

- SANVERIM - HYPNOSIS IN THE BIBLE

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The book from which I learned the history and practice of hypnosis treated it as a rather recent discovery, crediting F. A. Mesmer (1734-1815) with inventing hypnosis or "animal magnetism" as he called it.⁽¹⁾ But it is very improbable that this natural phenomenon could have evaded the ancients and remained unknown through all the centuries and millennia of recorded history.⁽²⁾ Its application is too simple relative to the mystery of the phenomenon. Indeed, many of the practices of the Hindu yogis that go back to ancient times belong to the category of autohypnosis.

In deep hypnosis it is possible to provoke - by a mere verbal order catalepsy, hysteria-like paralysis, and illusions. An order can be given so that a person will be unable to lift his arms; and, in the case of a person subjected to an even deeper hypnotic state, he will not be able to see or, if led to some destination, he can be made to believe that he is in different surroundings.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, I found two instances where supposed "miracles" can be recognized as inflicted hypnotic states, consisting of paralysis and somnambulistic illusions. In both of these stories the expression *hikku b'sanverim* - "he (or they) smote with sanverim" - is used to describe the phenomenon.

The first example is found in *Genesis* (19:11), in the narrative of the events shortly preceding the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot had in his house, as guests, two of the Lord's messengers or *malakhim* - a word usually translated as "angels"; but they are also called "men" in the body of the story. When the depraved people of Sodom demanded the delivery of the guests for their sexual debauchery and tried to force their way inside, Lot vainly negotiated with the people at the door. The messengers opened the door, stretched out their arms, brought Lot inside, and smote the assailants at the door with *sanverim*. Those smitten with *sanverim* groped for the door, unable to find it. The next morning Lot, with his family, hastily left the city and fled to Zoar. Then followed the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The second case where the word *sanverim* is used in the Scriptures is in the Book of Kings (II, 6:18). King Ben-Hadad of Damascus conspired to kill the king of Samaria in an ambush, hiding his assassins near a road where the king was to pass. But the king of Samaria was warned repeatedly by the seer Elisha, and each time would select a different route and thus escape the peril. The king of Damascus spoke to his captains and expressed the belief that somebody among them had disclosed their plans to the king of Samaria. They answered him by saying that the seer in Samaria knows what he, King Ben-Hadad, says in his bedroom; in other words, that the king of Samaria is warned by his seer, who is endowed with the gift of telepathy. On hearing this, the king of Damascus sent a detachment to fetch the seer. They found him in the village of Dothan. They were under orders to bring him to Damascus; but the seer smote them with *sanverim* and commanded them to follow him, saying that he would lead them to the man they were seeking. He led them to Samaria. There he opened their sight by ordering them to see again, and they saw; "and behold, they were in the midst of Samaria", the king's city. Then Elisha had bread and water set

before them and sent them back to Damascus.

The usual translation of the word *sanverim* is "blindness". Yet in these instances if blindness was meant, the regular word for blindness, *ivaron* should have been used. *Iver* signifies a blind person in many Biblical texts. The Old Testament also recounts the ways a person may become blind - slowly as in the case of the patriarch Isaac, or suddenly, as in the case of King Zedekiah, blinded by Nebuchadnezzar. The translation of *sanverim* as blindness is given on the basis of the fact that in both instances, the effect was a transient inability to see.⁽³⁾ But in the story of Lot we have a case of blindness obviously induced by hysteria, affecting simultaneously more than one person. In the story of Elisha, it is even more obvious that the term refers to hypnotic blindness or illusion. It was inflicted by verbal means, and it was also relieved by verbal means. The soldiers of Ben-Hadad were made to travel to Samaria while believing that they were going to a different destination. This deception could have been accomplished by a qualified hypnotist and could be performed with a select group of people. Their being sent to remove the seer, whose fame had reached foreign countries, made the men of the detachment well prepared (conditioned) for this feat.

References

1. Its first use is often placed in 1840 when a surgeon working in India applied it for its anesthetic effect before there was any other method of painless surgery. Ether was introduced for narcosis by C. W. Long in 1842 and chloroform by J. Y. Simpson in 1847. Even today there are physicians who apply hypnosis in childbirth.
 2. [See, for example, the remarks on hypnosis in the *Encyclopedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Vol. 9 (1974, 15th ed.), p. 134. The creation of the term "hypnosis" is attributed to James Braid, a Scottish surgeon, in the 1840s. - *LMG*]
 3. The word *sanverim* is probably not of Hebrew origin; there is no word in Hebrew that is built on the same root. [A Syriac commentary on *Genesis* interprets the word *sanverim* as "phantasies". Cf. Abraham Levene, *The Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis* (London, 1951), p. 92 - *JNS*; also see E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible, N. Y., 1964), pp. 139-140. Speiser states that *sanverim* is "a loanword based on Akkadian". - *LMG*]
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