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Emotional Distress in the Hebrew Bible
Somatic or Psychological?

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A systematic search was made in the Hebrew Bible for expressions of emotional distress. A wide range of somatic and psychological vocabulary was found, especially in the Psalms and other poetic literature. Somatic expressions most frequently involved the heart, bowels, belly, bones, and eyes. Head symptoms were rare. Metaphors referring to the heart were common; other somatic expressions appeared to be descriptions of actual physical sensations. Usually somatic and psychological expressions were paired together, utilising the 'parallelism' of Hebrew verse form. Biblical Hebrew thus incorporated a powerful and sophisticated language of emotional expression.

In 1973, Julian Leff published an influential paper "Culture and the differentiation of emotional states". Drawing on the experience of translating the Present State Examination (Wing *et al*, 1974) into a variety of non-Western languages, Leff argued that the observed absence of specific words for depression and anxiety in languages outside the Indo-European group was associated with a lack of 'psychological mindedness' in these cultures, leading to somatic presentation of emotional distress.

This thesis has been criticised by linguistic anthropologists (e.g. Beeman, 1985). Leff himself has acknowledged that his schema for the development of emotional differentiation ignored the possibility that bodily complaints might be used symbolically. His book *Psychiatry Around the Globe* was extensively revised (Leff, 1988) to take into account the growing appreciation of the subtlety of the language of emotional distress.

The various contributors to *Culture and Depression* (Kleinman & Good, 1985) provide a wealth of fascinating material from diverse contemporary cultures. However, it is desirable to take a longer historical view as well as a wide geographical view. In searching for material from non-Western cultures, it is instructive to go back in time two or three thousand years and to investigate the experience and expression of emotional distress in antiquity.

This paper analyses data from one particular non-Western literate culture of the past, that of the ancient Jews. The Hebrew Bible is an accessible (if increasingly neglected) source of data from this ancient religious community. Moreover, this collection of books, especially in their 1611 English translation (the 'King James' or 'Authorised' Version), has had an immense influence on the modern development of English language and sensibility.

Cultural background of the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible represents the collected religious writings of the Jewish people over a millenium. Reliable oral tradition goes back at least to the Exodus from Egypt, dated using modern archaelogical and historical evidence to the 13th century BC (Wright, 1962). The biblical text was first committed to writing probably in the time of the monarchy in the 10th century BC. The latest books are from the Persian period, although the Book of Daniel was written in the time of the Hellenistic Seleucid empire in the 2nd Century BC (Frost, 1962). During this time, the Israelites developed from a semi-nomadic tribal people into a settled agricultural and urban society. It remained a patriarchical society based on an extended family system which included married sons and their wives and children. The family was the religious as well as the social unit, celebrating festivals and offering sacrifices (Exodus 12:3–11; Deuteronomy 16:13–15).

In the long process of formation of the Hebrew scriptures, a crucial role was played by the temple in Jerusalem, which became the centre of Jewish religion, displacing the scattered hill shrines and altars of an earlier period. The law (Torah) was codified by the temple priests, the psalms were composed for temple worship, and the later prophets were probably temple functionaries (Pedersen, 1940).

Much of the Hebrew Bible would have been transmitted orally for many generations before being committed to writing. However, there is evidence for a steady growth of literacy in Jewish society, with a powerful guild of professional scribes (Nehemiah 8:1–8). By the time of the Maccabees in the 2nd century BC, many lay people had copies of the sacred books (Burrows, 1963).

Method

A systematic search was made in the Hebrew Bible for expressions of emotional distress. *Young's Analytical Concordance* (1939) was used to identify references to anatomical words ('head', 'heart', 'bowels', etc.), descriptive verbs ('panting', 'burning', 'writhing'), and abstract emotional words ('grief', 'sorrow', 'fear'). Lists were compiled of Hebrew texts where the context clearly indicated emotional distress. The distress might be collective or individual, religious or secular.

The frequencies with which these words occurred in the context of emotional distress were calculated. The associations of somatic and psychological words were noted. An attempt was made to summarise the significance of each somatic and anatomical term in relation to emotional distress.

Finally, the repertoire of somatic sensations associated with emotional distress was compared with the Bradford Somatic Inventory (BSI; Mumford *et al*, 1991). This is a comprehensive list of somatic symptoms described by anxious and depressed patients in Britain and Pakistan.

Results

Somatic vocabulary

The word 'heart' (*leb*, or *lebab*) occurs over 700 times in the Hebrew Bible, and it is the most complex of all somatic terms to analyse. Metaphorical phrases abound, for example 'contrite heart' (Psalm 51:17), 'hard hearted' (Ezekiel 3:7), 'wise hearted' (Exodus 31:6), 'thoughts of the heart' (Psalm 33:11).

Around 20 occurrences of *leb* probably refer to physical sensations attributed to the heart. These cardiac sensations include pain (Psalm 55:4; Jeremiah 4:19), fluttering (Isaiah 21:4), throbbing (Psalm 38:10), weakness or fainting (Psalm 22:14; Psalm 102:4). With other texts it is difficult to decide whether a physical sensation or metaphorical meaning is intended, for example where the heart is said to 'fail' or be 'heavy' (Genesis 42:28; Proverbs 12:25).

There are 29 references to 'bowels' (*meim*), nine of which occur in the context of emotional distress. Examples include: "Behold O Lord, for I am in distress: my bowels are troubled; my heart is overturned within me" (Lamentations 1:20); "My eyes fail with tears, my bowels are troubled, my liver is poured upon the earth" (Lamentations 2:11); "My bowels bubbled up, and rested not: the days of affliction come to meet me" (Job 30:27). In one instance *meim* occurs in the context of sexual arousal (Song of Songs 5:4).

The close association of abdominal and cardiac sensations in emotional distress is reflected in several texts, for example: "My bowels, my bowels, I am pained at the walls of my heart; my heart is noisy in me" (Jeremiah 4:19). Difficulty in differentiating visceral sensations is not restricted to biblical Hebrew: the sensation which gives rise to the English expression 'butterflies in the stomach' probably originates in the heart.

There are 30 occurrences of *beten* meaning belly or stomach, and a further 38 instances where it means womb. Four of the former group occur in the context of emotional distress, for example: "When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones" (Habakkuk 3:16); "My belly is as wine which has no vent; it is ready to burst like new wineskins" (Job 32:19) (cf. BSI item 25: "Has your stomach felt swollen or bloated?"). In four texts in the Book of Proverbs *beten* is used metaphorically to mean 'innermost part' of the body (Proverbs 18:8; 20:27; 20:30; 26:22). In one instance *beten* is said to be the source of deceit (Job 15:35).

There are 105 occurrences of the word 'bones' (*etsem*), of which 13 occur in the context of emotional distress. Examples include: "Dread came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake" (Job 4:14); "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax, it is melted within my bowels" (Psalm 22:14).

Since biblical Hebrew has no word to designate the living body as a whole, 'bones' often carries this meaning, for example: "My strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away" (Psalm 31:10). Sensations of heat inside the body are also expressed in these terms: "My bones burn with heat" (Job 30:30). By extension, *etsem* can refer metaphorically to the whole person (e.g. Psalm 35:10; Isaiah 66:14).

The word 'head' (*rosh*) occurs frequently, but only once as a possible focus of somatic sensations associated with emotional distress (Isaiah 1:5–6). The child whom Elisha revived complained of severe pain in his head but this was probably an acute organic condition (II Kings 4:19). There are occasional references to "covering the head" or "hanging the head in shame". Placing dust or ashes on the head was an outward sign of mourning (e.g. Job 2:12).

'Eyes' (*ayin*) are mentioned 21 times in association with grieving: 13 of these are references to tears, the other 8 to the eyes growing dim. "My eye has grown dim from grief" (Job 17:7); "My eye is wasted from grief, my soul and my belly also" (Psalm 31:9); "My heart throbs, my strength fails me; and the light of my eyes – it also has gone from me" (Psalm 38:10). In other instances, the eyes can express arrogance (Proverbs 6:17), humility (Psalm 123:2), mockery (Proverbs 30:17), or greed (Ecclesiastes 4:8).

Other somatic words are occasionally associated with emotional distress. There are three references to kidneys (*kelayoth*) (e.g. Psalm 73:21); and single references to sinews (*gid*) (Job 30:17), loins (*mothnayim*) (Isaiah 21:3), parched throat (*garon*) (Psalm 69:3), flank (*kesel*) (Psalm 38:7), and liver (*kabed*) (Lamentations 2:11).

There are no instances of somatic sensations in emotional distress associated with the back (*gav*) or the chest (*chazeh*). The neck or nape (*oreph*, *tsavor*) occurs ten times in a metaphorical sense, as in the expressions "stiff necked" (Deuteronomy 31:27) or "they hardened their necks" (Jeremiah 7:26).

Other somatic sensations

Several generalised somatic sensations occur frequently. These include: trembling (*raad*) – "Fearfulness and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me" (Psalm 55:5); faintness or sickness (*davvai*) – "My groans are many and my heart is faint" (Lamentations 1:22) and "My grief is beyond healing, my heart is faint within me" (Jeremiah 8:18); and weariness or fatigue – "I am weary with my groaning; . . . I drench my couch with my tears" (Psalm 6:6).

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Abstract vocabulary

Tsarar, *tsarah*, *tsar*, *tsir* (trouble, distress) occur around 120 times, in individual and corporate contexts. The related word *tsur* means besieged, bound up, or hemmed in; *matsor* means a siege or besieged place. Used abstractly, these words imply a constraint or restriction. Their range of meaning spans both the external 'stresses' impinging on a person and the subjective experience of 'distress' which results. In some instances there is an accompanying somatic description of emotion, in others there is a metaphorical reference to the heart, but mostly these words appear on their own, as a purely abstract statement: "In my distress I cry to the Lord" (Psalm 120:1). *Tsuqah*, *metsuqah*, *matsoq* (anguish, distress) occur 16 times; their meaning overlaps with the previous group but with an emphasis on the subjective experience of distress.

The word *chil* and related word-forms, meaning pain, grief, occur 38 times, usually in the context of severe emotional pain, grief or sorrow. "When the report comes to Egypt, they will be in anguish over the report about Tyre" (Isaiah 23:5). Sometimes there is a comparison with physical pain, for example "Like a woman with child, who writhes [*chil*] and cries out in her pangs [*chebel*], when she is near her time, so were we because of thee, O Lord" (Isaiah 26:17). With the heart, it can be difficult to decide whether the primary meaning is literal or metaphorical: "My heart is sore pained within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me (Psalm 55:4).

The word *chebel* has several meanings, including cord, band or rope. It occurs 10 times, meaning pangs or agony ('sorrow' in the Authorised Version), often likened to the pain of childbirth. It implies a physical sensation of constriction or tightness (cf. BSI items 5, 13): "The sorrows of death encompassed me" (Psalm 18:4); "They shall be afraid: pangs [*tsir*] and sorrows [*chebel*] shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain [*chil*] like a woman in labour" (Isaiah 13:8).

Chalah and its close relatives generally refer to physical disease and sickness. Thus Nehemiah is asked by King Artaxerxes, "Why is your face sad, seeing that you are not sick? This is nothing else but sorrow of heart" (Nehemiah 2:2). In another instance, *chalah* refers to illness resulting from emotional factors: "Amnon was so vexed that he made himself ill" (II Samuel 13:2).

Pachad (fear, dread) occurs 74 times as a noun or verb. On occasions there is an accompanying somatic description of emotion: "Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake" (Job 4:14). More often *pachad* stands alone as a purely abstract word: "He laughs at fear, and is not dismayed" (Job 39:22). Sometimes the heart is referred to as the seat of fear: ". . . because of the fear which your heart shall fear" (Deuteronomy 28:67).

Terror (*emah*) and fear (*magor*) occur 14 times and 8 times respectively. They are nowhere accompanied by descriptions of somatic sensations, but fear is sometimes located in the heart, for example: "Thine heart shall mediate terror [*emah*]" (Isaiah 33:18).

Misery (*marud*, *amal*) occurs five times, but is not associated with somatic descriptions: "Let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more" (Proverbs 31:7). The word *amal* normally means toil or physical labour.

The words *abal* and *abel* occur 39 times and are used generally for mourning: "I sat down and wept, and mourned for days; and I continued fasting and praying" (Nehemiah 1:4). The word *saphad* occurs 30 times and usually refers to a funeral oration or dirge, that is, to mourning behaviour rather than to the inner experience of grief: "Gird yourselves with sackcloth, lament, and run to and fro among the hedges!" (Jeremiah 49:3).

Chemah (anger, fury) occurs 110 times. Etymologically *chemah* is closely related to the word *chom* (heat). There

Table 1
Somatic sensations in the Hebrew Bible

Zone	Biblical texts	BSI equivalent: item nos
Heart	Deuteronomy 28:65 I Samuel 4:13; 28:5 Job 37:1 Psalms 22:14; 38:10; 39:3; 55:4; 102:4 Isaiah 21:4 Jeremiah 4:19; 8:18 Lamentations 1:20; 1:22; 5:17	6, 13, 19, 42
Bowels	I Kings 3:26 Job 30:27 Psalm 22:14 Song of Songs 5:4 Isaiah 16:11 Jeremiah 4:19; 31:20 Lamentations 1:20; 2:11	2, 14, 43
Belly	Job 20:20; 32:19 Psalm 31:9 Habakkuk 3:16	2, 25
Bones	Job 4:14; 19:20; 30:17; Job 30:30; 33:19 Psalms 22:14; 31:10; 38:3; 102:3; 102:5 Jeremiah 23:9 Lamentations 1:13 Habakkuk 3:16	10, 17, 18
Head	Isaiah 1:5–6	
Eyes	Job 17:7 Psalms 6:7; 31:9; 38:10; 69:3 Lamentations 5:17	8, 20
Kidneys	Job 16:13 Psalm 73:21 Lamentations 3:13	
Sinews	Job 30:17	
Loins	Isaiah 21:3	
Throat	Psalm 69:3	7
Flank	Psalm 38:7	
Liver	Lamentations 2:11	
Other symptoms		
Trembling	Job 4:14; 21:6 Psalm 55:5 (etc.)	22
Faintness/ weakness	Jeremiah 8:18 Lamentations 1:22 (etc.)	10
Weariness/ fatigue	Psalms 6:6; 69:3 (etc.)	27

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are many metaphorical references to anger in the heart, and one reference may be either a metaphor or a somatic sensation: "My heart became hot within me" (Psalm 39:3).

The Hebrew Bible and the BSI

This lexical analysis has identified a wide range of somatic sensations in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew somatic repertoire may be compared to the 44 symptoms which make up the BSI, which were described by British and Pakistani individuals who were anxious or depressed.

Four principal dimensions of somatic symptoms were identified in both Britain and Pakistan: head, abdomen, chest/heart, and fatigue (Mumford *et al*, 1991). Abdominal symptoms are well represented in the Bible, as are heart symptoms and fatigue symptoms. The most notable difference is the near absence of head symptoms from the biblical repertoire. Sensations of heat, so prominent in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, are also found infrequently in the Hebrew Bible. However, references to 'bones' are common, referring generally to the musculoskeletal system or the entire body.

Altogether, around a third of the 44 BSI symptoms can be identified in the Hebrew Bible with reasonable confidence. Table 1 gives biblical references and the numbering of the equivalent BSI symptoms. There are no significant additional categories of somatic symptoms (other than 'bones') found in the Hebrew Bible but not represented in the BSI.

Discussion

Biblical Hebrew has a vocabulary of around 5000 words, although only a tenth of these are found with any considerable frequency (Ryder, 1963). This is a small vocabulary for a language of such expressive range. Hebrew achieves its expressiveness through complex verb paradigms and the frequent abstract use of concrete words. Thus *ruach* does service as wind, breath and spirit (the spirit of God or the human spirit); *nephesh* means living being, mind, or person ('soul'). Both words can refer to mental processes, feelings, inclinations and emotions (Pedersen, 1926; Richardson, 1957). Hebrew thought was not dualistic, and no sharp distinction was made between physical and spiritual entities.

Heart (*leb*) can also stand for the self, the ego, or the 'inner man'. This reflects the ancient Hebrew view of the heart as the centre of the reason and will, as well as of the emotions. All the thoughts and emotions of which a person is capable may be attributed to the heart. The heart can be glad, sad, troubled, courageous, discouraged, fearful, envious, trustful, moved by hatred or love (Dentan, 1962). The heart is also the seat of the appetites and desires, both good and bad, and the organ of moral choice. Above all, the heart is the point of contact with God, where religious experience has its root.

The great majority of references to *leb* in the Hebrew Bible are overtly metaphorical (see Pedersen (1926) for a full discussion). Only a small number of texts seem to refer to somatic sensations felt in the chest or heart. By contrast, when bowels (*meim*) or belly (*beten*) occur in an emotional context, the primary meaning is nearly always a vivid physical sensation. Unlike *leb*, the abdominal organs did not appear to be a major focus of somatic metaphors for emotional distress in ancient Hebrew culture (*pace* Dentan, 1962). It was at a later period that Rabbinic and Christian commentators began to interpret these texts metaphorically and to discuss the functions of the various organs of the body in terms of different emotions.

The lexical approach adopted in this analysis of Hebrew somatic vocabulary may be viewed as a rather mechanical way of elucidating subtle cultural meanings. It might be argued that it was a matter of chance that the psalmists reported one somatic sensation rather than another. If a particular sensation is not reported, it does not prove that it was never experienced: an argument from silence is always hazardous.

However, a lexical approach does offer a solid framework on which to build an understanding of the ancient Hebrews' experience and expression of emotional distress. It is of interest that, for example, there is only a single (doubtful) reference to symptoms in the head (Isaiah 1:5–6), whereas heart symptoms and abdominal symptoms occur frequently. The selective focusing on particular regions of the body is likely to reflect cultural beliefs about the body in sickness and in health (Mumford, 1989). The ancient Hebrews were unaware of the function of the brain and had no name for it; they seem to have had little interest in what went on inside the head.

The lexical analysis of *abstract* words for emotional distress has revealed a great deal of overlap between the meanings of the various Hebrew words. This imprecision was reflected in the lack of a one-to-one relationship between Hebrew and English words for emotional distress in the 1611 Authorised Version. (The 1611 Bible was used in this comparison because it was found to be more literal than any modern translation.) Thus *tsarar* was variously translated as distress (in 6 instances), straitness (3), tribulation/adversity (4), trouble (2), and pangs (2); but *tsar* as trouble (15), distress (5), affliction (3), tribulation (2), anguish (1), and sorrows (1).

This lack of correspondence between English and Hebrew (*not* evident in relation to anatomical words) cannot readily be attributed to carelessness on the

part of King James's translators. Fifty leading scholars, including the professors of Hebrew and Greek at Oxford and Cambridge, worked in groups and met regularly to review their progress and to harmonise their work (Cross, 1958). The lack of correspondence seems rather to reflect the intrinsic difficulty in communicating emotional states in abstract language. It also confirms this author's previous comment that "close verbal equivalence [in different languages] is probably more easily achieved for somatic symptoms than for psychological symptoms" (Mumford *et al*, 1991).

Was emotional distress conceived somatically or psychologically?

This study has demonstrated that there are three categories of emotional statements in the Hebrew Bible: somatic sensations, somatic metaphor, and purely abstract language. These three types of emotional expression are not found in isolation from one another. In the poetic literature they are usually combined in pairs, employing the characteristic 'parallelism' of Hebrew verse form. Each verse consists of two halves, the second of which must generally satisfy the expectation raised by the first half (Robinson, 1947). Sometimes the second half of the verse develops the thought of the first half, sometimes it reiterates it, and occasionally it is difficult to see the connection.

Somatic expressions of emotional distress rarely occur alone, but are usually coupled with a psychological expression. The parallelism of Hebrew verse is an ideal vehicle for balancing somatic and abstract statements so as to complement each other. The use of somatic language by the ancient Hebrews was, therefore, not associated with any lack of 'psychological mindedness'.

It needs to be emphasised that the use of somatic expressions associated with emotional distress was not primarily metaphorical, except in relation to the heart (*leb*). Most other somatic expressions identified in this study appear to refer to physical sensations: the context makes it plain that the writer was fully aware of their emotional significance.

The reason why the heart occupies such an important place in the biblical language of emotion is not hard to fathom. Emotional excitement, fear, and distress are all accompanied by cardiac sensations. In terms of somatic sensation, the heart is a much more plausible centre for the emotions than the brain. Somatic metaphors centring on the heart are found in many other cultures, for example, the concept of sinking or shrinking heart among Punjabi Sikhs (Krause, 1989). Sometimes it is difficult to differentiate somatic sensations from somatic metaphor: this is not surprising, since many metaphors for emotion owe their cogency to the corresponding physical sensation.

It is clear that the Hebrew poets and writers had available to them a highly sophisticated language of emotional expression. They could select somatic sensations, somatic metaphor or abstract language, and combine them in different ways. Each of these forms of expression was distinct, and one was not reducible to the others. Together this threefold mode of expression communicates emotional experience more powerfully than any of the three strands separately.

Returning to Leff's (1973) original thesis, is there any evidence for a differentiation between types of emotional distress in the Hebrew Bible? There are no precise Hebrew equivalents for our modern English 'anxiety' and 'depression', yet most modern readers would agree that biblical Hebrew is capable of expressing a wide range of emotional distress. Fear is contrasted with grief, apprehension with misery.

The richest variety of emotional states is found in the psalms. The breadth of human emotions represented there explains why the psalms have come to occupy such an important place in both private and congregational worship of Jews and Christians. Following Jewish custom, the so-called penitential psalms (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) were used in the mediaeval Christian church during Lent, to induce feelings of grief and contrition. This is evidence for the power of these Hebrew psalms to communicate intense emotional and spiritual experience.

In times of personal distress, people of successive generations have turned to the psalms for solace. They have been helped to find words to express their experience of grief or fear, anger or despair, and by so doing, to move towards some kind of resolution. It can be argued that it is precisely through somatic language that the psalms provide such immediate and graphic descriptions of emotional distress, with which people from every generation can identify.

Metaphors based on somatic sensations act as a bridge between somatic and psychological experience, and offer a reliable anchoring to the language of emotion. Even today, somatic language remains the most vivid way of communicating emotions; it is the least vulnerable to changes in the meanings of words, surviving even the huge cultural transition from the era of the Hebrew Bible to the Western world of the late 20th century. This observation carries important implications for current psychiatric practice, particularly the conduct of clinical interviews and the design of questionnaires for measuring emotional distress.

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