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Psychiatry in the Old Testament

Was the scoundrel (*belial*) of the Book of Proverbs a psychopath?

George Stein

The first descriptions of psychopathy in the UK are attributed to Pritchard in 1835 and to Pinel in 1790 in France, but psychopathic characters have already appeared in the Bible. The Book of Proverbs includes a short epigram 6:12–19 of a person called the Scoundrel (*belial*):

Chapter 6,
 12 'A scoundrel and a villain goes around with crooked speech winking the eyes,
 13 shuffling the feet and pointing the fingers
 14 with perverted mind devising evil and continually sowing discord.
 15 On such a one calamity will descend suddenly in a moment damage beyond repair.
 16 There are six things the lord hates and seven are an abomination to him.
 17 Haughty eyes and a lying tongue and hands that shed innocent blood.
 18 A heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil.
 19 A lying witness who testifies falsely and one who sows discord in the family.'

McKane, a professor of theology, wrote that the 'eesh *belial* (the scoundrel) was a destructive man rather than a worthless man. There is a deep seated malevolence . . . He is obsessed with the thought of hurting his fellows. He digs mischief and his words have the destructive fury of a blazing fire' (*Proverbs: A New Approach*; 1970, SCM Press). This is a reasonable description of an aggressive psychopath based on the biblical account of the *belial* rather than any modern clinical text

Most of the DSM–IV features of antisocial personality disorder are contained here. The rabbis interpreted the word *belial* to mean *beli*, without and *Ya-al*, the yoke, which means somebody living without the yoke of the Torah (the sacred Jewish law). This is not too far from the DSM–IV criteria A of antisocial personality disorder – 'pervasive disregard for and violation of the rights of others'. Other DSM–IV criteria for this personality disorder include failure to conform to social norms (v. 17 and 19); deceitfulness (v. 19), impulsivity (v. 18), irritability and aggression (v. 17), reckless disregard for safety of self or others (v. 15, a reference to capital punishment), and lack of remorse (v. 19, which probably also describes wife or family abuse). Possibly up to five out of the seven criteria for DSM–IV antisocial personality disorder are mentioned or alluded to in this Biblical text. This poem is actually shorter (93 words) than the DSM–IV summary of antisocial personality disorder (127 words). Psychopathic personality disorders must have been a major problem in ancient Israelite society if it was so well described and appeared in the Bible.

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