

Was Ezekiel Mentally Ill?

By Peter Salemi

Some claim that the prophet Ezekiel was mentally ill. If this is the case, his book would have to be rejected from the canon, and also the whole claim of inspiration is called into question.

The Sunday Times (Johannesburg) of December 2nd, 2000 claiming that the prophet Ezekiel had classical symptoms of temporal epilepsy.

The New Scientist, volume 172, #2317, page 20 claims: "Ezekiel had psychiatric problems." According to an article in the New Scientist, Eric Altschuler says that records in the Bible reveal that Ezekiel who lived 2600 years ago showed extreme classic symptoms of temporal lobe epilepsy. Further search revealed that *other* authors had claimed the prophet was psychotic and a victim of sexual abuse! Is this true?

These people look strictly to the Bible to make their diagnosis and *so shall we*, along with Ezekiel *culture* and *background* which these people *don't* do, and to make that kind of diagnosis this *must* be *considered* as B.B. Bagwasi a 30 year medical practitioner says in his article "The Psychoanalysis of the Prophet Ezekiel."

The two major psychotic diseases attributed to the prophet Ezekiel mainly are Depressive Psychosis and Schizophrenia. These are the diseases that meet the popular definition of madness.

Depressive Psychosis

Bagwasi writes about this diagnosis of the prophet Ezekiel. In his article he first describes "Depressive Psychosis" and says, "According to Macleod, the following clinical features are characteristic of Depressive Psychosis: Mood swings ranging from mild dejection to severe depression, insomnia, i.e., sleep disturbances, slowness of thought and indecision, feelings of guilt, unworthiness and self blame, thinking of killing oneself (suicide), adverse effects of the mind on the body -constipation, loss of appetite, loss of weight and physical inactivity.

"It is the *combinations* rather than *single* symptoms that lead to the diagnosis. '*Normal*' people could be happy today and sad the following day; they too can suffer constipation; they may lose their appetite for whatever reason; they may intentionally lose weight (as it is fashionable these days), many a normal person has blamed himself or herself for an unavoidable accident. *The difference is that for the sufferer of Depressive Psychosis, combinations of such symptoms occur with great frequency and severity.* The difference between such a sufferer and the 'normal' person, then, is of *degree*. MacLeod thus warned that a patient with Depressive Psychosis 'can run up vast debts or jeopardize *his* social position drastically by ill-judged, embarrassing or boisterously inappropriate and undesirable behavior'" (article, The Psychoanalysis of the Prophet Ezekiel, p.51, emphasis his and mine). All people go through one of these things one time or another. The difference between a normal person and one with the illness is it is a *combination* of these different ailments together and with greater frequency, and weird behavior.

Schizophrenia

This condition refers to progressive disintegration of personality. Like Depressive Psychosis the patient is unaware of his/her ill health. The common clinical features are:

- (1) Disorder of thinking where the patient relates stories without paying attention to logical sequence,
- (2) The patient may also have ‘flights of ideas’, jumping from one idea to another in a disordered unintelligible fashion,
- (3) Incongruity of emotion where the patient may burst out laughing when told of a fatal road accident and weep at a joke,
- (4) Impulsive actions and utterances where patients do and say things abruptly without considering the consequences of what they do and say,
- (5) Thought insertion and thought broadcasting - patients here claim that someone put thoughts into their minds and she/ he can read their minds,
- (6) Paranoid delusions - patients may believe strongly that they are being persecuted for wrongs they have not committed,
- (7) Passivity feelings - patients believe alien forces are controlling their actions while they themselves are passive,
- (8) Hallucinations - this refers to disorders of sensations: seeing, hearing, smelling and tasting things that are not there, touching and being touched.

Now, “The American Psychiatric Association declares no single symptom is patho-gnomic of schizophrenia; the diagnosis involves the recognition of a *constellation of signs and symptoms* associated with impaired occupational and social functioning” (ibid, p.52, emphasis added).

Again, these can happen to any normal person. Examples are, “Hallucination is also common in non-mental diseases such as those with attendant very high temperatures, for example malaria. Drug abuse and poisoning, trauma and biochemical disorders (such as diabetes mellitus) can also lead to hallucinations. Non-psychotic mental conditions (such as senile dementia) also sometimes involve hallucination. Alcohol intoxication can lead to impulsive actions and utterances without taking into consideration the consequences of these actions and the utterances.” (ibid, p.52).

It’s a combination of these symptoms and its frequency that one can diagnose a person with schizophrenia.

Ezekiel

So what of Ezekiel? Now *we shall go solely by his book* to discover what kind of man Ezekiel was and did he suffer from any illness.

Bagwasi constructs a “scoreboard” of Ezekiel’s symptoms:

Symptoms	
<p><u>DEPRESSIVE PSYCHOSIS</u></p> <p>Mood Swings Insomnia Slowness of thought, indecision Guilt, unworthiness, self-blame Constipation Loss of appetite Loss of weight Retardation of physical activity Implied suicidal tendencies</p>	<p><u>Verses</u></p> <p>3:15</p>

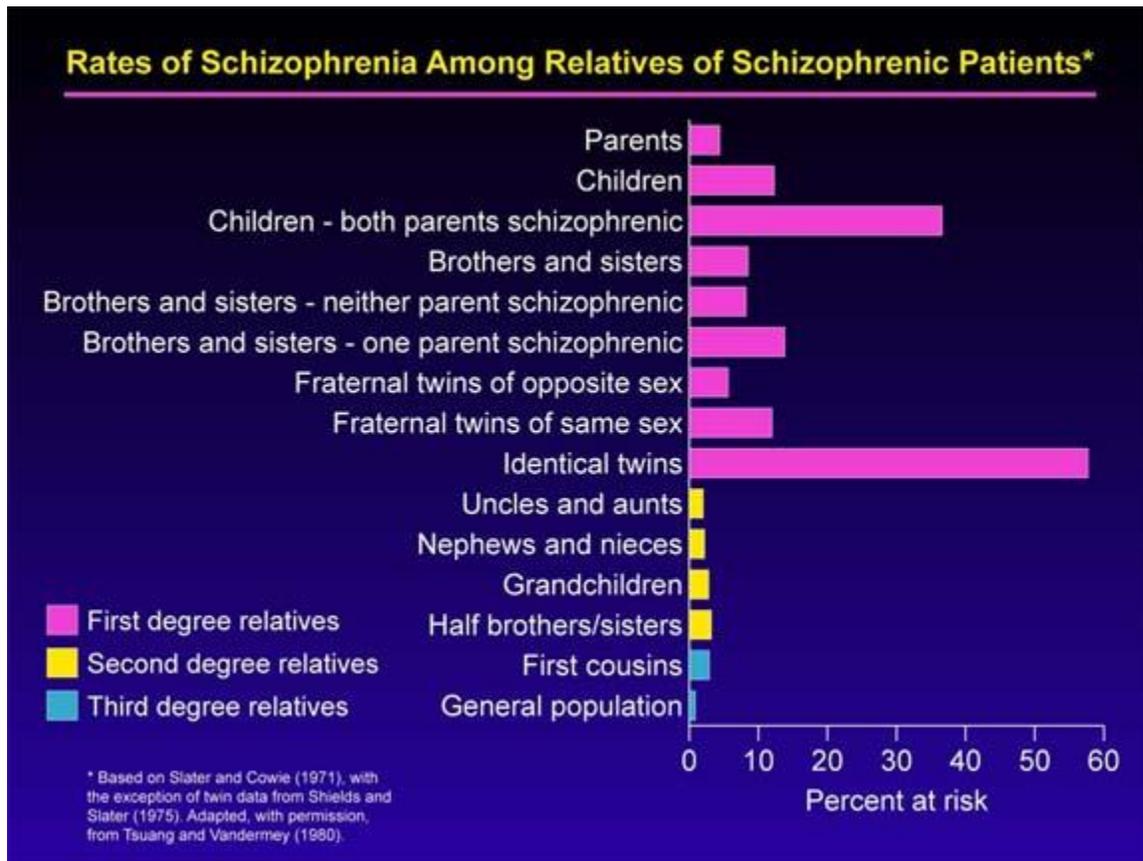
Symptoms	
<p><u>SCHIZOPHRENIA</u></p> <p>Disorder of thinking Incongruity of emotion Impulsive actions and utterances Thought insertion broadcasting Hallucination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual • Auditory • Olfactory • Taste Paranoid delusions Passivity feeling</p>	<p>4:8 read with 4:12</p> <p>1: 1-26 1:3,3:1,3:12; 3:13, 3:16</p> <p>3:3 3:25-26 (threatening) 4: 1-15 2:2,3:12 3:14; 3:24</p>

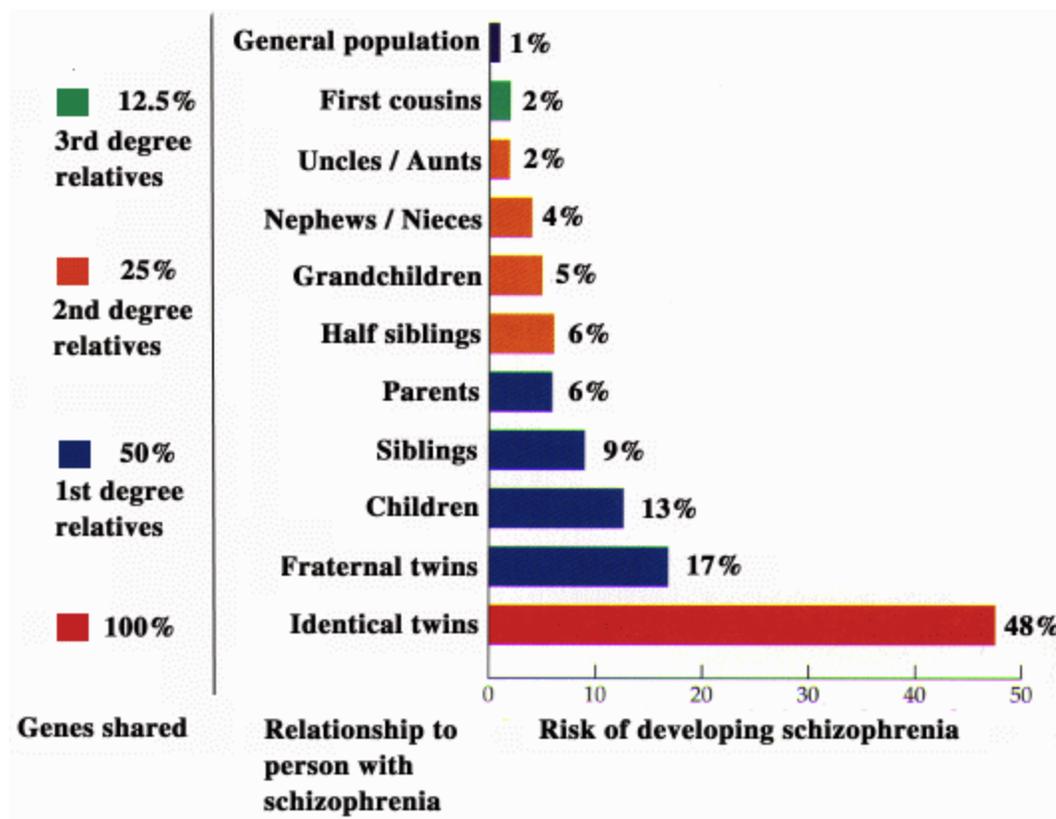
Bagwasi points out, “The *scoreboard rules out the diagnosis of Depressive Psychosis* but points out that Schizophrenia at this stage cannot be ruled out. Ezekiel sees, hears, and tastes things that are outside normal day-to-day experience. He claims he is being persecuted for the sins of other people. His God is also not exactly loveable; in fact, he exhibits the worst of human nature. For instance, he instructs Ezekiel to bake his food with human excreta and vows to send misery where parents will eat their children and children eat their parents (5:10; 6:1-14) Ezekiel claims an alien force has lifted him from the ground (Ezek 3:12) suggesting that he feels himself to be a passive object. Ezekiel also appears to suffer from hallucinations, thought disorders and paranoid delusions. *All of these are strongly suggestive of Schizophrenia*” (ibid, p.53, emphasis added). But is it really?

Well, no! As Bagwasi points out, one must “investigate” the man’s “culture” “occupation” and “family history” to determine a diagnosis as well; something that many of these authors who say Ezekiel was mentally ill did not do!

Bagwasi writes, “It is important to review the occupational and family history of patients... Family history, on the other hand, might reveal whether a patient has a high risk of suffering from genetic diseases inherited from their families, or diseases caused by adverse effects of the environment... The family tends to share the genetic pool and the environment. In the case of Ezekiel we shall examine closely what his occupational and family history can reveal. We shall concentrate on relevant material that might help us reach a diagnosis.” (ibid, p.55).

Schizophrenia.com shows the stats that there is a genetic link when it comes to this illness: “As can be seen from the graph below, *schizophrenia definitely has a very significant genetic component*. Those who have a third degree relative with schizophrenia are twice as likely to develop schizophrenia as those in the general population. Those with a second degree relative have a several-fold higher incidence of schizophrenia than the general population, and first degree relatives have an incidence of schizophrenia an order of magnitude higher than the general populace. Following are two images that summarize the average risks for developing schizophrenia for different groups of people. (The statistics in the two images vary slightly due to inclusion of different study data).





Ezekiel belong to the family of Levities who were priests of Israel, “The word of the LORD came expressly unto *Ezekiel the priest*, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the LORD was there upon him.” (Ezekiel 1:3). Ezekiel was of the Levitical Priesthood of Israel. His book reveals the intricate details of the priest’s duties as one reads in Ezekiel 40-46. This source writes, “And still more than in the case of Zechariah and Jeremiah, *the priestly descent makes itself felt in the case of Ezekiel*. We here already draw attention to his Levitical tendencies, which appear particularly prominent in Ezek 40 through 46 (see under II, 2 below), and to the high-priestly character of his picture of the Messiah (Eze 21:25 f; Eze 45:22; see II, 3 below).” (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, article “Ezekiel” emphasis added).

Now when it comes to the Levitical Priesthood, people with *genetic* defects could not serve in the Tabernacle. God makes this perfectly clear, “And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, “Speak unto Aaron, saying, Whosoever *he be* of thy seed in their generations that hath *any* blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God.

“For whatsoever man *he be* that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose, or any thing superfluous,

“Or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded,

“Or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken;

“No man that hath a blemish of the seed of Aaron the priest shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the LORD made by fire: he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God.” (Lev 21:16-21). As God looks at the whole man, in and out, the mind had to be without

blemish as the *mind is connected to the body* (see James 2:26). The Pulpit commentary says, “*Perfection of the body being typical of perfection of the mind and of the whole man, and symbolical perfection being required of the priest of God, none may be admitted to the priesthood with bodily defects, or excrescences, or grievous blemishes.*” (Emphasis added). So Ezekiel being a Priest had to be in his right mind, and in good physical health without any genetic defects. The outer man *reflected* the inner man.

Ezekiel’s Cultural Background

In Ezekiel’s day and in the Hebrew nation it was not uncommon for a priest to become a prophet, “This combination of the priestly and prophetic offices is not accidental at a time when the priests began to come more and more into the foreground.” (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, article “Ezekiel”).

Ezekiel believed himself to be a prophet, “And he said unto me, Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them.” (Ezekiel 3:4). Prophets were *not* a rare occurrence. This took place throughout the history of the Israelite peoples. “(Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to enquire of God, thus he spake, Come, and let us go to the seer: for *he that is now called* a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer.)” (1 Sam 9:9). This was part of the Israelite culture. *Was Ezekiel doing anything out of the ordinary? No!*

According to J. F. Sawyer, the prophets performed the following tasks: “They were religious and moral teachers. They reminded the people of their covenant obligation to Mosaic Law and they were watchmen and guardians of purity of the Hebrew religion. This is why they remained monotheistic in spite of syncretic influences. *They were very often political advisors of kings. Typically, they have a strong concern for social justice. Their social task led them to defend the poor, the powerless, the voiceless, the marginalized and the oppressed (‘the widow and orphan and the aliens amongst’)*” (J.F.A Sawyer, Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets, emphasis added). Do the deeds of the prophets sound like these people are plagued with madness?

This was the cultural background of Ezekiel. This source comments, “Others see evidence of schizophrenia or catalepsy in his personality. *It is ridiculous in the extreme to attempt amateur psychoanalysis on a person of another culture and age who has been dead for twenty-five hundred years.* One is on safer ground to speak of Ezekiel as ‘a highly developed mystic who was able to utilize channels of communication not normally available to others.’” (An Exegetical Commentary on Ezekiel by James E. Smith, p.9, emphasis added).

Another source writes, “Clinicians assessing the symptoms of schizophrenia in a socio-economic or cultural situation that is *different from their own must take cultural differences into account.* Ideas that may appear to be delusional in one culture (e.g. sorcery and witchcraft) may be commonly held in another. In some cultures visual and auditory hallucinations within a religious content may be a normal part of religious experience (e.g. seeing the Virgin Mary or hearing God’s voice).” (R., Boer, 'Ezekiel's Axle or Anarchism and Ecstasy' in T. Pipin (ed), Violence.Utopia, Kingdom of God, emphasis added).

Bagwasi concludes, “A careful examination of the patient's history will thus reduce the number of possible causes, as will the physical examination... In our preliminary evaluation he seemed to fit the diagnosis of Schizophrenia, because he appeared to have hallucinations, paranoid delusions and passivity feelings. *His occupational history revealed that he is a prophet. This profession has a long history:* Amos and Isaiah, for instance, predated him by 2 to 3 centuries. Both of these prophets also describe visual and auditory experiences of the Lord: Isaiah saw creatures with six wings (*Isaiah 6: 1-13*) (Ezekiel's creatures had only four wings) and Amos saw the Lord standing by a wall (*Amos 7:7*); both Isaiah and Amos enter into a conversation with the Lord (*Isaiah 6:8-13; Amos 7:2-9*). ***Ezekiel is not mad but typical of a prophet of his time, following in the tradition of Isaiah and Amos***... The diagnosis of mental disorder was based on the ***superficial interpretation*** of specific verses such as 3: 1-3; 3: 24-26; 4: 3-8,4: 4-8; and 4: 12-15. These will be discussed from the classical medical point of view.” (Article; The Psychoanalysis of the Prophet Ezekiel, p.62, emphasis his and mine). The cultural background of Ezekiel proves that he was not doing anything out of the ordinary. This was part of his culture at the time.

Diagnosis

The symptoms of schizophrenia are:

1. Delusions
2. Hallucinations
3. Disordered speech
4. Grossly disordered behavior. (quotes from Bagwasi)

Did Ezekiel have delusions? Was Ezekiel in his right mind when God told him to use Human excretion to prepare his food (Ezekiel 4:12-15)? Yes! As noted above he was a “priest” perfect in mind and body. Ezekiel “refused to use human excreta to bake food. This clearly indicates that Ezekiel is sensitive to what is right and what is wrong. He has not lost his sense of propriety and decency. *Even the divine command would not shake him.*

“He would not embarrass himself in public: in other words, he has a sense of himself as a *social being*. He would not embarrass the Israelites: he has consciousness of other social beings and of what they consider appropriate behavior. *All these points indicate that he was rational and that what he is exhibiting may not be the clinical features of mental disorder.* We have no evidence of Ezekiel demonstrating social/occupational dysfunction. In fact, his behavior seems to be in many ways entirely *typical* of and appropriate for the *occupation of prophet.*” (ibid, p.64, emphasis added).

Hallucinations? “Hallucination diagnostic of Schizophrenia involves hearing voices conversing with each other or voices running a commentary on the patient's life. Hallucinations in Ezekiel 1-6 are not of this type and hence *do not meet the criterion.*” (ibid, p.63, emphasis added).

Disordered speech? God told Ezekiel, “And I will make thy tongue cleave to the roof of thy mouth, that thou shalt be dumb, and shalt not be to them a reprover: for they *are* a rebellious house.” (Ezekiel 3:26). “His dumbness would be due to a physical, anatomical disorder and not due to disordered speech of psychosis.” (ibid, p.63).

In fact, the Bible says that the Israelites said that he was a great orator, “And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee *as* my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, *but* their heart goeth after their covetousness.

“And, lo, thou *art* unto them as a very lovely song of one *that hath a pleasant voice*, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not.” (Ezekiel 33:31-32).

This source comments, “The fallacy of suggesting that Ezekiel was in some sense deranged can be easily demonstrated from a *study of his words*. *His thought processes are normal, his ideas are completely comprehensible, his sentences are coherent and the sequence of ideas yield a meaningful continuity...Ezekiel was endowed with high intellectual capacity, clear perception, lively imagination, and eloquent speech...* Ezekiel was a man of intense moral earnestness (chs 22, 23). He was a powerful orator (33:32) and a poet of the first rank (15:1-5; 19:14-21; 21:14-21).” (An Exegetical Commentary on Ezekiel by James E. Smith, p.9, emphasis added).

Grossly disordered behavior? Why did Ezekiel act the way he did? Was it because he was ill? Or was it to demonstrate to Israel what the Lord was going to do to them as many of the prophets of God did in the Hebrew culture at that time?

Ronald Boer who, in his masterpiece “Ezekiel's Axle or Anarchism and Ecstasy” argues that Ezekiel uses *shock therapy to drive his message home*. They would not listen to the message, so God had to demonstrate to them what he was going to do through Ezekiel; a picture is worth a thousand words.

The Pulpit Commentary writes that this was the norm for the prophets of Israel, “*This mode of teaching, though not carried to the same extent, was part of the normal method of a prophet's work*. Zedekiah's horns of iron (1Kings 22:11); Isaiah's walking ‘naked and barefoot’ for three years (Isa 20:2, Isa 20:3); Jeremiah's yokes of wood (Jer 27:2), probably even the latter prophet's journey to the Euphrates (Jer 13:4); and Hosea's marriage with a harlot (Hosea 1-3), were all outward objective facts. We are only disposed to take a different view of Ezekiel's acts because they are more startling and repulsive; *but to adopt a non-natural interpretation on this a priori ground of feeling is not the act of an honest interpreter.*” (Emphasis added). I feel that those who put forth this idea that Ezekiel was mentally ill, are doing just that, not being honest with the interpretation.

Who were the mad prophets?

Israel recognized madness in ancient times and differentiated the true prophets from the “mad” prophets.

Notice what Hosea writes about the false prophets, “The days of visitation are come, the days of recompence are come; Israel shall know *it*: the prophet *is* a fool, the spiritual man *is* mad, for the multitude of thine iniquity, and the great hatred.” (Hosea 9:7). The Israelites regarded the truly mad prophets as the false prophets. Gill's Commentary says, “...they walked after the imagination of their hearts, were the real madmen; who pursued the frenzies and fancies of their own minds, to the deception of themselves and the people, and called these the revelations of

God, and pretended they came from the Spirit of God:” (emphasis added). It wasn’t God that influenced these false prophets. In fact God says, “Thus saith the Lord GOD; Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their *own spirit*, and have seen nothing!” (Ezekiel 13:3). These followed *their own* minds, and were mad, but *not* the true prophets of God.

In fact Hosea says after, “The watchman of Ephraim *was* with my God:” (v.8); showing the difference between a true and false prophet.

When Elisha sent a young prophet to anoint Jehu King over Israel, his companions said to him, “*Is all well? wherefore came this mad fellow to thee?*” (2 Kings 9:11).

Then Jehu said, “Ye know the man, and his communication.” By his habits they knew he was a prophet. Jehu said, “Thus and thus spake he to me, saying, Thus saith the LORD, I have anointed thee king over Israel.” (v.12) When he said this, “Then they hasted, and took every man his garment, and put *it* under him on the top of the stairs, and blew with trumpets, saying, Jehu is king.” (v.13)-thus they no longer labeled the prophet crazy. This indicates that the young prophet looked or behaved in a way that might be construed “crazy.” Once it emerged that his action elevated Jehu - a man who had power over the companions - they realized that the pejorative label of “craziness” might put them at risk. Hence, “craziness” is swiftly reconstructed as “appropriate behavior of a true prophet.”

It was understood that the false prophets were mad in the culture of Israel. In Jeremiah’s day we read, “The LORD hath made thee priest in the stead of Jehoiada the priest, that ye should be officers in the house of the LORD, *for every man that is mad, and maketh himself a prophet, that thou shouldest put him in prison, and in the stocks*” (29:26). Shemaiah the Nehelamite was trying to use this understanding to put Jeremiah in prison.

In Ancient Israel they understood that it was the false prophets that were mad, not the true prophets of God. They often persecuted the prophets because of the messages of doom brought against them, but never were they called “mad.” Their conduct with the people proved that they weren’t. Of Ezekiel it is said, “He certainly was acquainted with the sacred books, institutions and customs of his own people. He also was acquainted with the learning and culture of the world in which he lived. So accurate is his knowledge of Egypt and Tyre that one wonders if perhaps he had traveled to these places in his youth. Ezekiel possessed boundless energy, firm resolution, and amazing self-control (3:15, 24, 26; 24:18). He evidently was a man of deep personal humility as is indicated by the title applied to him some ninety-three times in the book, son of man. This title as used in Ezekiel sets forth man’s finite dependence and lowliness in the presence of God’s infinite power and glory...Ezekiel nonetheless was a warm and sympathetic soul (9:8; 19:1, 14). A deep undertone of pity for the fallen nation of Judah is discernible throughout the third main division in the book. While earlier prophets focus on the people taken collectively, Ezekiel was concerned for individual souls” (An Exegetical Commentary on EZEKIEL by James E. Smith, p.9, emphasis added). This can be applied to many of the other prophets of God as well. Stable in heart and mind with deep concern for God’s people Israel. To help the poor and the deceived, to stop the false worship of Idols and get back to the true worship of God and follow his laws. This is not madness but clear and stable thought and actions.

Conclusion

Was Ezekiel mentally ill? Absolutely not! He was doing what the prophets of Israel did from times past, and continued to do after Ezekiel's day.

Dr. Bagwasi a 30 year medical practitioner says, "Does Ezekiel's behavior meet the criteria for diagnosing major mental disorder such as manic depression or schizophrenia? The review has shown that he *does not meet the criteria of such a diagnosis*. If Ezekiel came to see me in my surgery I would have declared him fit and therefore responsible for his actions." (The Psychoanalysis of the Prophet Ezekiel, p.65, emphasis added).