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Psychiatry in the Old Testament

The voices that Ezekiel hears

George Stein

Like any prophet, Ezekiel hears the voice of God and it is his prophetic task to relay God's message onto the people. He hears the voice of God more often (93 times) than any other prophet, and the way God addresses him as 'son of man' or 'mortal' is also unique. Ezekiel experiences a variety of other auditory phenomena, including command hallucinations which are not described in any other prophet, 3:3 'He said to me; mortal eat this scroll that I give to you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.'

Even the rabbis thought it was strange that Ezekiel actually ate the scroll and they explained it by saying he was ingesting the wisdom of the *Torah* (law). Other examples of command hallucinations which are carried out are the shaving of Ezekiel's head (5:1) which would have gone against priestly prohibitions to shave. He is also commanded to dig a hole in a wall in his escape from the city of Jerusalem during the siege, 12:1 'The word of the Lord came to me . . . 12:5 Dig a hole through the wall in their sight and carry the baggage through it . . . 12:7 I did just as I was commanded brought out my baggage by day as baggage for exile and in the evening I dug through the hole with my own hands.' Note that the phrase 'in my sight' denotes that others must have observed this. Ezekiel also hears people gossiping about him by the walls, 33:30 'As for you mortal your people who talk about you by the walls and at the doors of the house say to one another each to a neighbour "Come and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord".' Ezekiel hears the conversations God was having with others, 9:5 'To others he said within my hearing "pass through the city and kill, your eyes shall not spare".' Sometimes this voice can be loud, 9:1 'Then he cried within my hearing with a loud voice saying "draw near your executioners of the city".' Like many individuals with schizophrenia, Ezekiel does his best not to listen to these malign voices, 8:18 'and though they cry within my hearing with a loud voice, I will not listen to them.' In his visions he also sometimes hears voices, as for example in the 'Chariot Vision', 12:5 'And there came a voice from above the dome of their heads'. Also in these visions, as well as voices Ezekiel hears non-verbal auditory phenomena, 1:33 'each of the creatures had two wings covering its body. When I heard the sound of the wings like the sound of mighty waters like the thunder of the almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army'. No other prophet hears command hallucinations, conversations with third parties about himself, hears voices in their visions, or has non-verbal auditory experiences. All these auditory phenomena are said to be characteristic of schizophrenia.

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