

# The possible psychoanalytical meanings of the mouth for mourning in the Book of Job

**Author:**Pieter van der Zwan<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Ancient Texts, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Pieter van der Zwan, pvdz1961@gmail.com

**Dates:**

Received: 13 Jan. 2022

Accepted: 30 May 2022

Published: 29 Nov. 2022

**How to cite this article**

Van der Zwan, P., 2022, 'The possible psychoanalytical meanings of the mouth for mourning in the Book of Job', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(4), a7351. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7351>

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This study is about the mouth and its parts in the book of Job on the one hand, and on psychic introjection on the other, even when these two aspects do not completely overlap. The dominance of the mouth and orality in this biblical book speaks for its symbolic and psychic implications, including dependency and depression, but also symbolisation and empathy, where psychic digestion is resymbolising what has been desymbolised by trauma. The hypothesis is therefore that the mouth plays a crucial role in the process of mourning in the Book of Job.

**Contribution:** Interdisciplinary research into biblical texts from the perspective of psychoanalytic literary criticism adds to the broader horizons within which these texts can be analysed and interpreted. Within this frame, the focus on the mouth continues and promotes the Bodies Studies movement, which has been blossoming for over 40 years.

**Keywords:** Book of Job; psychoanalytical; mouth; oral; introjection.

## Introduction

Complementary to another study, 'Images of the dead (body) and the missing corpse in the Book of Job' (Van der Zwan 2022), which focuses on incorporation, this study deals in contrast with introjection as suggested by the mouth in the same biblical book. Whereas the Song of Songs celebrates *eros*, the Book of Job grapples with *thanatos*, yet both have a strong oral dominance (cf. Van der Zwan 2017a: especially 908, 917, 2020:542, 550, 552).

The hypothesis of this study is that the oral dominance in the Book of Job plays an important role in the mourning process: there is a tension between using the mouth as an image of either incorporation or introjection.

After giving a survey of orality expressed in various ways in the Book of Job, a limited panorama of some psychoanalytical understandings of the mouth and orality will be presented before applying these to the way that orality features in the book to arrive at some possible psychoanalytical meanings suggested by the mouth in a work of world literature dealing with mourning, empathy and the lack thereof.

## A survey of orality in the Book of Job

### The mouth and its parts

The emphasis on the oral area occurs in the Book of Job, firstly, through the explicit mentioning of פה (mouth), which occurs 36 times (Job speaks in a third of these instances). As such, it is in the second position of body-part frequency after the eye,<sup>1</sup> when the many prepositional uses of פנים (with 70 instances, literally 'face') and יד (with 53 instances, literally 'hand') are ignored.

Schellenberg (2016:123) summarises these 36 instances as being 24 times about humans, three times about God, three times about the behemoth and leviathan and six times either metaphorically or not really referring to a mouth. An example of the latter could be 30:18, but that could simply be because the modern western recipient of the text finds it difficult to imagine the metaphorical 'mouth' of a coat as being its neck. The sense is, however, that of encompassment and constriction (Clines 2006:681), so it is negatively connoted.

What Schellenberg does not regard as referring to the mouth in 33:6 is probably an instance of the stereometrical use (Wolff 1994:22–23), where one body-part metonymically represents the whole

1. The עין (eye) is mentioned 46 and עפעפיים (eyelids) three times, that is, in total 49 times explicitly, excluding the indirect reference to the eye through the verbs for seeing, looking, etc.

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body. Continuing on this trail, the mouth can not only become a whole person but can even become personalised, such as in 5:15 where it is portrayed as having a sword.

On the other hand, the mouth can be used as a dead metaphor for the edge of a sword 'devouring' its victim, as in 1:15, 17 (cf. Dt 32:42; 2 Sm 2:26; Clines 1989:103, 741). This seems to continue even to the abstract level when iniquity (רָעָה) has a mouth in 5:16, as if it has many forms or 'body-parts', but this is rather a poetic licence for an 'iniquitous mouth'.

Stereometrical use is sometimes similar to but one step less removed from an idea in synthetic thinking where a body-part is selected and reduced to its function, which can include a wide range of possibilities from the emotional, cognitive, conative, behavioural, communicational, relational or political, for instance (Bester & Janowski 2009:10–12). In the Book of Job, this is often the case with parts of the mouth, such as the tongue, palate or lips. The mouth or its parts are never described visually as they are in the Song of Songs 4:2–3.

If the 36 instances mentioning the mouth are added to the parts of the mouth, that is, teeth, bite, jaw, cheek, gum, palate, tongue, lip and saliva, there are 77 explicit noun-references to the oral area (Van der Zwan 2019:4), making it by far the most dominant part of the body in the Book of Job, even beyond the face and the hand with their prepositional uses included.

The majority of these instances are metaphoric and negatively connoted with oral aggression. Of Job's shrinking body, his mouth survives the best, even when its breath stinks, according to 19:17 (*vide infra*).

Just as with the eye, the mouth or a part of it is explicitly referred to by all interlocutors, excluding Job's wife and the narrator. As with the eye, most of it concerns Job (31 times, of which 18 times are in the mouth of Job himself), and Job also mentions it the most: 33 times. This means that the mouth or its parts are mostly on Job's mind.

This is exceptional in the Hebrew Bible where the mouth (only, not its parts) is in the seventh position and for God, in the fifth position, amongst altogether 26 divine body-parts (Baumann 2003:246).

However, it is to be expected in a narrative constituted by 'oral-sadistic' arguments (cf. 5:15–16.21), although words for chew and bite never occur. Its effect in the opposite of silence manifests likewise in the mouth when the tongue cleaves to the dry palate in 29:10. The mouth, like the nose, is also associated with aggression in the Book of Job.

## Eating and drinking

There is a framing of risky eating and drinking in 1:4, 13, (16), 18 and a rehabilitative meal in 42:11 – a transformation, as with so many things in the last chapter. It seems the formerly false friends are included in the family get-together, similar to a funeral meal, perhaps eventually for the deceased

children and servants. Meals are therefore framing what sounds like a long mourning process. Because of practical considerations of space, the many instances of oral and digestive words will not be presented here, but suffice it to assert that most are used metaphorically and by Job.

Job refers to his enemies' gaping (פָּתְחוּ) mouths in 16:10, as if they were to swallow him, reminiscent of Elihu's words in 37:20 in the light of Isaiah 5:14, where She'ol has a mouth and a נֶפֶשׁ (throat, but also life-energy: death is alive!) as if it were a living body, and it destroys by devouring just after the starving and thirsty captives have been mentioned in the previous verse, suggesting perhaps She'ol's insatiable desire. Yet its mouth is for devouring, not speaking, as it is strongly associated with deathly silence.

One may be wondering why a mourning person would have eating and drinking so much on their mind. Pope's (1977:210ff.) interpretation of the eroticism and festive eating and drinking in the Song of Songs is that it is set within a funeral context, where a common meal is taken by the survivors during a wake. Such a feast is, from a psychoanalytical perspective, a regression, because of the loss of words from introjection to incorporation as *literally* taking the deceased inside the body as a disguised form of cannibalism (cf. also Horine 2001:30; *vide infra*). This literalism is, however, not the case with Job; his speech is mostly figurative. Neither does the verb, צָוַם (to fast), ever appear in a text starting off with a mourning rite in 1:20, 2:12–13 and possibly 2:8 (cf. Mathewson 2006:38n7).

## Speech and silence

A summary itinerary through the dialogues could speak for itself. After the prologue, Job is introduced in the poetical dialogue section by referring to his mouth right at the start of his first speech in 3:1. This is also the first explicit mention of Job's mouth by the narrator where it is indeed related to speaking. This is not the first reference to his mouth, as the narrator already points out in 2:10 that Job's lips have not sinned, again linking it to speech, a product of which is either blessing or cursing in the first two chapters (cf. also 31:30).

In 7:11, Job mentions a mouth for the first time (and specifically his own), connecting it to his spirit (רוּחִי) and his *nefesh* (נַפְשִׁי). That suggests that the mouth has psychospiritual meanings for him. Bildad starts off by immediately linking Job to his mouth in 8:2 and uses the same word (רִיחַ) but with a different meaning of 'wind', undermining that meant by Job. In 8:21, Bildad also contradicts Job's expressed bitterness in 7:11 by implying that laughter would have filled his mouth had he been innocent. Schroer and Staubli (1998:152) claim that laughter is virtually always connected to *schadenfreude* in the Hebrew Bible (*vide infra*). Perhaps Bildad is betraying his own *schadenfreude* about Job's fall. In 9:20, Job seems to say that his own mouth – as if dissociated – could betray him in not being authentic, adumbrating perhaps the splitting of his mouth from his disjointed body and self in 31:5

(cf. also 27:4 and 33:2 [but then by Elihu]; Clines 2001:148<sup>2</sup>). Schellenberg (2016:102) understands it as Job's words being turned against him (by others or God). Alternatively, his mouth could let him down in silence, being in awe of God's mysterious presence (Clines 1989:394).

Then it is only again in chapter 15 when Eliphaz refers three times to Job's mouth and once to God's. He virtually repeats his own words about iniquity in 5:16 (*vide supra*) but this time applies them to Job. He also echoes Job's words about self-condemnation in 9:20 (*vide supra*) but changes Job's subjunctive into an indicative in 15:6. He alienates Job's allegedly independent mouth and lips from and opposes them to the person, Job, over whom they take control, typical of the body of the wicked (cf. Schellenberg 2016:100–101). Eventually he condemns Job's mouth in 15:13. This critique is turned around to the three 'counsellors' when Job speaks in 16:5. He assures them of empathic words, were their situations the other way around. The conflict is then actually between the three critiquing Job's lack of wisdom and Job critiquing their lack of empathy. According to 16:7, speaking does not relieve him with catharsis, however, as the 'talking cure' has promised. This concern with the mouth continues in verses 9–10, where first God's teeth and 'sharp' eyes are virtually condensed, adumbrating psychoanalytical insight that eyes can be 'devouring' as well (*vide infra*). Secondly, in verse 10, humans showed their scorn through their open mouths, though there is perhaps also a hint at an image of the wild beast ready to devour, adumbrated by the previous verse (cf. Ps 22:14; Clines 1989:571), supposedly even without saying anything. They then also hit Job's cheek, probably intending it for his mouth, his body-part accused of his adversities, in contradistinction to the neutral narrator's assurance in 2:10 that his mouth had been impeccable up to that point, meaning that it could not have been the cause of his troubles. The attacks are on his mouth, not on his skin, where the symptoms of his supposed sins are.

In 19:16, Job realises that his mouth is losing status as even his servants ignore his call. Zophar probably hints at Job in 20:12 when he concretises evil motives as something sweet hidden behind the words of the wicked. Here he is crossing the boundary between speech and food (cf. also 6:30; 20:13), regressing to an incorporation fantasy that will be dealt with in section 3. Significantly, this chapter 20 probably has the most references to the mouth, namely in verses 13–16, 18, 21, 23 and 26 (*vide supra*).

Job's critique of the mouths of the counsellors continues in 21:5, when he urges them to silence, linking the mouth to the hand as he does in 31:27 (*vide supra*). Eliphaz, as in his second speech, emphasises the mouth again in 22:22, where God's mouth is now modelled as wisdom to be followed. This seems to inspire Job in 23:4 where he gains confidence in his mouth again, even willing to argue and compete with God's idealised mouth of verse 12. In fact, the mouth is the

main player in this competition and mutual condemnation amongst the interlocutors. Here, Job reverses Zophar's regressive words in 20:12 (*vide supra*) by progressing from the incorporative to the introjective stance (*vide infra* section C), regarding (God's) words as more important than his heart, if  $\text{קִיבֹם}$  (bosom) functions here metonymically and is generalised to include all inner organs, such as the stomach, as might be the case in 19:27 with  $\text{בְּתִקְיָי}$  (inside of me). Clines (2006:145) does not regard the preceding preposition abbreviated to  $\text{כִּי}$  as comparative but simply as inclusion, so Job preserves God's words *in* his bosom.

Job then also remembers nostalgically in 29:23 how the mouths of his amazed listeners dropped open (Clines 2006:668–669), dissimilar from the gaping mouths of his scorners in 16:10.

In 32:5 Elihu confirms Job's condemnation of the counsellors' (collective) mouth, but he does so by asserting his own mouth, twice, in 33:2. In 35:16, Elihu changes his view and now also condemns Job's mouth as the other three have done.

Just as iniquity is personified in 15:5 by Job (*vide supra*), so Elihu personifies  $\text{צָר}$  (distress) in 36:16 as having a devouring mouth, both being negative psychic states or traits, the former a conative-moral, the latter affective, meaning that oral-sadistic projections have been imposed on them.

In 37:2, Elihu prepares Job and the recipients of the book for God's voice in 38:1 by referring to God's mouth, which up to 38:1 has been silent and rather linked to devouring as in 2:3, 10:8 and 16:9, resembling animals.

God refers to Job's mouth in 39:27 and echoes somewhat Job's own words in 19:16 that his instructions are no longer being taken seriously. By implication, God contrasts here Job's impotence with God's own almighty mouth, in that God is the one who commands the vulture. Job therefore progresses to silence, even when he still voices precisely that in 40:4, again linking his hand to his mouth as has been the case in 21:5 and 31:7, in all three instances uttered by Job.

The book is, in fact, framed by silence, which the narrator uses to portray the context. Job's singular words in 1:21 to the 'desymbolised'  $\text{מוֹת}$  (death)-reports in 1:19 are somehow a denial through a generalisation about his *own* death hidden in 'resymbolising' euphemisms (Mathewson 2006:53–54). After his wife breaks the silence with her desymbolising  $\text{מוֹת}$  (death)-word in 2:9, followed by Job's 'resymbolising' response in the next verse (Mathewson 2006:58, 61–62) and the friends' initial crying, the collective mourning rite in 2:13 – seemingly without Job (Mathewson 2006:57) – is one including silence as a sign of respect, lest the friends interrupt the precious but precarious processing of the ineffable traumas to which Job has fallen victim. Silence is probably the precondition to introjection, as the mouth is free from words projected outwards.<sup>3</sup>

2. Clines (2001:149) identified only the tongue in the book of Job apart from five other body-parts in the rest of the Hebrew Bible in such 'language of disjunction'.

3. Cf. also the silence demanded from those underage, *unmündig* (not having a mouth, a voice, a vote), in German.

Twice God makes mention of an animal's mouth: firstly, in 40:23, about that of the behemoth or hippopotamus, perhaps presenting him as an ideal model for Job, even when the animal does not do anything specific in this case, passively (because it is confident) letting the chaotic waters be internalised; and secondly, that of the leviathan or crocodile, in 41:11, 13 (*vide infra*). Significant is that with both these animals, the mouth is juxtaposed to its eyes in 40:23–24 and in 41:10–11,<sup>4</sup> respectively, once again connecting these two body-parts, but also implicitly portraying its eyes as *projecting* something, not *introjecting* as usual.

## Psychoanalytical meanings of the mouth and orality

Sociologist of religion James Aho focused on the openings and closings of bodily orifices in transhistorical and transcultural religious accounts as symbolising the vulnerable spots of the collective body, where body politics and policing attempts through taboos, rhetoric and other regulations to assuage the anxieties are connected to these zones of transition,<sup>5</sup> clustered at both ends of the digestive tract, especially when these involve a fear of death (2002:14).

He recognised the mouth as the orifice that Judaism emphasises most, as is clear from the post-exilic dietary laws and rules on facial hair, which define the in-group with its projection of fantasised taboo violation on out-groups (Aho 2002:56).<sup>6</sup>

That may be one reason why Freud recognised the mouth as the first body-part in the human psychic life to be emotionally cathected but also caught up in the conflict of its multifunctional ambivalence. Ironically, it was also the one that caused his own death. The oral stage or hemitaxia involves the mouth as primary erogenous zone and spans the first 18 months of life. Thereafter, its desires are repressed, but because of traumatic stress one could regress to this stage and even be fixated in it. Symptomatic could be excessive eating and/or drinking or verbal aggression.

The stereometrical and synthetic uses of a body-part (*vide supra*) are, according to object-relations theory in psychoanalytic psychology, a part-object relation where (especially) an infant or someone in the paranoid-schizoid position unconsciously phantasising of splitting the love object selects a 'good' body-part from it and generalises it as its essence thanks to its functional value (Greenberg & Mitchell 1983:47).

Despite what one could call this psychosomatic nature of the classical Hebrew anthropology, its art depicting the human body is rather aspectual, showing body-parts juxtaposed in a

4. Even when its dangerous mouth has been mentioned right at the start when it was introduced in 40:25, suggesting it being its most important body-part.

5. Cf. the compulsory wearing of masks during the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020.

6. Incidentally, Jesus' critique of what he perceives as the Jewish obsession with food going into (as against words leaving) the body in Matthew 15:10–20 is radicalised in Matthew 12:34–37 in that the Last Judgement would judge every word spoken.

collection but separated from each other (Wagner 2010:80, *passim*). This ties in with the conscious, which cannot have a comprehensive body-image as the unconscious has.

For infants, there is a close, unconscious connection between the eyes and the mouth, in that both 'devour' the love-object (Almansi 1960:69). Likewise, Otto Fenichel (1935:573) links sight to the oral universe, both penetrating and sucking, especially when there is symbolic equation (Segal 1957:393–395) between looking and devouring, regarding the symbol to have literal meaning. As Engelbert (2011:174) puts it so well: 'What you cannot understand,<sup>7</sup> you eat'. This ties in well with the views of Robert Jay Lifton (1979:17ff.) about the need to resymbolise what has been desymbolised by psychotraumatic experiences. For Lacan (1978:164), however, the Real is the traumatic, indigestible, unsymbolisable truth of death external to the symbolic.

These two body-parts, the mouth and the eyes, are therefore intimately linked. In fact, all sensory organs, not only the mouth and the eyes, as erotogenic orifices are like metaphorical doors and windows through the skin into the human body, symbolically available for introjection. In addition, the throat as a continuation of the mouth could be added and then immediately has psychological connotations in the Hebrew as נפש. In this way, several organs cooperate organically as a foundation and impetus for psychic life.

Karl Abraham (1924:23ff.) distinguished an early, passive sucking and later a cannibalistic, incorporative biting phase. When there is oral fixation, it leads to depression. This distinction was rejected by Melanie Klein in 1952 (in eds. Heimann et al. 2018:185ff.), who identified an oral-sadistic tendency right from the start. She further recognised that infants virtually equate loving and cannibalistically destroying the love object (Klein 2002:293).

Sándor Ferenczi (1910: *passim*) coined the concept of introjection as a base for object love and an expansion of the ego. It is the second of the three internalisation processes, between incorporation and identification. Different from incorporation is the distinction between subject and object.

For the infant, introjection is accompanied by the magical incorporation fantasy of devouring. When the mouth remains empty and frustrated because of an absent breast, incorporation separates from introjection and the mouth is instead filled with words evoking the mother's presence despite her absence. The phantasy of concrete, literal incorporation is replaced by symbolic introjection of the love object through language (cf. also Segal [1957: *passim*] on symbol equation versus symbolisation; *vide supra*).

That is why Török (2009:262) regards introjection as stemming from 'bouches vides' (empty mouths). When worthwhile words are later lacking, their false substitute of eating fails to satisfy

7. Sight and insight are linguistically and conceptually connected in many cultures.

the real desire of meaningful representation (cf. Yassa 2002:87). This might be the case for Job as well, where words of empathy from his (false) friends remain lacking and his own words leave him and others frustrated. He cannot properly express his crippling grief about his children and therefore also cannot express his desperate need for empathy. When trauma becomes verbally inexpressible, blocking introjection, words fail to fill and feed. One regresses to its substitute of unconscious incorporation fantasy by literally eating and drinking as if of the object of love, as it previously used to be before the acquisition of speech. In this way, a void is avoided – in fantasy only, of course. This happens when the normally unconscious introjection becomes conscious because of the trauma of loss, which cannot be ‘absorbed’ into the body (Török 2009:263–264).

Fritz Riemann (2006:53) has linked orality and therefore, by implication, introjection to depressive tendencies (cf. also Mentzos 1984:42ff), where there is a passive dependence on and sometimes even an addiction to taking in external reality to support the ego against feelings of loneliness and emptiness.

## Psychoanalytical meanings of orality in the Book of Job

### Incorporation

It could be significant that only Job, Elihu and God use the noun, אכל (food), literally (*vide supra*). Elihu uses it twice in a generalised way, and God also twice refers to birds of prey, probably suggesting oral aggression embodied by these animals. Significantly, Job likewise uses it for one of the same birds of prey, the vulture, and also in a generalised manner in 9:26. The verb with the same consonants (eat, devour) is used only three times by the narrator and three times by Job, two of which are also generalised and one referring to the mouth. Not once does Job use either the noun or the verb referring to himself. The same applies to the very few referrals to hunger, thirst or famine. It would seem that literal ingestion plays a small role in the book and specifically that Job probably does not revert back to incorporation in his mourning process.

Yet whilst it is the greatest possible trauma when a parent loses even just one child through death<sup>8</sup> (Rosof 1994: *passim*; Talbot 2013: *passim*), then it is shocking that Job loses 10, an absolute record in the Bible. It is therefore conspicuous that Job virtually never mentions his dead children, except once in 29:5. A few verses later, in 29:17, he wants to rescue the prey from the devouring unrighteous, as if he retrospectively and unconsciously wants to revert and in this way deny their deaths. Alternatively, this could be a fantasy of vicariously devouring the dead object as an attempt to compensate for the empty mouth because of the ineffability of the traumatic experience. As the concreteness of this fantasy allows no associations as a way to symbolisation because it has been ‘swallowed’ whole without the possibility of ‘digestion’ (Török 2009:314), it seems as if Job has incorporated and

somehow identifies with the grave into this unspeakable crypt and therefore can hardly utter a word about it. One is tempted to moot the possibility that this could be an explanation for a possible fantasised compensation with the three most beautiful daughters in the world – or at least in the land – according to 42:15, but that would undermine a recognition of his psychospiritual progression (*vide supra*).

Typical of incorporation is inversely also the desire to enter the body of the lost loved object and to be devoured by it, sometimes as the wish for and ultimate longing to return to the mother’s body, as seems to be the case in 3:10–11.

### Introjection

Just as the book is framed by eating and drinking, it is also framing it even slightly wider with the implied psychic process of introjection, firstly through his empathic sacrifices in 1:5 and ultimately by experiencing the empathic presence of his family and friends in 42:11. In between, however, he is struggling to come to grips with introjecting negative experiences.

Negative introjection is also figuratively expressed as arrows entering the body, the poison of which Job’s spirit שָׁקָה (drinks) in 6:4 (cf. also 34:6). In 20:14, Zophar hints that the wicked, perhaps Job as well, has his (metaphorical) food become like an asp’s מְרִירָת (gall, poison) in his bowels. He virtually reiterates this sense in verse 16 with the word רָאֵשׁ (poison), in a passage about oral introjection in 20:12–16. In verse 24, he seems to parallel it with an arrow penetrating the body. Job himself has the same view in 16:13 of what his bodily suffering feels like when he mentions the archers shooting him in his kidneys. Here his gall מְרִירָתִי [my gall] will be echoed by Zophar in 20:25 as מְרִירָתוֹ (his gall from which) the poisonous arrow will be pulled, in both cases associated with the snake’s poison (as in verse 14, *vide supra*) inside the victim’s body. That is probably why he so often (3:20 [virtually], 7:11, 10:1, 21:25 [virtually]) speaks of בְּמִרַנְּשִׁי (in the bitterness of my soul) and otherwise refers to bitterness in 9:17, 18, 13:26, 23:2, 27:2. Significantly, bitterness, gall and poison are etymologically related in Hebrew.

The oral emphasis in the Book of Job therefore also leaves the impression that he is suffering from depression (Van der Zwan 2017b:3, 4, 5). The depression may be a consequence of Job’s excessive empathy, when he himself received so little, which has blocked him from healthy mourning.

Naming the love object in their absence is then its introjection, words filling the mouth when the loving food is absent. When these words also become empty for lack of empathy, as in 11:3 (בְּדִידָה), 12 (בְּיָבוֹה) and 27:12 (תִּהְיֶה בְּלִי), symbolisation fails.

## Conclusion

The mouth and mourning in the Book of Job are closely connected. There are switches between eating, speaking and silence in this highly oral biblical work. When mourning

8. Abraham having to sacrifice his eldest son (from Sarah), Isaac, and Jesus, as the first-born son of God, are the two models of self-sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, respectively.

becomes obstructed and there is regression to incorporation phantasies of meals, because trauma has rendered words elusive and illusive, introjection through symbolisation necessary for mourning becomes impossible. Despite traces of Job's incorporation, there is ample evidence of his introjection, as the mouth is predominantly linked to words and orality, mostly used in a figurative way. If the leviathan's (or perhaps God's own) mouth is modelled as ideal, then exhaling angry 'breath' is an important forward step in this progression in the mourning process.

This study was only meant as an appetiser. A host of heuristic questions hover above any pretended conclusion. Open for further research are the implications that the oral drive as conceived by Lacan, for which there has been practically no space in this study, could have for the development of this study. A second research question would be why chapter 20 is such an oral text, perhaps explainable after Job's important words about his body in the preceding chapter.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

### Author's contributions

P.v.d.Z. is the sole author of this article.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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