Symptoms of depression in Job –
A note on psychological exegesis

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ABSTRACT
A few remarks on a psychological approach to the (Hebrew) Bible clarify some basic methodological issues. I describe a particular psychological approach to the Book of Job and interpret a few texts in terms of depression. I argue that certain texts in Job, viewed within a psychological frame of reference, could be considered symptoms of depression.

A INTRODUCTION
Rollins (1999:340) considers Theissen’s book, Psychological aspects of Pauline theology a landmark because it is the first “methodically disciplined” attempt by a biblical scholar to integrate and apply the insights of ... major psychological schools ... to the exegesis of ... texts’. However, Theissen (1987:1) presupposes the expected unpopularity of this approach: ‘Every exegete has learned that psycho-logical exegesis is poor exegesis. It interpolates between the lines things that no one can know. It inserts modern categories into ancient texts.’ These could be considered prophetic words if we consider the scarceness of publications on the subject, at least in South Africa.

Since this kind of exegesis is still in its infancy, at least in South Africa, in this article I shall make a few remarks on psychological exegesis to clarify the methodology of the approach in general, and particularly that of my own study. My study consists of positioning it within the framework of psychological exegesis. I describe a certain definition for depression and apply it to the text of the Book of Job.

B METHODOLOGICAL CLARIFICATION
There is no single definition for psychology (Viljoen 1994:4). In the same way, it is to be expected that there is no single definition for psychological exegesis. Psychological exegesis of the Hebrew Bible is rather a kind of collective term for a multitude of approaches which studies the Hebrew Bible ‘in the light of (mainly) individual human behaviour’ (Scheffler 1994:148). In the same way that there are various schools of psychology, Scheffler (1994:152) states that there is no single psychological approach to the Bible, but that various
approaches are analogical to various models or paradigms within psychological theories.

The basic methodology of psychological exegesis is to describe a certain theory in psychology as the point of departure and apply it to a text, providing that this theory is appropriate to that specific text. We see this in practice in some South African studies. Scheffler (1990:264) studied the relationship between Samuel and Saul and states: ‘My choice is Eric Berne’s transactional analysis ... having become acquainted with this model, I saw the relationship between Samuel and Saul in a new light.’ In the same way Viljoen (1994:19) studies Job in the light of some personality theories; in a later study Viljoen (1997) applied the theories of Alfred Adler and Viktor Frankl to Proverbs.

From the above, it seems that there are two basic movements in psychological exegesis, that is, describing the particular psychological approach to the text and motivating why a certain text is appropriate for this theory to be applied to it. In what follows, I shall attempt to do justice to these two movements, adding my voice to Scheffler (1990:264): ‘Some of my insights I would like to lay before you for your critical consideration.’ What follows is partly a reworking of my MDiv dissertation (De Villiers 2002) in which I described a certain definition of depression. Within the light of this definition, I saw some of Job’s utterances and non-verbal expressions in a different way, namely as symptoms of depression.

C  A FEW NOTES ON ‘DEPRESSION’

The first question we must ask before embarking on an exercise in psychological exegesis is whether the Book of Job can be understood in a psychological way. In this regard, Gitay (1999) investigates the intuition that the voices in dialogue are not arguing on the same level, that is, they are talking past one another. He argues convincingly that a possible reason for this is that Job’s friends use dogmatic/religious language whilst Job uses emotional, humanistic language. Taking this as my basic hypothesis, I move on to a definition of depression, applying it to the Book of Job.

The word ‘depression’ requires clarification, because within psychiatry it could refer both to a symptom and to a complex of symptoms or a syndrome measuring up to some diagnostic criteria. Another problem is that this word is often used in spoken language to refer to the blue days that all people experience from time to time. Willner (1985:35) states in this regard: ‘We use depression to

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1  At the time of conducting the study I had access only to the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III-R), although I am aware that there is a fourth edition which in some cases differs dramatically from the third. In the meantime, I have indeed compared the criteria for MDE in DSM-IV with the results of my study and found it to be compatible with my results.
refer both to a clinical condition and to the brief, mild, downward mood swings that we all experience as part of daily living.¹

Montgomery (1990:11) draws a table of so-called core symptoms of depression. In addition to this, DSM-III-R has interesting criteria for a Major Depressive Episode (MDE) to determine whether a person struggling with depression should be treated psychiatrically. Possible criteria would be: depressed mood (subjective report or observable by others), marked diminished interest or pleasure, significant weight loss, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotor retardation or agitation, feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt, diminished ability to think or concentrate or indecisiveness, recurrent thoughts of death or suicide. DSM-III-R’s criteria for MDE would be at least five of the above symptoms within the same period of two weeks of which at least one symptom must be either depressed mood or loss of interest.

Although there is great difficulty in applying criteria such as DSM-III-R to the Book of Job as an ancient text, it is clear from a text such as CTA² 5.6.11-25, from Ugarit, that the symptoms of depression as described in DSM-III-R are not too far removed from the international expression of mourning in the Ancient Near East. This text is considered by Kruger (1989:64) to be the most explicit expression of international mourning customs from the Ancient Near East. I quote a few excerpts from Anderson’s (1991:60-63) translation here:

His clothing [El] tears, down to the loincloth,
his skin he bruises with a rock by pounding³,
with a razor he cuts his beard and whiskers.
He rakes his upper arms

like a valley he rakes his chest.
He raises his voice and shouts ...

Apart from the above quoted text, Pham (1999:16) makes a selection of texts from the Ancient Near East to compile something like a corpus of culturally specific mourning customs. In relation to some symptoms in DSM-III-R and Montgomery (1990:11), these include depressed mood (i.e. the gloomy face or unkempt appearance), cease of normal activities (loss of interest), inability to sleep (insomnia), refusing to eat or to be comforted (weight loss), feelings of restlessness/pacing to and fro (psychomotor agitation), fatigue or loss of energy (feelings of fading away), death wish (recurrent thoughts of death).

² Herder (1963).
³ It can be argued that this is a reference to self-laceration.
D DEPRESSION IN JOB

In the above section I have described a framework within which to categorise symptoms of depression according to DSM-III-R and have established that there is a relationship between the cultural specific expressions of mourning and this particular set of symptoms. What follows will be based on certain texts in the Book of Job.

The fact that Job stood up (1:20) after hearing the report of disaster on his family and possessions, introduces his acting out of international mourning rites and suggests something of an emotional response within Job. The REB suggests an emotional response after hearing the report from the messengers (1:14-19): At this Job stood up, tore his cloak, shaved his head, and threw himself prostrate on the ground.

Consequently, Job is described as sitting in the ashes whilst scraping himself with a potsherd (2:8). Instead of following his wife’s advice and cursing God, Job does indeed curse, not God, but the day of his birth (3:1): Why was I not stillborn, why did I not perish when I came into the womb? (3:11). If we consider the severity of Job’s cry to curse the day of his birth as explicated more thoroughly by Jacobsen et al (1992:187), it is clear that this correlates strongly to the death wish characteristic of depression. One could then only speculate how severely Job was scratching himself, that is, whether this is a form of self-laceration, which would complement Job’s suicidal ideation in chapter 3. Although we could debate philologically the precise degree of severity or the nature of Job’s actions in 2:8, since the verb ‘to scratch’ is a hapax legomenon in this case, it is clear that Job’s feelings of worthlessness were not merely subjective, but his depressed mood was observable by his friends: For seven days and seven nights they sat beside him on the ground, and none of them spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great (2:13). Sitting in the ashes and keeping silent could point to diminished interest.

Another classical symptom of depression is insomnia. Job’s cry of being unable to sleep, being awake and wishing the night to drag past, is an expression of this: When I lie down, I think, ‘When will it be day, that I may rise?’ But the night drags on, and I do nothing but toss till dawn (7:4). We see Job being haunted by nihilistic thoughts at night: ... troubled nights are my lot (7:3b) and I shall never again see good times (7:7b). This correlates to subjective feelings of being slowed down and worthlessness. It is debatable whether this could count as an example of irrational thinking, being the symptom of inability to concentrate. A clearer example of this is My mind is distraught (17:1a). The cry that his limbs have become like a shadow could be a reference to significant weight loss (17:7b).

Although the Hebrew text of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia is used as basis for this study, all quotes from the Book of Job are from the Revised English Bible (REB).
In Job 30:28 we find a more obscure expression: *I go about dejected and comfortless*. This verse is text-critically problematic for several reasons. Barré (2001:179) has studied this verse within its cultural framework of the Ancient Near East, equating it to the restless pacing to and fro in the Epic of Gilgamesh and to King Ahab’s walking slowly in reaction to Elijah’s prophecy in 1 Kings 21:27. This makes Job 30:28 an example of psychomotor retardation or agitation, a symptom of depression.

**D CONCLUSION**

This article has been an unsafe experiment in psychological exegesis. I have formulated as clearly as possible the points of departure of a certain model of depression as described in DSM-III-R. Having considered the criteria for MDE in DSM-IV, I found that my results concerning a biblical text needed no revision.

There are certain shortcomings in trying to study a text from a modern psychological (or psychiatrical) point of view, because there are things which are impossible to deduce from the text. An example of this is two of the criteria for MDE, that is, that the symptoms cannot be accounted for by uncomplicated/normal bereavement. In the prose prologue there is evidence of circumstantial evidence which would support a case for Job’s reactions as being normal bereavement at the loss of a loved one. It comes down to that DSM-III-R has a time specific category, namely that symptoms must persist for a fixed period of time to be classified as MDE. This is impossible to know from the text.

However, the similarities between some symptoms of depression and Job are remarkable. This holds potential for, amongst other things, the way the Book of Job is used in the ministry. There is a tendency to use the Book of Job to support various views on the question of theodicy, especially when preaching from it. This study shows that the Book of Job has more possibilities interpreted from an emotional point of view, rather than a corpus of proof texts on dogmatic issues. In pastoral situations, the book could comfort parishioners with symptoms of depression that their feelings are not sinful, but are indeed, in a particular way at least, ‘biblical’.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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