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Psychiatry in the Old Testament

Did Ezekiel have first-rank symptoms?

George Stein

Certain verses in the book of Ezekiel provide descriptions which might pass for Schneider's first-rank symptoms, now commonly held to be diagnostic of schizophrenia. Still, trying to link ancient biblical verses to modern concepts of the first-rank symptoms in a religious text which is replete with spirits, commands from the deity, and other prophetic experiences may be a problematical exercise.

'Thought insertion' describes the intrusion of alien thoughts into the individual's mind, like in 38:10 'Thus says the Lord God: On that day thoughts will come into your mind and you will devise an evil scheme'. It is important to note that these are not God's thoughts as might occur in a religious experience. Less certain is the description of thought broadcasting, where the person believes that others have access to their thoughts. It is described in 11:5 'Thus says the Lord. This is what you think. Oh house of Israel; I know the things that come into your mind'. In this case it is God who knows everything that comes into Ezekiel's mind but as God is all-knowing this is not unexpected. Passivity experiences or made impulses are sensations or bodily movements being generated by an outside will usurping the will of the person affected; 2:2 'And when he spoke to me a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet and I heard him speaking to me'. Note that it is a spirit and not the deity who entered Ezekiel and made him stand up. Auditory hallucinations which discuss the person, argue about them or refer to them in the third person are possibly described in 33:30 'As for you mortal, your people who talk together about by the walls and at the doors of the houses say to one another each to a neighbour'. Finally, Ezekiel almost certainly experiences command hallucinations which he obeys, as in the scroll episode; 3:3 'He said to me eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it'. If the above verses are accepted as descriptions of first-rank symptoms, then Ezekiel has four symptoms. However, it may be all too easy to misinterpret these ancient verses and read contemporary psychiatric meaning into verses primarily spiritual and religious in their intent.

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