Job's Emotional Struggle with the Womb: Some Psychoanalytic Interpretations

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Abstract

The womb is invested with great significance in the book of Job. As Job regresses from his extended body, concretised in his children, servants and material possessions, to his own, which is then "eaten into" by his skin problems, he longs to return to it. His fantasies about this womb reflect his unconscious anger, wishes and anxieties, processed by his symbolisation of the womb as a holding and containing grave where he can escape the attacks on his body. As such the womb invites a psychoanalytic study, with even transpersonal-psychological prospects, including that God is somehow, at least unconsciously, associated or even identified with the womb.

Keywords: womb; Job; psychoanalytic

Introduction

In a seemingly mostly "male" book, the quest for the psychoanalytic meaning of the womb may sound unexpected, even questionable. However, its mention in key verses suggests that its relatively low frequency and therefore apparent insignificance may be deceptive. The conscious intent of the ancient author seems to be undermined by his or her unconscious revelations.

The hypothesis put forward in this article is that the womb has a crucial psychological function for Job in his search for the Ultimate beyond the boundaries of his body and his existence.

After a brief survey of psychological studies on the womb, this study charts the body parts mentioned in the book of Job before locating the womb amongst them. This is succeeded by playfully imitating the three orders of Lacan (1974, *passim*; 1981, 29) to explore the presentation of the womb in the book of Job: the apparent instances of

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fantasies of hatred against the womb as a surface presentation of Job's attitude towards it can be viewed as the *imaginary*. Thereafter, symbolisation in the Winnicottian transitional space (1953, *passim*; *vide infra*),[1] pregnant with even superconscious[2] meaning to be "conceived," will be explored as the *symbolic*. In the final section the ultimate desire of Job of "seeing" God as the *real* beyond the imagined womb and its symbolisation will be dealt with.

Survey of Psychological Studies on the Womb

The psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi (1873–1933) regarded the body, and in fact all nature, as speaking, and recognised the reappearance of suppressed speech as a kind of ventriloquism (Bauchreden 1952a, 211). Human language, based on body language and itself a living "body", makes the world a reflection and expression of the body (1952b, 228). He summarised the communication between the body's organs, thanks to their close connections and mutual associations (1994a, 120), with the formula *uterus loquitur* (the womb speaks, 1994b, 103), suggesting, amongst others, the cause of hysteria (from ὑστέρα, the womb). In *Versuch einer Genitaltheorie* (*Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*), Ferenczi (1924, 53ff.) suggested that the wish to return to the womb (*regressus ad uterum*) and the comfort of its amniotic fluids symbolises a wish to return to the origin of life, the sea (*vide infra*), which is also an important image in the book of Job (cf. 6:3; 7:12; 9:8; 11:9; 12:8; 14:11; 26:12; 28:14; 36:30; 38:8; 38:16; 41:23). This is a notion which one can religiously extrapolate as a return to God.

While Freud (1940, 296) and Lacan (1966, 685ff.) regard the phallus as key to understanding the psyche and Melanie Klein (1975, 5–9) emphasises the mother's breasts, no one seems to take the womb that seriously in psychoanalytic thinking. Perhaps the womb is too hidden in unknown "pre-history", despite much research on prenatal existence, for instance that by the Italian child-neuropsychiatrist, Alessandra Piontelli (1992). The views of the Austrian psychoanalyst, Otto Rank (1884–1939), and the Czech psychiatrist and transpersonal psychologist, Stanislav Grof (b.1931), may also be relevant. The former points out that birth, well before the Freudian Oedipus complex, is the greatest trauma and the cause of all separation anxiety. Male homosexuality is then rooted in an abhorrence of female genitals associated with this trauma (Rank 1988, 61).

Building on these theories by Rank, Grof (1988, xvi) found three broad layers of human experience in his cartography of the psyche, all accessible through holotropic states of

1 In German, "symbol" can be translated by "Sinnbild", that is, an image of meaning.

2 "Das Symbol ist keine Allegorie und kein *Semeion* (Zeichen), sondern das Bild eines zum größeren Teil bewußtseinstranszendenten Inhaltes." ("Symbols are not allegories and not signs; they are images of contents which for the most part transcend consciousness." Jung 1952, 129. Translated by Beatrice M. Hinkle.)

consciousness: the biographical, the perinatal, and the archetypal or transpersonal, each going further back in time. The first is the sensory and the recollective-biographical barriers to be passed through and includes memories and fantasies of the birth process and other physical traumas, which he called COEX (Grof 1988, 3–6). Within the perinatal layer reliving such pain can lead to identification with the collective and have "dramatic physiological manifestations" (Grof 1988, 7). This immediately brings Job's bodily struggles and his exceptional empathy towards those suffering to mind.[3] On this level, four overlapping Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPM I–IV) occur.

The first matrix, the Amniotic Universe, is the ideal environment of the foetus's unity with the mother where boundaries are absent in its oceanic feeling (Grof 1988, 11–12; *vide supra*). When intrauterine experiences have been negative due to stress during pregnancy, their toxic energies could lead to hypochondria and inability to bond emotionally (Butler 2009, 3). One can associate this with the pristine state in which Job lives before his trouble starts, although his concern for the suffering and the sins of his children alternates with this condition or adumbrates the next experience.

The second matrix, Cosmic Engulfment, is a claustrophobic experience due to the contracting uterine walls before the dilation of the cervix. Feelings of loneliness and helplessness are overwhelming (Grof 1988, 18). A memory of this time is linked to identification with the victims of all times, especially infants who died in labour. Archetypically, this is associated with a devouring mother or harsh God (Butler 2009, 4). These experiences and themes, together with the struggle concerning boundaries, are readily discernible in the book of Job.

The third matrix, Death-Rebirth Struggle, is when the cervix is open during the birth process (Grof 1988, 21) and accompanied by sadomasochistic transformations of pain and choking into volcanic ecstasy (Butler 2009, 5). Hopefully fighting for a breakthrough, there is also identification with both victims and perpetrators, the latter including the womb. Memories and fantasies of and associations with the "hostility" of the womb and birth clearly run through the plight of Job (*vide infra*).

The fourth matrix, Rebirth and Separation from the Mother, is a post-natal experience with a possible sense of total annihilation and ego-death as "an irreversible end to one's philosophical identification with what Alan Watts called skin-encapsulated ego" (Grof 1988, 29–30). Somewhere between the ideal of the womb and the agony of the birth canal it involves a sense of awakening, insight and transcendence of the fear of death (Butler 2009, 8). Job's eventual insight is like a kind of rebirth into a new reality when he can see God and when he no longer cries out against his mother.

3 Although some (cf. Cooper 1997, 241) argue that his justice has not included care and empathy.

The Womb Amongst the Body Parts in the Book of Job

A survey of the bodily map of the protagonist can add insight into his experiences and struggles, especially when a psychoanalytic lens is applied to it.

Approximately 69 body parts are mentioned in the book of Job, including two of the four words for the womb used in the Hebrew Bible ([מעה], בֶּטֶן, רֶחֶם and קֶרֶב). It is also the biblical book in which the womb is mentioned most. This starts quite early, in 1:21, even before Job's opening speech in Chapter 3 which deals once again with the womb right at the beginning of his debate with his friends. The womb is referred to once again close to the end of the book by God, but then not to the womb from which Job was born. In this way the book is "embraced" by images of the womb.

Vall (1995a, 337) calls this well-known poetic couplet in the first chapter (1:21) the matrix of the total book. It mentions בֶּטֶן, the same word used for Behemoth in 40:16 (but then generally in the sense of "body") almost at the end of the book. Nine out of 16 times this noun is used for the womb (1:21; 3:10; 3:11; 10:19; 15:35; 19:17; 31:15; 31:18; 38:29), whereas רֶחֶם (womb, with no other meaning) occurs 5 times (3:11; 10:18; 24:20; 31:15; 38:8), putting the total number of times that the womb is mentioned explicitly at 14. Elsewhere, such as in 10:9–11, the womb is only implied.

Two other body parts will gradually gain importance in this interpretation of the womb in the book of Job. The word עוֹר (skin) occurs ten times, i.e., ten per cent of the 99 times it occurs in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, the *hapax legomenon* in 16:15, גִּלְדִּי (my skin), probably Aramaic, brings the total that the skin is mentioned explicitly to eleven. Ten of these instances are about Job and only 10:11 (giving the positive counterpart of Ezekiel 37:8) and 40:31 celebrate the miracle of the skin, in the former his own and in the latter that of Leviathan, the only time in the Hebrew Bible where it does not refer to a dead animal which has been skinned. Sometimes the word for skin is not mentioned explicitly, but referred to, as in 2:7, 8, 12 and in 11:15 where Zophar sarcastically speaks of פָּנֶיךָ מִמּוּם (your face without spot). Various interlocutors mention the skin, the first of whom is Satan (who actually challenged God to touch Job's bone and flesh in 2:5), while God has the last word about the "ideal" skin, namely that of Leviathan. Bildad mentions it in 18:13 and the remaining mentions all come from Job, the one who is probably most aware of it due to his plight in that very part of his body.

Apart from פָּנִים (face), which occurs 70 times in the book of Job, but often with the prepositional prefixes ל or מ, rendering it into a directional indicator, עַיִן (eye) is mentioned 46 times (Jenni and Vetter 1984, 260)[4] and so dominates as body part in a

4 In second position after פָּנִים (face) is, however, יָד (hand) with 53 mentions, of which many are also used with prepositions, and then in adverbial functions to suggest instrumentation.

narrative where facing the eyes of the Other seems to be the life-threatening or existential challenge.

The Womb Imagined as Enemy

Job seemingly blames his mother's womb for the conflict raging on his skin, his body-boundary suggesting his existential boundary as well, threatening him with death. There is a parallel with Numbers 12:12 where the appearance of Miriam's skin looks like someone stillborn.

Apart from equating his nameless mother as a *pars pro toto* synecdoche with her womb (which "forgets" him in death in 24:20) and so reducing her to it (paralleled in 19:17 where בִּטְנִי [my womb] is used for his wife), he curses that very base and origin of his existence when life makes no sense to him any longer in 3:10–11, somewhat echoed in 10:18, making him regard the womb as a grave.[5] This notion of the underworld is also clear in Jonah 2:3: מִמְּעֵ֥ה שְׁא֖וֹל (from the belly/womb of Sheol/the netherworld) and associated with the womb in Proverbs 30:16: שְׁא֣וֹל וְעֹ֣צֶר-רָ֑חַם (the grave and the barren womb).[6]

It is interesting to note that this indeterminacy of the womb due to the elliptical phrase not mentioning his mother is echoed in 38:8 where the sea is born from some womb. The word רֶחֶם is used positively in 38:8 and in 31:15 where the womb is generalised but with negative connotations in 3:11, 10:18 and 24:20 for his own or a sinner's mother's womb (cf. also 14:1). Likewise, בֶּטֶן is used negatively only when it refers to his mother and the godless in 15:35. That means that the womb has a negative connotation in about two thirds of the instances, and then referring to his mother, his wife or the godless. Elsewhere, the womb is referred to in a neutral rather than in an explicitly positive way.

Langton (2012, 459) argues that Job's opening speech in 3:1–10 is a satirical reversal of Akkadian birth incantations in an attempt to regain control of his life through magical strategies against the womb, and perhaps even against all creation, according to Perdue (1994, 144–45). According to Langton (2012, 464) it might also be a humorous literary device, because the direct address to a divinity and the mentioning of an enemy so typical of the traditional lament are absent in Job's questions in 3:11–12 (Langton 2012, 462).

Job goes beyond the probable precedent set by Jeremiah 20:14–18 by not only cursing the day of his birth but also the night of his conception in 3:6b, 7 (גַּלְמוּד [barren, hard,

5 This is reminiscent of the concept of *sūnyata* (emptiness) in Buddhism which signifies both destruction and the womb (*tathāgatagarbha*), the emptiness from which everything is born (Williams 1998, 96–97).

6 The same root as in Genesis 20:18.

stony])[7] and 9, as הֹרָה (has been conceived) in 3:3b proves. This last-mentioned root is also used metaphorically in 15:35 for the evil engendered by the godless וּבִטְנָם ([and] in their belly), who should be גַּלְמוּד (barren) according to 15:34, that is, like the night Job was conceived according to 3:7. It also resonates with the same word in 30:3 where it means "gaunt" and not "barren", as the people Job disdained are mentioned as fathers in 30:1, according to Clines (2006, 944). It is therefore here associated with dryness and desolation. These are the only three instances in the book of Job where this root occurs and then, of course, always with a negative connotation. In 24:21 the more usual adjective, עֲקָרָה (barren), parallel and in apposition to לֹא תֵלֵד (who does not give birth), is used (cf. Driver and Gray 1977, 33, 213). In this latter case the infertile woman is to be "grazed upon".

The word יוֹמוֹ (his day), referring to his birthday in 3:1, is used for the day of destruction in 15:32, 18:20, 1 Samuel 26:10 and Psalm 37:13. His curse personalises this day as if it were identical to him, and he wishes יֹום יֹאבַד ("let the day perish"), just as he himself should have done; likewise for the night in 3:6–9, so that it would not form part of the calendar any longer (3:6). In this way Job tries to wish away time and history, which the womb in some way ironically sets in motion and concretises through the development which it facilitates. By trying to deny historicity and time, Job regresses to the pre-boundary no-time in the womb and perhaps even before it.

The womb seemingly both equalises and levels but also humanises people from all classes due to their common origin, according to 31:15 (Trible 1978, 36; cf. Neville 2003, 183; *vide infra*), just as the grave does in 3:14–19. This interpretation of 31:15, however, remains controversial, as Gordis (1978, 348), for example, denies equality just because the same Creator has been involved. The universal parenthood of God, or even motherhood of God due to the repeated mention of the womb and the similarity of this last-mentioned verse to the content of 10:8–12 here, would, however, render all people at least siblings (cf. also Malachi 2:10) thanks to the personal and intimate involvement of God, even when God is also accused here of וַתִּבְלָעֵנִי (yet you swallow me up). This projected aggression can be related to a man's unconscious anxiety of being devoured by a so-called *vagina dentata* during sexual intercourse (cf. Paglia 1991, 47).[8]

One cannot deal with the womb in the book of Job without attending to birth as well. The verbal root ילד (bear, bring forth) is found already in the second verse of the book, referring to the birth of Job's children. In 3:3 it moves chronologically back to the birth of Job himself and in 5:7 Job repeats the same thought that one—but really referring to himself—is born into trouble (cf. also 3:20). Zophar shows the absurdity of an animal giving birth to a human being in 11:12, in this way subtly criticising Job (cf. Driver and

7 Balentine (2006, 86) interprets the "barren" as not being able to bring forth day anymore.

8 "The toothed vagina is no sexist hallucination: every penis is made less in every vagina, just as mankind, male and female, is devoured by mother nature."

Gray 1977, 109; Gradl 2001, 135). Clines (1989, 266) argues that the apparent impossibility suggested by such a birth is relativised by the next verse.

In 15:7, Eliphaz reminds Job by means of a rhetorical question that he was not the first man to be born. In 38:21, God ironically hints that the elusive knowledge of light and darkness goes back beyond the birth of Job (Pope 1973, 296), and, in 39:1–3, the deer's birth in nature is pointed out by God as an incomprehensible miracle. Metaphorically, iniquity is "born" by the godless in 15:35. The same can be said of the watery weather conditions (38:29) "born" מִבֶּטֶן (from the "womb") of an unknown mother, but also recognising a father who יְלָדוֹ (has engendered/begotten it; cf. Clines 2011, 1111). Although this verb could also refer to the mother, no feminine grammatical indicators occur here. Using this root as a noun, Job celebrates the cow's "children" in 21:11. Likewise, God speaks of the raven's chicks in 38:41 to remind Job that he takes care of them when they are hungry.

In the same way, death as opposite but also sometimes similar to birth plays an important role in the meditations of the book of Job. Interestingly, Job's wife, the mother of his children who die in the previous chapter, is the first to mention it in 2:9. For Job, death is the great "equaliser" of good and bad people (9:23), just as the womb is (31:15, *vide supra*). Job further views wisdom as a human invention which will also "die" (12:2). Personalised death seems to be privileged with (this?) wisdom (28:13, 21), according to Job, and in that way is perhaps idealised, like the womb. In the same speech (14:10), Job ponders a human being's death which seems to be a cul-de-sac, a dead end. However, as a tree's roots seem to die but revive with water (14:8), there might be hope for human beings as well, according to 14:14. Bildad even speaks of the בְּכוֹר (first-"born") of death in 18:13! In the end, God apparently reproaches Job for having so much to say about death, which is actually hidden from him, according to 38:17, even when one actually assumes that Job did come that close to death. God suggests the same ignorance about the womb of the sea and the sky (38:8, 29). Whether קִנִּי (my nest) with which Job would die, according to 29:18, excludes the possibility of his mother's womb, which he somehow owns according to 19:17, and refers only to his own family and the death of his children, is not clear, but shows that the opposites are juxtaposed.

Coupled with the apparently negative view of the womb is the relative absence of "womb-men" in a book of 42 chapters (Maier and Schroer 1998, 197), with but a few mentions of his mother (1:21, 31:18; in 17:14 the worm of death is called his mother and sister), one instance about his wife in 2:9 where he likened her to one of הַנְּבָלוֹת (the foolish women), and the introductory (1:2, 13, 18) and closing (42:13–15) comments about his daughters are considered exceptions.[9] This conspicuous silence about women

9 It must be significant that only Job's three daughters and not his seven sons are mentioned by name in his restoration period, when neither his sons nor his daughters have been named before his adversities. One also wonders if these are not exactly the same children he had originally, because their number

and such a complex attitude to the womb in a biblical book therefore calls for a psychoanalytic interpretation. This scarcity should, however, also be compared to the high incidence (31 times) of the divine name שַׁדַּי (*Shadday*) in the book, suggesting the breasts of a deity, and so a goddess.

Tied to that are Job's seemingly oedipal issues manifesting as revolt against the father(-God) but apparently without any conscious guilt. This struggle is normally about coping with exclusion, first by the father from the excessive involvement with the mother, and then extrapolated to all other exclusions. Yet, Job's father is never mentioned. He might be absent in the words although not in the mind of Job when the following instances are taken into account:

17:14:

לַשַּׁחַת קָרָאתִי אָבִי אָתָּה אִמִּי וַאֲחוֹתִי לָרִמָּה

If I have said to corruption: 'You are my father', to the worm: 'You are my mother, and my sister'

29:16:

אָב אָנֹכִי לָאֶבְיוֹנִים וְרִב לֹא-יָדַעְתִּי אֶחְקֹרָהוּ

I was a father to the needy; and the cause of him that I knew not I searched out

31:18:

כִּי מִנְּעוּרַי גְּדָלַנִי כְאָב וּמִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי אַנְחֶנָּה

No, from my youth he grew up with me as with a father, and I have been her guide from my mother's womb

38:28:

הֲיֵשׁ-לַמָּטָר אָב אוֹ מִי-הוֹלִיד אֶגְלֵי-טָל

Does the rain have a father? Or who has begotten the drops of dew?

The absent father is implicit in the following seven instances in which יָתוֹם (orphan) occurs:

6:27:

אַף-עַל-יָתוֹם תַּפִּילוּ וְתִכְרוּ עַל-רֵיעֲכֶם

Yes, you would cast lots upon the fatherless, and dig a pit for your friend

22:9:

אַלְמָנוֹת שִׁלַּחְתָּ רֵיקָם וּזְרֹעוֹת יְתֹמִים יְדֻכָּא

You have sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless have been broken

---

has not been doubled like that of his animals, which could have been simply due to the animals breeding.

24:3:

חֲמוֹר יְתוֹמִים יִנְהָגוּ יַחְבְּלוּ שׁוֹר אַלְמָנָה

They drive away the ass of the fatherless, they take the widow's ox for a pledge

24:9:

יִגְזְלוּ מִשֹּׁד יָתוֹם וְעַל-עָנִי יַחְבֹּלוּ

There are those that pluck the fatherless from the breast, and take a pledge of the poor

29:12:

כִּי-אֲמַלֵּט עָנִי מְשַׁוֵּעַ וְיָתוֹם וְלֹא-עֹזֵר לוֹ

Because I delivered the poor that cried, the fatherless also, that had none to help him

31:17:

וְאֹכַל פִּתִּי לְבַדִּי וְלֹא-אָכַל יָתוֹם מִמֶּנָּה

Or have I eaten my morsel myself alone, and the fatherless has not eaten thereof

31:21:

אִם-הֲנִיפוֹתִי עַל-יָתוֹם יָדִי כִּי-אֶרְאֶה בַשַּׁעַר עֶזְרָתִי

If I have lifted up my hand against the fatherless, because I saw my help in the gate

Freud (2005, 134–37) regarded the longing for the womb as one of the most frequent sexual fantasies recurring in dreams (Freud 1991a, 127) as the censured homosexual wish fixating on the father, where the mother has been replaced so that sex with the father inside the womb could lead to the birth of a new child to escape the world. That could make sense in the book of Job where the mother disappears somehow by the metonymic use of the womb (*vide supra*). That would mean, however, that Job would have identified so strongly with his mother that he can replace and displace her, revealing his ambiguity towards her, instead of towards his father, as is the case in heterosexuality (Freud 1946, 206). This non-recognition of the mother as a separate person is, incidentally, typical of the uterine state where the foetus does not distinguish itself from an other, a state to which Job would regress in his crisis. That some variant readings in the Targum interpret בִּטְנִי in 3:10 as Job's own blocked umbilicus (*vide infra* on the navel) depriving him of nourishment and resulting in his death (Mangan 1991, 28) is not necessary.

In a sense, Job has been "castrated" by God, which, for Ferenczi (1924, *passim*), would mean the impossibility of returning to the mother but for Freud (1955, 170; 1944, 94) it seems that this return is just the impotent man's substitute for the sexual act. Fantasy of return to the womb is then the substitute for coital sex of the impotent inhibited by his castration anxiety. He replaces his organ with his whole person.

On the other hand, sexuality is a defence against the death-drive which will eventually win the day. Freud (2000, 248) generalises it without exception: "Das Ziel alles Lebens ist der Tod" (the aim of life is death). Jacques Lacan (1984, 35) seems to harmonise these two drives when he interprets Freud's death-drive (1940, 50ff.) as ultimately

aimed at the return to the imaginary, harmonic unity with the mother, expressed in oral auto-destructive behaviour, which might have been the case for Job as well.

Such a wish can, however, be critiqued from a psychoanalytic perspective as pathological. Alford (1987, 877–78) interprets this denial of the distinction between life and death, and between the self and the other, as the regressive narcissism of a wish to return to the womb where the foetus is part of the maternal body in a seemingly eternal sleep. This is exactly the case in 3:13 in which Job imagines death as sleep. Wish and fulfilment are magically merged in the illusion of omnipotence. Job's apparent death-wish is therefore linked to the womb[10] (cf. also Clines 1994, 11–12).

The Womb Symbolised

Winnicott's (1953, *passim*) transitional, mental space as containment for creation seems like a symbolised processing of the womb experience transferred to cultural survival and development. Regression and retreat into this inner space as refuge allows illusions where hallucinations and observations flow into each other as a higher, more subtle product.

According to Freud, any container of physical space such as a room, vehicle (1998b, 157; 2008a, 359; 2008b, 697), or mantle (1998b, 57, 60) could symbolise the womb.

Mathewson (2006, 53) regards the womb in the book of Job as a euphemism, specifically of death. The first mention of the womb (1:21) is after the death of Job's livestock, his servants and his children. At least unconsciously this would have reminded Job of his own death. Two opposites are therefore conflicting in the mind of Job: birth and death. Because these three types of living beings have been internalised into Job's self, their death would feel to him like his own death, or at least as a part of him having died.

As unsymbolised "naked" reality, death disrupts the symbolic world in which people survive. Job defends himself against this terrible psychological reality by focusing on its opposite, that is, the womb, and merging it with death to sugar-coat it. He would therefore not die but simply return to the womb. Death, where God may be absent, is thus avoided. By trying to turn the clock back and denying the reality principle Job fantasises that he will end up where God is intimately present: in the womb where God made him, according to 10:8–12. In this way the womb represents the pleasure principle and death is (re)symbolised as a return to the mother. These verses and Psalm 139:13–16 are the only two instances in the Hebrew Bible where human gestation is described,

10 In descending order of not having been conceived (3:10), having died in the womb (3:11a) and having died at birth (3:11b).

and then in both cases poetically as a celebration, confirming again how important the womb is in the book of Job.

The enigmatic 1:21 is somewhat echoed by Sirach 40:1: ἀσχολία μεγάλη ἔκτισται παντὶ ἀνθρώπῳ καὶ ζυγὸς βαρὺς ἐπὶ υἱοὺς Αδαμ ἀφ' ἡμέρας ἐξόδου ἐκ γαστρὸς μητρὸς αὐτῶν ἕως ἡμέρας ἐπιστροφῆς εἰς μητέρα πάντων (from the day of his going forth from the womb of his mother, until the day of his return to the mother of all the living). At least unconsciously, Job associates the womb and the earth (cf. also Keel and Uehlinger 1998, 367; Simkins 1994, 99), and therefore the grave, no matter in what way their relation has been explained (Vall 1995a, *passim*). Behind this statement of Job, he seems to have a wish to return to the womb. It is interesting to note that Freud (2005, 257) also recognised the anxiety-provoking fantasy of the grave, especially as a place of being buried alive, as a transformation of a non-anxiety-provoking hidden fantasy of living in the womb. That would, however, mean that the womb-fantasy is the original and not that the unbearable certainty of the tomb is symbolised as the womb, as seems to be the case in the text.

Job longs to regress to the unconscious which he believes he will find in the womb-death, just as in sleep, according to 3:13 (cf. also Longman 2012, 101), but his call is to be raised or to raise himself from the "primordial womb of the collective unconscious" (Jacobi 1999, 95) and see God. This illustrates how the womb and the eyes are opposites in the book.

The celebration of the mine in Chapter 28 could easily be a disguise for the celebration of the womb. The somewhat romanticised description of the mine in 28:1–11 can be interpreted as a disguised hint at the womb where the precious minerals (28:1–2, 6, 10) and gemstones (28:6, 10) are to be found. In fact, one of the first words in this passage, מוֹצָא (source, spring, which is often here translated as "mine"), resonates with מֹצָא (springing forth) in 38:27, where God speaks of the new spring born from the desert. This sense of death as extremity is ironically also present in this "womb-mine" in 28:3, a death from which precious things are "born". Ironically, the human eyes can pierce its אֹפֶל (thick darkness) in 28:3 (cf. also 28:10, 11), and so seem different from the eyes which are confronted with harsh reality outside the womb, according to 3:10. The womb's possible association with תְּהוֹם (the deep) וְיָם (and the sea) in 28:14, the latter recalling נְהָרוֹת (streams) in 28:1, suggests that the same characteristics of the womb are in Job's unconscious: depth, (amniotic) fluid and darkness. Fountains and rivers, as gateways to שְׁאוֹל (the netherworld), are seen to be fed by תְּהוֹם (the deep) where Leviathan has to be kept under control (cf. also Keel 1996, 33f., 41f.; Klopper 2002, 60). This conceptualisation can be psychoanalytically interpreted as the chaotic yet life-yielding id, the Freudian pleasure principle, which needs to be kept within bounds despite its enlivening and animating impulse and is in this context related to the womb experience.

God Beyond the Imagined and Symbolised Womb

The words in 1:21, יְהוָה נָתַן וַיהוָה לָקָח (the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away/back), after the initial עָרֹם יָצָתִי מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי וְעָרֹם אָשׁוּב שָׁמָּה (naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither) suggests that God is somehow identified with the womb who gives but to whom the gift also returns. This is later echoed in Qoheleth 5:14, showing that these words had left a deep, collective impression.

This association of the womb with God is archaeologically corroborated by Schroer (1995b, 170) in that omega-like reliefs have been found on various vessels in which the head of a deceased has been kept. This symbol reflects the old-Babylonian mother-goddesses such as Ninḫursanga or Nintu, who were addressed as a "womb" to whom the dead returned (Strack 2014, 51). These images have also been found in Judah until Iron Age II C (700–600 B.C.E.) for their probably apotropaic effect. Prior to Ninḫursanga or Nintu was the Sumerian Ninhursaga, the Lady of the Womb (Jacobsen 1976, 104–09).

The "giving" womb functions almost like a hand, which happens to be the first body part which is mentioned in the book, and then in three instances, one of which refers to the hand of God in the transpersonal realm.

The reduction to nakedness as part of Job's regression (e.g., in 1:21) is, according to Vall (1995a, 334), not the way the dead were buried at the time, but an allusion to mourning where clothes were torn and the head shaven. That means that the womb is mourned, even when Job tries cursing as a psychological defence, but ultimately he stands defenceless in his existential encounter with the womb. Whereas Adam's nakedness symbolised his innocence, for Job it signifies, in line with Qoheleth 5:14, his inability to extend his body to surviving children or remaining possessions, something which the womb can also only temporarily do. The womb which he may have enviously idealised is exposed as not the ultimate origin or destiny. That the womb-earth is, however, not (mythologically) the beginning and end of everything, is clear from the addition יְהוָה נָתַן וַיהוָה לָקָח יְהִי שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבֹרָךְ (the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord). The mourning of this loss of the womb and Job's nakedness free him to embrace the God behind it all, whom he longs to see with his own eyes (*vide supra et infra*).

Just as the womb once served as a kind of skin for Job (cf. Pelham 2012, 158), outside of which he always remained naked, nakedness could alternatively refer to the loss of his extended body in children and possessions and, even closer, of his own skin which is now diseased and which continues his "unlayering". Following the previous verse's mention of nakedness along with the renting of his mantle and shaving of his head, it is as if he is undressing to return to the womb. This is still before his skin has been attacked, but already foreshadowing the link between the womb and his skin. A third possibility is that it could hint at the imminent decomposition of his corpse due to the decay of skin and flesh with which Job was clothed, according to 10:11, although he

will be re-clothed, this time with רִמָּה וגיש (וְגוּשׁ) עָפָר (worms and clods of dirt) according to 7:5. His own bare minimum parallels the womb to which Job has reduced his mother.

When one remembers Freud's explanation (Freud 1991c, 412) that sleep divests one of contact with the external world through the cathexes with the sense organs and through the ego which controls motility, and of the so-called covering of the psyche (probably consciousness), as one withdraws into the pre-mundane where even dreams are disturbances from the remainders of the wakeful and external world (cf. Job 7:14), then sleep is somatically a reactivation of the stay in the womb with the fulfilment of conditions such as rest, warmth, stimulus withdrawal and even assuming a foetal position (1998a, 85, 88; cf. also Ferenczi 1924, 99–109). "Der Schlaf ist eine solche Rückkehr in den Mutterleib" (Freud 1941, 88). It is perhaps not coincidental that Job speaks of sleep in 3:13 straight after having expressed his mourning at leaving the womb in 3:10–12. If Job 33:15 is also taken into account, according to which God speaks in dreams, visions and even תַּרְדֵּמָה (deep sleep), then God appears specifically in these womb-like states to people.

Ironically, from these instances of reduction, regression and minimalism is born an elevated notion of the womb. God's creation meant that the sea was "born" from God's womb in 38:9 as if breaking forth from a state of chaos into a world of laws and limitations. In 38:29, the ice and the hoar-frost likewise came forth in that way.[11] Perhaps a subtext is that it is God who "bore" them and not the great fertility and storm god of Canaan, Baal-Hadad, who is associated with them in CTA 3 2 38–41, 3 4 86–88 and 19 1 42–44 (Vall 1995b, 507). It is not coincidental that all three of these creations are watery substances (*vide infra*) and may allude to the amniotic fluid (Frymer-Kensky 1987, 234). Creation becomes the baby-body born from God who has strong, female features here. One need not interpret these poetic references to the womb as metaphors or even anthropomorphisms, as Benjamin Sommer (2009, *passim*) has argued when he asserts the belief in a literal body of the deities at the time. It may be significant that the adjective רַחוּם (compassionate, literally "womb-feelings") is only used for God in the Hebrew Bible (Trible 1978, 38), although Brown, Driver and Briggs (1907, 2268) interprets Psalm 112:4 as being about a human being, which Trible (1978, 59n17) recognises as a possibility.

It is as if Job has progressed in Chapter 38 to the insight that God and his mother are very similar experiences for him. Whitekettle (1996, 389) confirms this when he notes a symmetry between Leviticus 15:19–24/12:2–4 and Genesis 1/6–9, suggesting that the primeval macrocosm forms a backdrop for the uterine microcosm. He goes one step further (but without any texts to prove it) by pointing out the correlative association between "the dysfunctional womb with the desolate wilderness/periphery," the latter of

11 Unless the answer to the rhetorical questions is that these creations do not have a womb as their origin, as Schökel and Díaz (1983, 560–61) mooted.

which would be described just as the primeval world with the word תֹּהוּ (waste), as in Job 6:18 and 12:24.

Twice, in 38:8 and 38:29, God therefore alludes to God's own womb (cf. Keller 2003, 131), thus identifying with Job's mother. In verse 8 the "foetus" in this womb was initially contained and constrained בִּדְלָתַיִם (with doors) similar to דַּלְתֵי בִטְנִי (the doors of Job's [that is, Job's mother's] womb in 3:10). In Akkadian birth incantations these doors, locked by a bolt, have a protective function (Langdon 2012, 460), although their opening is also prayed for as a way to liberation (Foster 1996, 136). Ross (2010, 38) moots the possibility that there is no ellipse and that בִטְנִי means "my belly", referring to the navel of the neonatal (*vide supra* on the umbilicus). This would, however, not take care of the dual form of דלת in these verses, which is understood by Blommerde (1969, 133) as the vulva opening for the seed just before conception, and again at birth, although Walton-Burnight reminds us that "opening" the womb in Genesis 29:31–32 and 30:22–23 (וַיִּפְתַּח in both cases), and "closing" the womb in Genesis 20:18 (עָצֹר עָצַר) and 1 Samuel 1:5, 6 (סָגַר, in both verses), for instance, refers to conception and not birth. This is confirmed by the implied preceding noun, הַלַּיְלָה הַהוּא (that night, mentioned explicitly in verse 6), being a possible subject in 3:11 and so used in a metonymical way for conception. Habel (1985, 109) goes one step further and equates the said night in a metonymical way with a goddess of infertility. Behind this could even be a condemnation of sexual intercourse. In this way, Job's lament goes against the grain of the traditional hope for the opening of the womb. Likewise, Job turns the comforting rest, which is hoped for by God's faithful, upside down as he can now only imagine it as death, according to 3:13 (Burnight 2011, 158).

The unmentioned subject in 3:10[12] as in 3:20 is indeed God.[13] In a somewhat similar way, the womb, just as בִּרְכַּיִם (knees, without an article!) and שָׁדַיִם (breasts, again without an article) in 3:12, remains "anonymous". Newsom (1996, 368) interprets this displacement from God to his mother as Job's denial of his anger towards God. In 38:8 בִּדְלָתַיִם (with doors) could rather be imagined as God's holding arms in chronological sequence after[14] being born מֵרֶחֶם (from the womb, perhaps likewise sequentially meant in 3:11a),[15] suggested also by 38:10 where God's directing arm is hinted at. This distinction is confirmed by the distinction of what God did to the "doors": in the case of Job, God opened the doors, but in the case of the sea, God shut them. This can be maintained despite the different words used to denote "shut": סָגַר in 3:10, but וַיָּסֶךְ in 38:8, the latter being, interestingly, from the same root as וַיָּסֶךְ (and he hedged) in 3:23

12 Yet Gordis (1978, 35) takes the preceding noun שָׁחַר (morning), suggesting then "day" as subject in 3:10.

13 In Exodus 13:2, 12, 15; 34:19; Numbers 3:12, etc. it is, however, the first-born who is the פֶּטֶר (opener) of the womb.

14 And not as parallelism with מֵרֶחֶם, as Burnight (2011, 147n404) claims.

15 Changing the vocalisation to that of a *pu'al* participle to render the meaning as "enwombed" as Dahood (1963, 204–05) and Blommerde (1969, 38–39) propose, is not supported by any ancient version.

where it is used to express God's protection of Job. Yet, there may be a hint to the sea in 3:8 when לִוְיָתָן (Leviathan) is associated to it in a metonymic way, so that Job was born as chaos-monster from the oceanic womb (Cornell 2012, 7). In all these cases doors are related to the containment of watery substance as is also the case in Psalm 78:23: וְדַלְתֵי שָׁמַיִם פָּתָח (he opened the doors of heaven) to give rain (*vide supra*).

At the same time, God, by implication, in 38:8 also equates Job with the sea, the primeval, wild chaos, answering Job's rhetorical question in 7:12, הֲיָם-אָנִי אִם-תַּנִּין כִּי-תָשִׂים עָלַי מִשְׁמָר (am I a sea, or a sea-monster, that you set a watch over me?), in an ironic way. That Cornell (2012, 7) seems to identify this sea as the enemy of God goes too far. That would also have meant that Job is an enemy, although his name may be a pun on אוֹיֵב (enemy). In fact, on the same page (Cornell 2012, 77n21) he wants to move away from such an opposition to God's loving care and control, even of the chaos. Though obviously derived from different roots, וַיָּסֶךְ (and he [suggesting God] enclosed [it, that is, the sea]) in 38:8 sounds somewhat like and is reminiscent of שַׂכְתָּ (you fenced [him, that is, Job] in) in 1:10, with בְּגִיחוֹ (its [that is, the sea's] breaking forth) in 38:8 paralleled by Job's possessions which פָּרַץ (broke forth, overflowed) in 1:10. It is, however, exactly the same verb as that which occurs in 3:23 where the dead are hedged in by God, just as in the womb.

Darkness, probably that of both the womb and the grave, is personified and expressed by six different Hebrew images in 3:5–6 to intensify it: חֹשֶׁךְ וְצַלְמָוֶת (darkness and the shadow of death), עֲנָנָה (a cloud), כְּמְרִירֵי (those blackening), הַלַּיְלָה הַהוּא (that night) and אֹפֶל (thick darkness). One can associate the womb and its darkness with their opposites, the eyes and light as in 3:10 (somewhat echoed in 10:18 but then referring to those of others). Then the opening eye(lid)s of dawn in 3:9 and 41:10 may poetically be seen as a kind of birth from the dark womb of the night. Framing the book, they do not receive but produce the light. This appearance of daybreak is presented in a mythological way to conjure up the arrival and presence of the deity.

Behind the duality of night and day in Job 3, personified in Psalm 19:3–5, may be the Canaanite couple of Dawn and Dusk, two deities of fertility in CTA 23 who repeatedly bring life into the womb but also death. It is this which Job wants to stop with a curse of sterility and short-circuiting the transition from birth through life to death, somewhat resembling the Buddhist ideal of escaping from the same cycle. Cursing them is indirectly cursing God as Creator (Perdue 1996, 101n4).

In 38:14 the morning takes hold בְּכַנְפוֹת (of the wings) of the earth, perhaps the mother from whom it is born when it arises from behind its horizon. It is noteworthy that this parallels Psalm 139:13 and 15 in which the womb and the earth are similarly almost juxtaposed as a "distant parallelism" (Vall 1995a, 332). These wings remind one of the wings of the sun in Psalm 139:9 and Malachi 3:20 but also of הָרָחָם in Leviticus 11:18 and הָרָחָמָה (the carrion-vulture) in Deuteronomy 14:17, having the same consonants as רֶחֶם (womb). The womb as symbolised by the vulture is recognised as such by Freud

(1996a, 156f., 187): in the holy hieroglyphics of Horapollo Nilu the mother is portrayed as a vulture which was believed to be always female. The Egyptians honoured a maternal deity, Mut, with a vulture head, or multiple heads of which at least one was that of a vulture. Incidentally, Da Vinci used this image even before hieroglyphs were deciphered, suggesting that this image could be archetypical. Schroer (1995a, 70; 1997, 306–07) makes the same observation, adding even the griffon vulture and the "hand" of God to this range of imagery.

Conclusion

By "psychoanalysing" the womb as it is imagined and demonised by Job, and how it is symbolised by him to overcome his fear of "unsymbolised" death, one can intuit the ineffable Real beyond the imagined and the symbolised womb. The womb, although initially negatively evaluated by Job, has a range of meanings and nuances, as he processes his lost past and his problematic boundaries, symptomised by his skin disease, to finally associate it with God, whom he has been insisting on seeing right through the text.

The womb, skin and eyes are therefore three interrelated body parts crucial to Job's struggle. He has ambivalent feelings towards the womb but uses it psychologically to mediate and negotiate the boundaries between life and death, just as the skin does between the inside and the outside. Ultimately, Job longs to "see" beyond all these boundaries into the origin and destiny of it all, into the womb of God.

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