

Signs of sexuality in a book about death seen through a psychoanalytic lens: Paradox and parody in play and perversion

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Whereas the Song of Songs can be said to be about Eros, the Book of Job could be about Thanatos. Yet, the Song ends with a crucial reference to death, and in the Book of Job there are subtle traces of sexuality: the first chapter tells about probably promiscuous parties held by Job's children who then die during such a feast. Job reacts by referring to the womb, which presumably has sexual connotations. The womb is once again an issue in chapters 3 and 10. Twice he mentions breasts, although negatively connoted. In his last speech, Job suddenly refers several times to hypothetical transgressions with women, which betrays his hidden desires behind his piety. In addition, apart from body-parts such as the feet, hands and heart, a tail, loins and even a nose might sometimes be interpreted as euphemisms with phallic hints. In the final chapter his three 'new' daughters are the most beautiful in the world, perhaps presenting him as eventually allowing his libido to be re-introjected. Through a psychoanalytical lens it is, however, possible to make sense of this unexpected presence of sexual traces in a book about death.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Approaching texts from a psychoanalytical perspective challenges historical-critical exegesis by questioning its assumption that universality dissolves into historicity. It adds unconscious aspects of a text, here interpreting unexpected traces of sexuality in a book about mourning. This is done in a divergent way by pointing out various possible understandings.

Keywords: Book of Job; psychoanalytical; sexuality; mourning; Török.

Introduction

The context of this study are two previous publications by Van der Zwan (2022a, 2022b): the first about death and the second about the meaning of the mouth for mourning in the Book of Job. Both have, however, brought unexpected elements of sexuality in the book to the fore. Finding traces of sexuality in a text about mourning seems unexpected and even offensive (Cavitch 2007:313, 315).

The hypothesis of this study is that there is a psychoanalytically meaningful connection between death and sexuality in the Book of Job.

This will be explored by first summarising and reorienting the findings from the previous studies about death, then by carefully scanning through the book for traces of sexuality and finally by meaningfully integrating death and sexuality through psychoanalytic theories.

Death in the Book of Job

The book almost starts with the death of Job's servants in 1:15, 16, 17 and then of his children in 1:19, all in the first chapter. In 18:19, Bildad subtly blames him for their death. Except for once in 29:5, Job never speaks about them. Instead, his wife's suggestion of death or suicide in 2:9 adumbrates his own death wish, of not having been born or as a stillbirth in 3:3–13 and 10:9, 18, 19, 20, 21.

What is absent in a text should also be taken seriously, especially when its mention is reasonably expected. This is the case with Job's father precisely because he does mention his mother, even only a few times. He might therefore be projecting his own sad feelings into others when he refers to a תָּוֹם [orphan, fatherless] in 6:27, 24:3.9, 29:12 and 31:17.21. The תָּוֹם [fatherless] whom he cared for like a substitute father since leaving his mother's womb, according to 31:18, might

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have been a (half-)brother or (half-)sister, as his mother might have been the אַלְמָנָה [widow] in 31:16. That would mean that his father has died when his mother was pregnant but before this sibling's birth.

On the other hand, if he adopted the orphan in 31:18, it might have been because his mother has died as well, further explaining why he mourns his birth and the womb, which he lost in chapter 3. There might therefore be more deaths in the background than those of his children in the foreground.

The book ends with the last verse mentioning the death of Job himself, after an exceptionally long life, even when he has been begging for death during his trials. This is only one of several frames of the book. Another is that of his children, implying life and sexuality (*vide infra*). Within these two broad frames of the whole book, there is also another narrower frame – but then with an opposition – between Job's first speech in chapter 3 about his death wish and his last speech in chapter 31, where he fantasises about sex and life. In addition, his first reference to his mother's womb in 1:21 (*vide infra*) is also partially framed by what he says in 31:18.

Even when chapter 2 narrates a second step in the secret deal between God and the Satan, where the latter is allowed to attack the body of Job, his subsequent illness threatening him with death may be interpreted as a somatic reaction to his traumatising experiences about the death of his loved ones in the first chapter, as Halliday (1944:*passim*), Guy (1955:356), Kahn and Solomon (1975:35, 67, 103), Van der Zwan (2019b:2, 3, 7, 2020:47, 54), Kwon (2020:*passim*) and Concha (2020:*passim*) have understood it as well.

Amongst the more than 70 body-parts referred to in the Book of Job, the mouth of the main protagonist plays a particularly important but subtle role in the bodily expression of introjection (eating) and projection (speaking) in the mourning process (Van der Zwan 2022b). At the same time, genital sensation may be experienced in the mouth (displacement upward), or an oral sensation may be experienced in the genitals (displacement downward). Novelist John Cleland, for instance, referred to the vagina in *Fanny Hill* (1749:91) as 'the nethermouth'. If this is the case, then mourning includes or is confounded with sexual desire in the Book of Job. Similarly, whereas כֹּחַ [its strength] וְאִמְצָתוֹ [and its force] are in Behemoth's pelvic region, according to 40:16, כֹּחַ (strength) is to be found in Leviathan's neck in 41:14, having just focused on its facial area from 41:10–13 and thus suggesting displacement upward.

The grotesque body (cf. Van der Zwan 2022f) has a position between death and sexuality. Apart from ugliness, disability and diseases, especially those suspected of having been caused by promiscuity, emphasis on the sexual or rather obscene (Bakhtin 1984:xxi; Miles 1991:155, 221 n. 24) forms part of the package. Coupled with it are the quack cures offered to restore sexual potency (Miles 1991:186). Features of

the grotesque body may be detected in the physical descriptions of Job, Behemoth and Leviathan, although the sexual aspect is more subtle in the case of Job and Leviathan.

The sexual in the Book of Job is thus part of the grotesque, which misreads the tragic reality and in its 'riot of semiosis' (Eagleton 1981:145) blasphemes even the 'holiness' and seriousness of death and disability. In this way, deconstruction by the grotesque body is liberating (Black 2009:89). This is perhaps manifested through the renewed speech suggested by the *hapax legomena* in the second divine speech (*vide supra*). In this 'semantics of the body' (Clark & Holquist 1984:299), body-parts gain unexpected meanings, as will become clear from the euphemistic understanding of much of Behemoth's body.

Sexuality in the Book of Job

Although body-parts such as the hands, nose and feet can be used as sexual euphemisms, these will be ignored in this study, as they have elsewhere been dealt with in this regard (Van der Zwan 2017, 2022e and 2022g, respectively).

Sexuality is implied in 1:2 already by referring to Job's 10 children *before* the first death is mentioned in the first chapter. There might even be an element of incest present at the drinking parties to which Job's sons invite their sisters in 1:4, as no other women are mentioned. The book also ends by referring to his 10 (really 'new'? cf. Van der Zwan 2022c) children in 42:13–16 but now adding three more generations on top of them. Apart from the theme of death, this is another frame of the whole book.

The inner, poetic part of the book is also framed by more subtle references to sexuality 'contaminated' by death wishes in Job's first speech, when he immediately curses the night he was conceived in 3:3, 6, 7 and the day of his birth in 3:3, 11, 16. Not only birth, then, but even conception, and therefore sexual intercourse, is on his mind in 3:3b. Death and sexuality are intertwined, as it has been adumbrated in 1:21 already. In the final and exceptionally long chapter of his last speech he also – but now more blatantly – refers to his potentially lustful eyes in 31:1, an organ related to sexuality in the Dead Sea Scrolls (Lau 2016:212). Job reveals here his repressed wish for a תְּרוּלָה [virgin], someone who has had no sexual intercourse yet. Brenner (ed. 1995:57) observed that despite the unconventional wisdom of the book, there are still the conventional prejudices about sex, here as taboos about virgins and married women. Yet sexuality appearing in a book about death is part of the subversive wisdom and aesthetic embedded in the text.

For seven verses, from 31:2–8, he tries to avoid this theme of lustful longing but reverts to it and then mentions אִשָּׁה [a woman] as he fantasises about his neighbour's wife in 31:9. What is single adultery in the first verse has now become 'double' adultery, as both parties are married, supposing that Job's absent wife is still around somewhere. In fact, she is suddenly mentioned in 31:10, as if out of the blue, as her

voice has last been heard in 2:9, whereafter she was silenced in 2:10. He imagines her having sexual intercourse with a third party as well, allegedly as punishment for his own sexual sins. These sexual hints go further to recall his mother's womb in 31:15, 18, apparently mentioned incidentally, although explicitly. Unlike his first speech, this last one now also explicitly mentions his mother in 31:18, alluded to but eclipsed in 3:10, 11. The words in 31:9, *אם-נפתה לבי* (if my heart has been enticed), are virtually repeated in 31:27 but then intensified, as his desire would be hidden in his unconscious or from others: *ויפת בפתר לבי* [and my heart has been *secretly* enticed] and followed by: *ותשק ידי לפי* [and my mouth has kissed my hand, but literally: and my hand has kissed my mouth], which, even if it means something non-erotic, it still uses erotic metaphors. Fabry (1974:419) had pointed out that the heart embodies sexual desire, among other functions, overlapping with the possible meanings for *נפש* (Brotzmann 1988:401).

It might be more than coincidental that the metonymic body-part for the whole body according to Clines (2006:634) selected by Job in 31:20 is *הלציו* [his loins], that is, of the needy onto whom Job projects his wish for offspring from his own loins.

In 31:31, there is even a possibility of homosexuality, depending on the contextual meaning of *מבשרו* [of his flesh]. There is much hidden in his heart in this chapter, however, betrayed in 31:27, 28, 33, 34. It is significant that these framing chapters of Job's speeches repeat the same themes of sexuality and death by cursing, here in 31:30; however, it is refrained from and now has someone else as object.

It is not only on Job's mind that one detects traces of sexuality but also in the very mouth of God, if those words are not Job's own psyche speaking to him in his visions. It would be easier to project sexuality knocking at the door in chapter 31 onto an animal. In any event, 'God' openly introduces and normalises sexuality in nature in the first divine speech. For God, birth is much more in the foreground, such as God's reminder of the pregnancy, birth and offspring of wild-goats and hinds in 39:1–4.

In the second divine speech there is also a sexual description of Behemoth (Wolfers 1995:167–169). After a traditional translation of 40:15–18, Quick (2022:345) offers an exceptionally sexual one, asserting that the *wasf* focuses on the centre of Behemoth's body, where *מתן* [loins] in 40:16 are to be understood euphemistically for the sexual organs, something which Boer (2011:43) agreed with because of the dual form implying the testicles. The same applies to *בטן* [usually belly, womb], which is in parallel to the former and would refer to the genital, suggesting that the sexual region is conflated with the innards and gut. Furthermore, the noun, *און* [strength], elsewhere has a connotation of procreation, and the *hapax legomenon*, *שריר* [navel, umbilical cord] would add a phallic suggestion as a synecdoche for this bodily area. In the next verse, 40:17, the phallic suggestion of *זנב* [tail] in this context is obvious (even Alter [2010:170 n. 1]), especially

connected to the *hapax legomenon* verb, *הפיץ* [stiffen, as in the Septuagint], with a possible *double entendre* to another verb with the same consonants, meaning 'desire' (Bernat 2004:336). Another *hapax legomenon*, *פחד* [usually translated as 'thigh'] would then refer to the testes, as in the Vulgate, or simply as another sexual euphemism. In 40:18, both *עצם* [bone] and *גרם* [gristle] would have an analogy to semen, as they are often contextualised with procreation. These phallic suggestions could even be strengthened by *חרב* [sword], repeated in 41:18. What Quick has not observed is that *אף* [nose] in 40:24 could also have a phallic connotation, as it does elsewhere in the Book of Job (cf. Van der Zwan 2022e). Two verses later, in 40:26, it is also used for Leviathan. As God must be more masculine than these monsters, God's phallic energy can be relied on as a guarantee for fertility.

All of this ideal model focusing on the penis makes sense against God's call to Job in 38:3 and repeated in 40:7 to gird his 'loins', as a way to regenerate him as a phallic and fertile man so that he would have 10 children again in the last chapter.

Even when the masculine singular verbs are used for Behemoth, it has traditionally not been far-fetched to consider the two beasts of different genders, where Behemoth is feminine because of the suffix, which is usually considered as an intensive plural with an augmented meaning.

Despite these sexual undertones in the background, feelings for the feminine remain problematic and even hostile until almost right at the end. Job's emotional struggle with the womb (cf. Van der Zwan 2019a:passim) is one aspect of his unease with women, to whom he links human troubles explicitly in 14:1. Of women in general, only an adjective, *הנקבלות* [impious women], is used and then negatively connoted in 2:9.

One is tempted to explain this denigration of the feminine culturally, as Bildad in 25:4 also declares humanity impure because of women, to whom sexuality is linked, subtracting in this way by implication from Job the virtual perfection asserted in the first verse of the book (cf. Kahn & Solomon 1975:89). However, the sexual hints expressed by Job betray an underlying attraction or even temptation to women. Job mentions his mother explicitly only in 1:21, 17:14 (and then comparing her like his sister to a worm of death) and in 31:18. After his restitution, all his sisters are, however, celebrating with him in 42:11. His wife is briefly referred to only in 2:9, where she has a similar role as the Satan, challenging Job to curse God, and 31:10 (*vide supra*), in both instances therefore with negative connotations. Despite the positive last chapter, his wife as mother of his children remains as ignored as she is in the first chapter when his children are mentioned. Likewise, his daughters remain a minority compared with his sons in the last chapter, just as in the first.

However, among all the women, his daughters have taken the most prominent place, being mentioned in 1:2, 4, 13 and

18, first neutrally but then in a context of sin, and again in 42:14–15, where they are surprisingly elevated and named by their father against the cultural practices of the time, celebrated as (equally) the most beautiful in the country and given the same inheritance as their brothers, also against the cultural norms. Their names refer to sensual delights (Clines 2011:1238), perhaps because of their father's hidden incestuous desires for them.

Several aspects of sexuality and of Job's gender attitude can therefore be identified in the Book of Job, each needing a different interpretation to presumably add up to an overall perspective. The main question, however, remains why sexuality is on the mind of and is mentioned by a mourning man.

Psychoanalytic interpretations

Manic defence

The first, reflexive response from a psychoanalytical perspective is that sexuality in the book is a manic defence against unbearable depression because of the loss of loved ones. Mania then even masks suicidal impulses expressed through perverse sexuality (Meltzer 1973:134), which might be the case with the monsters (*vide infra*). When mania is a narcissistic defence, three feelings, *viz.* a sense of control, triumph and contempt, are involved (Segal 1988:83), which one can sense in Job's words in chapter 31 (*vide supra*).

Depression after victory, just as a sense of post-orgasmic 'nihilism', is well known.¹ The opposite is, however, also possible and could be interpreted as manic defence (Klein 1935:*passim*; 1940:*passim*) where the *ego* protects itself against a paranoid condition by trying to liberate itself from the dependence on the loved lost object. Hypersexuality with risky behaviour is a well-known manifestation of mania (Fletcher et al. 2013:51, 53, 54). This could be a hidden way of replacing an awareness of death with that of life as compensation and comfort during the mourning process, but in this way it also denies the reality of the loss. However, Job has not been expressing any hypersexuality all along during his complaints.

One can also understand this psychic motive as comic relief, because play and perverse caricaturing form clear ingredients in the description of at least Behemoth, but also partially of Leviathan, which narcissistically pretends to be omnipotent. This happens when the infantile psychic organisation puts the *ego* in a primary relation with the *id*, often happening with psychic regression (Meltzer 1973:128, 131).

Psychic regression

Regression of the *ego* to an earlier psychic stage is a defence mechanism against overwhelming experiences. According

1. Cf. Olley (1998:38), also referred to by Luteijn (2022:115) as interpretation of Elijah's flight to the desert because of his victory at Carmel in 1 Kings 19, where the cognitive dissonance of the unexpected could have caused stress.

to Meltzer (1973:159–160) the unconscious phantasises that the secrets of nature, including the ultimate knowledge, that of death, are hidden in the inside of the mother's body and that death means a return to her womb. This is what Job is also saying in 1:21 with his paradigmatic confession of faith, where both his birth and death are explicitly linked to the womb of his mother. Unlike his first speech in chapter 3, this brief formulaic statement in 1:21 resonates with his explicit mention of his mother in 31:18. It is therefore not only that he believes he will return to his mother's womb in death but also returns in 31:15, 18, even when he does not link it to death there, to this initial assertion in 1:21. Job regards the womb – not the grave – as the great equaliser, as all are formed there by the same God (if this does not refer to his mundane father) according to 31:15, just as the same God עשה [made, the same verb as in 10:8, 9] both Behemoth and Job, according to 40:15.

Linking the womb from which he was born with death is reminiscent of Sándor Ferenczi's thesis (1924:27) that sexual intercourse is unconsciously for a male like a return to the womb and that females experience it likewise through vicarious identification by unconsciously imagining the male phantasy. Males then completely identify with the penis, which then becomes in a reductionistic way a *pars pro toto* for the whole male body.

For Chasseguet-Smirgel (1978:*passim*) perversion is also regression, moving to the anal-sadistic phase, involving destruction or control of the object. This is, however, not psychotic regression, as the pervert retains a fair sense of reality.

Polymorph and perhaps perverse sexuality

Perversion can be regarded as transgressing boundaries of separation laid down by a *superego*, or, as Chasseguet-Smirgel (1986:88) put it, the erasure of differences between, for instance, species, genders and generations and between *libido* and *thanatos* because of feelings of envy for the other. In this way, the pervert reverts to the chaos before the paternal law. Instead of horror and fear about incest, the pervert fantasises about returning into the mother's womb (*vide supra*). In addition, there is a possibility that the virgin imagined in 31:1 is an image of one of his three lost daughters whom he would have hoped was still a virgin when she died. Likewise, Kristeva's (1980:32, 256, 290) thoughts about the abject have revealed how messy both death and sexuality are, because both are on the chaotic and semiotic side, threatening the fragile boundaries of the symbolic.

Then, perverse sexuality, as subtly expressed by the animals presented by God, cannot be excluded either (cf. Van der Zwan 2022d), as they are visualised by Job as eroticised animals. Meltzer (1973:92, 134) distinguished what Freud had joined as polymorphously pervert sexuality as universal to humanity and present in infancy already. Polymorph sexuality is merely infantile, whereas perversion is the narcissistic destruction of beauty and competition by

defiantly doing the opposite of nature for sadistic pleasure, not lusting after sensuality but trying to overcome depressive and persecutory anxieties. Something of this might be recognised in Behemoth being polymorph and Leviathan being perverse in its violence as regression to original chaos, although not in an explicitly sexual way. Both may be masks for Job himself, however, simultaneously being the (unconquerable) masochistic victim through projective identification and the sadistic other-outsider (cf. Huang 2007:105). Alternatively, these two pervert positions can be seen to be embodied by the (envious?) hunters in 40:19, 24–26, 31 and 41:18–21, as their virtual fetishistic focus is almost more on the ‘dismantled objects’² than on the (body-) part-objects of their victims.

Responses to trauma

The three above-mentioned aspects of sexuality in a context of mourning death can all tie in with trauma, where manic defence, psychic regression and the development of perverse sexuality can be symptomatic.

Britton (2018:28) asserted that in some hysterics, as a result of trauma, there is a belief of uniting sexually in death. One of these hysterics, Sabina Spielrein, the classic patient and later lover of Jung, wrote herself a paper in 1912 in which she believed her eroticised death wish to be normal. This death wish is to consummate the oedipal complex, with the sadistic component as destructive. This is not the same as that theorised by Freud as opposed to sexuality.

Likewise, in Nordic mythology, maidens serve sex in death to the warriors, and *houris* [حُور; dark-eyed] and *kawa'ib* [كَوَاعِب; fully breasted virgins] accompany Muslims in Islamic paradise.

Hyper-sexualisation and sexualisation of violence are sometimes the consequences of trauma (Fontanesi et al. 2021:passim). This is not only the case when the violence has been sexual in nature. It is rather a way of rationalising the violence. Sexualising death and ‘mortifying’ sex are, however, experiences not only limited to trauma and are captured by the French ‘petite mort’ as metaphor for orgasm. Incidentally, this link between death and sex has also been embroidered upon by the French philosopher, Georges Bataille (1957:passim).

Individuation

Although individuation is a Jungian concept, it is related to the *superego*, which Freud (1940:381) regarded as having been built up from all parental figures, at first usually the natural parents, then other authorities and finally the dark destiny of death. Over against the previous angles of this psychoanalytic exploration, individuation then represents psychic progression.

²This is an important concept in Meltzer's (1973:108–109) understanding of the pervert, but it is not necessary to elaborate on it here.

Probably without knowing it, Job is fighting for sexual liberation from the oppressive *superego* expressed by the collective critique he suffers from his false friends, who are posing as wise counsellors but are, in fact, representing the group as abusive father-figure. In a sense, Job wants to celebrate life, also sexually, and not accept the deaths of his loved ones as (undeserved) punishment. Yet because of the bad object of the threatening *superego*, his *ego* is trapped in feeling guilty about these sexual feelings as *id*, which he then condemns as hypothetical justifications for feeling punished. If Job suspects any sexual misconduct to have been the trigger for God's fatal punishment of his children, from which he as the father could not rescue them, Job might then identify with the victims as feeling co-responsible and guilty, instigated by his own sense of being punished.

Closely related is, however, the assertive healing process included in mourning. The God-part of Job's psyche, his mature *ego* (not regarded as such by Britton [2018:72, 107ff.], who otherwise has the same view), can now ironically judge the *superego* and determine reality apart from morality.

This happens when the *ego* as ‘child’ has become more independent from the *superego* as ‘parent’, is sexually more mature and manifests creativity (Britton 2018:120), while the *superego* becomes envious (Klein 1975:231) of the *ego*'s new capabilities. Britton therefore has a similar view of God developing in the shadow of Job as Jung (1952:passim) had.

Sexualisation as normal mourning ingredient

If ever there has been reason for Job to feel guilty, his last speech in chapter 31 might be the first time to justify that, as mourning hardly allows for carnal cravings. Yet Pope (1977:210ff.) likewise contextualises the Song of Songs within a funeral feast (cf. also Horine 2001:30), a manifestation of a psychic process called ‘fantasmes du cadavre exquis’ (the phantasm [or phantasy] of the exquisite cadaver) by Török (1968:723–725).

Job's sexual side is reminiscent of Rebecca, who seems to assist Isaac in closing his mourning about his deceased mother through their romantic and sexual relationship, according to Genesis 24:67 (cf. Rachmuth 2021, conference paper).

Likewise, Job's *ego* is enriched by introjecting his sexual desires repressed because of the mourning process. In this way, the incorporated lost love-object on whom the survivor is psychically dependent can be replaced so that healing of the psychic wound can take place (cf. Van der Zwan 2022a:passim for a much longer explanation).

Török (2009:233) called this the ‘névrose de transition’ (neurosis of transition) as part of the ‘manie normale’ (normal mania) during the ‘maladie du deuil’ (illness of mourning), causing without exception surprise, shame and even bodily illness because of this ‘péché irréparable’ (irreparable crime) and not because of the loss of the

love-object (Török 2009:231–322). Sex seems to be the best antidote to death.

Conclusion

The Book of Job is in various respects unique in the Hebrew Bible, and more so because it also confronts the recipient with the shocking reality of libidinal desire during mourning.

The hypothesis of the study has been hiding an assumption that death and sex are somehow mutually exclusive opposites, which has been proven to be incorrect, because psychoanalytic interpretations have shown both death and sex to be connected in the unconscious. The psychoanalytic exploration has not only shown a fair amount of overlap but also some mutually exclusive options amongst the possible theoretical foci.

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