

## What was Job's malady?

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### **Abstract**

**This paper explores the nature of Job's malady on various levels, using insights from disability studies as they have been applied to other parts of the Hebrew Bible, but rarely Job. What was the nature of Job's skin disease? Beyond that, how should we assess Job's mental torment accompanying his physical illness, as part of a broader intertextual resonance of lament as known from certain Psalms? It is argued that it is Job's feelings of social exclusion that are a major aspect of his malady, a factor well attested in disability studies but often left out of account in traditional biblical studies evaluations which tends to focus on moral issues. The relevance of the moral judgement of the friends who regard Job's disease as a punishment for sin is assessed. A fresh interpretation is offered of the strange omission of Job's restoration from illness from the Epilogue.**

**Keywords: Job, Epilogue, skin disease, Disability Studies, lament, social exclusion**

In the story of Job, as contained in the prose tale, a familiar aspect is Job's affliction with illness. After the initial challenge from the Satan to God concerning Job's righteousness, the Satan is allowed to 'touch all that he has' but not to 'stretch out your hand against him'. (Job 1.11) The loss of family, servants and all possessions swiftly follows. But after the second challenge, the Satan suggests that God 'stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh and he will curse you to your face.' (Job 2.5) This is the moment that Job's health is affected with the only proviso being to 'spare his life'. And

so we read ‘So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.’ (Job 2.7-8)

Shortly afterward the dialogue ensues in which Job bewails his lot and that suffering clearly involves physical suffering. In this paper I want to explore just how much of his complaint can indeed be put down to illness. I want to look at what Job’s illness probably was, at how it affects him first physically and then mentally and at its wider effects on his feelings of social ostracization and place in society. I plan to draw on some insights from disability/impairment studies to illuminate this debate and discuss the moral parameters of this issue – is disease always the direct result of wickedness? Finally I will reconsider the ending of Job in the light of this discussion.

### 1. Job’s skin disease

First, though, on a medical level, what exactly was Job’s disease? Older scholars debated this question at length. The first mention of the disease is in Job 2.7 where it strikes quickly as ‘the Satan...inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head’. This phrase ‘from the sole...’ (wqdq [d][w] d( wgr Pkm) appears in Deut. 28.35; 2 Sam. 14.25 and indicates the entirety of the body. It is clearly a skin disease the term (r Nyx#b being a general one that could cover various diseases of the skin. Skin diseases normally take some time to spread, but maybe for the sake of narrative impact this disease is described as sudden. The term is mentioned in Lev.

13.18-23 as a boil (Nyx#) which may be an initial sign of leprosy (although there is a special word for leprosy ((rcm).

Another possibility is elephantiasis, a disease producing swollen limbs and blackened skin (which might explain the reference to bones in v 5). Many suggestions have been made for Job's condition, including by professional medics. Here are just a few – chronic exzma, smallpox, malignant or infectious ulcer, ulcerous boil known as the 'Baghdad button', syphillis, pellagra, scurby, or simply vitamin deficiency. Take your pick! Rather than trying to be specific about the illness, it is probably better to translate the term (r Nyx#b here in 2.7 with a general phrase such as 'running sore', 'severe boils' or 'painful sores'.<sup>1</sup> Verse 8 tells us that Job used a potsherd to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. He might have already been there as a result of his mourning for his children. It is usually supposed that this ash-heap was a public one, outside the town, the resort of outcasts and persons with infectious diseases. The LXX has 'dungheap outside the city' (kopriaj ecw thj polewj) and it was common practice to dump dung there and then burn it. The heap of ashes would often be so high as to be useful as a watchtower.<sup>2</sup> This has strengthened the suggestion that it was from leprosy that Job was suffering. It would

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<sup>1</sup> This same phrase is used in Deut. 28.35b, often translated 'grievous boils'. It is interesting that qr – 'evil' is used.

<sup>2</sup> If it was ashes rather than dung it would be less infectious, but, knowing what we do about the link of cleanliness with health, dung would be disastrous!

also fit the mention in 2.12 that the friends ‘did not recognize’ Job ‘from a distance’ (qwxrm) – were they so distant that they didn’t see him clearly, or, more probably, did they not recognize him because he was so physically changed by his disease?

Looking into the dialogue at Job’s own description might also shed light on the nature of the illness. He describes the repeated eruption of pustules in 7.5 (‘my skin hardens, then breaks out again’) which might be maggots breeding in his sores or more likely a discharge of pus, and he speaks in 30.30 of a blackening and peeling off of the skin, both of which are signs of a skin disease. Other symptoms Job describes are less specific – emaciation (19.20), fever (30.30b), nightmares (7.14), sleeplessness (7.4), wasting away as if rotten (13.28), putrid breath (19.17) could belong to any number of complaints. He refers to aching in or rotting of his bones (30.17) and to their burning (30.30) which could either be further symptoms or a more general reference to the bones as the seat of disease.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars have suggested that because of the fairly general description of Job’s illness, that his disease is psychosomatic in origin, springing from his other misfortunes.<sup>4</sup> Whilst this seems unlikely given the severe nature of his symptoms, it does bring out the point that much disease is made better or worse by the state of mind of the patient and is a reminder that we need to look at the mental anguish of Job in this context.

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<sup>3</sup> The root (N~~x~~#) from which the term for Job’s illness is derived, means in some cognate languages eg Ugaritic ‘be hot’ or ‘be inflamed’. In an Ugaritic text, the god Baal is ‘feverish’ in his loins and so the noun may therefore be a general term for any inflammation of the skin.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Jack Kahn, *Job’s illness: loss, grief and integration: a psychological interpretation*, Oxford & New York: Pergamon, 1975 who interprets Job according to Freudian categories.

## 2. Disability Studies

So far I have pursued the older scholarly line of trying to define Job's malady in a medical framework. It is at this point that helpful correctives to this rather narrow approach are given by the burgeoning area of disability studies. Schipper<sup>5</sup> makes the point that disability is often only seen in individual and medical terms ignoring social, political, legal or other cultural terms which provide the wider framework for understanding any kind of illness, impairment or disability be it short or long term. This is a helpful reminder that there is clearly a social dimension (notably social ostracization) to Job's malady, that we should not ignore. Before turning to this though, should we regard Job's 'illness' as a disability? Schipper makes an important distinction between permanent and temporary disability and the normal assumption in Job is that since we know that the Satan inflicted the disease in the first place and since the ending of the story is a happy one, the temporary model fits him best. Schipper argues that we tend to assume able-bodiedness where neither is stated (for example, after Jacob dislocates his hip after his wrestling with God we assume that he recovered since it is nowhere stated that he limped for the rest of his life (Gen. 32.25, 31, 32)) and that we tend also to interpret poetic descriptions metaphorically (e.g. the description of the sufferings of the Deutero-Isaianic servant in Isa. 52:13-53:12<sup>6</sup>). The development of his disease is clearly a dramatic change of circumstance for Job and so has the nature of a life-changing injury

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<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant*, Oxford: OUP, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia*, HAT 3, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892 argued many years ago that the suffering servant had a skin disease, which raises the question whether disease is always a result of wickedness given that the suffering servant is blameless/a sacrifice.

for the whole of its course. In modern terms we would say that it affects his ‘employability’. Schipper argues that all disability is relative – indeed we are all ill at times in our lives and feel less ‘able’ than we normally do and we all age and may feel more impaired as we get older. In fact he argues that our perception of disability depends on age – if we see an old man with a walking stick we would not think of him as disabled, just as old but if we see a young man with such we assume disability of some kind. We also tend to measure cognitive impairment by children’s ages, so we say ‘an adult with a mental age of 6’. Schipper points to disability as in many ways a social construction, the result of social norms that tend to pick out people with impairments. It should not be forgotten though that disability is a lived experience for those suffering from it. It is a medical condition and an individual experience on one level, but the social and wider cultural experience that it leads to is an essential part of that experience. A good example from the Hebrew Bible is infertility – itself a medical condition but something that is also a key social experience and socially judged by others, also a condition that is a ripe subject for divine intervention, as shown in many examples. It also intrigues me that there is so much skin disease in the Hebrew Bible and less of other diseases.

Turning back to Job, this time to the dialogue and with this disability debate in mind, I want to look for wider signs of the effects of Job’s impairment beyond simply his description of his medical condition (as in chs 7, 19 and 30 described above). For Job, I would argue that there are two factors that contribute to his disease which are as much a factor in his ‘malady’ as his physical condition. These are first his mental torment and second the social ostracization to which his disease leads, as emphasized by those in disability studies. Let us look at Job’s sentiments in the dialogue in the light of these two

categories, but also consider similar lamenting sentiments from the Psalms and elsewhere that ground Job in a wider intertextual tradition.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Job's mental torment

There is no doubt that Job's mental state is linked up with his physical ailments, the body being a psychosomatic unity, but what I want to draw out here is the wider aspects of his despair that are both introspective and yet also focus on his personal relationship with God. It will also be seen that Job's complaints fit into a broader intertextual resonance of lament as known mainly from certain Psalms.

#### a) A death wish?

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<sup>7</sup> The close link of lament forms in Job and the Psalms was first noted in the context of form-critical studies such as Friedrich Baumgärtel, *Der Hiobdialog: Aufriss und Deutung*, BWANT 61, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1933, G. Hölscher, *Das Buch Hiob*, HAT 17, Tübingen: Mohr, 1937 and Claus Westermann, *Der Aufbau des Buches Hiob*, BHT 23, Tübingen: Mohr, 1956. Whilst Baumgärtel excised sections of the Job text that corresponded with psalmic lament forms as less original, Hölscher thought the 'confessions' of Job, as those of Jeremiah, to be misplaced psalms of lament. More constructively, Westermann argued that the close similarities between the way the lament was used in the two works indicated that Job was a dramatization of the psalms of lamentation. In more recent times scholars have spoken less of genre connections and more of specific allusions. See Klaus Seybold, 'Psalmen im Buch Hiob', *Studien zur Psalmenauslegung*, ed. Klaus Seybold, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998, 270-87. Seybold in *Die Psalmen*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1996, goes as far as to call Psalm 39 a 'Hiob-Psalm' (162). For a wider discussion of the links of Job and many other 'earlier' texts see Melanie Köhlmoos, *Das Auge Gottes: Textstrategie im Hiobbuch*, FAT 25, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999.

One has to feel fairly ill to wish that one had not been born or even conceived (Job 3, cf Jer. 20) and to long for death repeatedly as in 3.21-22 where Job is ‘bitter in soul’ and ‘long(s) for death, but it does not come and dig for it more than for hidden treasures’. This is just one side of the coin for Job, for although he starts off by wishing for death he later realizes that if he was indeed dead he would no longer be able to carry on his conversation with God. So in 7.8, 19, 21 he feels God’s gaze as oppressive but then thinks about being in Sheol and no longer feeling it and so longs for God’s presence again (cf Ps. 39.13), an indication of the way his arguments fluctuate – not holding one consistent position is a symptom of mental torment. In 7.16 his days are a breath (cf Ps. 39.6) – not only is time distorted on a daily basis, but overall his ‘days’ as in ‘his life’ are all too short. This bewailing his truncatedly short life contrasts with his wish for death and shows the fluctuations in his arguments. In 14.2 Job describes the way human beings blossom and then wither – nothing is lasting (cf. Ps. 102.11) for the same imagery and in 14.5 again he bewails the fleeting nature of his short life (cf. the measure of one’s days in Ps. 39.4).

#### b) God’s oppressive presence

Whilst at times Job longs for God, most of the time he finds God’s presence oppressive and, using vivid imagery, accuses God of waging a battle against him. In 3.23 he feels ‘fenced in’ by God, almost an irrational response from one in mental torment.<sup>8</sup> In 6.4 Job

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. The argument for parody in many passages in the Job dialogue in Katharine J Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature*, BZAW 197, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991. See earlier, Georg Fohrer, *Das Buch Hiob*, KAT 16, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag-Haus Mohn, 1963. Carol Newsome, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, Oxford: OUP, 2003 claims that Job’s parodies of psalms of



describes God's arrows – 'For the arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me'. This is part of Job's argument that God has turned against him, but the language of arrows could suggest stabbing physical pain as well. In 9.27 Job asks God to 'look away' to give Job respite from God's oppressive presence, as also in 10.20-22 and 14.6 (cf. Ps. 39.13).<sup>9</sup> At the end of the same chapter Job is back to reflecting on God as the cause of his afflictions: in 9.34 God wields a rod (cf. Ps. 39.10) and in 10.16 Job is hunted down by God and uses lion imagery to describe it (cf. Ps. 7.2, 16). In 14.19 Job is back to blaming God (cf. Ps. 69.2, 15) using the imagery of a flood sweeping over him. In 16.7-9 the imagery becomes more violent and the plea more impassioned. Job says that God has 'worn me out and shrivelled me up', a description of his leanness. God has 'gnashed his teeth at me'. In 16.12 Job feels broken in two and dashed in pieces; he has been used for target practice. In 16.13 the imagery of God as an archer is used - he slashes open Job's kidneys so that there is gall on ground. It is like a warrior attack (Job 16.14).<sup>10</sup> Later on, in chapter 19, God breaks Job 'in pieces with words' (19.1). In the summary in chapter 30 Job complains that God

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lament deliberately fragment and recombine key motifs to render them "literally and figuratively unspeakable" (p. 163).

<sup>9</sup> Arguably in the divine speeches God does 'look away' and focus on other aspects of his creation than the human.

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Raphael, 'Things Too Wonderful: A Disabled Reading of Job', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31:2004), pp. 399 – 424, thinks that Job 16.8-17 is describing dismemberment of the body 'from wounds to an occlusion of vision' which is then reversed in 17.7-11 'going from blindness to disintegration' and she describes this as a 'rhetorical chiasmus' (p 408).

has cast him into the mire (vv. 18-19) and tossed him about (v. 22). There is no mention of the Satan of the Job Prologue, rather it is God that Job blames for his maltreatment.

### c) Time is distorted

Related to the idea that his overall life is all too short is Job's complaint that his days are short and his nights long. Chapter 7 describes the way time is distorted when one is ill, a common human experience. Job describes months of emptiness and nights of misery (7.3). Job's sleeplessness is a physical phenomenon, but also a result of mental turmoil, again a familiar concept. His days are 'short' (7.6, cf. Ps. 102.3)) and 'end without hope' – night and day are distorted for him. In 9.25 he speaks again of days that pass all too swiftly (cf. 10.20, Ps. 39.4-5). In the summary chapter 30 Job describes his days of affliction (v. 16) and the nights that rack his bones, so that his pain gives him no rest (30.17).

### d) Physical responses to pain

Job is clearly in pain and expresses this in a number of different ways. In chapter 3 he speaks of his 'sighing and groaning'. Groaning is something one does if one is hurting physically, but it is also a prime indicator of depression and despair. He expresses the sentiment that so common are his sighs and groans that they are like food and drink to him, 'For my sighing comes like my bread, and my groanings (yṯg) are poured out like water.' (3.24). We might compare this to Psalm 22, where the Psalmist laments of God 'Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning (yṯg)?' (Ps.

22.1b).<sup>11</sup> Also ‘bread’ and ‘groaning’ are juxtaposed in Psalm 102.4-5. In the same chapter Job describes his lack of appetite (6.7) – this could have a double reference, both to tasteless food (v. 6) and to his state of health in general. Job 6.12-13 suggests his lack of strength, both in the face of God’s torment, but possibly also in general in the face of his physical illness. In chapter 13 Job describes his disease as eating away at him - in 13.28 ‘One wastes away like a rotten thing, like a garment that is moth-eaten’ (Ps. 39.11; Ps. 102.26). This is describing physical change but also mental anguish. In 14.22 Job complains that the pain of their own bodies is all they [mortals] feel. In 16.6 Job expresses the idea that his pain is not assuaged whatever he does - if he speaks or if he refrains (cf. Ps. 39.2). In 16.15 Job is in a wretched state, in mourning in the dust; in 16.16 his face is red with weeping, his eyes dark. In 16.22 death is in view, and in 17.1 death is waiting.<sup>12</sup> In 17.7 his eye is dim (cf. Ps. 69.4) and his members are diminished. Whilst these are physical symptoms they are hard to distinguish from his accompanying mental anguish. In 19.20 Job speaks of his emaciated body clinging to his bones (cf. Ps.

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<sup>11</sup> For an intertextual discussion of Job and Psalm 22, see Michaela Bauks, *Die Feinde des Psalmisten und die Freunde Ijobs: Untersuchungen zur Freund-Klage im Alten Testament am Beispiel von Ps 22*, SBS 203, Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> C. Barth, *Die Errettung vom Tode in den individuellen Klage- und Dankliedern des Alten Testaments*, Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1947, suggested that there is a fine line between life and death in Hebrew mentality and that the spheres of life and death overlap, death often encroaching upon life through illness and making the sufferer feel already under death’s power. See on the rhetorical significance of Job’s death wish within the book, Christian Frevel, ‘Dann wär ich nicht mehr da: Der Todeswunsch Ijobs als Element der Klagerhetorik’, *Tod und Jenseits im alten Israel und in seiner Umwelt: Theologische, religionsgeschichte, archäologische und ikonographische Aspekte*, eds Angelika Berlejun and Bernd Janowski, FAT 64, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009, pp 25-41.

22.14) and in v. 26 Job describes the destruction of his skin. In 19.27, ‘my heart faints’ – perhaps a reference to emotion but described with physical symptoms. In 21.6 Job describes a shuddering that ‘seizes my flesh’. In 23.2 he is back to ‘groaning’ and in 23.16 he again describes a faint heart. Finally, Job 26.1-2 describes his lack of power and strength.

#### e) Mental turmoil

Job’s accompanying mental turmoil comes out at the end of chapter 3, which has the nature of an opening programmatic chapter, in verses 25-6 when Job describes his ‘fear’ and ‘dread’ and being ill at ease and restless. These are all aspects of mental torment – being more fearful than one was before and, being already ill, dreading with an almost irrational dread what will come afterwards. Being unable to concentrate or settle to anything and feeling uncomfortable and restless are often aspects of illness that affect the mind as well as the body. In Job 6, Job describes his vexation and calamity being heavy, ‘heavier than the sand of the sea’ (vv. 2-3). Again this has the mood of a somewhat disproportional mental response to his situation that could well have physical ramifications. The language of a poisoned spirit in Job 6.4 indicates how this illness has reached to his inward spirit in the nature of a depression. Job 7.11 describes his mental anguish (of spirit) and his bitterness of soul, 7.13-14 his terrifying dreams and visions, again a sign of mental disruption and even of a physical temperature. In 7.15 Job speaks of ‘this body’ as if he is somewhat divorced from it – this is a common mental feeling when one is ill that somehow one’s body and spirit no longer match each other. In 9.27-8 Job tries to forget his complaint but then becomes ‘afraid of all my suffering’. This is perhaps indicative of nagging pain that does not allow one to forget it – as soon as it goes

it is forgotten, but when it still nags forgetting it is an impossibility. In 9.31 Job expresses the idea that despite washing, he feels filthy and uncomfortable in his clothes, presumably a by-product of having a skin disease. In Job 14.4 similarly he is unclean and cannot see any way out of that problem.

Chapter 30 is, as I have said, a kind of summary. In its last verses we get an overview of Job's mixed feelings. He feels as if he is in darkness (vv. 26, 28); his inward parts are in turmoil and never still (v. 27) and his days are characterized only by affliction (v. 27). His bones are burning (v. 30) (cf. Ps. 102.3). And at the end of the chapter, in v 31, he can but metaphorically play a mournful lyre and a weeping pipe.

#### f) Overview

Apart from this summary chapter, it is interesting to note that there is more from Job about his illness and its wider ramifications as just described in the first two cycles of speeches than in the third. Indeed the predominance is in the first cycle. In the second cycle such sentiments are outshone by his feelings of social exclusion, as I shall now go on to describe and this finds its summary in chapters 29 and 30. The third cycle moves on from the preoccupation with his ailments and distress to more preoccupation with his relationship with God and call for God to appear which has its summary in chapter 31. I have drawn attention in this section to intertextual parallels, especially in the psalms of lament.<sup>13</sup> This is to show that there is an element of Job that is less a personal complaint

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<sup>13</sup> See Will Kynes, *My Psalm has turned into weeping: Job's dialogue with the psalms*, BZAW 437, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012 for a full intertextual survey of the relationship between the Job dialogue and the Psalms.

than a stylized one, using known forms but often parodying them in the cause of describing his despair and railing against God. In many cases, then, Job turns what is a more positive sentiment in the psalms into a more negative one, in order to accuse God or bewail his lot and this is one of the distinctive techniques of the Job author.<sup>14</sup> It is clear from these many expressions of mental anguish that Job is using his illness to articulate his pain and does not see it as evidence of wrongdoing.

#### 4. Social exclusion

We have seen how God is seen by Job to have become his enemy. However, so have other people and sometimes the language seems to be interchangeable between enemies and God, for example, Job 16.10 ‘they gaped with their mouths and struck me on the cheek’ – this could refer back to his ‘adversaries’ or could refer to God (cf. Ps. 22.13; Ps. 102.8).<sup>15</sup> Former friends and also former recipients of his largesse have all turned against him. In 6.20 his enemies loom large (cf. Ps. 35.3, 25). In 6.21 he feels excluded by those who were once his companions: ‘You see my calamity and are afraid’. But their reaction is not only fear but contempt – in 12.4 he is a ‘laughingstock to my friends’ and in 12.5 ‘those at ease have contempt for my misfortune’. He calls his three friends ‘miserable comforters’ (16.2, cf. Ps. 69.21) and one gets the impression that it is the loss of other friends and former companions that troubles him more. In 16.4 he describes their shaking heads – isn’t that what mockers do? (cf. Ps. 22.7). Job could once assuage the pain of

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Katharine J. Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature*, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> On the motif of enemies in the psalms, see Othmar Keel, *Feinde und Gottesleugner: Studien zum image der Widersacher in den individualpsalmen*, SBM 7, Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969, pp. 93-131.

others (16.5). In 16.20 he feels the scorn of friends that bring him to tears. People mock (17.2) and spit (17.6, cf. Ps. 69.7, 11). In 19.13-16 Job describes at length the estrangement he feels from family and friends (cf. Ps. 69.8). In 19.17 his breath is repulsive – a physical aspect but one with social ramifications in that people do not wish to come near. In 19.18 he describes being despised even by young children. In 19.19 intimate friends abhor. And in verse 20 his bones cling to skin, another sign of his illness but also the reason for his rejection by others (cf. Ps. 102.5). He feels their pity (19.21; cf. Ps. 69.20) but that gives him no comfort, after all he was once their champion. It was he who tended to the needy and overcame his physical repulsion to help those who were afflicted. In 21.3 Job encourages them to ‘mock on’ (cf 30.9, cf Ps 69.12); in 21.5 he cries, ‘Look at me and be appalled.’ It is clearly his appearance that is most off-putting to people – they cannot get beyond the physical impairment to have real concern for the person suffering underneath. All respect that he formerly commanded is gone.

These ideas of social exclusion then gain momentum in the second cycle of the dialogue. They reach their climax in 30.1-15, 24-5. However there is a longer note in the summary chapters of 29-31 of recalling the past and his former social acceptance. Chapter 29 as a whole looks longingly back and in detail at that past that now takes on a rosy hue. In chapter 30 this has decisively changed. Job 30.1-8 describes disreputable people who mock him. In 30.9-10 he is mocked in song; he has become a byword. In verse 10 he is abhorred and spat upon by others. In verse 11 they show no restraint. He is ruined and attacked by these people (vv. 12-15) – this has clearly grown in his own mind in the same way that illness often leads to disproportion, but how far is it real? He complains in vv. 24-25 how unnatural it is to turn against the needy in this way and remembers how he, by

contrast, helped the needy. It was Job who wept and fasted for others, as in 30.25 (cf. Ps. 35.16). By the end of the chapter Job decides that he only has wild animals for company (cf. Ps. 102.6) – that is about the level now of his social interaction. Job 31.16-22 also recalls the past, as in chapter 29, – the repetition of ‘if I’ recalls his good deeds with the poor in the context of a sad reflection on his past life.

In short, social exclusion is clearly a major factor in Job’s complaint, an exclusion directly linked to his illness, in that one is a direct result of the other.<sup>16</sup> The idea that it might be due to wickedness is not entertained by Job. Social rejection of the disabled/impaired is a well-documented fact within disability studies, often exacerbated by physical repulsion by others, and embarrassment at the fact of physical or mental disability. Social rejection is also influenced by the perception by others that the disabled person is over-preoccupied by their illness and with moaning about it so as to be unable to converse in the usual manner.

## 5. Moral aspects

A moral dimension is immediately apparent when one turns to the dialogue between Job and the friends. Schipper makes the point that for the friends Job’s disease is all about

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<sup>16</sup> The link between illness and social ostracization, with friends becoming foes, is found in comparative ancient Near Eastern texts such as *Man and His God* and *Ludlul bel Nemeqi*. See Moshe Weinfeld, ‘Job and its Mesopotamian Parallels – A Typological Analysis’, *Text and Context: Old Testament and Semitic Studies for F. C. Fensham*, ed. W. Claassen, JSOTS 48, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988, pp 217-226. See also Katharine J Dell, *Job: Where Shall Wisdom Be Found*, Phoenix Guides to the Old Testament, Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2013, pp. 51-70.



wrongdoing.<sup>17</sup> They are not experiencing it and they see their role as standing in judgement upon it. For Job however the disease is all about his personal experience of pain and the outwards signs of disease are the outward signs of his inward misery. Similarly Greenstein writes ‘Job’s epistemology is, then, the opposite of his friends. Their world view is theoretical and abstract, while his is felt in the bone. While they stumble in attempting to apply a general, traditional doctrine to the specific case of Job, he relies on what he personally knows and interprets the workings of the world in the light of his experience.’<sup>18</sup> The friends perspective that directly links the disease to sin is given to us by Bildad in 18.13 when he mentions skin disease in the context of the punishment of the wicked – ‘By disease their skin is consumed, the firstborn of Death consumes their limbs’ - and by Zophar in 11.15 when he mentions a future when ‘you will lift up your face without blemish.’<sup>19</sup> Elihu makes a clear connection between diseased skin and wrongdoing when he describes the wicked: ‘Their flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen and their bones, once invisible, now stick out’ (33.21) and then the possibility of a ransom which will involve ‘his flesh becom[ing] fresh with youth’. (33.25)

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<sup>17</sup> J Schipper, ‘Healing and Silence in the Epilogue of Job’, *Word and World* 30/1 (2010) pp 16-22.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Greenstein, ‘On My Skin and in My Flesh: Personal Experience as a Source of Knowledge in the Book of Job’, in *Bringing the Hidden to Light: Studies in Honor of Stephen A Geller*, ed. K. F. Kravitz and D. M. Sharon, Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007, pp 63-77; p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> The ‘lifting up of the face’ motif is found in Job and the Psalms. See C. Newsom, ‘The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections’ in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 12 vols, ed L. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 421.

There is no doubt that sickness and disease were widely regarded as coming from God and as being a punishment.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, God could also choose to heal.<sup>21</sup> The author of Psalm 38 explicitly makes the link between God's anger at his wrongdoing and his disease: 'There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin...My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness.' (verses 3, 5) Yet, ironically, the psalmist's lament is to God as healer, as the only one who can lift his burden and restore him to health. In the wisdom literature, in Proverbs 3.8, the acquisition of wisdom will be 'healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body' (cf. Prov. 14.30), suggesting that rejection of wisdom will lead to illness. However, God is not mentioned as the cause of illness. In fact it is the wisdom that is on offer that can provide much-needed medicine as Prov. 17.22 makes clear: 'A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.' Furthermore the teaching of the wise brings healing, 'For they [my sayings] are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh' (Prov. 4.22). Readers or listeners are presented with a choice, one might say, in modern terms, a 'lifestyle' choice. Human beings are not simply the passive recipients of good and evil from God, rather they can choose a life of wellbeing for themselves.

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<sup>20</sup> Disobedience to God as a cause of disease is made very clear by the Deuteronomist in Deut. 28.21: 'The Lord will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you off the land that you are entering to possess.' (cf. Deut. 28.35b).

<sup>21</sup> The healing of the mind is often more difficult than the healing of the body: e.g. 'The human spirit will endure sickness; but a broken spirit - who can bear?' (Prov. 18.14).

Like the friends, the assumption that we all, as readers, tend to make in the book of Job is that Job's illness is part of his punishment for wickedness. In fact although all the calamities point in that direction, we know, with Job himself, that he has not been wicked, that he is 'blameless and upright' (1:1) and that this is all part of the 'test'. The illness is, like the other disasters, inflicted by 'the Satan', but he is not the embodiment of evil this figure later became. The question arises however, is Job's illness of a different quality to the other 'punishments' that he receives? Why is it picked out as the ultimate test and given a separate mention in the Prologue? Job had chosen that proverbial life of wellbeing and yet calamity struck nevertheless, not just in terms of destruction of children, property and possession but in a personal, life-threatening way with the infliction of the skin disease. It leads to pain, incapacity, humiliation and withdrawal from normal life. It leads to Job feeling alienated both from human society and from God. There is then a profound personal aspect to Job's suffering which is often forgotten by interpreters who stress the broad themes of human suffering and the problem of theodicy in the book. As Clements writes, 'It is in a real sense a book about sickness, if only because it singles out this type of human misfortune as one that is especially personal and acute.'<sup>22</sup> Clements traces a development away from a more cultic concern with illness, as found in Leviticus and Numbers, being caused by uncleanness/evil to a secularization of the issue in Proverbs and Job. This development might not be quite so linear and clear-cut as Clements proposes, but he goes on helpfully to say, 'there is reason to suspect that the author's purpose lay not in reaching deep and ultimate conclusions

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald E Clements, *Wisdom in Theology*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992, p. 86.

about all human suffering, but rather in establishing the parameters within which certain aspects of it should be understood.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the author of Job is exploring the attempt to understand the elusive nature of life-threatening illness. Illness is not something that is so obviously occasioned by ‘bad actions’ and seems to lack a straightforward moral explanation – it is still in God’s sphere, but arguably slightly dislocated from human causality and hence morality. Perhaps this understanding explains why the infliction of the disease is treated as a separate item in the Prologue. Disease has the character of simply appearing to strike at random – if God is the cause, this simply adds to the problem of why the innocent suffer.<sup>24</sup> Job is an innocent, a man of piety and devotion, who nevertheless becomes the victim of a severe, disabling disease which is certainly not self-inflicted.

#### 4. The Resolution of the story

The Job drama is resolved on three levels, first with the God speeches, which strangely mention nothing to do with Job’s physical illness,<sup>25</sup> second in Job’s two responses to God in 40:4-5 and 42:1-6, and third the Epilogue in 42:7-14, where, also strangely, there is no

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<sup>23</sup> Ronald E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology*, 1992, p 87.

<sup>24</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil*, Oxford: OUP, 2005. I strongly disagree with Crenshaw’s assessment that genetic flaws are to be associated with natural evil, i.e. where creation has ‘gone wrong’. On the theme of innocent suffering in Job, see Lothar Ruppert, *Die leidende Gerechte*, Forschung zur Bibel 5, Zurich: Echter Verlag, 1972.

<sup>25</sup> Rebecca Raphael, ‘Things Too Wonderful’ presents a strange argument that Job in the dialogue compares the divine attack on him to the divine attack on chaos monsters of old and that the divine speeches respond to this accusation. I find this unconvincing and this article disappointing in spite of its promising title.

restoration of Job's disease.<sup>26</sup> I will focus on the third here. In disability studies the point is well made by Schipper<sup>27</sup> that we tend to assume, in the absence of any information to the contrary, that a character is made well again. For example, we assume Jacob did not have a hip problem for the whole of his life but it is not explicitly stated. It is an assumption of the able-bodied that this state is the 'norm'. In fact, this is often not the case – many ailments, once present, last for the rest of one's life.

In the Job Epilogue there is no mention of the Satan and no mention of the restoration of Job's disease.<sup>28</sup> Most assume that he is restored to good health as he lives for many years and enjoys new offspring and their offspring. The restoration of Job's illness may be implied, but it is not actually stated. Whilst verse 10 could refer to a general restoration, the following verses go on to itemize the specifics of it (vv 12-13) and, whilst new family and material goods feature, the skin disease is not mentioned. As often noted, there is not the exact matching of the Prologue that one would expect in a 'folk tale' kind of tale – the element that is lacking is the healing of Job from his skin disease. Maybe the reason for this is that Job was indeed not restored to health. He may have had a long-term physical illness. Unsurprisingly there is no mention of his social displacement in the Epilogue and we assume that because he has a new family, these problems about his place in the

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<sup>26</sup> This forms an interesting contrast to the book of Tobit in which, in addition to the reward of prosperity after his ordeal Tobit receives a detailed physical restoration (Tob. 1.10-15).

<sup>27</sup> Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant*, Oxford: OUP, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Pointed out by C. L. Seow, 'Study notes for Job' in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., M. D. Coogan, New York: OUP, 2001, p 773, but not taken further.

community are also solved. But again this is not stated – does the loss of respect ever change back? Are things ever the same again?

This may have a moral ramifications – it may strengthen the idea that the disease was less to do with Job’s wrongdoing than has generally also been assumed. Schipper frames his discussion of the absence of mention of the skin disease in the Epilogue in terms of a moral difference in how Job and his friends approach Job’s disease. For the friends the disease is evidence of moral wrongdoing, for Job it is simply the manifestation of his pain. As Schipper writes, ‘The unusual silence in the epilogue of Job regarding any healing of Job’s skin diseases undermines the friends’ rhetorical connections between diseased skin and wrongdoing.’<sup>29</sup> The friends had no doubt expected that Job’s disease would be removed on restoration with the forgiveness of Job’s moral wrongs and yet ironically this does not occur and what is restored is possessions and children (which, strangely, the friends do not discuss in the dialogue). Schipper argues that in this change of focus, the argument of the epilogue moves beyond the ‘impasse’ of the dialogue to open up new possibilities instigated by God. In this land of new possibility restoration from disease is not the primary focus and hence the moral link made by the friends between disease and wrongdoing is undermined.

I would support the idea that the moral framing of Job’s disease is more of a concern of the friends than Job and that this is not the primary message of Job’s experience. Nor is the healing from the disease at the forefront of God’s concern in the Epilogue. What I

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<sup>29</sup> Jeremy Schipper, ‘Healing and Silence in the Epilogue of Job’, p 17.

want to stress though is that there is a possibility of evidence for a long-term illness here on Job's part that is not linked to moral wrongdoing and spawns his mental torment and feelings of social exclusion and ostracization. Whilst these feelings are to a certain extent removed by the restoration of Job, there is no evidence to suggest that there has not been a longer-term impact upon him. Verse 16 refers to the fourth generation with Job as head of the household, but this does not preclude him from having a long-term impairment or from negative sentiments that might ensue.<sup>30</sup> The narrative is terse and these details not recorded.

Finally, the prediction that Job's face would be 'lifted up' (as Zophar in 11.15) is fulfilled (42.9b), although it is God who lifts it, not Job himself. This only happens though, when Job, presumably still in his blemished state, since it happens before the restoration, intercedes for his friends (42.8). God offers no explanation of Job's physical pain, nor does God explicitly offer healing of his body. The outcome is left for the reader to decide.

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<sup>30</sup> Cf Both Isaac (Gen 27:1) and Jacob (Gen 48:10) were going blind in their old age, but remained head of their households.