiser 2010, p. 50). He appeals to the Lord on the basis of his own faithfulness, praying: "*'ānnā 'ādōnāi zākār-nā 'ēt 'āšer hihallaḡtī lāpānēkā be'ēmei ūbālēbāb šālēm*" ("remember now, O LORD, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart; (v.3b) *wahattōh bā ēnēkā āšīr*" (and have done what is good in your sight"). Hezekiah's prayer and dialogue with God are effective. Like his prayers in 2 Kings 19:15–19, which promptly evoked the assuring prophetic oracle of 2 Kings 19:21–28, his prayer in 2 Kings 20:3 evokes the remarkable prophetic response of verses 5–6.

5.3. Verses 5–6: The Lord's Response

In verses 5–7, the Lord promises to heal Hezekiah (*rōphe' lākā*) and to deliver the City of Jerusalem from the hands of the Assyrian King (*ūmikkaph melek- 'aššūr 'aššīlākā wā'ēt hā'ir hazzō't*), since the two are connected. We need a healthy King in a healthy city, which can

also resonate in Africa, where illnesses, corruption, and all kinds of suffering in a broken democratic city have become the order of the day (Udoekpo 1994). In other words, the judgment of death made by Isaiah in verse 1 could be taken as a “medical opinion”, which has now been turned around by God’s divine and merciful intervention through the power of this pious and faithful King, Hezekiah (Brueggemann 2000, p. 522). In fact, not only has God heard his prayer (*šāma’ttî ’et-tāphillātekā*), but God has seen his tears (*rā’ûti ’et-dimā’tekā*), as an elemental form of petition beyond mere utterances (See Brueggemann 2000; Adamo 2021, pp. 1–8). And this same God will heal the King (*hinānî, rōphe’ lākā*). Remarkably, the phrase in 5d, “*hinānî, rōphe’ lākā*” (indeed, I will heal you), is reminiscent of the Lord’s self-introduction in the wilderness, “I am the Lord your Healer” (Exod 15:26). Healing is the Lord’s work, in spite of the means (See Gaiser 2010, p. 54; Hempel 1957). Contrary to the case of Uzziah in 2 Kings 15:5 (who was unable to govern again after his leprosy), Hezekiah’s capacity to return to his royal role in the temple in verse 5e is “a measure of his full restitution and divine mercy. Not only will Hezekiah be delivered from his sickness, but God has blessed him with an additional fifteen years of well-being and peace.

Verses 6bc make it clear that God’s blessing through the mouth of the prophet transcends the King’s illness. Here, the prophetic words, “I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; (c) I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David’s sake” parallel 2 Kings 19:34, where God promised to “deliver and defend” the city of David. Brueggemann insists that in light of these promises, “there can be no doubt that the illness of the king is understood as an ebbing of the power of the dynasty” (Brueggemann 2000, p. 522). The more reason the Lord will extraordinarily heal the King and the city for the sake of the promises he had made to David and his descendants in 2 Samuel 7 (See Gaiser 2010, p. 55 for indebted analysis of the parallelism between this account of Hezekiah’s personal deliverance and the preceding account of the deliverance of Jerusalem (2 Kings 18–19)).

5.4. Verses 7–11: Healing Means, Process, and Signs

Granted that Hezekiah’s healing is the Lord’s work, yet God’s work is also accomplished through elements of creation and the activities of human and prophetic agents. In our story, Isaiah applies the ordinary lump of a fig tree (*dābelet ta’ēnî*) to the boil (*’al-haššāhîn*) and the King was not only healed, but “he recovered and lived (*wayyehî*). In Brueggemann’s view, this “verse 7 would seem to be simply medical advice for the specific illness of the king, but is an afterthought to the theological point of the oracle” (Brueggemann 2000, p. 523). However, I would go beyond Brueggemann’s view, and agree rather with Frederick Gaiser that, in addition to extraordinary means of divine healing, “such herbal remedies are used everywhere in the world” especially in African countries and communities (Gaiser 2010, pp. 57–58). In the Bible, Old and NT, God never refuses to use the means of creation and other human agents (cf. Adamo 2021, pp. 3–8; Gaiser 2010, pp. 58–59), such as doctors, nurses, physicians, words (2 Kings 4:8–17), touching (1 Kings 17:7–24), materials (Exodus 15:26), looking (Numbers 21:4–9), faith, and trust in the Lord (Mark 5:32).

In addition, 2 Kings 20:8 reminds us that prophetic words are usually or sometimes accompanied with signs as a kind of guarantor of their efficacy, especially when the result of the promise is expected in the future (Isaiah 7:14). But this is not strictly the case here, since the King has already been cured in verse 7. Gaiser thinks the demand here by Hezekiah is related to the political dimension of the story. In Isaiah 7: 10–17, Hezekiah’s father, Ahaz, refused to ask for a sign, which has been seen by some as impious or as thinking that it would be an unnecessary challenge to the Lord (Gaiser 2010, p. 54). On the contrary, here Hezekiah, according to Brueggemann, “has no such reservation of compunction. The king is filled with authority and is unabashed in his demand (Brueggemann 2000, p. 523). T. R. Hobbs, like Walter Brueggemann, proposes that Hezekiah’s request for a sign (2 Kings 20:8) does not contract verse 7, “a sign had already been given to Hezekiah, but he could not ex-

plain it; therefore, he requested another sign, not necessarily an immediate one" (Hobbs 1985, p. 293). But this could be the case if the healing in verse 7 is taken as a sign.

To the contrary, Vicki Hoffer believes he has a better explanation and canonical solution in his study of this parallel story in Isaiah 38:21 by pointing out the implications for the root word *hāyā* (live, recover, to be) in verses 1 and 7 and its parallel in Isaiah 38:21, which differs from the implication of *rāpā* (heal) in verse 8. According to Hoffer, one may explain Isaiah's action and its result in Isaiah 38:21 as *wayyehî* taken to mean "purification from a state of impurity" (Hoffer 1992, p. 79). That is to say, "Isaiah does not heal the King. He only provides the oxymoronic remedy to the lesion" (Hoffer 1992, p. 79). Rimon Kasher insists that perhaps a different solution may be suggested along these lines by understanding the term *wayyehî* to simply mean "not dying" or "remaining alive". In other words, verses 7 and 8 simply present the opposite of verse 1, namely, the threat to die, not to live, not to get well, not to recover, and not to be healed. Hezekiah's question in verse 8, "what shall be the sign that the LORD will heal me", (*mā 'ōt kî-yirppā' 'ādōnāi lî*), relates to his being completely healed and/or purified from the rash and his ability to enter the temple on the third day to perform his royal duties (Kasher 2001, p. 52).

In the remaining verses 9–11, it is remarkable that Hezekiah, a faithful and righteous King, specifies his request that the shadow should recede ten times instead of advancing. With God, everything is possible. If God could interfere with illness and heal the King through various means and agents, as discussed, God, the marker and source of time, could equally bring back lost time. In Brueggemann's suggestions, adopted in this paper, Hezekiah's demand is a reminder of the time of Joshua's battle with the Amorite. When darkness was about to engulf them, Joshua asked for more time, which was granted by the Lord (Josh 10:12–14). It is also reminiscent of Gideon's asking and receiving of signs from the Angel of the Lord (Judges 6:36–37). In like manner, the pious King Hezekiah receives assurances of his God's healing mercies through all the prophetic invocations and signs he had asked for (2 Kings 20:11). Nothing, including the natural order, can stop God's healing love for a pious and King in Jerusalem. Nothing can stop God from healing us from different parts of the world, including Africa, when we call upon him.

6. Conclusions

This work has discussed and exegeted in detail the theological story of "Sickness and the Power of Healing Prayer in 2 Kings 20:1–11 and Isaiah 38:1–22". It touched on various terms, such as disease, sickness, illness, health, and healing, in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament and in African contexts. Healing, of which Hezekiah–Isaiah narratives form a part, is the experience or process that restores fallen, alienated human beings to intimate fellowship, friendship, peace, and communion with God and fellow human beings or neighbors.

Hezekiah's illness as a pious King could raise challenging questions among us, such as why bad things happen to good people, especially in Africa, where illnesses, lack of adequate health care services, abuse of prayer and healing centers, and good governance have become the order of the day. Even though we do not always have all the answers, it remains true that God, though he, himself, based on our faith and prayer exemplified by Hezekiah, is the ultimate and extraordinary divine healer (*rāpā'*), as defined in Exodus 15:26, can always, reorder nature, as we saw in the sings, demanded by Hezekiah (2 Kings 20. 7–11). He can use other discussed agents, including prophets like Isaiah, physicians ordinary means, and other forms of creation, such as herbs in the likes of lumps from fig trees (*dābelet tē'ēnî*) used to heal boils, malaria, typhoid, and other types of diseases, including some of those listed in this paper. Hezekiah's healing story affirms to all in the contemporary world today, especially Africans, that a healthy King is needed in a healthy city, where illnesses, bribery and corruption, violence, terrorism, tribalism, mockeries, taunting, broken democracy, political threats, and other forms of man-made suffering and oppression are things of the past or curable (Udoekpo 2022).

Finally, it is that transforming power of God that the Bible and this paper affirm in the story and exegesis of Hezekiah's sickness and healing (2 Kings 20:1–11). The discussed narratives invite us in Africa and beyond to always trust God in moments of trials, socio-political, religious, and economic threats, and sickness. Hezekiah–Isaiah narratives invite us to always consider the role of prayer in healing and the relationship between healing through extraordinary means, God's grace, and healing through other ordinary means such as (water, words, prayers, and herbs that God has blessed for the global human race.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Adamo, David. T. 2021. I am the LORD Your Healer' Exodus 15:26 (\$apr hwhy yna): Healing in the Old Testament and the African (Yoruba) Context. In *die Skriflig* 55: a2689. [CrossRef]
- Adodo, Anselm. 2010. *Herbal Medicine, and Revival of African Civilization*. Ewu-Esan: Pax Herbal Publications.
- Adolph, Paul E. 1975. Healing, Health. In *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Edited by Merrill C. Tenney. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, vol. 3, p. 57.
- Brown, Francis, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. 2005. *The Brown-Driver Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic (BDB)*, 9th ed. Boston: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Brueggemann, Walter. 2000. *1 & 2 Kings*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary. Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishers.
- Gaiser, Frederick J. 2010. *Healing in the Bible: Theological Insight for Christian Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Gotom, Musa. 2006. 1 and 2 Kings. In *Africa Bible Commentary*. Edited by Tokunboh Adeyemo. Nairobi: Wordalive Publishers, pp. 406–66.
- Hasel, Gerhard F. 1983. *Health and Healing in the Old Testament*. Andrews University Seminary Studies, Autumn. Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, vol. 21, no. 3. pp. 191–202.
- Hempel, J. 1957. Ich bin der Herr, dein Arzt: Ex 15:26. *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 82: 809–26.
- Hobbs, T. R. 1985. *2 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary. Edited by David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, vol. 13.
- Hoffer, Vicki. 1992. An Exegesis of Isaiah 38, 21, 79. *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* 17: 69–84. [CrossRef]
- Holladay, William L. 1971. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (CHAL)*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Kasher, Rimón. 2001. The Sitz im Buch of the Story of Hezekiah's Illness and Cure (II Reg 20, 1–11; Isaiah 38, 1–22). *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 113: 41–55. [CrossRef]
- Manser, Martin Hugh, Alister McGrath, J. Packer, and Donald Wiseman, eds. 2017. *The Complete Topical Guide to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Barker Books.
- Mounce, William D., ed. 2006. *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Murray, James A. H. 1970. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Panov, Lida. 2021. Scribal Experience of Salvation-Aspects of Formation Processes in the Hezekiah-Isaiah Narratives. *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 133: 312–28. [CrossRef]
- Person, Raymond F. 1997. *The Kings-Isaiah and Kings-Jeremiah Recension*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft Series. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, vol. 252.
- Pretorius, Stephen p. 2009. Is 'Divine Healing' in the 'Faith Movement' Founded on the Principles of Healing in the Bible or Based on the Power of the Mind? *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 65: 399–405. [CrossRef]
- Silis, David L. 1972. *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. New York: Macmillan Press, vols. 5&6.
- Sweeney, Marvin A. 1996. *Isaiah 1–39: With an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*. Forms of the Old Testament Literature Series. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, vol. 16, p. 496.
- Udoekpo, Michael U. 1994. *Corruption in Nigerian Culture: The Liberating Mission of the Church*. Enugu: Snaap Press.
- Udoekpo, Michael U. 2010. *Rethinking the Day of YHWH and Restoration of Fortunes in the Prophet Zephaniah: An Exegetical and Theological Study of 1:14–18; 3:14–20*. Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Udoekpo, Michael U. 2017. *Rethinking the Prophetic Critique of Worship in Amos 5 for Contemporary Nigeria and the USA*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications.
- Udoekpo, Michael U. 2020. *The Limits of a Divided Nation with Perspective from the Bible*. Eugene: Resource Publications.
- Udoekpo, Michael U. 2022. The Prophetic Mission of Obadiah in the Context of African Christianity. In *A Biblical Approach to Mission in Context; A Festschrift in Honor of Sr. Prof. Teresa Okure, SHCJ*. Eugene: Wifp & Stock.
- Von Balthasar, Hans Urs. 1986. *Prayer*. Translated by Graham Harrison. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Von Rad, Gerhard. 1965. *Old Testament Theology*. Edinburg: T&T Clark, vol. 2.

Wildberger, Hans. 1982. Jesaja 28–39. In *Biblische Kommentar Altes Testament (BK.AT)*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, vol. X/3.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.