

Bible and the brain: How did ancient Israelites 'hear' God?

James Kugel has spent his entire scholarly career studying the Bible, but some very basic questions about it still obsess him. What was it about the minds of ancient Israelites that allowed them to hear and see God directly—or at least, to believe that they did? Were the biblical prophets literally hearing voices and seeing visions, understanding themselves to be transmitting God's own exact words? If so, why did such direct encounters with God become rarer over time?

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Kugel uses biblical research to show that ancient people had a "sense of self" that was fundamentally different from the one modern Westerners have—and that this enabled them to experience and interpret prophecy differently than we do. Then he uses scientific research to show that we shouldn't assume their view was wrong. If anything, our modern Western notion of the bounded, individual self is the anomaly. [...] Kugel cites several studies showing that even now, many healthy people hear voices—as much as 15 percent of the general population.

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"These results," Kugel concludes, "would suggest that a society's 'givens' have a lot to do with how voice hearing is interpreted"—cultural conditioning impacts whether a phenomenon like prophecy will be celebrated or pathologized.

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion, and analysis. Read full, original post: [Reading the Bible Through Neuroscience](#)