


Pathology and pain, disease and disability: The burdens of the body in the Book of Job peering through a psychoanalytic prism

**Author:**Pieter van der Zwan¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Religion Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Pieter van der Zwan,
pvdz1961@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 03 Feb. 2022

Accepted: 15 Mar. 2022

Published: 26 July 2022

How to cite this article

Van der Zwan, P., 2022, 'Pathology and pain, disease and disability: The burdens of the body in the Book of Job peering through a psychoanalytic prism', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(4), a7409. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7409>

Copyright:

© 2022. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Not only trauma, mourning and disease, but also disability has been recognised in the Book of Job in which the body plays an exceptional role. The protagonist is suffering physically, psychologically and spiritually. Although the word, *חלה* [be sick, ill], never occurs in the book, his body is portrayed negatively being afflicted by some unknown illness, which would probably exclude him from the community described in Leviticus 13–14. While *קָרָא* [be silent] occurs several times in the book, it never has the alternative meaning of deaf. Yet, his explicit empathy and sacrificial charity *לְעִוֵּר* [for the blind] and *לְפֶסֶח* [for the lame] in 29:15 resonate with his own plight and undermine the possible discriminatory restrictions of like disabled in Leviticus 21:18. In this way, the Book of Job has a transgressive and yet liberating subtext, subverting the idealised body of his status quo. This subtle and veiled critique by the protagonist and therefore the book can be interpreted from a psychoanalytic perspective on physical disability and illness, where the symptoms and alleged imperfections of the body quietly cry out against social and cultural injustice of which they are the projections and mirrors when the context has silenced a concern for the body because of a lack of compassion as it is in the situation of Job.

Contribution: The intersection and cross-fertilisation of Biblical Studies, Disability Studies and psychoanalytic theory as interdisciplinary approach widens the horizons and deepens the insight of all three research fields, hopefully for the benefit of those who suffer from their bodies, their psyches and their societies.

Keywords: Book of Job; disability; illness; psychoanalytic; social construct.

Introduction

The passion for the theme of this study has been born from the prominence of the body in the postmodern context and the questionable political-correctness of often euphemistic, pretentious, inclusive measures for 'outsiders' from a hidden but elusive, ideal.

Although different attitudes exist towards illness on the one hand and physical disability on the other, both kinds of bodies are somehow considered 'bad', unwanted or at least nonideal. It is for this reason that body image has become such an important research and treatment theme in psychology, sociology and philosophy, to mention but a few of the humanities, which have surged in this interesting field since the eighties of the previous century. Illness (pathology), impairment (bodily functional deficit) and disability (social limitation) partially overlap (Raphael 2004:400, 401). So, for instance, is chronic disease an illness impairing optimal functioning, which also disables. This might be the case with Job, whose life seems to have come to a standstill on several levels (cf. Raphael 2008:82).

Much has been written about the body in the Book of Job, some of which have focussed on disability, while others have been psychological studies. An interdisciplinary, psychoanalytical approach to bodily suffering has, however, been neglected and could show that the disability is never limited to the body only. It is this outstanding gap in research insight, which this study wishes to bridge. Even in Raphael's (2008:52) whole book where she considers Genesis and the Book of Job as containing the best narratives about disability in the Hebrew Bible, she mentions the word, 'psychological' only once.

After exploring the broken body in the Book of Job over against the ideal in the book and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, a brief survey of psychoanalytic insights about disability and disease will be

presented before these two lenses will be converged, thus zooming in onto a psychoanalytical understanding of bodily suffering in the Book of Job.

Translations are from the Jewish Publication Society of America Version of 1917 (Mamre 2016), but the English has been modernised by the author.

The battered and broken body in the Book of Job

One may question first whether Job is disabled or ill, and secondly whether 'disability' is not an anachronism. Raphael (2004:401) responded that Job's emotional and social isolation because of his illness renders him disabled. In addition, the insistent misreading of Job as patient because of James 5:11 is the blind or stubborn distortion of a text, which is actually about a protagonist's bodily, psychic and social suffering (Raphael 2004:402).

The body narrative in the Book of Job is framed by blessings in 1:10 and 1:21 in the first chapter and 42:12 in the last. Both the very first and last of these are from God, but the ironic 'blessings' meant as curses in 1:5.11 and 2:5.9 subvert this divine containment by their potential challenge and provocations.

Although the word, חלה [be sick, ill], never occurs in the book, עני in 30:27 could mean 'illness' within the context of somatic language. Greenstein (2017:39,41) rightly recognises two metaphors for illness in the Hebrew Bible: personalised, external attacks such as by curses, soldiers or predators on the one hand and internal disintegration of the healthy wholeness of the body on the other, as the two main models of malady in the ancient Semitic world. The first image may be a projection of sadism onto a perceived perpetrator and the second may reflect a negative self-subversion¹ of the body once the first image has been internalised. This idealisation of the perpetrator is also found with Eliphaz in 5:18 where God is both the aggressor and rescuer. *Like* a curse, the disease as inexplicable mystery to Job, echoes Deuteronomy 28 (*vide infra*) where it *is*, in fact, a curse. In both these instances, the disease is demonised that the narrator does literally in the prologue as well although in the epilogue *God* is said to have brought the evil upon Job according to 42:11. Interestingly, Job seems to avoid mentioning God, for instance, in 16:12–14 explicitly as agent behind his suffering.

The Book of Job counts as one among those in the Hebrew Bible where the body plays a significant role and where the body is mentioned more than most other biblical books. Among the approximately 250 body parts mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, more than 70 occur in the Book of Job, not all – although most – referring to Job as character but some also to his interlocutors including God, other people and animals, of which the two in the last few chapters of the book, the behemoth and the leviathan, take up a special position. In fact, no animal in the Hebrew Bible has been described in a

1. Like a cancer or an autoimmune disease.

longer text than that of chapters 40–41 and then most of it about the leviathan's body. This description sounds very different from the treatment the leviathan receives in Isaiah 27:1 and in Psalm 74:13–14, although according to Psalm 104:26 God has created it to play in the sea.

Hyun (2022:1) argues that three different bodies of Job are presented in the book: his perfect body in the prologue, his injured body in the poems and an implied disabled body in the epilogue caused by different temporal and spatial language or chronotopes, according to Bakhtinian thinking. From this alleged disabled body in the epilogue it seems that God has not restored Job's body. Hyun's (2022:5) claimed, 'Job's injuries and pains were caused by being at war with God and his friends. This claim might not necessarily be true as there is no evidence in the text for this. It could just as well have been that the war was a result, yes, even a symptom, of his bodily condition. Furthermore, there is no textual evidence that Job is left disabled in the epilogue either. Hyun may be going too far with that bordering on eisegesis, just to comply with a theory of literary interpretation. That Job might still be scarred by his bodily ordeals or 'may carry a record of the war in his body' (Hyun 2022:5) does not mean that he is disabled. In fact, if it is true that golden rings were worn by men in their ears, as Hyun (2022:6) asserted, then 42:11 rather suggests a renewed body, which is celebrated by Job's close ones.

Job breaks down psychically and spiritually not after the three losses of his 'extended' body, his children, servants and material possessions narrated in the first chapter, but after his body has been battered by the Satan-bully in the second chapter.

Job's body is not only ill but ugly according to 30:30 where his skin is described as black and falling apart, and stinking to the effect that his wife complains about it as in 19:17, probably reminding her of death and of a decomposing corpse.

Job's illness seems to be primarily affecting his skin, even when other symptoms have also been mentioned in a scattered way across the text: 6:10.12; 9:17; 9:28; 16:6.8; 17:7; 19:27; 30:17a; 33:21 and 34:6, for instance, of which some may be metaphors or indications of psychosomatic suffering. One needs to issue a caveat here that metaphors are not that easily identified in ancient texts and, vice versa, that some somatic expressions could be literally meant. Southwood (2020:170,179), for instance, regards somatic language as corporeal *metaphors* in biblical laments as social critique and crisis settings because they enhance the emotional appeal. Clines (2006:1009) on the other hand tended to emphasise the literal meaning of corporeal language.

It is not clear if Job suffers from pain, because in 16:6 נִצְּבִי [my pain] could also refer to his emotional suffering as it does in 2:13 and 14:22. If Elihu hints at Job in 33:19, then the bodily sense is, in fact, recognised by him. Otherwise the root of this noun is used only by Eliphaz in 5:18 to remind Job that God

is the One who not only causes pain but also heals, resonating with Exodus 4:11. To this Job could agree as he does not regard his interlocutors as capable physicians according to 13:4 and so turn the tables in respect of guilt, which has been projected unto him by them. The mutual blame game to make meaning of the misery might mirror the same relations in other cultures. This attribution of causes is part of what Kleinman (1988:*passim*) and Jurecic (2012:*passim*) refer to as narratives of illness.

Yet, it is noteworthy that Job's bodily suffering is never explicitly and probably never implicitly recognised by his human interlocutors. No diagnosis is stated anywhere, unless it is supposed to be clear from the symptomology described in 2:7 as boils, in 2:8 as itching skin, in 7:5 as open wounds and in 30:30 as black, possibly burning and flaky skin. In the unlikely event where it has been implicitly recognised its causality would have been attributed to evil, not in the sense of demons but in the sense of sin as chaos (e.g. cf. 18:4). In postmodern times such a malicious attribution would be veiled by suggesting that a patient has made it all up, when no physiological aetiology can be found. Psychosomatic illness is then often used as a euphemism for inauthenticity. This adds social and emotional suffering to the physical, with a vicious circle, escalating deeper and deeper into an abyss of helplessness and hopelessness.

Job's skin disease has not been identified by current medical scholars either (Habel 1985:95–96) and even if it is recognised and diagnosed as *צָרַעַת* [wrongly translated as 'leprosy'] in Leviticus 13–14 according to Heckl (2010:348), for instance, the symptoms are then not in agreement with those mentioned in 7:5b, 19:26 and 30:30. This has opened the case to the possibility of a psychosomatic illness, which Kwon (2020:*passim*) has explored. Instead of reducing the language of bodily suffering to metaphors for psychological illness (e.g. Greenstein 2007, 2013, 2017) or emotional states (Schellenberg 2016:111), even when this might sometimes be the case, such as in 16:12–16, somatisation as inclusive of both body and psyche has credibility, precisely because the medical diagnosis seems so elusive. Bodily dysfunction is expressed in 'idiosyncratic' vocabulary in the Book of Job and not expressed to fit Western, modern, medical categories according to Southwood (2020:164).

With skin diseases, there is not only the obvious external presentation of a bad body but also the often unjustified fear by others of contamination and contagion, and so skin diseases have been found to be the most misinterpreted and socially discriminated against (Koo & Yeung 2002:333, 335).

Whatever the diagnosis, there is a constant background of possible death for Job, and in 34:6, it seems that Job experiences *אִנּוּשׁ הָצִי* (my illness as my [final] arrow or wound). In addition, Job feels the *רִמָּה* [worms, a collective noun] as if they are crawling beneath his skin in 7:5 as eating away at his sense of wholeness and already feels his nakedness (cf. 26:6), adumbrated in 1:21 already before his disease, being 'clothed'

by dust, displacing his skin as a metaphorical garment as a hint to death or at least fragility. The worm signifies death on a psychic level as described by Connor (2004):

[T]he impulse to the neurotic excoriation, and the desire to cleanse oneself of sebaceous material and other visible deposits in the skin [...] mutates, in the obsessives and psychotics described by Freud and Bion, into a horrified, but lingering libidinous identification with the worms that occupy the pores of the skin. (p. 244)

This experience of losing his sense of skin unity suggests in some way that Job is fragmenting as a first step of the disintegration of death. As a result of losing weight as Job feels he is being devoured the worms (7:5) and 'moths' (13:28), which personify death, he might imagine losing his feeling of solid wholeness and might be anxious of breaking apart and so is desperately hanging on to his skin in 19:20 even when it is his skeleton at the centre and not his skin at the periphery, which holds him together. In addition, the word, *צֶלְמָוֶת* [shadow of death], occurs several times in the book in 3:5, 10:21, 10:22, 12:22, 16:16, 24:17a, 24:17b, 28:3, 34:22 and 38:17. Even Elihu mirrors these morbid experiences of Job in 33:21–22: *יָקַל בְּשָׂרוֹ מֵרֹאֵי וּשְׂפִי (וְשֵׁפֶ) עֲצָמָיו לֹא רָאוּ* [His flesh is consumed away, that it cannot be seen, and his bones corrode to unsightliness] *וַתִּקְרַב לְשַׁחַת נַפְשׁוֹ וַחַיָּתוֹ לְמִמְתֵּיִם* [Yes, his soul draws near unto the pit, and his life to the destroyers].

Heckl (e.g. 2010:264n192) suggested that his skin disease is a pointer towards death, but this does not need to be the case. In fact, God questions Job's assumed familiarity with death in 38:17: *הֲנִגְלוּ לְךָ שַׁעֲרֵי-מָוֶת וְשַׁעֲרֵי צֶלְמָוֶת תִּרְאֶה* [Have the gates of death been revealed unto you? Or have you seen the gates of the shadow of death?]. However, God in an understanding way meets the typical association of illness with death as exaggerated 'catastrophising' (*vide infra*). Even if his disease is not terminal, it seems to be at least chronic as it is incurable: no bodily healing is reported in the last chapter where otherwise his restoration and compensations are listed. If he suffers from the same skin disease as in Deuteronomy 28:35, he would likewise not have been healed.

Job's body is a broken body, which often fails because of its weakness. In 11:20 *תִּכְלֶינָהּ*, in 17:5 *תִּכְלֶנָּה*, in 17:7 *וַתִּכְבֶּה* [is dimmed] and in 31:16 *אֶכְלָהּ*, the verb, *כלה*, occurs in all cases except the third, and in all cases means 'fail', with a causative sense in the last instance.

Likewise, various psychological diagnoses have also been risked. These range from depression (De Villiers 2004:*passim*; Kapusta & Frank 1977:*passim*) to obsessive-compulsive disorder (Kahn & Solomon 1975:56–57) to paranoia (Kahn & Solomon 1975:54) to psychosis (Glasby 2017:34).

The recipient of the text has to cope with a number of lacunae and fill in the missing links. One doesn't know if Job's disease rendered him infertile or whether he was indeed separated from his wife as from others, as Leviticus 13–14 excludes someone with *צָרַעַת* from the camp, if not from the community.

That is perhaps why 42:10 phrases his restoration as a release from prison: וַיְהִי־לֹו שְׁבַת־אֶת־שְׁבִיּוֹתָאֵיִב [the Lord returned Job from captivity], a phrase otherwise used only for a nation besieged and trapped in its own country, according to Hyun (2022:5). Whether the ill and disabled are institutionalised in hospital as Michel Foucault (1963:*passim*) recognised or are socially stigmatised, they are psychically imprisoned.

According to Leviticus 13–14, only the priest builds the bridge between the insiders and the outsiders and serves eventually to reinstate the afflicted one back into ‘normal’ life. No such priest is mentioned in the Book of Job although sacrifice is at play in 42:8–9, reminding one of the reparatory rites in Leviticus 14. Furthermore, despite the detailed list of Job’s compensations in 42:10–16, the text nowhere reports the recuperation from his illness. Yet, one wonders whether it improved at least to the extent that his wife could tolerate or even enjoy his body to bear 10 children again, according to the last chapter.

It is ironic that his offspring, at least in respect of his daughters, turns out to be the most beautiful in the country. All three have names that remind of sensual ideals (Clines 2011:1238), just as their bodies are also idealised. In fact, it might be Job is now more open to the ideal body, which might have oppressed him earlier on, especially when he nostalgically remembered his former ideal body or felt even religiously obliged to have such a body. It is to this ideal body in the Hebrew Bible that attention should now be shifted.

The ideal body in the Hebrew Bible

Job marvels at the body into which God fashioned him from liquid to solid substance in 10:10, the inverse happening during his illness when Job pours out his נַפֶּשׁ [life-force] in 30:16, for instance. Perhaps his perfection praised in the first verse of the book included his body as well (cf. also Greenstein 2013:48–49). Closer to the end of the book God portrays the body of the behemoth in 40:18 and that of the leviathan² in 41:16 as ideals opposed to the fragility of Jobs in 6:12.

Usually men are complimented with beauty in the Hebrew Bible to further explain their blessing and the charismatic influence they have on their people. So, Saul (1 Sm 9:2), David (1 Sm 16:12; 17:42) and Absalom (2 Sm 14:25) are, for instance, praised for being handsome. Women, such as Sarah, desired by Pharaoh (Gn 12:11.14–15) and Dina, raped by Shechem probably because of her sexual appeal (Gn 34:3.4.8), are implicitly hinted at as beautiful but also suggesting the trouble this can cause. This might be because of some kind of anxiety and subsequent modesty about women’s sexual appeal. Yet, other women are openly described as beautiful: Rebecca in Genesis 24:16 and 26:7, Rachel in Genesis 29:17, Abigail in 1 Samuel 25:3 and Esther in Esther 1:11. If Job 42:15 is translated to mean that no women have ever been found to be as beautiful as Job’s three daughters, then 42:14–15 comes as a record announcement, as this would mean that they are

2.Which Newsom (2003:250, 251) even identifies with God.

more beautiful than all the other (previous) women in the country or even world. Alternatively, it is possible that Job’s eyes as that of a loving father have been opened to the feminine beauty of his daughters, being identical to those in chapter 1, but then not ‘seen’ by him. This possibility is reinforced by the fact that God gives Job twice as much as he had before, according to 42:10, but does not increase the number of his former children. This raises the questions whether his children have really died in 1:19. That still leaves the other question why no servants are mentioned among his compensations in 42:11–13. It is possible that verse 13 could be interpreted as being outside this list of compensations and only reminding the recipient that וַיְהִי־לֹו שְׁבַע־בָּנִים וְשְׁלֹשׁ בָּנוֹת [he also had seven sons and three daughters].

This is not the first time that bodies are presented as idealised in the Book of Job. Even before the two mythical animals are staged as models in 40: 15–41:26 even when their descriptions do not portray them as really beautiful, Job’s own body is remembered by him as the corrective for the disabled in 29:15 where he used to be eyes לְעִוְרִי [for the blind] and feet לְפֶסֶחַ [for the lame].

These two disabilities are two explicit categories among those 12 listed for human beings in Leviticus 21:17–21 (e.g. cf. 2 Sm 5:6, 8 referring to territorial culture, the implied scorn of the lame in Proverbs 26:7 and the figurative sense as pejorative for dullness as in Isaiah 42:18, 19 and 59:10). People with such disabilities and even temporary bodily malfunctions are here in Leviticus excluded from bringing sacrifices and so being near to God. Even when skin abnormalities are also among these 12 categories, two earlier chapters, 13–14, have already been dealing with it separately and then to the extent that they also make for social in addition to religious separation. This ideology pervades, in fact, the whole Book of Leviticus as idealism and is justified under the rubric of holiness as a kind of separation and then not only pertaining to human beings but also to sacrificial animals (cf. also Dt 15:21, 17:1). That the deaf³ and the blind are to be protected in Leviticus 19:14 and the blind not to be led astray according to Deuteronomy 27:18, however, does not constitute a contradiction to this, but boils down to a condescending, patronising attitude. Significantly, ugliness is not explicitly among these categories but may be implied. Against this background Job’s ‘bad’ body struggles to reach God.

Raphael (2004:*passim* but specifically 404–409, 415–421) notices that references to chaotic and marginalised monsters⁴ in the dialogues, in 3:8, 7:12 and 26:12–13 (the last chapter of the original book, according to some scholars), all of these uttered by Job, are virtually framing his description of the attacks on his body such as in 16:8–16 and 17:7–17. He

3.It may be significant that deafness or dumbness are never mentioned in the Book of Job where explicit empathy and assistance is expressed for other disabilities. The questions arise if these two impairments are not regarded as a disability or even subtly – unconsciously – seen as the ideal state or if the deaf and dumb are simply not ‘heard’ (in the sense of noticed) by Job who is accused of hardly hearing his interlocutors. The is silence about the deaf (both חָרָשׁ in Hebrew) and muteness about the dumb.

4.They are beyond animals, so the ‘hippo-croc hypothesis’ for the behemoth and leviathan is not accepted, in agreement with Raphael (2004:412n22).

complains about God wrongfully identifying him with these presumably threatening enemies and challenges his opponents to crush him like a monster. Their words are dismembering him, in fact, according to 19:2. In the end, God, however, rehabilitates these monsters as wonders of and central to creation, yet outside of human society that is now shown as peripheral. They survive every attack on them (*vide infra*). Raphael (2004:414) draws particular attention to the similarities in vocabulary for describing the bodies of Job and the behemoth, even when they are opposed, apparently making Job even less than this monster.

What Raphael does not mention is that cursing accompanies the first instance where it, in fact, occurs three times in that chapter 3 using three different Hebrew roots, נקב, קלל, and ארר, different from the word used in the first two chapters. In chapter 7, in verse 6, קלל also appears, but is from a homophonous root and, although meaning 'to be swift', could unconsciously conjure up the other root meaning 'curse' at the same time. At least in chapter 3, the monster mentioned in verse 8 is thus mentioned in the context of curses, a word that occurs twice in the same verse. It is to this 'accursed' body everywhere between the lines that the focus will now shift but then reinterpreted from a psychoanalytical perspective to broaden the horizon of meaning and insight as a relief to the psyche.

Psychoanalytical insights about bodily suffering

Freud has ambiguous views about disability. Already, in 1914, he admitted that organic inferiority plays an insignificant role in neuroses and is rather used as a pretext for it (Freud 1991a:145), but in 1923, he asserted the primacy of the body as the base for the ego, which is a projection of the surface of the body (Freud 2010:253–255). In his 1916 article (Freud 1991b:366ff.) on disability, 'Die Ausnahmen' [The exceptions], he stereotypes it, labelling disabled people as having a victim mentality, a sense of entitlement demanding to be exempt from the superego and being averse to the reality principle even relating it to femininity, which also suffers from the incomplete body because of the absence of the penis. Freud also reveals his ambiguity about the social versus the bodily influences on disability (*vide infra*), which is why the feminist, Juliet Mitchell (2000:87), reinterpreted Freud by regarding the penis as a social symbol of unfair, patriarchal privilege, not innate in the organ itself. In his 1919 article, 'Das "Unheimliche"' [The uncanny], Freud (1947:257, 259, 267) associated the disgust for disorderly body deformity with the unsettling perversity of intimacy, which is somehow also familiar.

Like Raphael, the South African scholar, Watermeyer (2013:86–90), focusing on the (unconscious) object relations between the abled-bodied world and a disabled person, highlights monstrosities without any apparent awareness of its applicability to the Book of Job. Accordingly the Latin root, *monstra* (sign), has been applied to de-'*monstrate*' how alternative, different, disorderly or malformed bodies serve

as omens and so divine revelations since antiquity. According to Fiedler (1978:31), these projections are universal psychic strategies for human development. Monstrous imagery is not rooted in teratology but in unconscious, constitutional anxieties about the body, its limits and its changes. Freakish bodies and monstrous extremes facilitate the normalisation of one's own body deviations to which one is sensitised through the primitive anxieties and even hostility evoked by another's physical impairment.

Lacan (1949:453) emphasised that because the self is always unconsciously based on a 'corps morcelé' (broken, fragmented body) experienced in infancy, it is actually unstable. Yet, it is partially and superficially rescued through the mirror image as the illusion of a whole body, but the unsymbolised Real always haunts it from the background. Through the repression of modernism with its ideological ideal of a unified self, the psychic situation is made even more difficult, but generally these psychic dynamics always remain culturally mediated.

This mediation mostly results in the disabled's disrupted socialisation, which should be exposed and critiqued by psychoanalysis with a view to emancipation. It is not coincidental and actually very significant that the human interlocutors avoid referring to Job's bodily suffering.

Despite Watermeyer's correction that disability being a social construct and ultimately the product of unconscious phantasies of the collective body, he does not seem to acknowledge that the chronological cause is still an 'unknown' individual body that triggers this.

The unconscious 'contagion' by the alienating difference of the disabled body suggests individualism-or-at-least – minority out of control, undermining the fantasy of sameness in the idea of equality. At the same time and ironically, dependence in modernist, competitive capitalism is regarded as shameful. The disabled body becomes a screen onto which the abled-bodied's own body anxieties are projected as defence against the reminder of bodily vulnerability and death. Disability is therefore scarier than a different (unchangeable) race or sexual orientation, because everyone can become disabled. Yet, the disabled ironically contain everyone's split-off anxieties about the body. It is against this inner psychic reality that prejudice, stereotyping, stigmatisation, discrimination and patronising of the disabled in *all* societies are to be understood.

Heled (2020: *passim*; *vide supra*) summarised the psychoanalytical views of chronic disease and disability focusing on the psychic structures and their impact on subjectivity of a person with disability. There are common subjacent mental features especially regarding the challenges to the ego and self not only stemming from but also resulting in negative feelings: a vicious circle. Whereas Heled never refers to monstrosities, he emphasises the issue of body image, which Watermeyer mentions only once in his whole book and then just as an aside.

As a result of the intrusion⁵ from the outside the psyche turns inward to protect the body image and ego-ideal fantasies. With congenital disability the ego would be narcissistically⁶ more permanently impaired compared with psychological trauma without resulting in disability (Heled 2020:4). Even with acquired disability, as is the case with Job who is already an adult, the core of the self is afflicted as there is 'a strong connection between ego and body sensation'. With disability resulting from traumatic experiences there is a redistribution of body cathexis towards a greater occupation with the self, but with disease the libido is regressively re-catheted from the external reality and whole-body representation to the relevant organ as if it were erotogenic, making the disability part of the ego-structure. A conflict between the ego and superego leads to moral questioning as defence against depression as superego attack on the ego. Castration anxiety is particularly acute for the blind and amputated, the two disabilities, which Job highlights in 29:15 when one understands amputation as equivalent to lameness (Heled 2020:3). Problematic in Heled's summary, despite his brief concession as an aside (Heled 2020:4) is that the reverberating connection with the social and collective body is ignored and that the individual body is ultimately the base of disability with a common, universal sediment in the unconscious, irrespective of societal and cultural context.

Psychoanalytical meanings of Job's 'bad' body

One can easily be caught up in the long arguments that make up most of the book or even with notions such as theodicy as discourse directed by the able-bodied human interlocutors, without⁷ empathically resonating with the body of Job, which also calls on the recipient to reflect on the history of his or her own body and how that experience raises questions about God. Sensing the suffering of the protagonist in an empathic way can also open the recipient up for the hidden, often invisible, bodily pain of other recipients and even non-recipients of the book and so access the 'universal' body. In this way, the recipients can be a correction to the false friends of Job and deconstruct social apathy as antipathy.

Despite the verbosity of Job's companions their empathic failure is probably where they failed him most in their responses and precisely what renders Job disabled. They pretend not to see but only to hear him. Yet their hearing is superficial. Initially still אָתוּ לְאָרְצָא [with him upon the ground] in 2:13, his now clearly false friends subtly turn against him with accusatory *schadenfreude*-arguments devoid of empathy and practical assistance, probably stemming from envy all along, showing that their arguments derive more from the heart than from the head. This alienation goes so far that in 30:10 Job laments being despised even by outcasts:

5. Raphael (2004:409ff.) highlighted God's observant but quiet attention and gaze as (part of) God's attack on Job, making him to fixate on himself. This points to the position of the disabled subjected to excessive attention despite being marginalised.

6. Watermeyer (2013:59) referred to Freud regarding patients with an organic disease as the key route to understanding narcissism.

7. Cf. 6:14–21, 12:2–4, 13:4–5 and 16:2–5 where Job complains about their lack of understanding.

תַּעֲבֹבוּנִי רְחֹקוּ מִנִּי וּמִפְנֵי לֹא-תִשְׁכַּחוּ רַק [they abhor me, they flee far from me, and spare not to spit in my face]. Their lack of compassion is not limited to Job, although but generalised to all the marginalised, if one considers Job's rhetorical questions to Bildad in 26:2–3.

Apart from affective and cognitive empathy a physical reaction in the somatic nervous system probably based on mirror neuron responses is also possible (Rothschild & Rand 2006:passim). Through this somatic empathy, one can feel the bodily pain of the other, together with the emotional and existential anxiety and aggression coupled with it.

As the skin is literally and symbolically the site of contact with the other, it constantly renegotiates individual identity, as either being threatened or extended. Empathy is emotionally crossing this boundary non-intrusively in a containing, transcending way to the other.

Job's vulnerability at the borders of his community because of his struggle with the limits of his existence is likewise primarily as a result of his skin, which has important psychoanalytic meanings as it is the boundary of the body and the ambiguous site of both connection and excluding conflict with external reality. Job's own words seem to be a fending off and *defence* against the unsympathetic words of his companions but in that way he is also colluding in the same verbal game they are playing.

Paradoxically and ironically his social exclusion also means that he is therefore overly included and even overwhelmed by an external world, which floods his own boundaries so that his identity becomes an issue: an experience that God understands at the end of the book by repeatedly confronting him with the question about his own self.

Job is aware that the attack on his body boundaries has a transcendental origin and seems to experience it as penetrating violence, which he would psychically incorporate. Coupled with that would be idealising and identifying with the aggressor whose internal voice therefore manages to silence the others.

God is the first to answer not to Job's claims of innocence in his last speech in chapters 29–31 as his companions have previously done, but to his suffering in his first lament in chapter 3: God verbally paints the bigger picture of containment in creation by which Job's birth is empathically held in grace. It is as if God hears something different behind Job's defence: his real existential anxiety. Reik (1948:136), recommended a 'third ear' that listens to the tone rather than the content of what is said, reminds of Socrates' invitation: 'Speak, that I may see you', something his companions have avoided.

Finally, a subtheme in the book is that of falling. Klein (1975:4), the well-known British psychoanalyst has found that the greatest fear of the infant is not death as such but of falling and falling apart. This ties in with the second image of

fragmentation and erosion, which Greenstein recognised (*vide supra*). This is anyway what happens in death during the process of decomposition. Failing is also subjectively felt as falling apart and so brings up a sense of death (Greenstein 2017:43; *vide supra*). The fear of falling and falling apart is closely tied to the bodily experience before an infant sees itself in a mirror (Lacan 1949:*passim*; Winnicott 2005:149–159), which might not be a literal one, but could be the holding eyes of the loving mother. This whole image of the body and therefore the self in the mirror creates the illusion that the body is one and integrated: a function that the skin also provides. It is therefore understandable that the skin is such an issue for Job (Van der Zwan 2017:*passim*) and why לִפְתָּח [the flakes or falling, drooping parts] of the leviathan's body in 41:15 are held together as the ideal. In 30:30, the verb is not explicitly used but implied for skin falling from the body, thus suggesting a delayering as if peeling an onion. Job, therefore, experiences a psychological regression during his illness, when he senses some kind of falling (apart).

Conclusion

The Book of Job is less about ethical questions as Job's companions thought, but about empathy as more a developmental level in emotional progression than a moral issue. The subtle protest in the book is an appeal to emotional sensitivity to respond to the bodily suffering and difficulty of others, as Job has done. Job sees through the illusions of the body as a mere public display and perceives its fragility by internalising and identifying with the pain and disability of others, so that he experiences himself as ill as well.

Once he has worked through this shattering reality, he can recognise the beauty of the body, even in the bodies of the magnificent monsters and ultimately in his daughters. It is only then that he can die in peace. In this way the eyes of Job are opened to the ideal in his immediate life, where the aesthetic can be gratefully acknowledged thanks to his spiritual maturity.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

P.v.d.Z. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards of research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Clines, D.J.A., 2006, *Job 21–37*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN.
- Clines, D.J.A., 2011, *Job 38–42*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN.
- Connor, S., 2004, *The book of skin*, Reaktion Books, London.
- De Villiers, F.T., 2004, 'Symptoms of depression in Job: A note on psychological exegesis', *Old Testament Essays* 171, 9–14.
- Fiedler, L.A., 1978, *Freaks: Myths and images of the secret self*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY.
- Foucault, M., 1963, *Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie du regard médical*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris.
- Freud, S., 1947, 'Das Unheimliche', in A. Freud, E. Bibring, W. Hoffer, E. Kris & O. Isakower (eds.), *Gesammelte Werke chronologisch geordnet. Band XII: Werke aus den Jahren 1917–1920*, pp. 227–268, Stefan Fischer, Frankfurt am Main.
- Freud, S., 1991a, 'Zur Einführung des Narzißmus', in A. Freud, E. Bibring, W. Hoffer, E. Kris & O. Isakower (eds.), *Gesammelte Werke chronologisch geordnet. Band X: Werke aus den Jahren 1913–1917*, pp. 137–147, Stefan Fischer, Frankfurt am Main.
- Freud, S., 1991b, 'Die Ausnahmen', in A. Freud, E. Bibring, W. Hoffer, E. Kris & O. Isakower (eds.), *Gesammelte Werke chronologisch geordnet. Band X: Werke aus den Jahren 1913–1917*, pp. 365–370, Stefan Fischer, Frankfurt am Main.
- Freud, S., 2010, 'Das Ich und das Es', in A. Freud, E. Bibring, W. Hoffer, E. Kris & O. Isakower (eds.), *Gesammelte Werke chronologisch geordnet. Band XIII: Jenseits des Lustprinzips; Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse; Das Ich und das Es*, pp. 246–255, Stefan Fischer, Frankfurt am Main.
- Glasby, M., 2017, *Wholeness and holiness: Medicine, disease, purity and the levitical priesthood*, Apostolos Publishing, London.
- Greenstein, E.L., 2007, "'On my skin and in my flesh": Personal experience as a source of knowledge in the Book of Job', in K.F. Kravitz & D.M. Sharon (eds.), *Bringing the hidden to light: The process of interpretation: Studies in honor of Stephen A. Geller*, pp. 63–77, Eisenbrauns, University Park, PA.
- Greenstein, E.L., 2013, 'Some metaphors in the Poetry of Job', in M.L. Grossman (ed.), *Built by wisdom, established by understanding: Essays on Biblical and Near Eastern literature in honor of Adele Berlin*, pp. 179–95, University Press of Maryland, Bethesda, MD.
- Greenstein, E.L., 2017, 'Metaphors of illness and wellness in Job', in S.C. Jones & C.R. Yoder (eds.), *'When the morning stars sang': Essays in honor of Choon Leong Seow on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday*, pp. 39–50, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin.
- Habel, N.C., 1985, *The Book of Job*, Westminster John Knox Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Heckl, R., 2010, *Hiob: Vom Gottesfürchtigen zum Repräsentanten Israels*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 70, B. Janowski, M.S. Smith & H. Spiekermann (eds.), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.
- Heled, E., 2020, 'Chronic illness and disability in psychoanalysis: A theoretical review of structural characteristics', *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 39(2), 135–144. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pap0000326>
- Hyun, S.T., 2022, *Job the disabled: Disability and welfare in the Book of Job*, viewed 16 January 2022, from https://www.academia.edu/19001887/Job_the_Disabled_Disability_and_Welfare_in_the_Book_of_Job.
- Jurecic, A., 2012, *Illness as narrative*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh.
- Kahn, J.H. & Solomon, H., 1975, *Job's illness: Loss, grief and integration: A psychological interpretation*, Pergamon, Oxford.
- Kapusta, M.A. & Frank, S., 1977, 'The Book of Job and the modern view of depression', *Annals of Internal Medicine* 86(5), 667–672. <https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-86-5-667>
- Klein, M., 1975, 'Envy and gratitude and other works 1946–1963', in M. Masud & R. Khan (eds.), *Envy and gratitude and other works 1946–1963*, pp. 1–346, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London.
- Kleinman, A., 1988, *The illness narratives: Suffering, healing and the human condition*, Basic, New York, NY.
- Koo, J.Y.M. & Yeung, J., 2002, 'Body image issues in dermatology', in T.F. Cash & T. Pruzinsky (eds.), *Body image: A handbook of theory, research, and clinical practice*, pp. 333–341, Guilford, New York, NY.
- Kwon, J.J., 2020, 'Psychosomatic approach to Job's malady: Based on somatic symptom disorder', *Journal of Religion and Health* 59(4), 2032–2044. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-019-00940-5>

- Lacan, J., 1949, 'Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je, telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique', *Revue Française de Psychanalyse* 13(4), 449–455.
- Mamre, M., 2016, *A Hebrew-English Bible according to the Masoretic text and the JPS 1917 edition*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, PA.
- Mitchell, J., 2000, *Psychoanalysis and feminism*, Basic Books, New York, NY.
- Newsom, C.A., 2003, *The Book of Job: A contest of moral imaginations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Raphael, R., 2004, 'Things too wonderful: A disabled reading of Job', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31(4), 399–424.
- Raphael, R., 2008, *Biblical corpora: Representations of disability in Hebrew biblical literature*, T&T Clark, New York, NY.
- Reik, T., 1948, *Listening with the third ear: The inner experience of a psychoanalyst*, Grove Press, New York, NY.
- Rothschild, B. & Rand, M.L., 2006, *Help for the helper: The psychophysiology of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, NY.
- Schellenberg, A., 2016, 'Mein Fleisch ist gekleidet in Maden und Schorf' (Hi 7,5), Zur Bedeutung des Körpers im Hiobbuch', in G. Etzelmüller & A. Weissenrieder (eds.), *Verkörperung als Paradigma theologischer Anthropologie*, pp. 95–126, De Gruyter, Berlin.
- Southwood, K., 2020, 'The "innards" in the Psalms and Job as metaphors for illness', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 42(2), 159–185.
- Van der Zwan, P., 2017, 'Some psychoanalytical meanings of the skin in the book of Job', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i1.1639>
- Watermeyer, B. (ed.), 2013, 'Psychoanalysis and disability studies: An unlikely alliance', in *Towards a contextual psychology of disability*, pp. 51–91, Routledge, Milton Park.
- Winnicott, D.W., 2005, *Playing and reality (1971)*, Routledge, London.