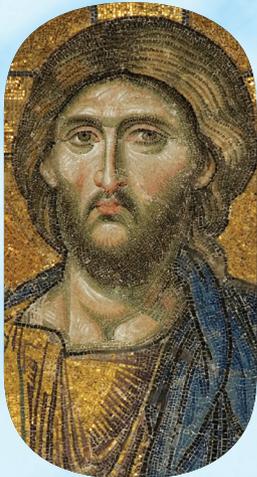


CORINTH AND THE

B  **ODY**

OF CHRIST

BY SCOTT HUMMEL

THOUSANDS OF GREEKS TRAVELED TO Corinth filled with anxiety for their illnesses and hope for their healing. Those seeking healing visited the Temple of Asclepius, known as the Asclepeion. During the time of Paul, Corinth housed one of the most important Asclepeions in the Roman Empire; only the Asclepeions at Epidaurus, Kos, and Pergamum held greater prestige. An Asclepeion was more than just a temple for the worship of Asclepius, it functioned somewhat like a hospital with its priest/physicians who were known as “asclepiads.” The most famous asclepiad was Hippocrates, the “father of western medicine.” The original Hippocratic Oath for physicians began with the invocation, “I swear by Apollo, the physician, and Aesculapius and Hygeia and Panacea, and I call to witness all the gods and goddesses.”¹

According to Greek mythology, Asclepius was born a mortal to the Thessalonian princess Coronis and the god Apollo, who taught him the elements of medicine prior to Chiron, the wise Centaur, teaching him the principles of pharmacology.² Asclepius was such a proficient physician that he not only healed the sick, but raised the dead. As a result the god Hades complained to Zeus who was so enraged by Asclepius’ arrogant violation of the natural order by raising the dead that Zeus killed Asclepius with a thunderbolt.³

Asclepius’ healing powers in life and beyond elevated him from mortal to hero. Asclepius and Herakles were among the most famous Greek heroes. Originally Apollo was the primary god of healing, but by the time of Paul, Asclepius had obtained the status of a full god, was the god of healing, and occupied “the centre of human hopes for healing.”⁴ Asclepius’ wife and four daughters personified concepts related to medicine, especially his daughters Hygeia and Panacea. In art Asclepius usually appears as a bearded man, similar to Zeus but with a kinder and gentler expression. Typically Asclepius held a staff with a snake wrapped around it. In fact, the Rod of Asclepius became a symbol for medicine and healing.⁵ His likeness influenced later artistic depictions of Jesus. In fact, “his mildness and benevolence made him the most Christlike of the pagan deities.... But Asclepius was a savior from sickness and danger, not from sin and damnation.”⁶

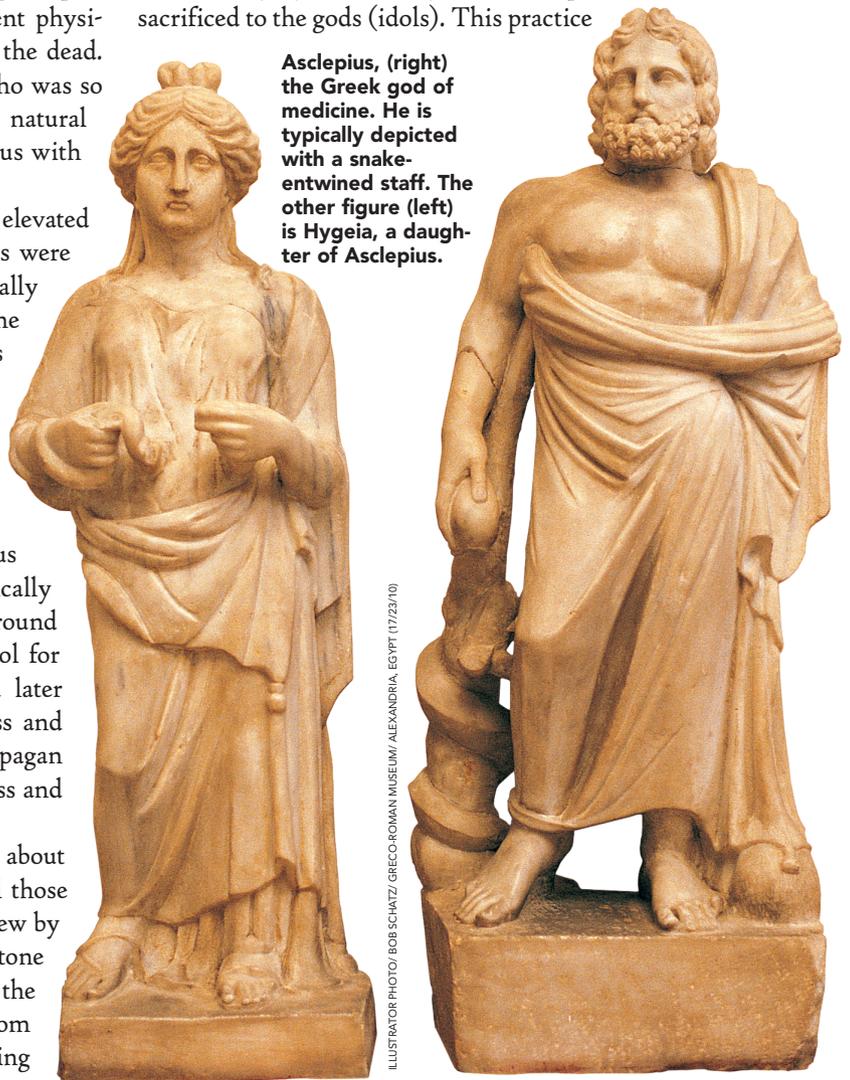
Pindar, a fifth-century B.C. Greek poet, wrote about the sick who sought healing from Asclepius: “All those who now come with a tumour on the body that grew by itself, or with limbs damaged by grey iron or by a stone flung from a distance, or with bodies scorched by the burning heat of summer or by winter, he set free from whatever torments each individual suffered, treating

some with a mild magical spell, giving others a healing drink or binding dressings with ointment about their limbs. He restored others to health through amputation.”⁷

Visitors to Corinth found the Asclepeion, the temple complex of Asclepius, in the quieter, northern part of the city with scenic views of the mountains and sea. The two-level complex included a colonnaded court, a Doric temple, water basins, a long altar, an offering box, dining facilities, an area for the sacred serpents, and the sleeping quarters.⁸ Even-larger Asclepeions, like the one at Epidaurus, also contained theaters and gymnasia.

Those seeking healing from Asclepius first observed a purification period which involved bathing for ritual cleansing, offering certain sacrifices, and abstaining from sexual activity and certain foods. Patients brought gifts of cakes, money, and animal sacrifices to Apollo and Asclepius. Typically they brought a piglet to Asclepius, but the poor could bring a lesser animal, such as a chicken.⁹ Those bringing the offering could eat a portion of the meat sacrificed to the gods (idols). This practice

Asclepius, (right) the Greek god of medicine. He is typically depicted with a snake-entwined staff. The other figure (left) is Hygeia, a daughter of Asclepius.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ/ GRECO-ROMAN MUSEUM/ ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT (17/23/10)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ AUDREY SMITH (35/43/88)

Left: Overlooking ancient Corinth, with the standing columns from the Temple of Apollo.

Lower left: Terra-cotta arm unearthed at Corinth. Worshipers would have given this as a votive offering to the Asclepius Temple in Corinth. A "votive" is a gift given to a god or deity. Once given it becomes the permanent property of the temple.

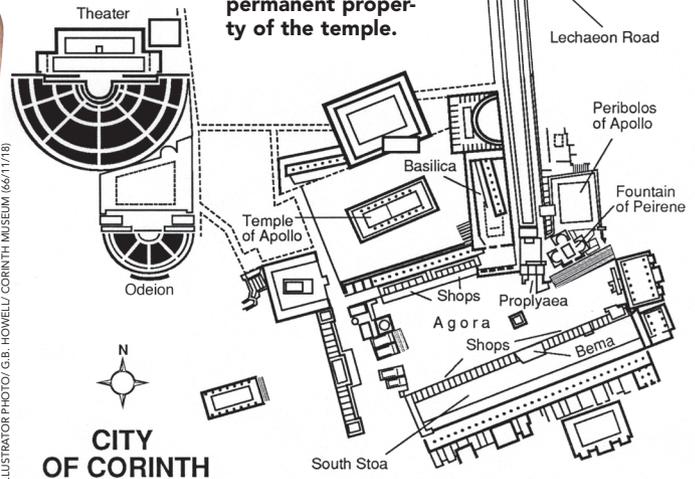
of eating meat sacrificed to idols created problems for the church, which Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians 8. During their stay, patients observed a strict diet and exercise regimen.

The most distinctive aspect of the stay in the Asclepeion was the *incubatio* or sleeping in the temple. In the evening the priests brought the patients into the sleeping chamber. They lay down on pallets in the dark room and slept. They believed that while they slept Asclepius either healed them or spoke to them in their dreams, giving them instructions for being healed. When they awoke, they told the priests the contents of their dreams, who then interpreted Asclepius' instructions and prescribed a regime for healing.¹⁰ While the whole experience in the entire complex promoted rest, refreshment, healthy diet, and exercise, most of the healing, including healing miracles, was associated with the sleep and sleeping chamber. Dogs and especially the sacred snakes were used to promote healing. Healing obtained in the Asclepeion in Corinth was a mixture of placebo, "miracle," and the best therapeutic methods of the day.¹¹ The desperate need for healing meant large numbers visited the Temple of Asclepius in Corinth. In fact, long after worship of other pagan gods had been abandoned, "the Christians were still trying to wean people away from Asklepios."¹²

In an effort to convince the gods, namely Asclepius, to heal them, worshipers made vows to the gods that they promised to keep if they were healed. A votive offering is one that a person gave to a god in fulfillment of a vow. Worshipers brought a wide variety of votive offerings to the Temple of Asclepius in gratitude for their healing. For example, Pausanias, a Greek geographer, visited the Asclepeion at Epidaurus about A.D. 170 and described the inscriptions and dedication plaques with the names of the men and women healed along with their respective illnesses and how they were cured.¹³ Other types of votive



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ CORINTH MUSEUM (66/17/18)



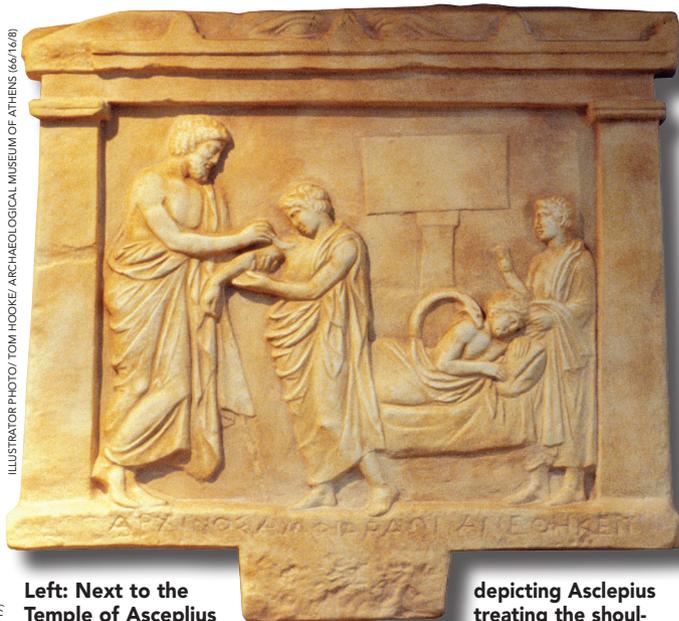
ILLUSTRATOR MAP/ PAULA SAVAGE AND BRENT BRUCE

FAST FACT

The English word "scalpel" is derived from "Asclepius," the name of the Greek god of healing.

offerings included works of art, money, sacrifices, and literary pieces. The most distinctive types of votive offerings were terra-cotta reproductions of body parts that had been healed. The Asclepeion in Corinth was full of these body parts. In fact, excavators in Corinth uncovered ten cubic meters of life-size and small-scale models of body parts, including eyes, organs, legs, arms, feet, hands, and even sexual organs.¹⁴ Some of the models were so detailed that they revealed the disease or problem with that body part.

Paul's analogy of the church as the body of Christ communicates effectively the importance of each person in the church and his or her respective role, gift, and contribution. However, the analogy of the body of Christ took on a deeper and more vivid meaning in Corinth because of the presence of the Asclepeion and the votive offerings of specific



Left: Next to the Temple of Asclepius at Pergamum are the ruins of what is thought to be a two-story medical center, likely the first in Europe. The lower level (shown) had a cen-

tral rotunda and six semi-circular rooms, likely for treating different ailments.

Above: A temple-like votive relief

depicting Asclepius treating the shoulder of a young man. The same patient is also shown in the background asleep, while the holy snake tends to the wounded shoulder.



Left: Head of Apollo; marble; found at Athens, Greece, east of the Olympieion; dated to the 2nd cent. A.D. Mythology claimed Apollo was the god of music, poetry, and medicine and the protector of herds and flocks.

body parts that people gave in gratitude for healing. The Corinthian believers could visualize all the visitors who came to Corinth seeking healing. The thousands of votive offerings in the shapes of body parts not only expressed gratitude for healing, they signified the importance of each part to the whole body. As Paul spoke metaphorically of the foot, hand, ear, and eye, each of these parts were literally represented in the Temple of Asclepius. A part may seem lesser or weaker until it no longer works or is diseased. Then the whole body is acutely aware of its importance and value. Furthermore, each terra-cotta body part served as a tangible reminder that disease in one part could spread throughout the entire body. Life-threatening diseases also

serve as a reminder of our mortality and thus our need for salvation in Christ, the true Great Physician. ☪

1. John Young, *The Oath of Hippocrates* (Glasgow, Scot.: James Maclehose and Sons, 1900), 4.
2. Maria Mavromataki, *Greek Mythology and Religion* (Athens: Hailtis, 1997), 110. Walton, "Asclepius" in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed., ed. N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 129-30.
3. Mavromataki, *Greek Mythology*, 111.
4. Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, trans. Brian McNeil (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 156.
5. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1993), 208; Walton, "Asclepius," 130.
6. Ferguson, 210.
7. Klauck, *Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 156, quotes Pindar, *Phythian Odes* 3 in William H. Race, *Pindar*, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), 485.
8. Clyde E. Fant and Michell G. Reddish, *A Guide to Biblical Sites in Greece and Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 60-61, and Klauck, *Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 157, describe the excavations of the temple complex of Asclepius in Corinth.
9. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985), 268.
10. Klauck, *Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 163; Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 210.
11. Walton, "Asclepius," 129. The ritual of incubation was described by Aristophanes (Plutarch. 653-747).
12. John Camp and Elizabeth Fisher, *The World of the Ancient Greeks* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 160.
13. Pausanias, *Graec. Descr.* 2.27.3. Quoted by Klauck, *Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 160. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 211.
14. Fant and Reddish, *Guide to Biblical Sites*, 61; Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 211.

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