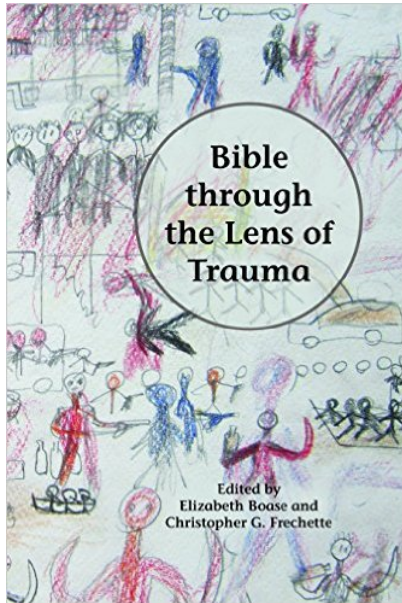


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Bible through the Lens of Trauma

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This collection of twelve papers with an introduction by the editors emerges from one of SBL's newest program units, Biblical Literature and the Hermeneutics of Trauma, which started in 2013 after a successful interdisciplinary conference in Århus. Although the interest is foreshadowed in earlier Hebrew Bible scholarship, this volume offers an introduction to the contemporary shape of the field and the diverse approaches involved. Offering a "hermeneutical lens for biblical interpretation" (2), contributors engage with contemporary work in psychology, sociology, and cultural studies as they focus respectively on impacts at the individual, the social, and the literary level. These foci lie along a line of escalating contestation, with disagreements not only over the way entire communities might manifest traumatized behavior but also, and of particular interest for biblical studies, the way such experiences might be encoded at the literary level.

The collection is divided into three sections. The first explores the relationship between individual and collective trauma and their respective visibilities in biblical texts, working more or less within a historical-critical orbit. The second features authors asking similar questions but experimenting with newer critical approaches, and a final section concerns the ongoing life of traumatized communities with studies on survival, recovery, and resilience. Appearing initially in clinical contexts, these latter concepts also arguably extend

to entire communities and may be seen in the renegotiating and rebuilding functions of a number of biblical texts where the acute aspects of trauma may no longer be visible.

Opening the first section, it is fitting that Ruth Poser's study of Ezekiel, in "No Words: The Book of Ezekiel as Trauma Literature and a Response to Exile," should concern a book written very soon after the events it describes. Using Herman's language of *intrusion* where trauma enters reported experience, and *constriction*, where expression becomes temporarily impossible, Poser not only investigates the prophet's own traumatic experiences and affective responses but also compares the book's literary patterns of visionary representation, repetition, and gapping with the "Trauma Novel" described by Granofsky, noting corresponding symbolic, apophatic, and integrative functions.

Elizabeth Boase's "Fragmented Voices: Collective Identity and Traumatization in Lamentations" draws on community-trauma concepts developed by Caruth, Erikson, and particularly the constructivist anthropologist Alexander, who posits trauma "metanarratives" that play long-term roles in identity negotiation. Boase sees Lamentations as designed to serve the generations living beyond the original crisis in exactly this same way and provide historically grounded frameworks for understanding later experiences of pain, victimhood, and questions about responsibility.

Christopher G. Frechette's "Daughter Babylon Raped and Bereaved (Isaiah 47): Symbolic Violence and Meaning-Making in Recovery from Trauma" considers images of rape and sexual violence but problematically where the perpetrator is God—here punishing the "daughter of Babylon." Although this is often understood as mere revenge (70), Frechette sees rather the removal of an "obstacle to justice" (71) for Deutero-Isaianic hope. Noting a link with Lamentations and the parallel violations of both Zion and Babylon (72), Frechette follows Herman in seeing an inter-generational therapeutic function, securing "affective engagement and reinterpretation" (76).

Philip Browning Helsel's study of Qoheleth, "Shared Pleasure to Soothe the Broken Spirit: Collective Trauma and Qoheleth," explores the way in which chronic collective trauma can lead to "broken-spiritedness." In dialogue with Erikson, Helsel explores the Ptolemaic "colonialism" presupposed by the book. Although there are no explicit images of violence, he nevertheless sees the ongoing economic, social, and religious dislocation of captivity producing a feeling of meaninglessness (*hebel*), even among elites. In this context calls for a renewed sense of enjoyment are not hedonistic or faithless but bring healing and redemption to the business of living.

Opening section 2 on new approaches, Margaret S. Odell returns to the theme of female symbolizations of group history in "Fragments of Traumatic Memory: *Ṣalmê zākār* and

Child Sacrifice in Ezekiel 16:15–22.” Here the text uncomfortably focuses on Zion’s perfidious “whoring” after other gods, apparently including child sacrifices. Traditionally understood in terms of Molech syncretism, Odell rather argues, in dialogue with Caruth, Laub, and Felman, as well as other ancient Near Eastern examples, for a symbolic representation of Zion’s subjugation where the entire female-child narrative emerges out of a fundamentally fragmented experience.

Continuing in the exilic prophets, Louis Stulman’s “Reflections on the Prose Sermons in the Book of Jeremiah: Duhm’s and Mowinckel’s Contributions to Contemporary Trauma Readings” looks at the *sermons* of Jer 1–25, taking as his cue earlier work by Duhm and Mowinckel. With others focusing on poetic and imaginary transformations of trauma, Stulman seeks to show how these prose compositions also bear reading as trauma literature (130–32). With their relentlessly Deuteronomistic overtones, the dual obsession with both guilt and survival represent a sustained attempt to respond to the exilic experience.

Opening the final section, on survival and recovery, Brent A. Strawn considers “Trauma, Psalmic Disclosure, and Authentic Happiness.” Noting repeated patterns of disclosure, recapitulation, and transformation, Strawn draws on empirical pastoral studies where Pennebaker finds disclosure fulfilling an important therapeutic role. Speaking of a psalmic “process” (153), Strawn notes how readers are invited to participate on their own terms (154–55) and find growth and even happiness for themselves.

Sameuel E. Balentine’s “Legislating Divine Trauma” uses the phrase “trauma hermeneutics” as it reconsiders the problem of divine infliction. In a wide-ranging survey, Deuteronomy (163–67) and other legal material (167–70) come in for special scrutiny. That sustained blame for disobedience leads inexorably to divine punishment is problematized as a “totalizing” logic characteristic of oppressors (171). In a bold move, Balentine wonders if theism *as traditionally understood* might itself be the intended target.

Next, L. Juliana M. Claassens turns to the classic text of terror in “Trauma and Recovery: A New Hermeneutical Framework for the Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13).” Here she moves on from traditional interest in the trauma as such to consider Tamar’s resistance, survival, and recovery. Using Herman’s therapeutic stages of safety, memory, and reconnection, Claassens reads the provision of a home (183) and Tamar’s lamentation as evidence of the first two. The third remains for readerly conjecture, though the note about the preservation of Tamar’s name might offer some hope.

Robert J. Schreiter’s “Reading Biblical Texts through the Lens of Resilience” begins by defining resilience as “the capacity to live under and respond to oppressive or violent

situations” (193). Schreiter then engages with anthropology and postcolonial theory as it shows the importance of ongoing sources of strength for post-traumatic life. A learned habit, resilience is the focus of Sedmak’s scheme of thinking, remembering, and believing. Although an interior struggle in one sense (198–200), acquiring resilience must always remain a performative act of identity formation (201–2).

In the penultimate paper, “Between Text and Trauma: Reading Job with People Living with HIV,” Gerald O. West explores the book of Job via the reading of AIDS victims in South Africa. Using the pastoral cycle, participants readily connected with the despair of the early chapters before being able to move into any sense of normalization. For many, the study group itself became a sacred space into which family and friends could be drawn. The ensuing stories and poetry helped restore dignity and offered metaphors for the reinterpretation of experience.

In “Toward a Pastoral Reading of 2 Corinthians as a Memoir of PTSD and Healing,” the only excursion into the New Testament, Peter Yuichi Clark reads Paul’s Corinthian crisis through the lens of PTSD. Focusing on five passages in 2 Corinthians (1:3–10; 4:7–12, 16; 6:4–10; 11:21–33; and 12:7–10), Clark sees constant notes of affliction and suffering (“crushed,” “despairing of life,” etc.) and a craving for comfort. Undergirding the sincerity of Paul’s appeals to his opponents, his openness produces one of the most powerful rhetorical engagements in the New Testament.

It has been a regular criticism that social-scientific biblical scholars have been overly concerned with conflict as a driver of social and theological structuring. However, this new lens of trauma reminds us that real people and communities are in the front line at the affective level and that being overwhelmed in this way can have unpredictable consequences for memory, imagery, silence, and the interplay of perpetrator and victim. While direct stories of war, rape, persecution, or illness might be obvious hunting grounds, several papers here show how postacute, reflective texts can show how trauma is, by stages, survived, transformed, and harnessed within ongoing community life.

It is inevitable that in a volume of collected papers of this kind there will be imbalances and inconsistencies, such as the unequal lengths of the three sections, the relative paucity of New Testament material, and a dearth of “true” front-of-text studies. However, the volume does serve as a snapshot of some of the approaches being pursued and sets out some useful cross-disciplinary frameworks. The recurrent themes of individual trauma, community trauma, and the broadly literary questions of how these may manifest themselves in writing are clearly useful. Authors also emphasize the way that intrusive (explicit) and constrictive (suppressed) responses are visible (or inferable) in all three orbits. Finally, it was also good to include, besides the more traditional reactive concerns,

the project of ongoing recovery and healing, again at both the individual and collective levels and the way that some biblical literature was involved in this project.

A number of suggestive connections perhaps begged to be explored further, such as the ways that different literary genres might in principle operate as vehicles of both intrusion and constriction, particularly in the more curious transformations possible in visionary and apocalyptic material and the otherwise muted tones of wisdom literature. I wonder, too, whether there might be some profit in exploring in the later Hellenistic and Roman interest in vulnerability, crisis, and character development or Stoic approaches to trauma and the role of literature in “rehearsing” grief. But for the moment, this volume provides a wide-ranging and stimulating collection for anyone wishing to learn more about this fast-developing area.