WORKING PAPER 011

The Serpent and the Medicine

Ancient Healing, the Rod of Asclepius, Pharmakeia, and the Christian Question of Where Healing Comes From

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Independent working paper. This paper presents developing hypotheses, research questions, and interdisciplinary inquiry. It has not undergone peer review.

Abstract

The serpent is everywhere in medicine. We see it on medical logos, hospitals, ambulances, and professional emblems, but most of us rarely stop to ask why it is there. Its history leads back to ancient Greek healing traditions centered on Asclepius, where medicine, religion, ritual, dreams, practical treatment, and sacred symbolism existed side by side. Even the original Hippocratic Oath invoked Apollo, Asclepius, Hygieia, and Panacea. For me, that history raises a larger question: How should Christians think about a medical tradition that developed, in part, inside a religious world Christianity does not recognize as divine? This paper follows that question without jumping to the conclusion that modern medicine is therefore demonic. I am interested in something more precise: the difference between where a practice came from and what it is now, between using medicine and worshiping medicine, and between receiving treatment and deciding where healing ultimately comes from. I also examine pharmakon and pharmakeia, the biblical use of pharmakeia for sorcery, the serpent in Scripture, and whether what we believe about medicine, fear, dependence, expectancy, and divine healing might actually affect us psychologically and biologically. The question underneath all of it is simple: Is medicine the instrument, or is medicine the source?

Author's Note

This paper began with a video in which I was asking questions about the serpent in medicine, ancient Greek healing, the Hippocratic tradition, pharmakeia, and my Christian conviction that healing ultimately comes from God. The video was theological and exploratory. Once I began turning those ideas into a paper, I found places where the history needed to be tightened. Delphi, not "Deli," was the sanctuary associated with Apollo and the Pythia. Python belongs to the Greek mythology surrounding Delphi, but the historical sources I reviewed do not establish a Greek "marine kingdom" as the source of medical healing. The Pythia was primarily an oracle, not someone dispensing medical remedies. And while Hippocratic medicine was connected culturally and professionally to the Asclepian tradition, the evidence does not allow us to verify a literal bloodline from Apollo to Hippocrates.

But correcting those details did not make the larger question disappear. If anything, it made the question more interesting. Ancient Greek medicine grew inside a world where healing, religion, ritual, gods, sacred serpents, dreams, natural remedies, observation, and early forms of rational

medicine overlapped. So what do Christians do with that history? And perhaps more importantly: How do we use a medical tool without quietly making the tool the thing we ultimately trust?

Why Is There a Serpent in Medicine?

The medical serpent most directly connected to healing is the Rod of Asclepius: one serpent wrapped around a staff. Asclepius became the Greco-Roman god associated with medicine, and healing sanctuaries dedicated to him - called Asclepieia - spread throughout the Mediterranean. These were not simply hospitals in the modern sense. Historical and archaeological sources describe places where practical treatment and religious ritual existed together. A person might receive care while also participating in purification, sacrifice, prayer, sacred sleep, dream interpretation, and other religious practices.

Snakes were closely connected to Asclepius and his sanctuaries. Historical medical literature describes nonvenomous snakes being used in Asclepian ritual, and the staff with the serpent eventually became one of medicine's most enduring symbols. Some interpretations connect the snake with renewal because it sheds its skin; others connect it directly with the mythology of Asclepius. Either way, one thing is clear: the serpent did not begin as a modern pharmaceutical logo. It came out of an ancient world in which medicine and religion were deeply intertwined.

There is also another symbol people often confuse with it: the caduceus of Hermes, which has two serpents and wings. The traditional medical symbol is the Rod of Asclepius, with one serpent. That distinction matters. It also matters that the survival of an ancient symbol does not automatically mean that a modern physician is participating in the religion that first produced it. Symbols can outlive the belief systems that gave birth to them.

Apollo, Delphi, and the Pythia

Apollo was associated in Greek mythology with prophecy, plague, purification, and healing. At Delphi, the mythology connected him with the defeat of Python. The priestess who delivered the Delphic oracle was called the Pythia, and ancient accounts describe her entering an inspired or altered state and delivering messages that were interpreted for those seeking guidance.

From a Christian perspective, Apollo is not a god I recognize as worthy of worship. But I also want to be careful about what history can and cannot prove. History can show us that the Greeks worshiped Apollo and sought supernatural guidance at Delphi. Christian theology can call that worship idolatry. What historical method cannot do by itself is prove that Apollo was literally a demon - or prove that no spiritual reality was involved at all. That tension is part of the larger question running through this entire Working Paper Series: What can history tell us? What can psychology and biology measure? What can theology speak to? And where do the limits of each method begin?

Asclepieia: Ritual and Treatment Together

The Asclepieia fascinate me because they do not fit neatly into our modern categories. They were not simply "superstition," and they were not simply "medicine." They brought together

religious faith, patient expectation, environment, practical therapies, and early medical observation. People could fast, bathe, exercise, receive massage or other care, make offerings, and then sleep in a sacred area hoping to receive a healing dream or encounter with Asclepius. This practice is often called incubation.

That raises a question that still feels surprisingly modern. We now know that expectation, relationship, environment, sleep, touch, diet, movement, stress, and meaning can affect the human body and mind. Recognizing those measurable effects does not prove that the gods invoked in an ancient ritual were real. But the reverse is also true: finding religious elements in ancient medicine does not mean every practical observation or treatment that came out of that culture was useless. Both things can be true at once.

The Hippocratic Oath and Its Gods

The original Hippocratic Oath opens by calling on Apollo the physician, Asclepius, Hygieia, Panacea, and the gods and goddesses as witnesses. That is part of the historical text. The oath placed the physician's ethical promise inside the religious world of ancient Greece and then addressed responsibilities involving teachers, patients, harm, confidentiality, conduct, and professional duty.

Modern physicians generally are not standing in medical schools swearing the original pagan oath word for word. Schools that use physician pledges often use revised or modern versions. So I do not think the history supports saying that every modern doctor who takes an oath has entered a covenant with Apollo or Asclepius. The more interesting Christian question is this: What does it mean that some of Western medicine's ethical ancestry developed inside a spiritual system Christianity rejects? Which parts are simply history, and is there anything about that inheritance that remains spiritually meaningful today? That is a question to investigate, not a conclusion to assume.

Pharmakon, Pharmakeia, and a Necessary Distinction

This is where the Greek words pharmakon and pharmakeia become important. Pharmakon could refer to a drug, remedy, poison, or substance depending on context. Pharmakeia developed across contexts involving drugs, poisoning, magic, and sorcery. In Galatians 5:20, pharmakeia appears among the "works of the flesh" and is commonly translated as "sorcery" or "witchcraft." Related language also appears in Revelation in contexts of sorcery.

There is a real linguistic relationship between these Greek words and our modern words pharmacy and pharmaceutical. But a shared word history is not enough to say that taking a prescription is the same thing as practicing the sorcery condemned in Galatians. In the New Testament context, pharmakeia refers to sorcerous or magical practice; it is not a blanket condemnation of every medicinal substance. That distinction matters if we want to ask serious biblical questions without making the text say more than it says.

What interests me more is the overlap itself. Why could drugs, remedies, poisons, enchantments, and ritual practices live so close together in the ancient vocabulary? Part of the answer may be that ancient people did not separate medicine, religion, magic, and

pharmacology into the clean categories that modern Western culture tends to use. Their world was more integrated - for better and for worse.

The Biblical Serpent Complicates the Symbol

The serpent becomes even more complicated when we look at Scripture. In Genesis, the serpent is associated with deception and the fall. But in Numbers 21:4-9, God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it up so that the Israelites who had been bitten could look at it and live. Later, in 2 Kings 18:4, Hezekiah destroys that same bronze serpent because the people had begun burning incense to it. Then in John 3:14-15, Jesus refers back to the lifted serpent when speaking about the Son of Man being lifted up.

That sequence stops me because it shows that an instrument and a source are not the same thing. The bronze serpent could be used in a moment of healing without being the source of healing. Later, when people began treating the object itself as sacred, the relationship to it changed. I am not saying pharmaceuticals are the biblical bronze serpent. I am saying Scripture gives us a category worth thinking about: Can something be genuinely useful and still become something we trust in a way it was never meant to carry?

Medicine as Instrument, Medicine as Source

This is the heart of the paper for me: medicine as an instrument and medicine as the source are two very different ideas. A Christian can receive surgery, medication, rehabilitation, psychotherapy, or other care and still believe that God is the ultimate source of life and healing. That does not require us to demonize medicine, and it does not require us to deify it either. It allows medicine to be what it is: a human tool that can have real benefits, real limitations, real risks, and appropriate uses.

I think there are two opposite mistakes available here. One is medical idolatry - giving a drug, diagnosis, clinician, or health system an authority over life, identity, prognosis, or healing that belongs to God. The other is rejecting medicine simply because parts of its ancient history developed alongside pagan religion. The historical evidence does not require either conclusion.

So the practical question becomes much more personal: Can I receive help from this treatment without making it the place where I locate my ultimate hope? That is a theological question. But I wonder whether the answer also has measurable psychological and biological consequences.

Fear, Dependence, and Healing Expectancy

This is where fear and dependence enter the conversation. In the original video, I questioned whether long-term medical management can sometimes leave people increasingly afraid of sickness or convinced that they will always be dependent on a treatment. I do not think that can be said universally. For many people, ongoing medication or monitoring is lifesaving, stabilizing, preventive, or genuinely restorative. Continuing treatment is not evidence of spiritual bondage. But I do think the meaning a person attaches to treatment matters. The same medication can be experienced as a useful tool, proof that the body is permanently broken, a source of safety, a source of fear, or one part of a much larger healing process.

And that is something we can study. Health psychology already looks at expectancy, illness beliefs, perceived control, adherence, stress, placebo and nocebo effects, and quality of life. What happens if we add spiritual questions? What does a person believe about God as healer? Are they afraid to live without a medication? Do they believe recovery is possible? Does faith reduce fear, increase hope, or change the way symptoms are interpreted? Can someone deeply believe in divine healing while also responsibly receiving medical care? These are not only theological questions. Some of their effects may be measurable.

A Researchable Model

The statement "God heals" is a theological claim; I am not trying to reduce God to a psychological mechanism. But parts of the human response surrounding that belief can be measured. Imagine comparing people with similar diagnoses and similar treatment plans who understand healing very differently. One person may believe medicine is the only thing keeping them safe. Another may see medicine as one useful tool while locating ultimate healing in God. Would we see differences in anxiety, symptom monitoring, stress responses, treatment adherence, perceived control, quality of life, or long-term recovery?

To study that well, researchers would need to stop treating all religious belief as one variable. Faith in God is not the same thing as confidence in a medication. Healing expectancy is not the same thing as denying illness. Positive religious coping is not the same thing as refusing treatment. Fear of illness, fear of medication, spiritual struggle, perceived dependence, hope for healing, and confidence in medical care may all operate differently. Separating them could help us ask a much better question: Can strong Christian faith in healing and responsible medical care exist together - and what happens psychologically and biologically when they do?

Primary Research Questions

1. What was actually happening inside the Asclepieia when religious ritual, practical treatment, dreams, expectation, and early medicine were all operating together?

2. How did the Rod of Asclepius remain a medical symbol long after explicit worship of Asclepius declined?

3. What did pharmakon and pharmakeia mean across ordinary Greek, biblical Greek, medicine, poisoning, magic, and sorcery - and where do those meanings overlap or separate?

4. Does the New Testament itself distinguish ordinary medicinal use from the pharmakeia it condemns as sorcery?

5. How do Christians who use medicine understand the difference between receiving medicine as a tool and treating medicine as the source of healing?

6. Do fear of illness, perceived dependence on treatment, and expectation of healing show up in measurable differences in stress, symptom perception, treatment behavior, or quality of life?

7. Can a person hold a strong belief in divine healing while also engaging responsibly with medical treatment?

8. Could spiritually integrated interventions reduce catastrophic expectations, fear, or hypervigilance around illness without encouraging unsafe medical decisions?

9. How do we distinguish faith from denial, hope from unrealistic certainty, and spiritual discernment from dangerous disengagement from needed care?

10. What would a genuinely Christian model of healing look like if it made room for prayer, spiritual agency, biology, physicians, medicine, surgery, behavior, and community - while still being clear about what is the instrument and what is the source?

Research Boundaries

There are several things I am not claiming here. The pagan setting of ancient Greek medicine does not, by itself, prove that modern medicine or pharmacology is demonic. The serpent symbol does not prove that today's physicians are knowingly aligned with Asclepius. And the linguistic relationship between pharmakeia and pharmacy does not prove that taking a pharmaceutical drug is the same thing as practicing New Testament sorcery. Those conclusions require evidence that word origins and historical associations alone cannot provide.

I am also not arguing that people should stop medication, avoid physicians, discontinue psychiatric care, or replace needed medical treatment with prayer alone. Medication can relieve symptoms, prevent complications, treat disease, stabilize psychiatric conditions, and sometimes contribute directly to remission or cure. Decisions about starting, changing, or stopping a treatment belong to the individual clinical situation and should not be inferred from the historical questions in this paper.

My theological position is straightforward: I believe healing ultimately belongs to God, and I believe Christians should be careful about turning anything - including medicine - into an object of ultimate trust. The research question that follows is equally important to me: Does where a person locates healing agency - in God, in themselves, in clinicians, in treatment, or in some combination - change what happens in the mind, body, behavior, and course of recovery?

Working Proposition

I do not think the history of medicine forces Christians into a choice between faith and medical care. I think it forces us to ask better questions. Healing practices have always carried assumptions about the human person, what illness is, where it comes from, and what has the power to heal. Modern medicine looks very different from ancient Greek medicine, but those deeper questions have not disappeared.

That is why the serpent on the medical staff interests me. Not because its presence proves some hidden modern covenant, but because its history brings a much larger question to the surface: What do we believe is healing us?

My working proposition is that medicine can be received as an instrument without becoming the object of our ultimate trust. The physician may treat. The medicine may act. The surgery may repair. The body may respond. And within a Christian framework, God can still be understood as the ultimate source of life and healing. What I want to know next is whether that

distinction remains only theological - or whether believing it changes the experience and trajectory of illness in ways we can actually measure.

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