

An injured and sick body – Perspectives on the theology of Psalm 38

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Research Project Registration:**Project Leader:** Dirk J.Human **Project Number:** 2364743**Description:**

This research is part of the research project, 'Psalms and poetry', directed by Prof. Dr Dirk J. Human, Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

Dates:

Received: 27 May 2022

Accepted: 08 July 2022

Published: 31 Aug. 2022

How to cite this article

Human, D.J., 2022, 'An injured and sick body – Perspectives on the theology of Psalm 38', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(1), a7783. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7783>

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Descriptions of body imagery and body parts are evident in expressions of Old Testament texts. Although there is no single term for 'body' in the Hebrew mind, the concept of 'body' functions in its different parts. As part of anthropomorphic descriptions of God and expressions attached to humankind, body parts have special significance, contributing to the theological dimension of texts. The poems in the Psalter are no exception. Several body parts are mentioned in Psalm 38, an individual lament song. In addition to God's hand (v. 3) and an allusion to his voice (v. 16), several body parts describe the psalmist's condition. These include 'flesh' (*bāšār*, 3, 8), bones (*'atsəm*, 3), head (*rōsh*, 5), loins (*kəsəl*, 8), heart (*lēb*, 9, 11), eyes (*'yn*, 11), mouth (*pəh*, 14, 15), and feet (*rəgəl*, 17). In addition, allusions to the ear (14, 15) and injured body (wounds, 6) form part of the psalmist's lamenting experience.

Contribution: This presentation touches on the general meaning of these body imagery in the Old Testament and their specific function and meaning in the text of Psalm 38. A textual analysis will portray their theological significance.

Keywords: lament; prayer for wholeness; body parts; body imagery; embodiment; body of God.

Introduction

On a theme with the title 'Body and Embodiment in the Psalms', it is appropriate to incorporate the understanding of 'body' and 'body imagery' from an ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament perspective. Because the term 'body' is indicative of several objects and descriptions (the physical body, a social construct, land, the community, a group of people, a literary unit, an organisation, etc.), one has to be sensitive to identify or define what is described as the 'body'. The peculiar characteristics of the Semitic languages and the intellectual conceptions of the ancient Near Eastern world(s) project a distance and alienation on understanding such concepts in our modern time and worlds of reality. 'Body' is one of them.

More than 1000 references and descriptions of 'body' and body imagery appear in the Book of Psalms, particularly in 143 Psalms.¹ Only seven psalms do not refer to the human body. This number illustrates the importance of this *corpus of life* for Israelites in their expression(s) of their faith and theology.

Psalm 38 – A prayer for wholeness

Introduction

Psalm 38 is the third of seven well-known penitential prayers² in the Psalter. Its text comprises an impressive and moving description of life-endangering suffering. A depiction of comprehensive and severe distress unfolds where the worshipper is threatened by illness, own guilt and the enmity of close relatives, friends, neighbours and malicious enemies. This situation leaves the psalmist deserted before God, whom he addresses for help and wholeness (healing or salvation). In the psalmist's experience, the 'body', specifically the injured or 'dys-appearing'³

1. See Gillmayr-Bucher (2004:301). They are Psalms 1; 29; 87; 93; 113; 117; 150.

2. Cf. Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143.

3. 'Dys-appearing' in this sense means a 'dys-appearing bodily state', where the body is not in harmony with itself, its community, other people, or God ... It is thus malfunctioning. See Leder (1990:69–99) and Coetzee (2000:518).

Note: Special Collection: Septuagint and Textual Studies, sub-edited by Johann Cook (Stellenbosch University).

body, plays a pivotal role. Apart from the psalmist's 'body', the 'bodies' of God, family, friends, neighbours and enemies all participate in this described experience. Aspects of hopelessness, guilt, anxiety, desolation, loneliness and rejection characterise the atmosphere of the psalm. The text projects a dark tone. Nonetheless, the basic undertone of the supplicant's prayer communicates confidence and hope in the Lord, Yahweh, his God.

The text's descriptions are reminiscent of stereotyped depictions, traditional formulas and language, which refer to specific events or a particular elusive illness (cf. Anderson 1972:301; Gerstenberger 1988:162). Language and concepts seem to be standardised or even liturgical (cf. Kraus 1978:447). This poetic approach makes it difficult to choose between the option of conventional descriptions of distress or the portrayal of an actual biographic event. The textual and theological resemblances with other penitential psalms (6; 32) (cf. Jüngling 1998:818), with psalms from the fourth subsection of Book I (35–41),⁴ and the books of Job,⁵ Isaiah (cf. Hossfeld 1993:240), and Jeremiah (cf. Terrien 2003:328) are evident. There are also evident similarities with several other psalms, like Psalms 13, 22, 69, and 88.

Although the psalm is not strongly embossed by the wisdom tradition, it nonetheless exhibits aspects of this tradition.⁶ The cause–result pattern (*Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*) of the sapiential tradition (v. 2),⁷ the foolishness of the psalmist (v. 6), the two pathways of good and evil (v. 21) and resemblances with the Book of Job (v. 13) suggest wisdom influence. Suggestions that there are links to the 22-verse structure of acrostic psalms and the Hebrew alphabet seem doubtful.⁸ However, the psalm does have a 'teaching tendency'.⁹

Major discussions on Psalm 38 revolve around literary questions of its unity, composition and structure, *Gattung* and settings (*Sitz(e) im Leben*) and its dating.

Genre

Psalm 38 depicts the comprehensive, life-endangering suffering of a psalmist. Overwhelmed by the wrath of God, his (the psalmist) illness and guilt and the aloofness of close relatives and life-endangering enemies, this penitent describes his anguish before Yahweh. In this utmost distress,

4. See Jüngling for similarities with Psalms 35 and 37; cf. Eaton (2003:192) for similarities with Psalms 35, 37 and 39; see Hossfeld (1993:240–241) for similarities with Psalms 35, 36, 37, 39, 40–41; cf. Weber (2001:185) for similarities with Psalms 3, 37 and 39.

5. See verses 3, 12–15; cf. Kidner (1973:154).

6. Hossfeld (1993:240) thinks that the 'Grundpsalm' of Psalms 38 was 'berührt' by wisdom influence, but not 'geprägt'.

7. In verse 2 the causal relationship between guilt and illness plays a role. In the ANE and the Old Testament, illness was often seen as a punishment for sin or guilt.

8. Against Eaton (2003:167) and others.

9. Deissler (1964:161) speaks about a 'lehrhafte Tendenz'.

the supplicant calls on God's intervention to help and restore his miserable situation.

Many scholars recognise a context of illness due to several descriptions of the psalmist's malfunctioning or dysfunctional body or body parts. Aspects in and outside the body are mentioned. They include the following: 'there is no soundness in my flesh' (vv. 4a, 8b); 'there is no peace in my bones' (v. 4b); 'my wounds stink and rot' (v. 5); 'I am bowed down and brought very low' (v. 7); 'my loins are filled with burning (pain)' (v. 8a); 'I am feeble and utterly crushed' (v. 9a); 'the anguish of my heart' (v. 9b); 'my heart pounds' (v. 11a); 'my strength abandons me' (v. 9b); 'the light of my eyes is no more with me' (v. 9c). In verses 14–15, the ears and mouth of the psalmist are not functional, whether deliberately or because of illness. Then: 'the stumbling of my feet' (v. 17); 'I am about to fall' (v. 18a); 'my pain is ever with me' (v. 18b); 'I am anxious' (v. 19). These descriptions point to a context where physical and psychic dysfunctional conditions suggest the supplicant's grievous and deadly disease.

With elements of prayer (invocation and petition, vv. 2, 10, 16, 22–23), lament (elevating the situation of distress, 3–9, 11–15, 17–21), expressions of confidence (vv. 10, 16, 22–23), an intended confession of sin (v. 19), and petitions for help (vv. 2, 22–23) scholars have suggested a variety of literary genres as a description of this psalm. Suggestions include the possibilities of *Klage* or lament,¹⁰ prayer,¹¹ prayer song (cf. Kraus 1978:446), penitential prayer or psalm,¹² petitionary prayer¹³ and psalm of sickness.¹⁴ Some scholars prefer to describe Psalm 38 as a *lament* or the *complaint of an individual*.¹⁵ Others compromise on 'lament song' and 'penitential song' (cf. Duhm 1922:159; Van Uchelen 1979:256).

Although some scholars are not convinced of the psalm's liturgical use or functioning in penitential or illness healing rituals,¹⁶ understanding the psalm's function should not exclude such ancient Near Eastern practices or ceremonies.¹⁷ Such healing rites could have included a text like Psalm 38 inside or outside the official Israelite cult.

10. Cf. Anderson (1972:301); Jüngling (1998:819) opts for 'song of lament'.

11. Cf. Schmidt (1934:72) describes it as a prayer, which is a lament of a sick person; Deissler (1964:162); Craigie (1983:302) opts for 'prayer'; Seybold (1996:159) suggests an 'individual prayer'; Terrien (2003:325) uses 'prayer of petition for healing'; Eaton (2003) suggests 'lamenting prayer'; Tanner (2014) describes the poem as an 'individual prayer for help by someone who is ill'.

12. Cf. Kittel (1929:138), who chooses for 'Busslied eines Kranken'; Kidner (1973:153).

13. Hossfeld (1993:240) depicts the text as 'Bittgebet eines Schwerverkranken'.

14. Gunkel and Mowinckel suggest a 'psalm of sickness', although this is not a literary or generic genre.

15. Cf. Deissler (1964:161); Gerstenberger (1988:164); Coetzee (2000:517); Weber (2001:183) describe it as 'individuelles Klagegebet'; Clifford (2002:193) says 'individual lament'; Prinsloo (2003:366–373).

16. Hossfeld (1993:240) denies text indications of its use in a 'Buss- und Krankenliturgie'.

17. Seybold (1973:98–106) attempted to reconstruct the ritual background of Psalm 38. With reference to other Old Testament texts like Psalm 107 and Job 33 and the ancient Near Eastern rituals, he identified five elements in such a liturgy of petition: dressing in mourning, ritual numbness, silence, weeping and prayer.

BOX 1: Text and translation.¹⁸

1 A psalm of David. For remembrance.	1 מְזוֹר לְדָוִד לְהִזְכִּיר:
2 LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.	2 הֲזַח אֱלֹהִים בְּמַעַסְפֵּי תוֹכִיחֵנִי וּבְחַמַּתְךָ תִּסְרַנֵּנִי:
3 for your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down on me.	3 כִּי־חִצֵּיךָ נִחְתּוּ בִּי וַתִּנְחַת עָלַי יָדְךָ:
4 Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.	4 אֲרוּמָתִים בְּכַשְׂרֵי מַסְנֵי זַעְמְךָ אִיר־שָׁלוֹם בְּעַצְמֵי מַסְנֵי חַשְׂאֵתִי:
5 for my guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.	5 כִּי עֲוֹנֹתַי עֲקְרוּ רֹאשִׁי כַּמֶּשָׂא כְבֵד וַיִּכְבְּדוּ מַסְנֵי:
6 My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly.	6 הִבְאִישׁוּ וַנִּמְקֹו בְּחַבְרוֹתַי מַסְנֵי אִוְלָתִי:
7 I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning.	7 נִעְנִיתִי שְׁחֵתִי עַד־מָאֹד כְּלִיָּזוֹם מְקַר הַקְּלָתִי:
8 My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body.	8 כִּי־בִסְלֵי מְלֹאֵי נִמְלָה וְאִין מָלֵם בְּכַשְׂרֵי:
9 I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart.	9 נַפְגִּיתִי וְנִדְבַּרְתִּי עַד־מָאֹד שְׁאֵנֵתִי מִנְהַמַּת לֵבִי:
10 All my longings lie open before you, Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you.	10 אֲדֹנָי נִגְדָה כְּלִי־תַאֲוִתִי וְאֵנְחָתִי מִמֶּךָ לֹא־נִסְתָּרָה:
11 My heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes.	11 לֵבִי קָטַרְתָּר עֲנַבְנֵי כְתוּ וְאוֹר־עֵינַי אֶסִּיִם אִין אִתִּי:
12 My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbours stay far away.	12 אֲהַבְוֹ וְרֵעֵי מִנְגֵד נִנְעֵי זַעְמְדוֹ וְקָרוֹבֵי מֵרֵחַק עֲמָדוּ:
13 Those who want to kill me set their traps, those who would harm me talk of my ruin; all day long they scheme and lie.	13 וְרִצְוֹשׁוּן מִבְּקָשָׁי נִפְשֵׁי וְדָרְשׁוּ רַעְשֵׁי דִבְרוּ הַזֹּת וּמְרֻמֹּת כְּלִי־הַיּוֹם וְהַיָּגִי:
14 I am like the deaf, who cannot hear, like the mute, who cannot speak;	14 וְאֵנִי כַתְרֵשׁ לֹא אֲשָׁמַע וְכַאֲלֵם לֹא יִפְתַּח־פִּי:
15 I have become like one who does not hear, whose mouth can offer no reply.	15 וְאֵהִי כַאֲישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־שָׁמַע וְאִין כְּפִיו תוֹכְחוֹת:
16 LORD, I wait for you; you will answer, Lord my God.	16 כִּי־רָוַה וְתוֹה הַתְּקַלְתִּי אַתָּה תַעֲנֵה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵי:
17 For I said, 'Do not let them gloat or exalt themselves over me when my feet slip'.	17 כִּי־אָמַרְתִּי פֹדִי־שְׁמַחְדִּילִי בְּמוֹט רַגְלִי עָלַי הַדְּבִילִי:
18 For I am about to fall, and my pain is ever with me.	18 כִּי־אֵנִי לִצְלַע נִכּוֹן וּמִכְאוֹבֵי נִנְתִי תַמִּיד־כִּי־עֲוִנִי אֲגִיד אֲדַלַּג מִחַשְׂאֵתִי:
19 I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin.	19 וְאִוְבֵי חַיִּים עֲצַמְו וְרַבִּי שְׁנֵאֵי שָׁקַר:
20 Many have become my enemies without cause; those who hate me without reason are numerous.	20 וְיִשְׁלַחַן רַעַה תַחַת טוֹבָה יִשְׁטַנְוֵנִי תַחַת (רְדוּפִי־) [רְדוּפִי־] קוֹב:
21 Those who repay my good with evil lodge accusations against me, though I seek only to do what is good.	21 אֱלֹהִים עֲנֵנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי תִרְחַק מִמֶּנִּי:
22 LORD, do not forsake me; do not be far from me, my God.	22 תִּרְשָׁה לְעֲזוֹרָתִי אֲדֹנָי תִּשְׁעֵתִי:
23 Come quickly to help me, my Lord and my Saviour.	

Structure and outline

Psalms 38 can be segmented in many ways. Exegetes therefore offer a variety of possibilities to describe the structure of the psalm.¹⁹ It is artistically composed, containing a variety of stylistic figures.²⁰ A feasible structure comprises the following framework, which provides a segmentation where every 'address to God' introduces a new beginning or section (vv. 2, 10, 16, 22). Divine titles in every introductory part characterise these divisions. In these invocations, God is addressed as the following:

- Yahweh (v. 2)
- Adonai (v. 10)
- Yahweh, Adonai, my God (v. 16)
- Yahweh, my God, Adonai (vv. 22–23)

18. In Box 1, the author has used the NIV translation and adapted the translation where he deems it necessary. The NIV starts numbering verse 2 of the Masoretic Text as verse 1, therefore the difference in verse numbering.

19. Apart from a text development in symmetrical order, where content and motives are arranged in a single chiasmic structure, the text centres around a core part, verses 14–16, an expression of hope in the Lord, Yahweh. cf. Terrien (2003:325–326).

20. These features include inclusio, parallelism, chiasm, metaphors, onomatopoeia, simile, alliteration, etc.

These titles show a climactic development of growing intensity and trust between the petitioner and Yahweh. With these features in mind, the following framework²¹ seems evident:

- The heading (v. 1)
- The first petition for help (v. 2)
 - A description of distress (vv. 3–9)
- An address to God and expression of confidence (v. 10)
 - A description of distress (vv. 11–15)
- An address to God (v. 16)
 - A description of distress (vv. 17–21)
- A final plea for help (vv. 22–23)

The first petition (v. 2) and final pleas for help (vv. 22–23) build an *inclusio* around the psalmist's grievous experiences of life-threatening endangerments (vv. 3–21). The supplicant laments and urges Yahweh to withdraw his anger or wrath and not abandon him, nor stay far from him, but hasten with the intervention of help and salvation. These pleas form the basis of the psalm's theme, *urging God to restore the wholeness of broken and injured 'bodies'*²² through his presence and active intervention.

The first description of the supplicant's distress and agony (vv. 3–9) touches on two themes, namely the psalmist's guilt and illness. A bodily depiction sketches the physical and psychical destruction, inside and outside the supplicant's body.

In verses 2–4, the petitioner suffers from illness in a dysfunctional body. With the ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament wisdom-like influence,²³ this petitioner recognises that this agonised state results from his sin or guilt, causing him to be chastised by God. This punishment is described as 'arrows' and the action of God's hand.

Verses 5–6 portray the guilt as overwhelming, while his stinking and festering wounds resulted from his foolishness. In the context of wisdom thinking, this folly is an offence against norms in the world order.²⁴

In verses 7–9, the petitioner's bent body posture, pain and the lack of physical soundness complement descriptions of his inner feebleness, depression and anguished heart.

In a second address (vv. 10–15), the psalmist expresses hope in Adonai with the confident acknowledgement that God knows his longings and sighs (prayers) (v. 10). The psalmist continues to describe the life-threatening illness and the people who desert and ostracise him (vv. 11–15).

In verses 11–13, the supplicant laments his lack of strength and malfunctioning heart and eyes. In addition, a closer

21. Cf. the divisions of Gerstenberger (1988:160); Jüngerling (1998:818) and Hossfeld (1993:242–245).

22. These bodies include the body of God, the supplicant's body, and the bodies of the supplicant's relatives, friends, neighbours, and enemies as societal body.

23. See Proverbs 13:24; 19:18; 20:30.

24. See Psalms 69:6; 107:17.

circle of beloveds, friends and neighbours avoid him, while malicious enemies seek his life. These evildoers gossip about destroying him while they continuously plan deceit.

Verses 14–15 outline the petitioner's inactive ears and mouth. This deafness and numbness are a reaction to the enemies' malicious and life-threatening behaviour.

The psalmist again expresses confidence in Yahweh, Adonai, 'my God' (v. 16) in the following address. The supplicant reiterates hope when he waits for Yahweh. He knows that God will answer his petitions. Hope and certainty prevail in the notion that Yahweh, as 'hearing God', will answer. A further description (vv. 17–21) summarises the dangers in which the psalmist is bound: exulting enemies, his stumbling, pain, sins, and vengeful enemies.

In hopeful anticipation of Yahweh's intervention (v. 17), the petitioner requests Yahweh not to allow his enemies to rejoice in his falling – the malfunctioning of his own feet.

He laments his falling and continuing pain (v. 18). He intends to confess his sins, for he is anxious about them (v. 19). His enemies multiply and hate him without reason, while they repay evil for good to him who seeks only good (vv. 20–21).

At the climax of the psalm, the final pleas for help underscore the psalmist's intense confidence in Yahweh that this deity will help restore the wholeness of his shattered life.

Date

Situating Psalm 38 as a specific biographic event is very uncertain. The human experience of sin, sickness and social enmity, together with the experience of God's wrath, could have happened at any time over centuries. The psalm could also have resulted from an individual or communal experience or both. Therefore, exact dating remains elusive.

Some scholars allocate a pre-exilic date to the psalm.²⁵ Because of the heading, לַדָּוִד, the supposed Davidic authorship and certain events around David's life motivate some scholars to select a Davidic time (cf. Kidner 1973:154–155). Similarities with the Book of Jeremiah (see v. 7)²⁶ convince others of Jeremian authorship. The possibility of the exilic-postexilic time is another suggestion.²⁷ However, because of the textual relations and connections with the theology of Job, scholars refer to the text's origin as coming from a late period (cf. Duhm 1922:163; Kraus 1978:447).

25. Hossfeld (1993:240) dates the basic psalm (without verses 14, 20–21) as pre-exilic, because of its closeness to illness descriptions and slight wisdom influence.

26. Compare verse 7 with Jeremiah 4:28; 8:21; 14:2.

27. Jüngling (1998:819) makes this choice because of the psalm's 'proximity to the Job poems'; Terrien (2003:328) alludes to its origin at the end of the monarchal or early exilic period, when there was no temple and when many experiences of 'physical suffering and spiritual agony' were composed.

Similarities to the texts of Job²⁸ and Deutero-Isaiah,²⁹ the lack of reference to the Temple, combined with the theological theme of life-threatening experiences as deeds of God's anger and wrath, suggest that the psalm could be read as coming from an exilic-postexilic time, reflecting a *collective Israelite experience*. However, this does not exclude a (more timeless) pre-exilic reading of the text as reflecting an *individual experience*.

Embodiment of an injured life

Introduction

Several bodies and body parts are involved in the descriptive scenery of Psalm 38. They include the body of God, the body of the sick and injured supplicant and the bodies of the supplicant's near relatives, friends, neighbours and malicious enemies. On a different level, the individual's body stands in relation to and in opposition to the social bodies of the community and the world at large.

The body of God

Psalm 38 alludes to a divine 'body' in references to two body parts, namely the 'hand' of God (v. 3) and also his implied voice and implied ear as a God who is speaking – in this case, 'answering' (v. 16). A third reference is found in the final petition, in which the supplicant is pleading with Yahweh: 'do not be far from me' (v. 22b) – thus a plea for the presence of the divine 'body'.

Characterisations of God in the Old Testament follow descriptions of the human body and its body parts. Old Testament texts describe God only in the human form and its bodiliness, even though attributes of animals or nature³⁰ sometimes appear in depictions, mostly in poetic texts. Presenting God's being and deeds in a human image and form can be defined as *anthropomorphism*.³¹ Anthropomorphisms occur when God is depicted as having a (humanlike) body, a face, eyes, ears (cf. Ps 130:2), a mouth, nose, arm, feet, hands, hips, a voice, right hand, heart and so on. God can also arise, stand, call (cf. Hs 11:1), shout, listen (cf. Ps 4:4), sit down on a throne, be clothed (cf. Ps 93), sleep, wake up, lift his voice, speak, keep silent, look (cf. Ps 4:4), come near or go away and so forth. God is also close to or far from people (cf. Ps 10:1; 22:11).

The term *anthropopathism* often complements *anthropomorphism*.³² This term describes God's being who is assigned human emotions, moods, or feelings, and indicates the more spiritual dimensions of life. Examples of these are God's wrath (Is 57:16), mocking, love, hate (Ps 45:8), rejection

28. Compare the 'arrows' in verse 2 with Job 6:4; 16:3; also, Deuteronomy 32:23–24; Lamentations 3:12; Psalms 91:5–6.

29. Compare verses 14–15 with Isaiah 53:3, 7.

30. Nature images include descriptions that God is a sun (Ps 84:12) or a light (Ps 27:1).

31. *Anthropos* + *morphe* = human form. *Anthropomorphism* is in the history of religions only one possibility to present a god. Gods could also be portrayed as animals, animal-humanlike beings, mixed animal creatures or a formless power.

32. *Anthropos* + *pathos* / *pathein* = human feeling / emotion.

(Ps 74:1), forgetting (Ps 13:1), repentance (Gn 6:6), grief, mercy, jealousy and so on.

In Psalm 38, the supplicant acknowledges that his sickness is the consequence of his sins and iniquity, which kindled Yahweh's justified anger and wrath. It is therefore God's punishment or chastisement which he requests to be terminated (vv. 2–4). This punishment is like 'arrows' fired at him; it is the illness caused by God's wrath.³³ In this context, the supplicant laments: 'your hand has come down on me' (v. 3b), indicating that Yahweh is causing the supplicant's severe distress.

Because the 'hand' in the Old Testament symbolises strength and action, it can denote 'power, violence and tyranny' (cf. Anderson 1972:302; Staubli & Schroer 2001:164). Therefore, this body part of God implies divine punishment, hostility and the infliction of pain (1 Sm 6:3,5; Job 19:21; 23:2; 33:7; Ps 32:4; 39:12; Lm 3:3).³⁴ Because Yahweh is the source of this suffering, the supplicant will soon revert to him for intervention and restoration.

In his third address to Yahweh, the psalmist hopefully expresses his confidence: 'Lord, I wait for you; you will answer, Lord, my God' (v. 16).

Very often, Yahweh is **petitioned to see or hear** the distressful circumstances of psalmists. And God often does so.³⁵ When Yahweh heard all the cries and prayers of the poor, needy and distressed, he answered the petitions with acts of grace and mercy (Ps 28:6), forgiveness (Ps 66:19), protection, deliverance and healing (Ps 34:7, 18; 119:149). For this 'answering' God, the supplicant of Psalm 38 is hopefully and confidently waiting.

In a triad of final petitions (vv. 22–23), the supplicant intensely pleads with Yahweh: 'My God, do not be far from me' (v. 22b). At this climax, the petitioner seems to have a very intense, personal relationship with Yahweh. Because of the afflicting pain caused by the wrath of God and the agony of the petitioner's sins, illness and enemies, only the presence of the divine 'body' will bring help and salvation. It will restore, rehabilitate and resocialise the supplicant. Wholeness can only be attained when the destructing hand (v. 3) of the distant divine body is replaced by the presence of the same helping body (v. 22b). Only Yahweh himself can do this.

The supplicant's body

Psalm 38 primarily focuses on the fate of the supplicant's injured and sick body. Various references are made to this

33. Illness and healing are in Old Testament thought connected to Yahweh. Cf. Wolff (1974:147). In the ancient world great catastrophes and sickness are related to God or the gods. Cf. Malina (1993:109–110).

34. See where 'arrow' and 'hand' are punishing instruments: Psalms 7:14; 11:2; 32:4; 39:11; 64:8; 109:27; 144:6; Job 6:4; 16:12–13; 19:21.

35. He is hearing the voice of the faithful (5:1, 4; 77:1), of the needy and those in bondage (69:33), laments of the afflicted (10:17), the cries of supplicants in distress (Ps 34:17; 38:16, 22–23; 55:17), and of those who fear him (Ps 145:19). He often hears the supplicant's 'weeping' (6:9) or their 'cry for mercy' (6:10).

body or body parts and their state of malfunction or dysfunction. These comprise terms such as 'flesh' (*bāšār*, vv. 3, 8), bones (*'atsēm*, v. 3), head (*rōsh*, v. 5), loins (*kāsēl*, v. 8), heart (*lēb*, vv. 9, 11), eyes (*'yn*, v. 11), mouth (*pāh*, vv. 14, 15) and feet (*rəgēl*, v. 17). In addition, the allusive ear (vv. 14, 15) and injured body's wounds (v. 6), burning (v. 8) and pain (v. 18) are mentioned. Exegetes should be aware that body images and metaphors in poetical texts have allusive meanings, which might vary between literal, figurative or symbolic interpretations.

In his acknowledgement of Yahweh's wrath, which caused his illness, the supplicant describes the condition of his body twice as 'there is no soundness in my flesh' (vv. 4a, 6), meaning a lack of wholeness or health. Here the term '**flesh**' probably refers to the 'substance of which humankind and animals are made'. It refers to the 'whole body' or 'whole person'.³⁶ As a parallel to verse 4a, the utterance in verse 4b says, 'there is no peace in my bones, because of my sins'. '**Bones**' refer to the human skeleton inside the body. Both descriptions add a complementary depiction of the outside, visible and the inside, invisible body, thus the complete body (cf. Wolff 1974:27–28). The supplicant is in a complete state of utter illness and disharmony, almost a death experience.

Because of this comprehensive illness, the image of the next body part confirms the supplicant's devastating distress. He is overwhelmed by his sins and laments in verse 5: 'my guilt has overwhelmed me' (lit: drowned my head).³⁷ The **head** is the most prominent feature of the body. Because it is visible and very vulnerable (Ps 140:7), it signifies the centre of life and represents the whole person. In the Hebrew mind, it was not regarded as the seat of the intellect, but, like the 'face', the head was a synonym for the 'self' and human identity. With his guilt well above his head, like water or waves overflowing the whole person, the supplicant of Psalm 38 was emotionally in real life-endangerment and threatened by death.

Communication organs are present in the human face, of which the eyes, mouth and ears are the most important. As part of the head, the supplicant's **eyes, ears and mouth** cease to operate normally in this distress. They are silenced. In verse 11, he says, 'the light of my eyes is gone', and in verses 14–15, 'I am like the deaf who cannot hear, like the mute who cannot speak. I have become like one who does not hear, whose mouth can offer no reply'.

The 'light of my eyes' is a *hapax legomenon* and can either indicate physical, visual sight or vitality as a *life force* (Ps 13:3; 88:10; Ec 12:2). In view of its parallel phrase in verse 11a ('my strength abandons me'), the latter is more probable. The supplicant lacks inner mental and emotional energy.

36. According to ancient world thinking, humankind has or possesses no body, it is a body – a body with everything in it, functioning in a (w)holistic way. Body is not divided into separate chambers of body, soul, and spirit. A dichotomy between body and soul, or the tri-partite division body-soul-spirit did not exist. Cf. Anderson (1972:303). See Genesis 40:19; Psalms 79:2; 84:3; 109:24. The term is also a metonym for humankind. See Genesis 6:12; Psalms 136:25; 145:21; Isaiah 40:5.

37. Similar images are found in Psalms 18:5, 17; 42:8; 69:3, 16; 124:4.

The cessation of the ears' and mouth's communication functions (vv. 14–15) results from his friends' and enemies' behaviour (vv. 12–13) and indicates despair or inner discouragement. Unlike Job, who wanted to argue with God and his friends, this psalmist keeps silent, most probably to emphasise the anticipation of and hope for Yahweh's remedial intervention.³⁸

Outer physical and inner mental or emotional dysfunctions enhance the picture of the supplicant's holistic misery. This includes the description of his festering and rotten **wounds** (vv. 6, 12),³⁹ his **loins** (back) full of burning (v. 8), his **groaning** (v. 9) and **sighing** (v. 10), his feeling 'feeble and utterly crushed' (v. 9), his failing **strength** (v. 11), his **pain** which is always with him (v. 18) and his **anxiety** (v. 19).

Even in his **body posture**, the sick and afflicted psalmist is bowed down and bent lowly forward (v. 7a).⁴⁰ He walks the whole day mourning, dressed in mourning attire (v. 7b).⁴¹ This outward bodily projection indicates his inner feelings of being crushed, feeble and anxious (vv. 9, 19). These descriptions amount to his miserable physical and psychic condition, a picture of total affliction.

Descriptions of the **heart** escalate the depiction of the psalmist's gruesome condition. According to Old Testament anthropology, the heart of humankind was a symbol of life, the inside of one's being, and the seat of emotions.⁴² Nonetheless, for the Hebrew mind, this organ was not the only or most important metaphor to express feeling and emotion. The heart was primarily viewed as the seat of reason, mind, intellect, contemplation, conscience, insight, memory or remembering, knowledge, the ability to know, planning, discernment and consideration.⁴³ But this body part was, *par excellence*, the organ of thinking and decision-making. Through contemplation and reflection, the heart was the origin for guiding people to do the right deeds.

The supplicant of Psalm 38 complains, 'I groan in the anguish of my heart' (v. 9) and 'my heart throbs' (v. 11).⁴⁴ He thus has an 'anguished heart' and a 'throbbing heart'. In view of the earlier depictions, these two expressions probably indicate the inner suffering (pain, fear or anxiety) and the physical

38. In ancient Near Eastern healing rites or ceremonies silence plays a role in the process to attain healing. This could be such an aspect of those rituals. cf. Gerstenberger (1988:164), also Hamme 2016:18).

39. See Isaiah 1:6; 53:5; Proverbs 20:30. These stripes or blows are often taken as an indication for scholars that the psalmist suffered from leprosy (Lv 13).

40. See Isaiah 21:3; Proverbs 12:8.

41. See 35:14; 42:10; 43:2; Job 30:28; Malachi 3:14.

42. For example, fear (Dt 1:28), courage (Ps 27:3), despair (Dt 28:65), sadness (Neh 2:2), trust (Ps 28:7), anger (Ps 39:3), and even desire (Ps 37:4) come from the heart. A few references to heart as physical organ (2 Ki 9:24) occur in OT texts, but little was known about the heart then. Modern societies view the heart today as the most important and overarching expression of feeling and emotion.

43. As noetic (intellectual function) and vegetative (bodily function) organ the heart was the origin of decisions (Ps 64:7), plans (Sir 37:17), thinking (Ps 27:8), memory or remembering (Is 33:18), wisdom (Ps 90:12) and good sense (Ps 49:4).

44. The expression לִבִּי סֹרֵרָה ('my heart beats 'furiously to and fro') is characterised by onomatopoeia to make audible the psalmist's fear or anxiety.

manifestation whereby the heart exercises a biological but irregular and disharmonious function.⁴⁵ As an internal organ, it could reflect emotion, but because of its dominant intellectual role in the Old Testament, a secondary meaning of both expressions in this poetic text could signify the supplicant's troubled or disturbed mind.

In Psalm 38, even the **feet** are not omitted. In a final list of his afflictions, the supplicant is concerned about the gloating of his enemies.⁴⁶ He asks God: 'do not let them gloat over me because of the stumbling of my feet'. The feet are moving organs of humans and animals and are the lowest parts of the body. They are used for walking and standing (cf. Staubli & Schroer 2001:182) and ensure stability in bodily movement. 'Stumbling of feet' indicates a 'falling' action.⁴⁷ Figuratively, sinning is often depicted by feet that stumble or slip.⁴⁸ In Psalm 38, this stumbling relates to the supplicant's sin, iniquity, and foolishness (vv. 4, 6, 19), which contributed to his misery. By referring to the feet, the psalmist's grievous suffering or bodily dysfunctionality is described in Psalm 38 from '**head to foot**', a trope indicating the whole person.⁴⁹

The supplicant finds himself in the sphere of death. Apart from his sins, which caused God's wrath, and his illness, which caused a dysfunctional body, malicious enemies 'set traps for him and seek his life' (*nepheš*).⁵⁰ This is a life-endangering threat. Enemies want to erase his life.

Nepheš and life are synonyms. With its air passage and gullet, the throat indicates the whole neck, which is instrumental as a life necessity. Blood is the vehicle of life power (Lev 17:11). *Nepheš* thus denotes the seat of life and life power and expresses vitality. Its understanding extends beyond bodiliness.⁵¹ As a personal principle and pronoun, *nepheš* indicates the personal aspect of the human being, the whole person and can therefore be translated with 'I' or 'me'.⁵² The concept is intertwined with body and organ function.

Using a hunting metaphor, namely setting traps,⁵³ the enemies' intention to wipe out the psalmist's life (his *nepheš*) is described.

45. Coetzee (2000:519) opts for a biological, anthropological interpretation and not for a theological function.

46. In the ancient world, when a nation or an individual is defeated by an enemy, it also meant that the defeated group's god is inefficient, impotent, and weak. With this petition the psalmist wants to convince Yahweh to intervene in his miserable situation with redemptive help.

47. Anderson (1972:306) indicates that this is 'a figure of misfortune'. See Psalms 15:5.

48. See Job 12:5; Psalms 37:31; 56:13; 66:9; 73:2; 116:8; 121:3.

49. See 2 Samuel 15:25; Isaiah 1:6.

50. In the Hebrew mind, humankind was seen as a psychosomatic unit, comprising body and spirit, with the understanding of 'soul' as a specific function of and interaction between body and the mysterious *life force* (throat, breath, life power and vitality), depicted as *nepheš*.

51. See Job 12:10: 'In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind'.

52. See Psalms 49:15: 'But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself'.

53. Psalms 9:17; 109:11.

Bodies of family, friends, neighbours and enemies

In Psalm 38, a distinction between two groups of enemies is evident. Both seem to distance themselves from the suffering supplicant. Firstly, there is the close circle of family, friends and neighbours (v. 12) and then a more radical group of malicious enemies (vv. 13, 17, 20–21). Both groups represent social 'bodies' in relation to the inflicted 'body' of the psalmist. Their distorted relationship with the psalmist influences the well-being and wholeness of the supplicant.

Family, friends, and neighbours

His illness is responsible for the fact that his loved ones, friends and neighbours avoid and withdraw from the sick and plagued supplicant (v. 12). They retreat and stand far off from him. The silence and absence of this closer group probably add to the agony of his experience. As familial, social, and religious communities, they disengage from the sufferer, probably because of shame or health reasons. As a result of this, the psalmist is ostracised, isolated and rejected. This de-socialisation contributes to disharmony and a lack of soundness in relations, and it adds to the need of the supplicant for re-socialisation.

Extreme enemies

A group of malicious enemies also plagues the supplicant (vv. 13, 17, 20–21). They are unidentified. Most probably, they belong to a sociopolitical community or 'body' who, out of envy, endanger the supplicant or want to eliminate him: they set traps, seek his life, seek his harm, speak destruction and plan deceit the whole day (v. 13). They gloat over his fall (v. 17); they are active (alive), multiply and hate the supplicant without reason (v. 20). They reward his good deeds with evil and accuse him – he who wants to do good (v. 21).

The supplicant seems to be powerless against this endangerment. With a distant God, his sins, a miserable illness and rejection by the communities of which he formed a part, the supplicant is overwhelmed to the point of death by these hostile forces. The grave distance between the supplicant and his social body can only be solved by intervention from outside, by Yahweh. The supplicant is not only ostracised, rejected and de-socialised but is regarded as a nonperson. The intensity of endangerment has escalated to the utmost form of suffering. Therefore, the threefold petition (vv. 22–23) at the climax of the psalm signifies hope and is a call on Yahweh not to abandon the supplicant, not to remain far off, but hasten to restore wholeness on various levels.

Synthesis

Psalm 38 is an outstanding example of how body and embodiment are illustrated in the Psalms. Bodies and body imagery play a dominant role in sketching and developing a theology of utmost human suffering.

The psalm is a prayer for the restoration of wholeness. Brokenness is caused by the psalmist's sin, God's wrath,

illness, social rejection and threatening enemies. The atmosphere of the text radiates underlying agony, despair, physical and psychic anguish and life-threatening danger. Still, the underlying tone is one of hope, expectation and confidence in Yahweh, the Israelite God.

Apart from the 'individual body' of the supplicant, the psalm exposes other bodies, such as the 'body of God', and social bodies, such as 'closer relatives and friends' and 'malicious enemies'. Interaction between these bodies shows a grave alienation among them, especially between the individual, injured and sick body of the supplicant and the others.

The restoration of the sick and injured body and reversal of the alienation between all the other bodies are situated in the hope that only Yahweh's help and healing can effectuate wholeness. The supplicant prays for his intervention. This prayer reverberates healing moments towards such wholeness.

Acknowledgements

I dedicate this article to a long-term friend, colleague and mentor in the Old Testament and the Hebrew poetry, Phil Botha. Since I was an undergraduate student I was impressed by the humbleness, dedication, knowledge capacity and thoroughness of him as an academic and person. Herewith I want to pay tribute and express my gratitude to him for the academic example he has set to colleagues in academia.

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

D.J.H. 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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