Book Reviews

Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette (editors)

This collection of essays is the product of the SBL “Biblical Literature and the Hermeneutics of Trauma” program unit. With the exception of one essay, it comprises revised versions of papers from the 2013 and 2014 Annual Meetings. The editors present a helpful introductory chapter that places the volume in the wider stream of trauma studies, calls attention to particular themes that appear across the essays, describes the organization of the work, and briefly summarizes the individual contributions. For the reader whose background is primarily in Bible, the introduction offers a succinct discussion of the relevant approaches to trauma studies upon which the essays draw. For the reader whose background is primarily in trauma studies, the introduction offers less orientation to biblical hermeneutics, but enough to recognize areas of common concern between the fields.

In discussions of trauma the first challenge is to indicate just how the term itself is being used. The bare word “trauma” may be understood to mean “wound,” but beyond that the usages vary significantly. It has been applied to physical wounds or injuries, as well as to those that are psychological, social, political, historical, intergenerational, cultural, economic, spiritual (singly and/or in combination). Sometimes, in common parlance, trauma is used simply to indicate a bad experience (just as the word atrocious can be used to describe someone’s taste in clothes). Other times it is reserved for experiences that are very bad, painful, upsetting, experiences that bring deep suffering over time. Sometimes it is used to indicate experiences that push us to and even beyond the limit of what we can bear (as in the commission of an atrocity), that are, so to speak, world destroying. The differentiation can have to do with both matters of degree and kind. Speaking broadly, trauma refers to effects rather than causes. An event or experience is traumatic to the extent that it breaks down or even destroys our physical, personal, and communal world.
The trauma frameworks that the volume’s authors draw upon include psychological, sociological, and literary/cultural approaches. Looming large is the path-breaking work of Judith Herman, whose book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* first appeared in 1992. Herman’s work (now in a revised edition from 1997) places traumatic experiences of individuals within larger social and political contexts. She critiques the ways such forces affected the history of trauma theory and treatment going back to the late 19th century (with special attention to sexual trauma in women), and extending through the two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War into present discussion of PTSD. Her work, nevertheless, is primarily focused on processes of recovery for those who have suffered trauma. Another approach that figures prominently is work on traumatic loss of one’s assumptive world. This is very much a meaning centered approach that considers trauma as an experience that overwhelms the capacity for understanding and integration, fragmenting the conscious and pre-conscious, explicit and implicit structures and narratives out of which the life world of the victim had been constructed. Jeffrey Kauffman’s (ed.) *2002 volume Loss of the Assumptive World: A Theory of Traumatic Loss*, and discussions that developed from that, have contributed important insights for several of the authors in the current work.

Sociological approaches deployed here consider how collective trauma negatively affects social and cultural bonds, on one hand, yet may also foster group identity and cohesion through the framing of a trauma narrative. This includes the formation and transmission of identity through time and generations. The sociological work of Kai Erickson and Jeffrey Alexander, respectively, reflects these complementary effects (with elaborations and variations presented in the various essays in the current volume).

Literary approaches here have been richly influenced by the psychoanalytically, post-structurally oriented work of Cathy Caruth (as important in her field as Judith Herman is in hers), and studies of trauma by scholars such as Elaine Scarry (torture and war), Shoshanna Felman (Holocaust/Shoah), and Ronald Granofsky (trauma novel). These approaches consider how trauma can be so severe as to be inexpressible in directly discursive ways, and how that creates modes of expression that are fragmented, incoherent, full of gaps, contradictions, silences, symbols and substitutions. What kind of hermeneutics can respond to such expressions?

“In the turn to trauma as a hermeneutical lens, what is emerging is not a single methodological approach but rather a heuristic framework (13).” In the essays of this volume that framework uses the lens of trauma to open new approaches to understanding historical experiences behind biblical texts, the
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critical lens, what is emerging is not a her a heuristic framework (13).” In the uses the lens of trauma to open new experiences behind biblical texts, the encoding of such experiences within biblical texts, and appropriation of biblical texts in contemporary contexts “as a means of facilitating recovery and resilience for both individuals and communities (14).” The titles of the essays may offer the best overview of the texts and concerns considered. The overview, “Defining ‘Trauma’ as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation (Christopher G. Frechette and Elizabeth Boase), is followed by four essays on individual and collective dimensions of trauma: “No Words: The Book of Ezekiel as Trauma Literature and a Response to Exile (Ruth Poser, the essay that was not based upon a SBL paper),’ “Fragmented Voices: Collective Identity and Traumatization in Lamentations (Elizabeth Boase),’ “Daughter Babylon Raped and Bereaved (Isaiah 47): Symbolic Violence and Meaning-Making in Recovery from Trauma (Christopher G. Frechette),” and “Shared Pleasure to Soothe the Broken Spirit: Collective Trauma and Qoheleth (Philip Browning Helsel).” These are followed by two essays on how trauma theory might offer “New Insights into Old Questions,” illuminating historical, compositional, and redactional problems: “Fragments of Traumatic Memory: Šalmé zákár and Child Sacrifice in Ezekiel 16:5-22 (Margaret S. Odell),” and “Reflections on the Prose Sermons in the Book of Jeremiah: Duhm’s and Mowinkel’s Contributions to Contemporary Trauma Readings (Louis Stulman).” The volume concludes with six essays concerned with with “Survival, Recovery, and Resilience in and Through the Text: Ancient and Contemporary Contexts.” These include “Trauma, Psalms and Liturgy, and Authentic Happiness (Brent A. Strawn),’ “Legislativing Divine Trauma (Samuel E. Balentine),’ ”Trauma and Recovery: A New Hermeneutical Framework for the Rape of Tamar (L. Juliana M. Claassen),” “Reading Biblical Texts Through the Lens of Resilience (Robert J. Schreiter),” “Between Text and Trauma: Reading Job with People Living with HIV (Gerald O. West),” and “Toward a Pastoral Reading of 2 Corinthians as a Memoir of PTSD (Peter Yuchi Clark).”

To help place the collection of essays in the larger work of the SBL a concluding appendix provides a listing for annual meeting sessions that include the keyword “trauma,” which the reader will see is broad, indeed. I hope additional collections of essays will come, because even a volume as rich as this leaves so many possibilities behind.

Two kinds of value are especially prominent in this volume. One is the inherent interest of the specific readings themselves, and another is the usefulness of the heuristic framework more broadly. The purpose of a heuristic frame (or lens) is to help us see possibilities that may have otherwise escaped our notice. Recalling the hermeneutical insights of Paul Ricoeur, the movements from experience to speech to writing inevitably entail a loss of context...
(a decontextualization) and gaps of meaning (see, for example, the essays in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, John B. Thompson, ed. and trans., Cambridge University Press, 1981). The movement from writing to interpretation inevitably entails additional displacements and gaps (redaction, combination, transformations of genre, etc.). Then such factors as histories and normative practices of interpretation, varying cultural and political contexts, subjectivities, social locations, and contemporary questions (recontextualizations) inevitably entail yet further gaps (on one hand) and possibilities (on another hand) for meaning-making. That is, distance and difference can be productive of new meaning, new appropriations of what has been written.

The wager is that the worlds “behind the text,” “within the text,” and “before (in front of) the text” may be mutually illuminating. In this case, it is a wager that contemporary understandings of trauma help us to appreciate more fully both personal and communal realities of ancient trauma that lie behind many biblical texts, how those realities may have affected the creation, redaction, and transmission of textualized trauma, and how, in turn, contemporary understanding may be deepened by the words and worlds of ancient texts. This includes a concern for and commitment to those who suffer trauma in our own time. To my mind, that is the most important implication of the prominence of Judith Herman's work in these essays (and other approaches to trauma that focus upon recovery): the reason that we search for deeper understanding of trauma is for the sake of those who suffer, and those who suffer can teach us how to read and understand more deeply. Interpretation is a means of response and responsibility.

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