

# Lycanthropy from Nebuchadnezzar to Modern Times

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The book of Daniel tells the story of King Nebuchadnezzar II, who reigned over the Neo-Babylonian Empire from 605 BCE to 562 BCE. After King Nebuchadnezzar II destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, the prophet Daniel was exiled to serve him in Babylon. When the king dreamed of a strong tree being cut down, he asked Daniel to interpret its meaning. Daniel explained that the tree represented the king's great power, and that due to his arrogance and lack of appreciation of God, the king will be cut down, his power stripped, and his lot will be amongst the animals for "seven periods." He will be banished from civilization and eat grass and dew. The text records that the prophecy came true. After this time ended, he declared that, "my understanding has been returned to me" [1].

The commentaries take a range of approaches to understand this passage. The Midrashim, as is their style, explain that the king literally transformed into an animal [2]. Most other commentaries, however, take a less literal view. Rav Saadia Gaon saw a parallel to the case of King Saul of Israel, who suffered from depression that was described as an "evil spirit." According to this analysis, King Nebuchadnezzar suffered from a much more severe case of depression that caused him to wander away from civilization and to eat grass to survive, like an animal [3]. The Malbim saw a progression of events. Once the king became mentally ill, he damaged all that surrounded him and tried to escape to the outdoors. His servants locked him up in chains. When the royal doctors saw his animalistic ways, they gave him grass to eat in his house. Eventually, they let him go and he ran to the desert to be with the animals [4]. The Ibn Ezra concurred with these explanations, stating that King Nebuchadnezzar thought he was an animal and went to live amongst them. The Ibn Ezra thought this explanation was likely because he heard a reputable report of someone who lost his mind, thought he was a ram, lived on an island amongst rams, and crawled using his arms and legs for many years [5]. Similar stories have been propagating for hundreds of years.

The medical term clinical lycanthropy, defined as the delusion that one has transformed into a non-human animal, dates back to Ancient Greece. The word itself comes from the Greek word, "lycos," (wolf), but has been extended to incorporate a wide range of animal delusions.

The Ancient Greek historian Herotodus described lycanthropy in the 5th century BCE, as did the Roman poet Virgil in the 1st century BCE [6]. By the second century CE, lycanthropy found its way into medical literature through Marcellus of Side. References to this delusion continued to be found in medieval literature, explaining it as a product of the "evil eye" [7]. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the masses believed that lycanthropy was caused by Satan, witches, and even poison, and manifested in seemingly natural diseases. In some cultures, rituals were performed to transform people into animals. The chosen animal is generally one that is feared in the individual's society. An African ritual indicates that the transformation was desired for healing purposes. They believed that an animal cannot suffer from human diseases, so turning a person into an animal would save them. Later, in the Age of Enlightenment, professionals sought scientific explanations to the medical phenomenon, replacing those with the previously believed demonic causes [8].

Dozens of case reports of clinical lycanthropy have been published over the past half a century. Patients ranged in gender, age, location, personal circumstances, diagnosis, and treatment, but all imagined themselves to be animals for some duration of time. The most common opinion amongst investigators seems to be that lycanthropy is a secondary symptom to the diagnosis of a mental disorder, and not a disorder by itself. In an article examining reported case studies from 1966-2002, thirty cases were described. Patients imagined themselves as wolves, dogs, cats, horses, tigers, birds, and more. Most of these patients were suffering from an affective disorder or schizophrenia, though some cases were associated with alcohol or drug consumption. Affected individuals generally lived in isolated rural areas and had this delusion for a short period of time [8].

Over the past thirty years, eight cases of lycanthropy were reported in the area around Babylon, Iraq. The majority diagnosis was severe depressive disorder with psychotic symptoms, and all but one patient imagined changing into a dog (with the exception believing that he was a cow). Most of these patients lived on farms, where they often interacted with dogs, so it is fitting that this was the animal they imagined. All of the patients in this study experienced

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threatening life events before the delusion came about, causing the researchers to believe that there are small populations with a genetic predisposition given certain evolutionary factors. Dangerous circumstances trigger the mind to hone its primitive origins as a coping mechanism. Most of these patients were extremely aggressive and had feelings of guilt, so it is possible that the mind is trying to assuage the guilt, and convince the person that, "I am not the aggressor, and the animal took over my mind" [9].

Guilt, in a religious context or not, seems to play a key role in lycanthropic symptoms. A thirty-two-year-old man was admitted to Kerman Psychiatric Hospital in Kerman, Iran, claiming that due to his sins during his human life, God punished and killed him. He also concluded that he and his wife were dogs, and that his daughters were transformed into sheep. This is the first known case of lycanthropy and Cotard's syndrome together. Cotard's syndrome includes a skewed vision of mortality, where the patient denies his existence, though paradoxically, there is a sense of immortality. Immortality thus plays a role in both conditions, as turning into an animal is seen as a way of escaping danger and death. The patient's history included a sexual relationship with a sheep in his adolescence, and he described guilt about the incident. The patient explained to medical professionals that dogs protect sheep, so his hallucinations seem to indicate a sense of guilt and desire to protect his daughters, stemming from his reported sexual sin [10].

Another case report sees consumption of ecstasy as the trigger for lycanthropy. This was a variant of the "typical" form lycanthropy takes, as he believed that the people around him turned into animals. The twenty-eight year old Iranian man believed his father became a boar and attacked

him, his brother a horse who kicked him, and that his mother had become a donkey and brayed continuously. He also believed that there was a chicken in his head, taking over his body. The individual had no history of psychiatric symptoms and the delusions began after regularly taking ecstasy pills. Researchers found that even occasional consumption of the drug triggered his symptoms. This led them to conclude that the individual had a predisposition which, combined with ecstasy, caused the delusions. His underlying diagnosis was schizophrenia, and tests led his doctors to determine that consumption of ecstasy can not only change symptoms, bringing on the lycanthropy, but that it can also trigger them in an individual who was not yet showing any symptoms [11].

Attributing modern neurological diagnoses to biblical figures lends an additional nuanced insight into the character's life. When Nebuchadnezzar II lost his power, he retreated into the most basic animalistic version of himself. He was overtaken by a severe depression, forcing him to hone his most primitive defense mechanism. The predisposition to this form of delusion brought on by a mental disorder may have already been in his ancestors, or he may have been the first to exhibit it. The gene may have been passed down in Babylonian lineage, causing the overwhelming majority of modern-day case studies of clinical lycanthropy to occur in the very place Nebuchadnezzar II ruled 2000 years earlier.

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## References

- [1] Book of Daniel, 4:1-34
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