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Mental health disorders in the old testament: A critical appraisal

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Abstract

Mental disorders are not a product of the civilised world, as many would want to believe, but they have existed right from the Old Testament era. The issue seems to be a lack of critical appraisal of incidents, causes, and solutions deployed at that time, which, to a large extent, can add to existing knowledge. More so, literature interrogating issues of mental health disorders with a specific focus on the Old Testament seems scant. This situation creates a knowledge gap that affects the current global efforts to tame the tides of mental disorders. Therefore, this paper examined Old Testament characters such as Cain, Hannah, Herod, Saul, and David to examine manifestations of mental disorder and identify possible causes and remedies using textual analysis as methodology. Findings revealed that Biblical characters in the Old Testament manifested mental disorders: Cain – schizophrenia because of extreme jealousy and bitterness; Hannah – depression; Herod – delusion and perversion; Saul – depression and schizophrenia; David – depression and anxiety disorder. It was further revealed that possession by an evil spirit, the departure of the presence of God, anxiety, jealousy, and pervasive thinking led to mental health disorders in the Old Testament. Remedies to mental health in the Old Testament included: the peace of God and contentment. The paper recommended that individuals prioritise mental health, embrace satisfaction, withdraw from pervasive thoughts, and recognise the importance of mental health for overall well-being. Policymakers and leaders should provide and increase funding and resources for mental health services.

Keywords: Schizophrenia, Anxiety Disorder, Manifestation, Psychotic Disorders, King Saul, King David

Introduction

Mental health and the Old Testament have attracted scholarly exploration in recent times. Scholars find the interdisciplinary intersections between the Old Testament and mental health lucrative, providing the platform for interrogation or re-examination of various ways the Old Testament spot-

lights mental health concerns, and current comprehensions of the subject of mental health arising from Biblical text. It is noteworthy to assert that mental disorders are not a product of the civilised world. They have existed in the Old Testament epoch. The gap is the seeming lack of a critical perspective of the Old Testament theology in the light of contemporary realities. This lacuna has invariably created a knowledge breach that has equally impacted negatively on the current global efforts to address the rising tides of mental disorders in the world (Vigo, Thornicroft, & Atun, 2016).

The concept of manifestation is deeply rooted in religion and performative arts, as it advances the interpretation of metaphysical or transcendental subject matters such as emotions, perception, and virtually all mental disorders. In recent times, concerns surrounding mental disorders have attracted global attention and led to numerous interdisciplinary studies. One such issue is “manifestations,” which have been notably explored in literature, medicine, psychology, psychiatry, and more. Some of the mentioned disciplines have seen scholars investigating performance and mental health, poetry and medicine, mental health from the Christian perspective, representations of mental disorders resulting from injustice and infidelity, neurosis stemming from patriarchal suppression in African women, and the clinical implications of spirituality for mental health (Omobowale, 2001; Kekeghe, 2016; Obot, 2022; Hambrick, 2023; Kehinde, 2006).

However, studies on manifestations or representations of mental disorders in Old Testament theology appear insufficient. Against this backdrop, the current paper examines manifestations of mental disorders with particular reference to the Old Testament theology. This paper deployed textual analysis to interrogate Old Testament characters such as Cain, Hannah, Herod, Saul, and David to examine manifestations of mental disorder and identify possible causes and remedies.

Conceptual Clarifications

Manifestation is the public display of emotion or feelings or something theoretical that is made real. The concept of manifestation is apt and often applied to spiritual exegesis (Harold, 2001). Here, the idea is to explain spiritual, emotional, and psychological phenomena becoming materialised in the physical form (Moreira-Almeida, Koenig & Lucchett, 2005). Many believe that mental disorders have spiritual inclinations and that the application of medical procedures might not be productive in the long run (Harold, 2001). Contrary views situate factors that contribute to the emergence of mental disorders and possible cures to only the clinical origin (Keyes, 2002). Another set of people agrees that mental disorders seem to have both spiritual and

clinical implications. However, this paper unravels various manifestations of mental disorders in the text under review. This is predicated on human beings manifesting subconscious traits through actions and reactions, and it is common knowledge that dramatic arts are a viable tool for such rendition. In other words, drama, consciously or unconsciously, portrays human characteristics as a direct influence of the subconscious mind in what is referred to as the dramatic impulse (Lehmann, 2005).

Mental Disorder

A mental disorder is a global health challenge. It affects the mindset, mood, or behaviour of millions of people across the world. Thus, it has affected the productivity of many (Olatawura, 1982). Mental illnesses can last for a short time or your whole life. Some mild mental illness lasts only a few weeks. Sometimes, severe illnesses can be lifelong and cause serious disability. Mental disorder is a term that is often contextualised within mental health discourse. Mental health itself is a broad spectrum, which means “a state of well-being in which every individual can cope with the standard strains of existence. It also refers to a state where an individual is productive in society (WHO, 2007). Furthermore, the concept is directly related to the enjoyment of life, the ability to cope with stress and sadness, the fulfilment of goals and potential, and a sense of connection to others. Mental health is more about wellness than illness, and it is not simply the lack of a mental health condition.

In concise terms, Keyes (2014) identifies three components of mental health: emotional, psychological, and social well-being. He stated that emotional well-being includes happiness, interest in life, and satisfaction. In the case of psychological well-being, he specified that an individual must appreciate his or her personality, be good at managing the responsibilities of daily life, and maintain decent relationships with others. For social well-being, he posited that there must be evidence of productive contributions to society and the ability to be a part of a community (social integration, coherence, and actualisation).

However, the whole idea of mental disorder occurs when the mental well-being of a person is threatened by clinical, psychological, environmental, economic, social, or spiritual factors (Hatch & Harvey, 2010; Olatawura, 1982; Baxter, 1998). Succinctly, the American Psychiatric Association (2014) explains the hallmark of mental disorder to be the inability of an individual to participate meaningfully in day-to-day human activities. Therefore, it could be said that mental disorders are related to ailments capable of provoking dysfunctional or abnormal behaviours in people.

Indeed, mental health disorder comes in different forms. Forcén, &

Forcén (2014). Grouped mental disorders as follows: mood disorder, anxiety disorder, psychotic disorder, personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, and substance abuse. This paper explains briefly mood disorder, anxiety disorder, and psychotic disorder because they are closely related to the Old Testament narrative. Mood disorders include depression or bipolar disorder. A lot of people suffer from depression as a result of environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political factors. This disorder manifests through persistent sadness or loss of interest in life. It affects sleep, appetite, and concentration. People with depression are considered less productive. Irritability or anger, while others may experience feelings of worthlessness or guilt. Feeling sad, irritable, empty, and/or hopeless. Losing interest or pleasure in activities you once enjoyed.

Also, anxiety disorders are another type of mental health disorder. Anxiety disorders are a group of mental health conditions characterised by excessive and persistent fear or anxiety that can significantly interfere with daily life. These disorders can manifest in various forms, including generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, and specific phobias (Sartorius, 2002).

Furthermore, psychotic disorders, otherwise known as schizophrenia, refer to severe mental illnesses characterized by a significant disconnection from reality. In most cases, it comes with hallucinations and delusional manifestations. People experiencing these disorders usually have disordered thought processes, emotional imbalances, and behavioural challenges that make them function ineffectively in society. Schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, and schizophreniform disorder are some of the common types of psychotic disorders. (Vigo, Thornicroft, & Atun, 2016).

Arguably, mental illness is treatable. Most people with mental illness recover and live productive and happy lives. Incidentally, treatment is different for each type of mental illness. It can vary according to the individual and how serious the symptoms are. It can also depend on your history of disorder. The main types of treatment include the following.

Conceptualising the Old Testament

The Old Testament is the foundation, or the earlier portion of the Bible. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the Old Testament as “the first part of the Christian Bible that discusses the historical accounts of the Jews, and Yahweh’s plans for them before Jesus Christ was born. Grabbe (2007) validated the above statement by submitting that the Old Testament is more or less a direct history of the Jews. However, Jones’ (2000) perception of the Old Testament (OT) differs significantly in that the Old Testament

symbolises the Christian canons. Thus, it is not just historical material of the Jewish people. Succinctly, the Old Testament, on one hand, represents the history of the Jewish people, and on the other hand, is a reference material for total Christian living. Furthermore, Lim (2005) assertively stated that the Old Testament consists of 24 books of the Hebrew Bible, written by various authors over centuries through the inspiration of God. Based on the above statement, a third dimension has been established. That dimension is inspiration. This dimension added a deeper spiritual spectrum, which gives it continuous relevance and importance over centuries, even to contemporary times. In respect of significance, Smith (2019) explains thus:

The Old Testament is important because it shows us who God is. The Old Testament is where God first introduces himself to the world, where he first communicates with mankind. And the Old Testament shows God to us in so many ways. God's holiness, justice, faithfulness, love, wisdom, and power were demonstrated in story after story throughout the Old Testament.

In corroborating Smith's submission, Laney (2015) asserts that the Old Testament **is the truth about God and humanity. An important issue that directly touches humanity is mental health. This aspect demands attention, especially the spiritual dimension. In this regard, Romans 1:16** affirms that the gospel is *"the power of God for salvation"*. Simundson (1989) explains that the Old Testament speaks of mental health issues indirectly, but through the theological themes, readers can gain insights into the causes and remedies of mental disorders. In a more detailed perspective, Simundson (1989) submits that:

The Bible is surely an important resource to which people of faith turn in their search for mental health. Those who are struggling with overwhelming emotional and spiritual burdens will open their Bibles, hoping to find some word that will ease their suffering, answer their doubts, remove their depression, bring security, and assure them that they are loved and accepted by God.

The above statement emphasises certain narratives in the Bible that help the faithful seek peace and overturn emotional and spiritual burdens, which, in turn, lead to mental stability. Simundson (1989) admits that the intention of God, according to the Old Testament, is to guarantee believers

peaceful living, health, and wholeness. With this posturing, the Bible's relevance is emphasised, given that it attracts the widest readership, standing as a reference point of the creation myth. Therefore, examining this text to understand issues surrounding mental health is apt.

Manifestations of Mental Disorders in the Old Testament

A close reading of the Old Testament reveals characters who experienced various mental disorders. An instance is Cain in Genesis 4:8-16. The story is about Cain, who killed Abel, his brother. The act was because Cain was jealous of God's acceptance of Abel's offering, and because of this act, he was cursed and banished from the land. The cause of mental disorder in the case of Cain is acute jealousy and envy. These two drove him into a wild state of mind, such that killing Abel was the only means of succour.

Another manifestation of mental disorder in the Old Testament is 1 Samuel 16:14-23. This passage shows the departure of the Spirit of the Lord from Saul and the eventual torment that came upon him by an evil spirit. Verse 14 says: "Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him." In 1 Samuel 16:15-16, David played the Harp to drive away the evil spirit from Saul. Within this context, Saul's mental disorder originated from torment by the evil spirit sent from the Lord. King Saul was the first King of Israel who reigned in Jerusalem from c.1029–1005 BCE (Oded 2007:78). 1 Samuel 9:1 records that Saul was the son of Kish, a wealthy and influential man from the tribe of Benjamin in Israel. He was the tallest man in Israel and well-built for the kingship role. Many have also argued that at the beginning of Saul's reign as King of Israel, there were no traces of mental disorders. However, during his reign, he exhibited extreme jealousy towards David, which, perhaps, heralded the extreme manifestation of Schizophrenia. 1 Samuel 18:9, 28, 29 acknowledged that Saul was preoccupied with David's increasing fame in the latter part of his reign. Thus, he was depressed because of bitterness (Stein, 2011). The primary reason for Saul's mental disorder was God's departure, arising from his bitterness and disobedience

Furthermore, Matthew 14:1-12 details King Herod's beheading of John the Baptist. The passage explains how Herod killed John the Baptist at the request of Herodias's daughter, Salome. The daughter of Herod asked the head of John the Baptist on a platter after consulting her mother about what to ask as a reward for a dance she performed at Herod's birthday celebration. From the Bible passage, it can be seen that Herod had arrested John the Baptist for daring to rebuke him for marrying his brother's (Philip) wife. Herod had plans to kill John the Baptist, but was afraid of the people who acknowledged

him as a prophet. Requesting the head of John the Baptist by Salome was an easy way to satisfy his heart's desire. In this instance, perversion is seen to be the genesis of the mental health disorders of King Herod.

In addition, Hannah experienced mental health challenges. 1 Samuel 1:10-17 gives an account of Hannah's sadness for barrenness. Hannah was praying in her heart. Her lips were moving, but since she did not say the words out loud, Eli thought she was drunk. He said to her, "You have had too much to drink. It is time to put away the wine." Hannah answered, "Sir, I have not drunk wine or beer. I was deeply troubled, and I was telling the LORD about all my problems.

Several Bible passages have shown that King David was afflicted with some mental disorders, such as major depression, fear, anxiety, and minor depression. Some schools of thought believe that major depression was the mental disorder that King David suffered the most. Others seem to agree that anxiety was the height of his disorders. Many scholars have argued that David was plagued by fear and anxiety more than all the characters in Bible history. Thus, fear and anxiety became his regular companions.

Causes and Remedies to Mental Disorder: The Old Testament's Perspective

Biblical narrative suggests causes and cures to mental health disorders. In this regard, two causes have been established. One, disorders come from the departure of God's presence from any individual. This was recorded in 1 Samuel 16:14. When the spirit of God departs from a man, a vacuum is created which must be occupied, and often, an evil spirit takes over, as in the case of King Saul (Forcén & Forcén, 2014). This assertion tallied with Cook's (2020) explanations on demonic possession when he cited the case of the Gerasene Demoniac. More so, disobedience and unforgiveness were the issues that brought about Saul's mental disorder. This statement was strongly supported by Enright & Fitzgibbons (2015)

Another source of mental health is anxiety. This is found in Philippians 4:6-7. The Bible states thus:

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

The above passage reveals anxiety as one of the manifestations of mental disorder. This disorder emerges as a product of yearnings and expectations.

Succinctly, when an individual expects something, the possibility of anxiety is certain, and it can destabilise the mind. The level of anxiety increases when there is an imminent delay in the materialisation of what is expected. It has been argued that anxieties, worries, and fear are open invitations to the evil spirit that destabilises the human body. Based on the foregoing, the panacea for anxiety disorders is thanksgiving, contentment, appreciation, and prayers. To support the statement above, “Expect nothing and you will not be disappointed” becomes an important adage to emulate.

Also, loneliness has been chronicled as a possible root cause of mental disorders (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982). For instance, the Psalms of David portrayed extreme loneliness. During Saul’s reign, David went into hiding because Saul was after his life. That period was characterised by intense loneliness. Within that period, the Bible recorded that David drew strength from the presence of God. To buttress this point, Psalm 34:17 states thus: “The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles”. In Psalm 42:1, David asked a significant question: “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God”. It is pertinent to note from the above that the presence of God eradicates all loneliness.

Furthermore, fear can bring about various manifestations of mental disorders. Perhaps, that is why the Bible admonished, “Fear not for I am with you always”. In other words, the presence of God drives away fear and brings calm. The Bible also asserts that fear is a negative spirit and is capable of igniting an emotional experience in anticipation of some specific pain or danger. Explicitly, 2 Timothy 1:7 “For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind.” Furthermore, Deuteronomy 31:8 states that “He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” Also, Isaiah 43:1 says “Don’t fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine.” Isaiah 41:10 “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, and I will uphold you with my righteous right hand”. There exist several reasons why people succumb to the spirit of fear, such as rejection, ridicule, failure, heartbreak, imprisonment, harm, disease, death, and so forth.

Furthermore, eternal peace is a cure for mental disorders. When peace exists, there is balance in the three-tier aspects of the human being, namely: the body, soul, and spirit. To buttress this point, the end of the above passage, which says “and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”, speaks volumes. The implication of not being thankful and dependent on supernatural peace and guidance seems to be the source of mental health challenges. John 14:27

“Peace is what I leave with you; it is my peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid”.

Conclusion

The Old Testament has provided a strong background for scholars and researchers to interrogate mental health, considering manifestations, causes, effects, and treatment. The paper revealed certain Biblical characters in the Old Testament that manifested mental disorders. For instance, Cain experienced Schizophrenia, which led to the killing of his brother Abel. This was caused by extreme jealousy and bitterness. Also, it was found that Hannah had depressive tendencies as a result of barrenness. Herod was delusional and pervasive, which led to his beheading of John the Baptist. Saul and David had cases of depression, anxiety disorders, and Schizophrenia. The paper revealed that a lack of peace, contentment, jealousy, and the absence of God contributed immensely to mental health disorders in the Old Testament. The presence of God and the promise of God made provisions for peace of mind and god living. A strategy that addressed mental health issues. Thus, it was recommended that individuals and groups learn from the Old Testament and prioritise mental health, recognise its importance for overall well-being, and quality of life. Similarly, policymakers and leaders at all levels should provide and increase funding and resources for mental health services.

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