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## psychiatry and sacred texts

### The prophet Samuel, hypnagogic hallucinations and the voice of God

Christopher C. H. Cook

The Hebrew book known as *Samuel*, written originally by an anonymous author in perhaps the 6th century BCE, gives an account (1 Samuel 3:1–14) of how Samuel, as a young person, first hears the voice of God. Laying down to sleep one night in the temple at Shiloh, where he is an attendant supporting the work of the elderly priest, Eli, Samuel hears his name called out loud and assumes that it is Eli who has called him. This happens three times before Eli concludes that God is calling Samuel, and he gives the boy instructions to respond to the voice, if he hears it again, with the words ‘Speak, your servant is listening’. When Samuel responds to the voice as instructed, there follows an account of a longer message that he receives from God concerning the punishment that God will impose upon Eli and his family, because Eli did not restrain his sons from blasphemy. This inaugurates a prophetic vocation that Samuel exercises from then on.

While some prophets in ancient Israel (e.g. Hosea, Elisha, Jeremiah) are accused of madness by their peers, and others (e.g. Ezekiel) have been diagnosed as mentally ill by some modern commentators, it is interesting that neither fate seems to befall Samuel. Hearing a voice when falling asleep, a form of hypnagogic hallucination commonly experienced in the general population, is not usually considered diagnostic of mental illness, and hearing one’s name called is a typical example. The subsequent longer message that Samuel receives is described by some commentators as a dream theophany, and by others as a vision, but it would be unusual to identify such a complex monologue as a part of a psychopathological experience. Lack of psychiatric attention to this text may therefore be due to lack of evidence for psychopathology.

Importantly for Jews, Christians and others who read *Samuel* as a sacred text, the purpose of the author was not to provide an historical account of ancient psychiatric phenomenology, and we therefore have no unambiguous evidence as to whether Samuel’s experiences were hallucinatory or in a dream. This does not matter, for it is the prophetic message, and the narrative account of God’s dealings with Samuel and Eli, that scripture is concerned with, not diagnosis. However, the possibility that Samuel experienced hypnagogic hallucinations is not incompatible with a belief that he heard God through them. It is the interpretation of the narrative and the experience, the meaning that is found in them, and the ways in which they enrich (or deplete) the lives of those concerned (Samuel, Eli, or the readers of the text) that confer value on them, not a scientific account of how they occurred.

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