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Why is it Important to Pay Attention to the Depiction of Pain in the Hebrew Bible?

Katherine E. Southwood

Pain is one of those topics that, once identified as a theme, is impossible not to notice almost everywhere within the Hebrew Bible. It is a manifestation of being human as part of the vulnerability of existing as being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*), as Martin Heidegger powerfully described it (Heidegger 1962:295-311). Pain is also built into the fabric of our world and is it important to acknowledge that is it not only a feature of humanity, but must also be recognised in other species. In many languages, pain is a term which has a wide semantic range, including physical somatic sensations such as disease or injury. Likewise, it can be emotional and psychological, such as the pain caused by grief. Physical pain can cause psychological pain and vice-versa; categories tend to overlap rather than pain being neatly confined to linguistic classifications. As an extension of this type of expansive thinking regarding how we consider the concept of pain, it is important to recognise that pain may pertain to individuals or collectives. As such, trauma, as well as suffering more generally, may both be considered to be part of what is understood as pain. This is because the study of pain is inherently intersectional, spanning science, technology, and medicine, as well as the history of emotions, the arts, and the humanities. Furthermore, the study of pain raises problematic philosophical questions. For example, pain gives rise to epistemic reflection since on a corporeal level it is fundamentally unshareable (which also means that another being's pain is undeniable). Or, to put it another way, the personal experience of pain has no object.

As a result of firstly the epistemic questions that emerge, secondly the disciplinary intersectionality of pain as a topic, and thirdly the inability to make clear distinctions between different types of pain (physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological, mental, metaphysical), it is perhaps not surprising that the relationship between pain and language is a complex one. This has long been acknowledged in disciplines where one of the key primary points of focus is pain. For example, in medical anthropology and sociology, as well as other sub-disciplines (ethnophysiology, or bioethics, for example), pain is a key feature of research. For example, illness labels can give people experiencing pain agency just as they can act to take away agency. This is because even biomedical disease labels and language has social consequences. When a physician makes a diagnosis, a person's condition acquires a social state and meaning which may in turn change their behaviour

and understanding of their own body (and this may or may not be empowering). Any language, even medicalised terminology, that is assigned to pain is, therefore, impossible to disentangle from social and cultural associations. Indeed, even somatic sensation including pain, are interpreted in light of cultural and social determinants. For example, as anthropologist Thomas Csordas explains, attending to a body sensation is ‘not to attend to the body as an isolated object, but to attend to the body’s situation in the world’; therefore, even a bodily sensation can ‘become a mode of attending to the intersubjective milieu that gives rise to that sensation’ (Csordas 1994:138). A case in point here is medical and psychological anthropologist Jason Throop’s fieldwork in Yap (an island in Micronesia) wherein different attitudes towards pain cause it to be overlain with different meanings than the US based anthropologist had been anticipating (based on his own US cultural context). As he observes it ‘is not that pain hurts less here. It does not, nor do wounds reopened by the strain of continued work heal more quickly. The pain simply matters less’ (Throop 2010:159). A similar perspective emerges through the sociocultural anthropologist Mark Nichter’s work, where he makes the case that ‘how bodily processes are understood in different cultures and how such understanding influences perceptions of health, physical development, illness, medicines, and diet’; this in turn influences perceptions of ‘what physical symptoms are deemed normal and abnormal at particular times’ (Nichter 2008:25). Therefore, in addition to epistemic complexity, disciplinary intersectionality, and the defiance of straightforward categorisation, linguistic obscurity, and difference perceptions and approximations of meaning in relation to cultural and social ways of speaking about pain must be acknowledged.

It is rather difficult to make clear linguistic distinctions between different domains of pain. However, even before we attempt to make such distinctions the very nature of the connections between pain and language have to be given attention. Indeed, said connections have been the subject of significant debate. Of course, if these connections are a source of debate it follows that the connection between pain and meaning-making is a fraught one too. Contrary to early helpful contributions such as those by Elaine Scarry and by Susan Sontag (who dispited the connections between pain and language, as well as pain, metaphor, and meaning), nowadays many thinkers are keen to unpack the connections between pain, language, and meaning.¹ Many argue

¹ Scholarship, which is nowadays critiqued, has been helpful in the past in terms of fashioning our thinking around pain, meaning, and language. For example, Sontag (a patient experience expert, Philosopher, and public intellectual) made some valuable inroads into advocating for resisting applying language and especially metaphors to attempting to understand illness. For example, she argues that it is

that putting pain into language is indeed possible (perhaps with the exception of very extreme cases of pain such as torture) and that the abundance of pain metaphors, illness narratives, and autopathographies that exist is evidence of the possibility of pain and language having a productive relationship (Kleinman 1988; Good 1994; Aaronson 2000). For example, Ann Jurecic, an academic specialising in English literature and medicine, argues persuasively about language's role in the context of pain and meaning-making when she states that pain is not inexpressible, rather giving language to pain 'makes a claim asking for acknowledgement, which may be given or denied' (Jurecic 2012:62).² Therefore, the premise of earlier discussions as pioneered helpfully by Scarry and Sontag, namely that pain is not easily put into language and that illness metaphors should be resisted to avoid stigma, is perhaps flawed.

A more productive starting place for deep reflection on the relationship between pain and language, and meaning-making, may be to think carefully about how to make people receptive to stories of pain. The different starting points betray within them a different set of attitudes and values, which end up giving rise to different types of questions when it comes to pain. For example, when somebody or a group in pain asks the question "Why me?" an attempt to answer said question might be considered slightly tone-deaf. Furthermore, it is 'theologically cowardly simplistically to assign responsibility and agency without pause for thought' (Southwood and Southwood 2022). This is because the question "Why me?" is so often an expression of lament which masquerades as a question but, in reality, calls for moral witnessing, or even simply a recognition that the person expressing pain is fully human. This is because, as Throop argues, pain 'is a basic existential fact of our distinctly human way of being-in-the-world. To be human is to be vulnerable to both the possibility and inevitability of suffering pain' (Throop 2010:15). Meaning-making cannot simplistically be imposed externally by viewers on to the person experiencing pain, just as a witness to another's pain exists at an epistemic distance without a first-person understanding of the experience.

'punitive ... to give a disease meaning' and suggested it was liberating to detach illness from metaphor because through doing so one might avoid unnecessary stigma (Sontag 1978:58). Similarly, Scarry (a professor of Aesthetics and General Theory of Value) made a helpful contribution to discussion by exploring what was then understood as pain's inexpressibility. Scarry argued that pain resists language because it is world destroying, and therefore language breaks down and is shattered into cries and shrieks in the face of pain (Scarry 1985:5).

² For a fuller discussion of the ways in which Sontag's and Scarry's work have been critiqued refer to Southwood 2021:24-28.

The construction of meanings around the experience of pain (be they political, social, symbolic or other types of meaning) is, and needs to be, therefore, the privilege of the person or group experiencing pain (whether directly or indirectly). In contrast, assigning meanings to other people's experience of pain, given the inaccessibility of the experience, risks epistemic and hermeneutical injustices. For clarity, epistemic injustice is a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower. Epistemic injustice is not uncommon among people who experience illness, because patient voices are regularly dismissed as irrelevant, confused, or a drain on resources. Carel and Kidd suggest that people who are ill 'may be regarded as cognitively unreliable, emotionally compromised, existentially unstable or otherwise epistemically unreliable' and this means that their voices and interpretations of their experiences are deemed 'suspect simply by virtue of their status as an ill person' (Carel and Kidd 2014:531; cf. Fricker 2007). Essentially, through being ill, the person is denied the credibility they might otherwise have. This type of injustice can be seen readily in the book of Job through the assignment, on the behalf of Job's friends, of moralising language and meaning to Job's pain. Moralising language may be defined as 'judgemental communication – speech emphasising personal responsibility and incriminating assumptions embedded within advice' (Southwood 2021:1; cf. Southwood forthcoming). Perhaps, therefore, rather than arguing that pain resists language and meaning it may be better to suggest that 'pain does not resist meaning, [but] it does resist moralising' (Southwood 2021:142). Perhaps one of most important things that Job highlights is the need for empathetic attention, rather than dismissal, when people experience pain.

Though there is much in common between them, the articles in this volume deal with the topic of pain in the Hebrew Bible in different ways and from different perspectives. In Melanie Peetz's article, 'The Pain of the Oppressed and Divine Empathy in Exodus 3,7-10', the focus is on God's empathy and how, in response to Israel's pain, divine empathy transcends scholarly conceptualisations of empathy. Peetz highlights the first-person verbs of sensory perception that appear with Yhwh as grammatical subject, namely that of seeing and hearing. She suggests this pairing should be understood as a merism (thus signifying all-encompassing awareness). Effectively, therefore, Yhwh recognises and fully understands Israel's situation. Furthermore, Peetz argues that the verb 'know' which appears towards the end of the section (v.7), has a synthesizing element summarizing sensory perception and processing it further. Peetz's suggestion which follows, that Yhwh's knowing Israel's pain transcends cognitive understanding and instead refers to an understanding and ability to perceive that emerges through personal experience and sensory involvement is

fascinating, with exciting epistemic implications beyond the argument in the article. Similarly, Peetz highlights the reference on Yhwh's lips to Israel as 'my people' as an indication of solidarity in suffering and the intention to alleviate the problem through intervention. Furthermore, Peetz draws our attention to the ways in which Yhwh self-identifies as being bound up with Israel through the promise to the ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a commitment transcending their current situation through being located in the remoteness of historical distance. Peetz argues that this representation of divine empathy goes beyond the concepts of empathy and compassion as widely understood. Instead, it encompasses an aspect of wilful obligation and an expanded sphere of perception and experience. Yhwh's response to Israel, therefore, encompasses both empathy and compassion but also goes beyond both concepts and the words uttered by Yhwh in the passage betray a first-person, experiential perception and very deep understanding of Israel's predicament.

In Rosanne Liebermann's article 'Reading Narratives of Pain in the Hebrew Bible: The Case of Elaine Scarry and the Golden Calf Episode (Exodus 32)' asks how we should understand the final punishment promised by Yhwh in Exod 32:34, where Yhwh strikes the people with a plague on account of the golden calf. Liebermann reflects on Scarry's understanding of the matter describing Scarry's case that in this episode, Yahweh views the embodying of himself through the calf as unlawful and therefore a reduction on divine power. According to Scarry, this is what instigates the immediate reaction from Yhwh a reaction which she frames as Yahweh's intensification of the embodied nature of the people who experience death and pain as part of divine punishment. Liebermann contextualises Scarry's work, noting the strengths and weaknesses of her general arguments and their reception in scholarship. One key strength of Liebermann's argumentation here is her distinction between the reception of Scarry's work in her own field and the way that her work has been critiqued in Biblical Studies (with reference to the material / immaterial dichotomy). This helps Liebermann to provide a helpful steer for readers to navigate the different ways in which research evolves both within and without Biblical Studies.

Liebermann goes on to provide a further critique of Scarry's interpretation of the Golden Calf Episode after which she provides some of her own exegesis as part of a reconsideration of how pain functions within the text. For Liebermann, perhaps with some similarities to Scarry's case, pain is a highly effective tool which Yhwh uses in the book of Exodus to reinforce the power differential between himself and humans. However, Liebermann also argues that an important meta-narrative of pain exists in the book of Exodus. Namely, that 'Exodus promises that if the Israelites uphold the practices it

describes, they will notice the positive effects of their special identity as Yhwh's people via the good health of their bodies'. Liebermann contextualises this against various responses to the COVID-19 pandemic among Christian groups to show the risk that Exodus poses in terms of stigmatizing sufferers of ill-health. Liebermann persuasively argues for the importance of the person experiencing illness to be able to tell their own story about illness, rather than having meaning projected on to them. The projection of meaning and stories on to those who are ill is not only part of stigmatisation, but is part of a tactic of responsabilisation that is ultimately harmful.

Christl Maier's article 'Jerusalem's Open Wound: Bodily Pain as a Metaphor of Collective Trauma' addresses pain in Jeremiah and helps us to think carefully about the ways in which pain and its expression in language is culturally determined. Maier's work analyses the linguistic idioms of pain in Jeremiah and then examines the narrative representations of pain focusing on the motif of the open wound. She argues that Jeremiah is a metanarrative of cultural trauma. Readers are invited to view the scenes of wounding presented in Jeremiah as if they were spectators. This motif of the wounded body leads readers to feel sympathy for Jerusalem just as it may also evoke disgust and repulsion. What is interesting here, argues Maier, is the move in Jeremiah from rebuke to consolation and rebuilding. This, she argues, when read with a hermeneutics of trauma makes for a 'deeply ambiguous' image of God as both healer and perpetrator of wounds. Maier suggests that the image of the wound, as part of collective trauma is a way of communicating about a broken society in crisis under Babylonian hegemony. In this context, the laments of the female figure address the suffering of the social body and describe the pain of traumatized people.

In her essay, 'To Heal and to Harm: Metaphor and Trauma in the Book of Nahum', Juliana Claassens thinks about the ways in which trauma, rather than defying language and meaning as we discussed earlier, can actually be generative for metaphor. Claassens argues that metaphor plays a vital role the narration of traumatic memories which allows people to develop new meanings and to exercise perspective-taking in a way that facilitates integration. She focuses specifically on the way that Nineveh is portrayed as having been strong and healthy previously but now attacked, wounded, and bereaved. Claassens examines this representation of Nineveh as a suffering body. Claassens notes that the prophet Nahum, whose name means "to comfort," acts as a witness to the defeat of Nineveh, offering a candid reflection on the terrifying effects of war on suffering bodies. Crucially, she shows how the recognition and understanding of the extent of suffering offers some capacity for relief and offers therapeutic possibilities through the

chance to create a unified story wherein the City is a suffering body with suffering bodies in her midst. Claassens then examines collective trauma in Nahum showing how there is a propensity for harm, and therefore a danger, associated with metaphors which contain fantasies of revenge against Nineveh in Nahum. Interestingly, Claassens turns to Sontag's work towards the end of her essay to think about the complexities involved in regarding the pain of others reminding us that, like photographs of war, texts do not speak for themselves. Instead, moral witnessing is involved in engagement which attempts to recognize pain in another. Claassens suggests that readers should extend empathy and compassion for all victims, including Nineveh, in the text in our recognition and acknowledgement of pain.

Thomas Wagner's essay, 'Suffering as the Experience of Remoteness from God' explores emotion in the context of the God-human relationship by considering suffering and the perception of pain not as culturally determined, but as a core part of human nature. Wagner detaches pain from suffering suggesting that pain represents a physical sensation that is related to the self, whereas suffering emerges through the perception of pain and its interpretation through cognitive processes. Wagner suggests that pain is not individualised but instead becomes relevant for the sociability of a person in addition to how there are perceived by others. Wagner looks first to the example of Psalm 38 to explore the way human suffering finds expression. He notices the way in which v.17 of the Psalm expresses pain and understands it as having been initiated by God. As such, Wagner suggests that pain in the Psalm is understood interpersonally. Wagner draws on a comparison with a Mesopotamian ritual text, VAT 8237, where the cause of human suffering is a demon whose affliction and ritualised violence are the source of pain. Similarly, he draws on the evidence of a cylinder seal from a MB IIB or LB I found at *Tell el-`Ağğūl* and in the *Utukkū Lemnūtu* series as further evidence to illustrate the case that pain is represented in many instances in the ancient world as having originated in an interpersonal way through the attack of another being. Wagner suggests that the demonic character of these examples from ritual texts might also be understood to exist in the depiction of Yhwh in the Psalm. However, realising this the Psalmist's confession of loyalty to Yhwh calls upon him as a protective deity. So, paradoxically, Yhwh takes on characteristics of both roles. Wagner goes on to survey, briefly, how this type of attribution of the cause of suffering to Yhwh can be traced in Lamentations 5 and in Job where questions emerge about the justification of suffering and theodicy.

The last two essays are contributions from the co-editors of this volume. Martina Weingärtner's essay 'Vom Schmerz Gottes: Ausgewählte Einblicke in eine menschliche Gottesprädikation' discusses the question of God's pain

as it is represented anthropomorphically and anthropopathically in several texts (Gen 6:6; Ps 78:40; Hos 1:1-11; Jon 4:10f). Weingärtner addresses what she identifies as widespread discomfort in terms of representing God in human terms, especially when those human terms involve divine suffering and pain which would seem to contradict immutability. However, Weingärtner points out, persuasively, that pain is a component of empathy and compassion and as such we should acknowledge God's pain more freely as part of the divine emotional range. Demythologising God's pain and pathos so as to strip away the possibility of suffering, vulnerability, and fragility therefore may be problematic. However, Weingärtner also cautions against taking metaphoric expressions that relate to God's pain too literally suggesting that anthropomorphisms must be understood as relational linguistic phenomena. Weingärtner provides exegesis of several key verses, noted above, wherein God expresses or is depicted as in pain as the next logical step in the argument. These moments in the Biblical text are carefully-selected for the research agenda. However, Weingärtner urges caution when thinking critically about the topic of God's perception of pain. She makes a case for pausing to carefully consider the way we translate various linguistic representations of perception in Hebrew, when this terminology emerges in relation to divine, superhuman pain. A key consideration here is the way that language is so regularly situated in an anthropological-psycho-social-phenomenon. Perhaps, therefore, we should situation God's pain in the key tension that exists between anthropology and theology as part of reflective processes of self-interpretation and self-restraint. God's pain, when considered from this perspective may have a poimenic function because it provides a space for human pain to be embedded. This occurs because a key difference between human and divine pain is that in the case of the latter, God does not become helpless.

In the final essay, 'Fragile Masculinities: Vulnerable Bodies, Pain, and the Shaping of Manhood in the Hebrew Bible,' Danilo Verde explores Biblical masculinity using hegemonic masculinity (defined as the dominant form of masculinity within a given culture, encapsulating the ideals, norms, and practices that legitimize and sustain male dominance over women) as a springboard for reflection. In this topical article, Verde juxtaposes manhood in the Biblical texts with the topic of pain. This coupling of themes generates a productive tension given the ways in which pain subverts the ideals of power and dominance. Verde's focus on the fragility of male bodies in the Biblical material opens up an interesting space through which to engage with male vulnerability. Verde's range of textual material within the discussion is helpfully broad. However, striking examples of male figures experiencing pain who are included in the discussion include Jacob in his wounding at the

Peniel; Samson's downfall from strength and heroism; and the tensions created by the depictions of male leadership coupled with fragility such as is the case with Ahaziah, Ben-Hadad king of Aram; Jehoram, king of Israel; and Uzziah king of Judah. Verde highlights how many of these texts shift the focus from the supposed invincibility of rulers to their reliance on Yhwh. In this way, many of the depictions of manhood are subverted because the idea of reliance on Yhwh places power beyond the realms of the control of male leadership. Verde notes, however, that although these narratives complicate certain aspects of hegemonic masculinity, they also help to uphold patriarchal structures through a masculine portrayal of Yhwh as the ultimate figure of power and authority.

Verde persuasively makes a case for the importance of recognising the Biblical material's powerful contribution to representing male pain as part of an expression of the full humanity of male characters. A key example that Verde discusses in the essay is that of Job. Verde argues that Job is a figure who contrasts starkly with the macho ideal, found in many other Biblical texts, of inner strength, resilience, and silent suffering. Instead, Job's strength can be seen through his endurance of suffering and his attempt to communicate passionately about it and make it known (rather than being silenced, stigmatised, or hushed-up under a veil of taboo). Instead, as Verde observes, Job is a Biblical figure 'who is granted the most expansive space to articulate his pain and suffering'. Furthermore, Verde focuses on other male figures in the Biblical material who are given space to articulate their pain. For example, Hezekiah, David, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jonah, and Habakkuk all wrestle openly with pain. Finally, Verde turns to consider male pain as it is represented in Proverbs, arguing that the theme of male physical pain surfaces in the book's metaphorical framework, wherein somatic metaphors are used as vehicles to impart wisdom. In Proverbs, Verde suggests, pain is a consequence of foolishness, but – although it certainly has its limitations – not in an entirely simplistic way. Instead, Proverbs offers a profound understanding of the ways in which health is directly related to the inner workings of both mind and body especially with respect to attitudes.

It is often the case that Biblical studies, because as a discipline it is receptive to insights from other fields of study, ends up being instructed through interdisciplinary engagement as if texts were passive recipients of more insightful disciplines. This collection of essays has demonstrated the huge potential that the Biblical texts, as well as Biblical scholars have to contribute to knowledge so that the flow of information and ideas is not unidirectional. The contributions here help us to think afresh about the ways in which pain can be a necessary part of empathy and compassion; about the possibilities for divine empathy and compassion; about the nature of stigma

and social constructs around pain in terms of our expectations around gender; about the ways we translate linguistic knowledge that deals with the topic of perception; about the importance of moral witnessing; and about the epistemic implications that pain has in terms of cognition and culture. It is my hope that these reflections on pain, given their interdisciplinary nature, are utilised both by scholars whose primary concern is the Biblical material, but also by the academic (and perhaps even broader) communities beyond the confines of Biblical scholarship.

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