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“TRAUMA IS SUFFERING THAT REMAINS”. THE CONTRIBUTION OF TRAUMA STUDIES TO PROPHETIC STUDIES¹

ABSTRACT

Although the study of trauma has been common practice in several fields, biblical scholars have, since only a few years ago, used the concept of trauma as an important tool to interpret biblical texts. This article aims to provide a brief overview of the history of trauma studies in order to understand its impact on theology and biblical studies. The last section of the article focuses on trauma studies and the interpretation of prophetic literature.

Suffering in different guises is not, however, foreign to us. It crops up under our own roof. I need to write to you about my own struggles to deal with the question of suffering ... Suffering is not an attractive theme ... Not only is writing about suffering risky, it is also difficult. We react differently to suffering, and its causes defy easy answers. Why do the innocent suffer? Can suffering ever be eliminated? (Ackermann 2003:99-100).

1 I want to dedicate this article to Fanie Snyman, who is a well-established national and international scholar. Since his doctoral dissertation, his research focus has been primarily on the Book of the XII. He is well-known for his contribution to the study of the Book of Malachi. His major work is his commentary on the Book of Malachi (Snyman 2015). The theme of suffering indeed also plays an important role in the Book of Malachi, as outlined by Snyman (2008) in one of his publications.

1. INTRODUCTION

In her introduction to the book *Post-traumatic public theology*, Rambo (2016:3) states that “[t]rauma is suffering that remains”. According to her, this condensed definition formulates the core of a traumatic experience, namely the problem of integration. The overwhelming nature of traumatic experiences hinders the human processes of adaptation, and the force of the violence causes an inability to both integrate and incorporate this experience into a new framework of meaning. The challenge in the aftermath of this traumatic experience is to again orientate oneself to life, befriend the world, and restore trust and connections. Therefore, according to Rambo (2016:4), “the post-traumatic is the challenging territory of this work of integration”.²

The ancient Greek word for trauma (τραῦμα) can be translated as “wound” or can indicate “an injury inflicted upon the body by an act of violence” (Jones 2009:12). In other words, according to Jones (2009:12), to be traumatised implies that one is struck down by some kind of external force that threatens to ruin one. This external force attacks the human body in such a way that it is wounded. Caruth (2016:3) indicates that the Greek word originally referred to an injury inflicted on a body. However, in its later usage – as is evident, primarily, in the medical and psychiatric literature – this term is interpreted as a wound inflicted not on the body, but on the mind. In Freud’s writings (for example, *Beyond the pleasure principle*), the term “trauma” is understood as a wound of the mind, which, unlike the wound of the body, is an injury that cannot be healed, but that imposes itself again upon the mind of the survivor. Trauma is thus

not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on (Caruth 2016:4).

Freud’s writing on trauma thus indicates that trauma is the story of a wound that continuously cries out in a loud voice of a reality or truth that

2 See also Rambo (2017:4-5): “Trauma makes it impossible to think that traumatic experiences are over. It turns us to think of bodies as the loci of trauma. It turns us to think about the porousness of experience and the complex ways what another’s trauma, trauma that we view as external to us, comes to live within us. It also means that if we are oriented posttraumatically, we interpret events with epistemological humility and a wariness about how easy it is to dismiss them, to cover them over, to render them invisible. Both the vulnerability of such experiences internally and the difficulty translating such experiences externally require a unique set of capacities for those who see to witness trauma”.

is otherwise not available to one (Caruth 2016:4). In another study, Caruth (1995:153) defines trauma as

the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be replaced within the schemes of prior knowledge ... Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become ... a “narrative memory” that is integrated into a complete story of the past.

Caruth (1995:153) adds that trauma is speechless terror as it is “history that literally *has no place*”. A traumatic event has an impact on the inner psyche of both individuals and communities, as this event defines the very nature and anxieties of its victims (Claassens & Garber 2008:187). Garber (2015:28) postulates that, from the perspective of trauma theory, the initial trauma is the historical experience of the traumatic event, which can be defined as the “wound”. Although the historical traumatic event is lost in the bigger landscape of the past, it repeats itself through recurring manifestations and memories of the event.

Although the study of trauma has been common practice in the medical, psychiatric and psychological fields (and, to some extent, in Holocaust Studies), the discourse of trauma is a relatively new field of study in the other humanistic disciplines. According to Caruth (2016:116), only since the last decade of the 20th century has the study of trauma, in other words “its theoretical formulation and its use as a critical framework for interpretation”, become common practice in a number of disciplines across the humanities and social studies, including Christian theology and biblical studies. In all of these fields, the theory of trauma does not make a new claim to knowledge, but it links the language of trauma to the language of literature. For Caruth (2016:117), it is in this literary dimension of the discourse of trauma that the language of trauma continues to address so many people from different backgrounds, cultures and fields of study.

Trauma shatters interpretative frameworks, thus seriously challenging the theologian, who has to interpret experience and existence, and the field of theology, which is a meaning-making enterprise (Rambo 2016:4). In the subsequent section, a short overview of the history of trauma will be given, as biblical scholars need to understand what trauma means from a psychological perspective, in order to engage in interdisciplinary study about trauma. This section discusses some main developments and positions in the development of trauma studies.

2. A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF TRAUMA STUDIES³

Although the phenomenon of trauma has always been part of the history of humankind, the study of trauma is relatively new and spans just over a century (Rambo 2010:3). In spite of this relatively short time span, psychological literature on trauma is nevertheless infinite. This section does not provide the reader with a comprehensive account of the historical development of trauma and trauma studies (Esterhuizen 2017:21). A number of studies have already provided a detailed overview of this historical development. One example is Herman's (2015:7-32) classical book, *Trauma and recovery*, first published in 1992, which outlines this history. Rambo (2016:11) justly states that Herman's book "is recognized as something of a sacred text within the field of trauma studies", as it maps psychological trauma and a path to recovery.

Herman (2015:10) begins her history with the end of the 19th century.⁴ Although the formal study of trauma has a history of approximately 150 years, it was particularly during the past two decades of the 19th century that theoretical models were developed. The research done during those years focussed foremost on the connection between life-threatening or violent events and their impact on the lives of people or on the community (Esterhuizen 2017:21). A major focus was also the study of hysteria which was commonly diagnosed as a disorder occurring in women (Herman 2015:10).⁵ The relationship between trauma and mental illness, associated with this hysteria, was the focus of the works of Charcot, Freud, and Beuer (Rambo 2010:3; Esterhuizen 2017:21).

According to Herman (2015:9), the absence of strong political movements causes an active process of forgetting. However, during the 20th century, political movements influenced the development of trauma studies. Changes in social and societal structures, medical advances as well as a new philosophical outlook promoted the interest in trauma and the subsequent study thereof. In this regard, Esterhuizen (2017:21-22) infers that

3 This section is based on a previous publication (see Groenewald 2017:56-58).

4 See also Esterhuizen (2017:21); Rambo (2010:3).

5 In this regard, Herman (2015:10) infers as follows: "In the words of one historian, 'for twenty-five centuries, hysteria had been considered a strange disease with incoherent and incomprehensible symptoms. Most physicians believed it to be a disease proper to women and originating in the uterus.' Hence the name hysteria. Another historian explains that hysteria was 'a dramatic medical metaphor for everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable in the opposite sex'."

[p]hilosophical ideas have greatly influenced the different approaches and studies of understanding of human beings, the world they live in and events that continuously shaped and redefined traumatic concepts.

In Rambo’s (2010:4) view, the study of trauma

has also moved away from an exclusively individual look at the psyche to a study of cycles of history and the global and political effects of ongoing violence. The study of trauma has expanded to account for multiple levels of trauma: historical trauma, institutional trauma, and global trauma.

Esterhuizen (2017:23-24)⁶ states that the way in which trauma is understood goes back to Sigmund Freud – the father of the psychoanalytical theory – who had developed and theorised the concept of psychic trauma already in the early 1880s. Like his teacher Jean-Martin Charcot, Freud interpreted hysteria as the result of traumatic experiences which both men and women experienced during the course of their lifetime. We can, therefore, understand hysterical symptoms better when related to earlier life experiences that caused trauma in a person’s life. This phenomenon is referred to as “deferred action”, implying that the effects of a traumatic experience(s) only become visible later in a person’s life when these experiences are recalled in memory.

For O’Connor (2012:2), trauma studies arose from “the bloody smear that was the twentieth century”.⁷ Trauma studies in the 20th century were dominated by the war cycles of that century. Subsequently, the focus shifted to the soldiers and to the after-effects of these military conflicts on both individuals and societies. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)⁸ was no longer only an issue belonging to the private sphere, but it also carried over into the public sphere. It became a national issue with major political consequences (Rambo 2010:3). After World War I, Freud, who

6 See also Rambo (2010:3).

7 O’Connor (2012:2) also states that “[c]entral to these loosely connected investigations are the long lasting effects upon victims and their offspring of the Holocaust, or Shoah – the systematic destruction of European Jewry and others by the Nazis during the Second World War”.

8 According to Janoff-Bulman (1992:50), “... there is explicit acknowledgement of the fact that PTSD ‘can develop in people without any such pre-existing conditions’. We are confronted with a psychological disorder that can strike psychologically healthy individuals. What is clear is that there are extreme life events that will produce psychological difficulties not in a vulnerable few, but in large numbers of people exposed to them”.

did psychoanalytical therapy with some of the soldiers returning from the front, made a simple but profound observation, namely that the past does not remain in the past, but always returns.⁹ In the experience of trauma, the wound is relived in time. Trauma is thus not a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but the “problem of temporality is at the root of the phenomenon” (Rambo 2010:19).

Any study of trauma, therefore, needs to focus on the potential return of such an event in the present, as well as its impact on both the present and the future. This can happen in ways that are diverse and unaccounted for. *The challenge of trauma studies is to have to deal with the past returning.* Scholars of trauma need to identify the wounds – the marks of an event – that continue in the present long after the past event(s). Trauma is time and again defined and comprehended in categories that surpass the human ability to understand, process and integrate the events of the external world. One can simply consider the way in which events such as genocide, extreme natural disasters, wars and foreign occupation of territories have a lasting impact on the character – in a negative sense – of communities and nations in the aftermath of these events (Rambo 2010:4).

The events that cause trauma can be described by the relationship between death and life. In a psychological, not literal sense, trauma is an encounter with death and the human being is drawn into the sphere of death as these radical experience(s) destroy the familiar world and all knowledge of operating within it. The term “survival” is used to describe the aftermath of a traumatic event, as life takes on a fundamentally different characteristic when combined with an experience of death (Rambo 2010:4).

For Stulman (2014:178), the emergent field of trauma studies represents a significant shift in the intellectual landscape – a revolution of sorts. In the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, the study of trauma has become a major trend in fields as diverse as animal science, on the one hand, and the humanities, on the other. It is as if “violence” – the dialect of our time – has been put under a microscope and scholars are studying the effects of

9 See also Janzen (2012:28) who states in this regard: “In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, published two years after the war, Freud refers to the ‘traumatic neurosis’ observed in those exposed to combat, and notes that it involves intrusion into the dream lives of the victims. Just as in the case of those who suffer from hysteria, Freud points out, the repetitive return of the trauma in dreams causes the patient to become ‘fixated’ to the trauma, thereby upsetting the normal healing nature of dreams”.

domestic abuse, political terror, war, incest, rape, forced relocation, military occupation, captivity, torture, and other unspeakable acts of brutality. Researchers have employed quantitative and qualitative methods, including multi-formant, intergenerational, diagnostic, psychotherapeutic, and neurobiological, as well as various forms of criticism such as deconstructive, post-structural, feminist, and post-colonial – all to arrive at a greater understanding of the ravages of violence on the *psyche* and the *soma*, and on the individual and the community (Stulman 2014:178).

According to Stulman (2014:179), biblical studies is, in fact, a latecomer on this scene and the integration of trauma and biblical studies might have a profound impact on the interpretive landscape of biblical studies in the 21st century.¹⁰

3. THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA STUDIES ON THEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL STUDIES¹¹

According to Rambo (2010:4), theologians have always reflected on issues of human suffering. They have always struggled with the question as to how to understand suffering in the world, given the theological claim that God is in a relationship with the world. This discourse, as we all know, is described as the theodicy question. It engages with the presence of suffering, and even evil in the world, and how this is to be reconciled with the claims about the goodness of God. Although theodicies may respond to suffering by trying to provide theological explanations to the questions suffering puts forward, the degree to which these explanations help in the healing process is still unsure (Rambo 2010:4-5).¹²

10 See also Frechette & Boase (2016:1).

11 For this section, see Groenewald (2017:58-59).

12 See also De Gruchy (2006:113-115) who states in this regard: “Can the God who has created such beauty also be the author of the ugliness that afflicts the world? Can the God who creates life also be the agent of death and destruction? What kind of God allows pain and suffering, injustice and oppression to overshadow so much of the beauty that surrounds us, subverting the ends of justice in dehumanizing oppression? ... There are different ways of responding to the problem of theodicy, depending on whether human suffering results from natural disasters, human violence, war and ethnic cleansing, or from widespread epidemics such as HIV and AIDS. One response has to do with the freedom God has given us to live, not as automatons but as responsible world citizens. Another response to the theodicy questions focuses on the way in which the world is created and life has evolved and continues to do so within the cosmic galaxy”.

The rise of trauma studies poses new challenges for the theological engagement with suffering. New questions should be asked, and the focus should shift to new aspects of the discussion in order to transform the discourse about suffering. According to Rambo (2010:5),

theologians following the conversations about trauma have started to think that trauma calls for a distinctive theological articulation. Unique dimensions of trauma move theology in new directions.

According to this understanding, trauma does not belong merely to the fields of psychology and counselling; it has become part of the theological discourse and presents profound challenges to theological understandings in general (Rambo 2010:5).

The integration of trauma theory into theology as a field of study affords us the opportunity to integrate various academic subjects with their respective literature methodologies. It has thus opened and developed the possibility for interdisciplinary research. Becker (2014:25) states that, through literature studies,

we can analyse more in detail how far trauma phenomenology can be used in our understanding of individuals as well as the collective experience of disaster, catastrophe and trauma.

Trauma studies have made us aware that the impact of trauma – whether it is felt directly or indirectly – can be experienced by an individual or by the collective group. Ancient texts, as in the Hebrew Bible, provide us with possibilities as to how Israel tried to cope and deal with the experiences of trauma and tension. Through their echoes in the literature of the Hebrew Bible, these traumatic experiences are not simply conveyed to us in what is said in a straightforward manner, but also in the unsaid (Esterhuizen 2017:4, 8).

A number of theologians and biblical scholars, who are challenged by the numerous incidents of violence and suffering within the sacred texts, have turned to trauma theory in order to make sense and give theological expression to the violence and suffering. Trauma theory provides a specific perspective for the exegete in order to interpret sacred texts and reconsider their central theological perspectives (Rambo 2010:30). Although it has become evident from the above discussion that the concept of trauma is commonplace in many different contexts, the “use of trauma theory in the field of biblical studies is still in its infancy” (Janzen 2012:238).¹³

13 Carr (2014) published an important work exploring trauma hermeneutics for both Old and New Testament texts.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Old Testament scholars once again focussed on the Babylonian exile and especially on the impact it had on the people of Judah. The exile has been regarded increasingly as the major driving force behind the creation and preservation of many of the biblical texts. According to Garber (2015:24-25), the application of psychological biblical criticism, poststructuralist and postmodern biblical interpretation, ideological criticism and postcolonial theory has increased over the past few decades. These methods also led scholars to interpret the biblical texts in light of trauma theory. Regarding these recent methodological developments, and specifically the application of trauma theory to biblical texts, Garber (2015:25) makes the important statement that

the use of trauma theory does not constitute a method of interpretation but a frame of reference that, when coupled with diverse forms of biblical criticism, can yield interesting results in the study of the biblical literature and the communities that produced it. Interpretation through the lens of trauma theory has also ventured beyond the narrower concern of exilic literature into the breadth of the biblical corpus. The impact of trauma is no longer the sole purview of an exilic approach, but is part and parcel of the human condition that lies beneath the production of a wide variety of biblical texts.

A biblical trauma perspective has developed from a dialogue with several other disciplines and theoretical interpretations which all had an impact on the manner in which biblical trauma hermeneutics employ the lens of trauma. Exegetes also identify several aspects of trauma, including not only the ongoing effect of the traumatic event or "wound", but also those skills that can facilitate survival, recovery and resilience. Therefore,

[t]rauma hermeneutics is used to understand texts in their historical contexts and as a means of exploring the appropriation of texts, in contexts both past and present (Frechette & Boase 2016:2).

4. TRAUMA STUDIES AND PROPHETIC STUDIES

A basic principle of life is the tension that exists between suffering, on the one hand, and hope, on the other. This tension, however, can suffocate hope and cause despair. For Esterhuizen (2017:43), there is a relationship between suffering and hope, as it not only creates

the possibility of hope in the presence of suffering and despair, but it can also influence the way in which suffering is related to hope.

It is, therefore, an imperative for the exegete, when reading the prophetic literature, to develop a sensitivity for the effects trauma can have on individuals and communities. Biblical prophecy creates meaning and hope in the midst of extreme suffering for trauma-stricken communities (Esterhuizen 2017:43-44).¹⁴

It is an imperative to explore the ways in which the texts of a certain period – whether it be pre-exilic, exilic or post-exilic – speak about and through the story of a traumatic experience (Caruth 2016:4). These texts ask what it means to transmit and to theorise around a crisis. Even when these texts occur in a language that is literary, it is a language that defies and “stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound” (Caruth 2016:5).

Stulman & Kim (2010:6) describe the written prophecy of the Hebrew Bible as ancient war and disaster literature, given the fact that these prophetic texts contain the literary reflections of those who survived the military threats and attacks of three great world powers (Assyria, Babylon, and Persia) during the historical periods indicated as pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic. War and its subsequent traumas and atrocities form the centre of this *corpus* of literature. Scribal prophecy is thus a deliberate literary reflection of the traumas and horrors of war, given the devastations of the cities and countryside. Written prophecy contains the legacy of the victims of war, namely the losers, the traumatised (Stulman & Kim 2010:7).

It is, therefore, not surprising that Heschel – given his own historical experience¹⁵ – depicts the prophet’s word(s) as “outbursts of violent emotions” (2001:5), a “scream in the night”, and a “blast from heaven” (2001:5, 19). He also states that the

prophet predicts disaster, pestilence, agony, and destruction.
People need exhortations to courage, endurance, confidence,
fighting spirit, but Jeremiah proclaims: You are about to die if you do
not have a change of heart and cease being callous to the word of

14 See also Stulman & Kim (2010:7).

15 Heschel (2001:xvi), who was born in Warsaw in 1907, wrote his doctoral thesis “The prophetic consciousness” at the University of Berlin. He submitted his thesis in 1932 and did his doctoral examination a few weeks after Hitler came to power. The thesis was published in Krakow in 1935. He succeeded to flee Europe at the time and arrived in the USA in March 1940. His mother and three of his sisters were murdered by the Nazis. For him, those experiences deepened his commitment to his faith, as well as heightened his sensitivity to the suffering of other people. Therefore, his book *The prophets*, published (1962) two decades after these tragic events, is dedicated “To the martyrs of 1940-45” (see also Davis 2014:94).

God. He sends shudders over the whole city, at a time when the will to fight is most important (Heschel 2001:20).

Written prophecy is thus a representation or re-enactment of the community’s unspeakable suffering in the form of poetry and *Kunstprosa*. This “blood poetry” confronts cruelty and brutality; it protests and dissents raw power. This “textual art” is meaning-making art for the sake of survival (Stulman 2014:181-182).

It is ironic that the literary legacy of the weak, vulnerable and traumatised victims of war outlived the literary contribution of the major powers. In a certain sense, one can assume that

the God of this vulnerable and war-torn community is a survivor as well ... whereas the gods of the great empires ... are dead, the God of Israel, the God of the abused and humiliated, survives and is still worshipped in churches and synagogues today (Stulman & Kim 2010:7).

Prophetic literature, therefore, is more than only war and disaster literature; it also lives on as meaning-making literature, giving hope for the victims of war and exile. It denies death and destruction, and it creates a language of hope that can imagine a new future for the survivors of war and trauma (Stulman & Kim 2010:7).¹⁶

O’Connor uses the insights from this new field of inquiry. In her book *Jeremiah. Pain and promise*, O’Connor (2012:ix) makes use of insights from trauma and disaster studies to investigate “how overwhelming violence and debilitating losses afflict minds, bodies and spirits”. Although every passage in the Book of Jeremiah anticipates and speaks about disaster,¹⁷ this prophetic book also offers its readers strategies to cope with these life-changing events. According to O’Connor, a major contribution of trauma and disaster studies is its focus on the impact of violence on the community in the face of war and atrocities. As the Book of Jeremiah addresses the victims of the Babylonian displacements and deportations of the 6th century BCE, the prophetic scroll also displays features that might have helped people survive in spite of the Babylonian attacks. It promises

16 See also Claassens (2017:27).

17 According to Heschel (2001:134), it is significant to state that Jeremiah lived in an “age of wrath”. Davis (2014:166) describes Jeremiah as a “prophet and poet of wartime” and as an artist whose verbal images are “searing, poignant, shocking, hopeful”. For Carr (2014:79-80), the prophet Jeremiah – the weeping prophet – becomes a symbol of the unspeakable suffering his people had to endure.

a future beyond the Babylonian assaults; a future that is open-ended, as it constitutes a future coming from God. Having said this, O'Connor (2012:x) bravely and honestly states that

Jeremiah does not explain suffering in any satisfactory way, at least not to me (no biblical book does), but the book pledges what God will make a future and points the way toward it. Jeremiah's literary artistry is a mode of survival, and expression of hope, even when the words themselves are hopeless.

O'Connor's frank testimony reminds us of Ackermann (2014:51), who mentions that the life of faith contradicts all neat explanations. She indicates her preference for the work of theologians who allow ambiguity, paradox and uncertainty to pervade their writings (Ackermann 2014:52-53). The scribes (theologians) responsible for the scroll of Jeremiah struggled with the contradictions of life:

The book of Jeremiah not only gives speech to the disaster; it also functions as a complex theological response ... In large measure, Jeremiah attempts to find meaning in events that defy ordinary categories, events that are beyond communal recognition (Stulman & Kim 2010:98).¹⁸

Therefore, Ackerman (2014:47) indicates that we are challenged to keep on hoping in those situations that cause us to despair. For her, the language of lament is a way to deal with our "Jeremianic" cry. The theologians of Judah held onto prophetic hope; no wonder that Isaiah (2:4) and Micah (4:3) could call out: "And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks".

I adhere to O'Connor's (2014:211) remarks that insights from trauma and disaster studies have benefitted the process of biblical interpretation, as these studies have opened the eyes of exegetes to the deeper dimensions of human suffering as part of the complex history forming the cradle of these prophetic texts. Exegetes have realised that the focus of their attention should not only be on this history of textual production, but that it should also include an awareness of these texts' function as meaning-making literature for traumatised people. For O'Connor (2014:211), the term "disaster" is appropriate to indicate the impact of traumatic violence

18 See also Claassens (2017:33): "One could say that the prophet Jeremiah serves a prime example of a carrier group who seeks to frame the traumatic events of the Babylonian invasion and exile in such a way as to help his audience on the one hand face the traumatic events they had lived through, while also finding some meaningful way of moving beyond disaster".

upon communities that do not have the capacity to cope with these events, as their impact is catastrophic and overwhelming. Trauma and disaster thus do not refer to everyday human suffering, but to disaster that overwhelms everything.

5. CONCLUSION

For two decades now, biblical trauma hermeneutics has developed as a result of the dialogue with different disciplines and theoretical frameworks. Biblical scholars have applied the concept of trauma as an important tool to interpret biblical texts. It is important to emphasise that trauma theory is not a method of interpretation, but a lens used to read and interpret biblical texts. This approach asks for a creative and imaginative reading of sacred texts. When prophetic texts are read as disaster and survival literature, they become meaning-making literature, empowering their hearers and readers to overcome their traumatic experiences.

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