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Psychiatry in the Old Testament

Did the author of Psalm 30 have cyclothymia or bipolar disorder?

George Stein

Psalm 30 is a short psalm used as a song for the dedication of the Temple. It contains a description in religious terminology of two abrupt changes of mood which seem to resemble the mood switches of affective disorder. Examples quoted here are verses 30:3–5 and 30:8–12.

30:3 'O Lord, you have brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit. 4 Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. 5 For his anger is but for a moment: his favour is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with morning.'

A state of misery is described in verse three (and also in one and two, not quoted here), but an abrupt change of mood seems to occur in the night. The psalm continues:

8 'To you Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: 9 What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? 10 Hear O Lord and be gracious to me O Lord, be my helper! 11 You have turned my mourning into dancing: you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, 12 so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God I will give thanks to you for ever.'

Only a writer who has had personal experience of such an abrupt change of mood, from a state of mourning (depression) to one of joy (elevation), could describe it so well. He attributes his improved mood to God whom he thanks. Today, in the clinic, many individuals with affective disorder will report such abrupt mood switches. Those with bipolar I disorder are often too lacking in insight to notice their moods have changed, but people with bipolar II disorder or cyclothymia are all too aware that their mood has improved. Perhaps this author had one of those disorders.

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