VIEWS OF MENTAL ILLNESS AMONG GREEKS, ROMANS, AND CHRISTIANS

Robert M. Grant

The present essay, in a volume dedicated to David E. Aune, who has explored early Christian ecstatic experience and magic in the context of the Greco-Roman world,1 addresses a related phenomenon—mental illness and psychotherapy.2 What were ancient understandings of mental illness? How were various types of psychological maladies treated? Were Christians any or much different from their contemporaries in this regard? We begin with a survey and anthology of passages from Greco-Roman authors, and then see how the New Testament and early Christian writings fit into their world in this regard.

1. Physicians and Mental Illness

1.1. Hippocrates

The classical medical writers regularly discuss mental illnesses, beginning perhaps as early as the fourth century B.C.E. with the treatise of Hippocrates On the Sacred Disease—a significant title because the author actually rejects the concept of a ‘sacred disease’ in reference to epilepsy and other seizures. It is “not more divine or more sacred than other diseases, but has a natural cause.” The author analyzes the misappropriation historically.

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2 I distinguish the latter from psychology and psychiatry, both of which are more theoretical than practical. Cf. W. V. Harris, Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 366–67: “There never was in antiquity any psychotherapy in the Freudian or post-Freudian sense. . . .”
Those who first attributed a sacred character to this malady were like the magicians, charlatans, and quacks of our own day, men who claim great piety and superior knowledge. Being at a loss, and having no treatment that would help, they concealed and sheltered themselves behind superstition and called this illness sacred, so that their own utter ignorance might not be manifest.3

And it is cured like other diseases. Therefore “whoever knows how to cause moist or dry, hot or cold, in men by regimen, can cure this disease also, if he distinguishes the seasons for useful treatment, without having recourse to purifications and magic.”4 So the treatise ends. It was clearly intended to differentiate medicine from magic, though not necessarily from conventional religion.5 The Roman medical author Celsus claimed that Hippocrates, though a pupil of the philosopher Democritus, was the first to differentiate medicine from philosophy.6 In the fourth century the philosopher Plato could associate the “false opinions” of those who were either mentally disturbed or dreaming. Madmen, he noted, sometimes supposed that they were gods, while in sleep others thought they were birds and flew as if on wings.7 Plato offers no cure for the aberrations. Similarly, as Sorabji points out, the Stoics “could not deal with what we call mental illness.”

1.2. Asclepiades

The famous physician Asclepiades came from Bithynia to Rome in the first century B.C.E. According to Pliny, he was a charlatan who had taken up medicine after rhetoric.9 In fact Asclepiades, whose pupils founded the Methodical school of medicine, was “a pioneer in the humane treatment of mental disorders, [who] had insane persons freed from confinement in the dark10 and treated them by using

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4 Ibid. 21, pp. 182–83.
5 Ibid. 4, pp. 144–51.
6 Celsus, On Medicine, Forward 8.
7 Plato, Theaetetus 158B.
9 Pliny, Natural History 26.12–20; but his account is confused and false; “clearly due to confusion with the rhetor of the same name from Myrlea,” F. Kudlien in KP 1 (1964): 117, 36–49.
10 Celsus 3.18.5.