

Thinking about the Neuroscience of Religious Experience: Daniel's Interpretation of Scripture

This study takes as its focus Patrick McNamara's chapter, "Self-Transformation as a Key Function of Performance of Religious Practices" in his book, *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience*. According to McNamara, a crucial part of the religious experience is the decentering process which is a loss of agency that ultimately can result in the transformation of the religious practitioner toward some 'ideal self' (153-54). The general cognitive processes related to decentering and transformation resemble "the experience of problem solving and sudden insight and creativity concerning the solution to the problem after a period of impasse" (18); the individual begins with intense concentration, with no results, discouraged, the individual abandons the project. From this sensation of defeat (loss of agency), the individual experiences a surge of creativity and resolves the problem (18). This paper will explore the way in which practices of mourning found in penitential prayers play a key role in the cognitive and affective processes associated with transformation that ultimately produce a more complex Executive Self who, in this case, is capable of scripture interpretation. This study will examine how the ritual acts of mourning (fasting, wearing sackcloth and ashes) performed by Daniel in the penitential prayer found in Dan 9 can generate vivid sensations of grief that can then be understood to play an instrumental role in Daniel's experience of scripture interpretation. Some studies of grief and the post-traumatic growth that sometimes follows grief have noted the role of rumination in grieving individuals, noting that there is a correlation between this process of rumination and the experience of transformation (Bray 2013). The cognitive process of ruminating can have both an intrusive and intentional frequency. According to Martin and Tesser (1996), rumination "refers to several varieties of recurrent [event related] thinking, including making sense, problem solving, reminiscence, and anticipation." In Dan 9:2, Daniel studies Jeremiah's prophecy that the exile will go on for seventy years, then he performs mourning practices and prays a penitential prayer in which he confesses sins and guilt (9:4-19)—these are the acts that create a loss of agency in Daniel. After doing this, Daniel gains access to a new interpretation of Jeremiah's prophecy. This paper proposes that the rites of mourning and confession of sins are instrumental in generating the experience of grieving which, in turn, initiates a loss of agency; these cognitive and religious experiences of transformation that follow may be what allows Daniel to access a new understanding of Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years. The dynamic process of prayer and scripture interpretation in Daniel 9 can be said to fit the cognitive processes of decentering and transformation that is