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## Psychiatry in the Old Testament

### Did Ezekiel have catatonia?

George Stein

3:25 'As for you mortal, cords shall be placed on you with them so that you cannot go out among the people.  
26 And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth so that you shall be speechless.'

The picture here is of cords being placed upon Ezekiel so that he cannot move, but we do not know whether these were real, as in the case of Jeremiah, or allegorical cords. The phrase 'you will be speechless' is suggestive of mutism. The traditional rabbinical explanation for these verses is that Ezekiel was such a hypercritical prophet who was constantly berating the people for being rebellious that he had to be silenced and confined to his house. However, his period of silence and immobilisation went on for a long time.

4:4 'Then lie on your left side and place the punishment of the house of Israel upon it; you shall bear the punishment for the number of days you lie there  
5 for I assign to you a number of days, 390 days and so you shall bear the punishment of the house of Israel.  
6 When you have completed these, you shall lie down a second time, but on your right side and bear the punishment of the house of Judah: 40 days I assign you.  
7 You shall set your face towards the siege of Jerusalem, and with your arm you shall prophesy against it.  
8 See I am putting cords on you so that you cannot turn from one side to another until you have completed the days of your siege.'

In this passage Ezekiel must prophesy with his arm because he cannot speak and he cannot move, even to roll over. This lasts for a very long time, more than a year for the first episode and 40 days for the second episode. The most common and possibly the only non-fatal human condition lasting for such a long time where a person moves very little, does not speak and from which there may be complete recovery is catatonia.

Ezekiel ate very poorly and drank very little in his period of immobility and it seems he had to cook his food using human faeces (possibly his own): 4:12 'You shall eat it as barley cake, baking it in their sight on human dung'. The phrase 'in their sight' suggests that the local people must have witnessed this. The taboos about handling human excrement or defilement were thought to be very strong in ancient Israel, particularly among the priesthood (Ezekiel was an important priest). However, such taboos are sometimes lost in people with serious mental illness, especially schizophrenia. Previous psychiatric commentators, including Jaspers, in *Aneignung und Polemik*, have also suggested that Ezekiel may have suffered from catatonic schizophrenia.

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