
Trauma Theory and Theological Engagement: An Appraisal on Trends in Trauma Hermeneutics

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Abstract

Studies on trauma theory and its significance to biblical hermeneutics are largely unknown in Africa, especially in the West African context. But due to recent sad events of conflicts and violence, trauma is now being explored for possible engagement in biblical and practical theological scholarship. This essay is an appraisal on the crucial problem of trauma studies in an African context, from theological and pastoral perspectives. Certain issues have been highlighted as the background that leads to trauma studies in the history of the modern world and even in modern African contexts. The contribution that this essay provides is mainly in terms of introducing its readers to the possible meaning(s) of trauma, the various trends and types of trauma, as well as some of the useful materials and theological perspectives on engaging trauma theory. Thus if this study further generates more concern and interest in engaging the African human condition of trauma from more rigorous/critical theological, psychological and pastoral perspectives, with the possible aim of overcoming it, toward a state of good healing and the restoration of human dignity, then the aim of this essay will have been achieved.

Keywords: Trauma; Human Dignity; Wound; Affliction; Healing

Introduction

The three crucial questions that this contribution will respond to are as follows: what is trauma? What are some possible types of trauma? And what are the ways in which pastoral care be practiced as a therapeutic paradigm in healing trauma memories? The turn of events in history especially from the middle of the 20th century has pointed us to the seriousness of being human and the urgency for finding useful frameworks and metaphors as keys to unlocking the potentials of humanity in the world of God. The experiences of life from the Nazi period in Germany and the subsequent search for human and world stability in the modern world system has been a contested phenomenon that still keeps us searching for adequate models and frameworks. The idea of trauma as the inner wound of the heart remains an open challenge to the entire history of humanity to find useful ways of reconstructing and stability.

Trauma as a case in point within the variegated history of humanity with regards to turns in religion, politics, culture and myriads of worldviews remains a testament. Trauma is the remaining testament of those who have suffered and even died without justice in the world. Trauma is the affliction of life that reduces life to less than what it

is meant to be. Trauma is an injury that remains an open challenge to the creative reconstruction of life. Tragic events, such as the history of the Holocaust in Germany, the transatlantic slave trade, neo-political enslavement by means of new methods of dehumanisation and deprivation of freedom and equal justice in Africa, Latin America, Asia etc., cause the effects of trauma to still ring loudly in our ears. Coming to the recent history of Africa in the modern political era, there have been series of injuries inflicted on many people because of interreligious conflicts, political injustices and irresponsibility, social inequality and increasing segregations, among other such things. These and many more have rendered our history in the modern period, with special emphasis on African contexts like that of Nigeria, a sorry history of trauma, traumatising and incessant spiritual and identity crises.

The idea of trauma has become so necessary now to be closely engaged as a key concept and paradigm in theological, social, and political theories and practical situations. The history of human life has now massively turned to the history and experiences of survival.¹ Trauma has become an insidious crisis in the practical life experiences of people in many spheres of life.² This is found even in biblical narratives (Claassens 2020:10–31). Claassens has observed that “trauma narratives also serve as a testament to resilience and survival as evident in the often subtle signs of resistance that also may be found amidst such portrayals of insidious trauma” (Claassens 2020:11).

Groenewald (2018:88) observes the negligence or the unfamiliarity with trauma theory in biblical hermeneutics. Trauma studies have been identified by different scholars and in different fields of study and life interpretation, with the field of theology being left behind until very recently. This kind of negligence is very obvious in African contexts like Nigeria. Since 1966, there has never been a decade free of large-scale violence and dehumanisation in one part of Nigeria or another. This has become so rampant in the past decade. Thus almost every Nigerian home or family group has experienced one form of trauma or another. People everywhere are crying for healing and restoration of life, property, status quo and other such things. This turn of history makes it more urgent for me to try to explore some ideas and forms of trauma and also suggest ways of engagement by way of providing a progressive move toward healing and restoring many to human dignity and a good hope for justice, relationality and faith in God and other human beings as bearers of the image of God in the world. In what follows, we shall look at some trends in trauma theory and the significance of pastoral care as a form of theological response to trauma memories.

¹ Mostly, this is about survival of the fittest or the luckiest. This speaks in loud voices for the demise and disappearance of justice on the horizon of human engagement and interpersonal relationships. This makes life more of a fantasy game, as what is mostly depicted on movies and pages of written novels. Vickroy 2014:130–151cf. Tribble 1984; Williams 1993).

² Trauma is the struggle to understand and express the inexpressible, an attempt to say the unsaid, cf. “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.” Groenewald (2018:95; 2017:55–65 cf. Esterhuizen (2017).

Some Trends in Trauma Theory

It may be important to ask about the different kinds of trauma that there may be in the field of trauma studies or in various human experiences of both ancient and modern worlds. However, this is not possible for a short study like this, which is basically introductory to do justice to the idea of trauma in terms of outlining its various types exhaustively. But for the sake of actual categorisation from an introductory point of view, it is important to mention a few that may be prominent within human life experiences.³ Below are six types of trauma that can be identified and related with in practical human experiences.

First, is Personal/Individual Trauma: This is a feeling of being afflicted or tortured by the actions of others to oneself personally. This is the direct form of trauma to the personal integrity and feelings of one's own life. This can occur in cases like rape, in which human dignity and freedom of a girl or woman (and in some exceptional cases even young men) is violated by the rapist. In such cases, the victim is dehumanised by the insensitive and ungodly greed and wickedness of another person/people (Scholz 2010; Root 1992:229–265; Caruth 1995; Carr 1996; 2014; Rambo 2017; Becker Doehorn & Holt 2014). Such experience brings fear and a high sense of mistrust and insecurity into the victim's life. More often than not, it causes the victim to lose the essence of her being. In some cases, the act leads to early pregnancy, which can lead to a child that will not be a symbol of joy to the mother but rather a symbol of tragedy and a reminder of sorrow. The traumatic experience becomes a life-long trauma.

Second is Social or Cultural Trauma: This is a case of being disoriented, defeated and violated as a social group or a cultural group (Eyerman 2013:41–53; Alexander 2012; Pollock 2009:40–54).⁴ In biblical history, the fall of Jerusalem to the Assyrians and later on to the Babylonians is an example of religious and social defeat that brought serious trauma and disorientation to the people, the entire nation of Israel. The entire history of exile and oppression in Israel is a history of trauma and counter trauma etc.⁵

Claassens pays close attention to “culture trauma” in her analysis of the historical experience of trauma in the book of Jeremiah in particular and shows how trauma studies remain open and relevant for biblical studies. She describes cultural trauma as a disruption of collective identity, arguing that “[o]ne aspect of trauma theory that is particularly suited to the process of reframing and/or re-symbolising the traumatic events underlying the book of Jeremiah is the notion of cultural trauma proposed by trauma theorists like Ron Eyerman and Jeffrey Alexander” (Claassens 2017:28). In the midst of cultural or social trauma, a lot of work needs to be done in order to bring order, hope

³ There may be very many kinds or types of trauma especially in much deeper studies of human psychology, history, philosophy, religion and ethics. This means further studies on this topic can continue almost endlessly.

⁴ For me there is a serious connection between social and cultural trauma theory. Social speaks of the contextual setting, while cultural speaks on the practical ways of life of the people in a particular context. Thus the way elements of social and culture are related is always an interface or an overlap. Claassens observed that, “one should note that the narrative constructions emerging from a process of cultural trauma are open to misuse, both political as well as societal” (Claassens 2017: 29).

⁵ For more on the exile as the history of trauma and counter trauma in Israel see (Alexander 2012; Allen 2008; Brueggemann 1998; Eyerman 2013; 2004):159-169; Garber 2015:24-44; O'Connor 2011, 2014; Stulman 2005; Stulman & Paul 2010; Stulman 2014).

and healing to the victims. This is the role of religious leaders and historians for re-orientation and the rehabilitation of the people by way of trying to de-traumatise them.⁶

Third is Spiritual-Ethical Trauma: This can be illustrated by the life and experiences of Job in the cannon of the Hebrew Bible. This is also known as theodicy. It is the struggle of human beings with the goodness, love and power of God in the presence of evil, suffering and death. Job is a man whose life becomes a real puzzle. The irony runs deep into the fabric of his whole life in order to touch and reshape his idea of God and the practice of faith. Job was an ancient sage who lived in a world fixed within popular cultural ideologies of deeds and consequences. The dictum, ‘if you do good, you shall see good,’ was the order of the day. This was the doctrine or principle of retribution which governed the cultural and spiritual worldview of Job and the people of his day. This has its own typical versions in our African historical contexts. Job found himself, ironically, in the midst of the conversation between Yahweh and the Satan, which eventually led to his trials. These trials came to Job in rapid succession (cf. Job 1). After all the tragic loss, Job experiences such great trauma that he lost his words. The silence of Job and his friends (2:11–13) does not come as a surprise but is rather a clear indication that all of them have been overtaken by the inner and outer wounds of Job, and none of them have the strength to actually explain to Job what is happening. The entire section of the dialogue between Job and his friends (4–27) is actually full of speculative thinking and general conclusions from human common sense. Job’s words came like torrents of rain upon a dry land (chap. 3, 9–10, 16, 29–31). Job’s trauma is more spiritual-ethical because his quest and contestation is more with God than with any other person. This happens in many ways to people in a traumatic context, especially in the context of great loss or sickness. This kind of trauma calls on God in deep weariness and longs to have time to at least possibly understand something about God, self, suffering, the future etc.

Fourth is Accidental Trauma: This kind of trauma is one that happens as a result of an accident or something tragic. The life of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is a case in point. Jonah was a prophet who decided to rebel against the will of God by trying to run away from the face of the Lord. His actions cause serious panic and trauma to the sailors who are with him on the ship on his way to Tarshish. They cry seriously unto the Lord for help against the tragedy (cf. Jon. 1). At the end of Chapter 1, they have no option but to throw Jonah into the great Sea. Yahweh had prepared a great fish/whale that swallowed Jonah as a sign of the sovereignty of God over Jonah and all of nature. Jonah 1 and 2 are expressive of the cases of accidental trauma (Claassens 2022:1–12). But more specifically on the side of Jonah, Chapter 2 is his prayer from the belly of the fish, which expresses his deep longing for life against death, for order against chaos, for mercy against justice, and for safety against destruction. Thus Jonah and the book that bears his name continue to be symbolic of God’s sovereign act of using chaos, even chaos that can lead to trauma, to bring about order that fulfills his good will for the sake of other nations.

⁶ “It is at this point where ‘carrier groups’ such as public intellectuals, preachers, authors, artists, and in a contemporary society, mass media play a vital role in the process of ‘re-narration,’ i.e., offering an interpretative framework in order to help shape the traumatic events in such a way to re-establish collective identity” (Claassens 2017:28).

Fifth is Trauma and Gender: There are many debates on the ideas of gender, but for the sake of our study, Claassens identifies the issue of being “female” as being a person vulnerable for genderised trauma. Many people, especially in patriarchal contexts, take advantage of gender differentiation to harass and even dehumanise and marginalise women. This has happened in many instances of domestic violence, even with some kind of ideological justification. Claassens agreeably observes that a “feminist perspective on trauma is critical” (Claassens 2020:14); it remains an open invitation for biblical scholars to give voice to the plight of women as those being mostly oppressed in various contexts. It is important to note that “a feminist understanding of trauma recognizes the impact of a social environment to contribute further to the suffering that victims experience by, for instance, blaming the victims of interpersonal violence and/or questioning the veracity of their feelings or reports” (p. 15). Furthermore, “a feminist understanding of trauma considers the role of the embodied self” (p. 15) as that which is open to be recognised, honored and well nurtured.⁷

Sixth is Identity Trauma: This kind of trauma can be related to personal, social or cultural trauma. It is a feeling of uncomfortability due to one’s origin in a certain place, region, tribe, family, or even religion. In the general world context, we know that the world has been classified into first, second and third classes. The majority world is now the third world, in which the African continent is a major part. This results in African people being seen as pitiful and less desirable in many circles. This is why ‘Africanness’⁸ in many historical contexts has been synonymous with poverty, injury, injustice, hypocrisy, primitivism etc. Another example of identity trauma could be related to the pigmentation of one’s skin. The whites see themselves as better than blacks, especially during the heydays of the apartheid in South Africa and racial segregation in America. In 1930s Germany, the Jews and others were considered less than humans, while the Aryan Germans were the real human beings. This kind of attitude has created serious trauma of identity, resulting from the violence of trying to cleanse the system of the “undesirable”. Today in the ‘post’ eras of these negative ideologies, the residual effects of being white and being black still have a way of re-traumatisation, toward either theodicy or cultural guilt and estrangement.

Trauma and the African Contexts

Trauma as an experience of discomfort, injustice and inequality has been a historic problem in the African continent. A collection of scholars from African contexts have closely examined the African public and they present their discovery of the series of problems that often traumatise people in African contexts (Agang, Forster and Hendriks 2020). There are increasing numbers of emigrants into other continents and countries away from Africa largely because of the quest to escape problems that occur in African contexts. I cannot be exhaustive in articulating the various ways in which trauma has

⁷ According to Claassens (2020:15), “exploring the intersection of trauma, gender, race and class which involves acknowledging and naming the reality of insidious trauma in literature and in life has distinct ethical implications.” Claassens, “Reading Trauma Narratives:” Those “distinct ethical implications” are the urgent calls for the recognition and the ascription of human dignity as actual worthy of the self in the presence of God. There is need for mutual acceptance and actual nurturing for growth rather than applying oppressive measures in the name of crude cultures and ideologies.

⁸ This is the sense of being a typical African.

been experienced in African contexts, but I will provide a few significant examples. In South Africa, the history of social and economic inequality, especially during the days of apartheid rule, many black people, including women and children, have been traumatised (cf. Terreblanche 2002). The feeling of inferiority compared to others is a traumatising problem. Similarly, in cases of economic hardship, many poor people have been badly traumatised, and many continue live with complex memories. In sub-Saharan Africa, there have been many cases that have plunged people into trauma. There is the endemic problem of poverty, which permeates other facets such as the social, economic, and cultural (Smigelsky 2014:127). Unjust political systems have also brought wars and conflicts in various places and to very alarming extents that have been traumatic to many people (Smigelsky 2014:127). The “high rate of disease” that include cases like “HIV/AIDS, cholera, tuberculosis and malaria” have become so endemic and traumatising. These is also “gender-based violence”, in which there is no safety even within the family. “Gender-based violence in sub-Saharan Africa encompasses many types of abusive experiences, including domestic violence, sexual exploitation, genital mutilation, and rape or sexual assault” (Smigelsky 2014:128). These cases have largely been the experiences of those considered poor and powerless, such as women, children and young people, mainly from underprivileged backgrounds. Child-abuse is another systemic problem that traumatises young people as they grow. Some grow to be vengeful and brutal, thus making society toxic and inhumane in many cases. Many such abused and traumatised children turn to drugs in order to find some relief for themselves. By doing so, many have lost their sense of human dignity, social freedom, and religious or spiritual confidence.

From a postcolonial critical perspective, Dube (2018; 1999; 2001; 2010; Dube & West 2000) has been actively contributing to the formulating of practical theories for the reconstruction of Africa and its people. Dube has contributed meaningfully to the formation of African critical hermeneutics that help to liberate African women from traditional and political oppression. She helps to formulate and suggest ways of reading the Bible in ways that allow the typical voice of women to be heard in their own right and for the nurturing and renewal of Africa. In her contribution to the collection of essays on *The Healing of Memories*, a project that opens the door for the “healing” and reconstruction of Africa for better life, Dube (2018 cf. Claassens 2016) writes on “The Cry of Rachel.” Her chapter gives voice to the suffering of numerous women in Africa who have been traumatised by the deaths (killings) of their children. Their experience of trauma may be personal and collective at the same time. Yet, such memories need to be healed for the person to gain the strength that arises from the ashes of grief. Such women need the help and voice of Jesus, who he said to Jairus’ daughter, “Talitha Koum”. Dube (2012) also reflects on this narrative with great hope for the rising and renewal of Africa as a continent and the raising of hope in the minds of those who cry and mourn often.

In the Nigerian context, the ongoing sociopolitical conflicts and kidnappings and human trafficking problems have incessantly been traumatising our country. Corruption has engendered the collapse of social order and spiritual integrity. There are many terrorist organisations that now take up arms against innocent poor people. The problem of terrorism and insecurity has been a serious by-product of social injustice and political greed and insensitivity to the needs of others (Falola 1998; Agang 2017).

Ackermann (2003; 2013; 2014), from her South African context, has raised her voice for the liberation of those who are oppressed, especially women. In her analysis of the Tamar narrative of domestic violence and rape in biblical literature, Ackermann narrates many similar stories which can be compared to the experience of Tamar's in the Bible. She has written personal reflections which are passionate, critical and prophetic in order to find a voice to speak for the voiceless in South Africa and the rest of the African continent.

Landman (2012:1) gives attention to the crisis that often ensues in developing contexts between religion and culture, with special emphasis on the church and contextual traditions. She narrates the stories of women, both black and white, particularly from her South African context, in order to illustrate how care-giving ought to further develop a good sense of love and care and patience, especially when people (women) who suffer traumatic experiences are trying to navigate the darkness of their experiences to the light of freedom and restoration of hope and dignity. Landman discovered instances in which unhelpful decisions from a certain culture that are unhelpful to the needy person may nevertheless be insisted upon (2012:1). The combination of "faith and ritual healing" continues to be a serious challenge among many sufferers. Despite the dangerous tension between faith and culture, Landman discovered creative ways and patterns that are integrative and constructive for the healing of those who suffer traumatic experiences. She explains that "these women in counselling found new ways of becoming a cultural and religious being, but with dignity and worth. Without doing away with either culture or religion, the women found ways of exploring the healthy aspects of religion and culture, and thus, through indigenous ways of healing, they found relief from their trauma and tension" (Landman 2012:6).

Trauma and Biblical Studies

Biblical literature is a literature of survival (Koepp-Taylor 2013; Boda 2015; Furman 2020:32–59). It presents its readers with many stories of human struggles and survival history at different points and through different circumstances (Boase & Frechette 2016; Claassens 2012).

In this section, I would like to highlight how trauma as an experience of human problems or as an existential predicament has been portrayed at different stages in history in order to further illustrate the dimensions of its presence and possible effects in human experiences of life. Trauma has been used as a key theoretical point of departure in recent biblical studies. Trauma studies thus forms an important research paradigm in biblical studies and other fields of theological research (cf. Rambo 2010; Rance 2014; Garber 2015; Herman 2015; Janzen 2013; Jones 2009). The following will be useful as a possible illustration of this point. Beginning from the Genesis narratives in the Pentateuch, the story of God's judgment became traumatic to the biblical characters, as far as we can imagine it, in the case of being expelled from the Garden of Eden, and in the case of being exposed and expelled from the comfort of family, as in the story of Cain after the murder of his own brother. This is not in any way excusing any sinful or unethical action, but rather, it is a case in point for the dimensions of personal trauma cases in the Bible. The stories of the Patriarchs from Genesis 12 to 50 present many cases of trauma, especially in relation to the human inability of the matriarchs to bear children (cf. Claassens 2020; Lapsley 2005; Meyers 2013; Moss & Baden 2015). Drought and

famine were major problems for economic stability and flourishing for the patriarchs, while childlessness or barrenness was the most traumatic problem among the matriarchs. The stories of the conflict between Sarai and Hagar grew from the anxiety and insecurity of barrenness. Later on, Hagar was expelled from the patriarchal home of Abraham with very little resources to care for her own son, who later almost died of thirst (Gen 21), thus presenting us with another case of trauma and the predicament of homelessness.

The family conflict that ensued in Jacob's household was also generated from the traumatic experience of the matriarchs with child bearing. Later on in the same household, there was envy, jealousy and conspiracy that generated the further crimes of kidnapping and human trafficking in the experience of the young Joseph and his siblings. The rape of Dinah was a special case of individual trauma and gender abuse. This came about from a clash of cultural interest, which also contributes to cultural mistrust and further cases of tribal conflict and generative trauma.

The story of the Israelites in Egypt after the death of Joseph turned into a sympathetic story of oppression, injustice, mistreatment, human abuse and economic exploitation. The Hebrews/Israelites were subjected to hard labour in order to serve as cheap economic tools for the Egyptian monarchy. Such oppression restricted the freedom that the Israelites needed in order to flourish. Their identity and human dignity were badly trampled upon by the hard boots of their oppressors; all they could do was to raise their voices to cry for help. The Lord God heard their cry and graciously came to their rescue (Exod 3:7). The entire exodus narrative emanates from the trauma of unfreedom to the struggle for justice that creates freedom and life. During the process of the miraculous liberation of the Israelites, there were several deaths of the firstborn children of both human beings and animals. The entire Egyptian country was badly traumatised. The sin of the parents was sadly visited upon their children. That was done for the sake of the liberation of Israel as the covenant people of Yahweh. The liberation of Israel from the Egyptian bondage was not actually for themselves but rather for the sake of the glory of God, which will turn out to be the blessings of the nations.

During the wilderness wanderings, the Israelites experience various cases of trauma from their own sense of anxiety toward the actual judgment of God that came upon them. In the book of Numbers, there are stories of trials and struggles for survival through the wilderness. The unbelief of the people arose from the dryness and hopelessness of the situation. The horizon was bleak and hope was invisible. The anxiety of the people led to their expression of their trauma in ways that attracted judgment for their unbelief. The many deaths through the wilderness remains a very hard and traumatic memory to those whose survived it and to even to those who closely read the story today with interest. The wars that were carried out in order to take over the promised land were also indications of actual confrontations, struggle, and displacement or colonisation by the Israelites, who were ironically former slaves in Egypt.

During his rise to prominence in Israel, the young David experienced trauma as a life-threatening problem in his relationship to King Saul. Valerie Rance (2014) explains how David suffered trauma from the threats of Saul and Goliath (cf. 1 Sam 16–17). Yet the triumph of David over Goliath brought great relief from the collective trauma of the people of Israel. Part of the personal tragedies that David suffered was when “King Saul forced his first wife to marry another man during David's exile (1 Sam. 25:43-44)” (p.

7). Also, when the Amalekites took away his wife and children and those of his men, he was deeply traumatised and risked his own life to rescue them (p. 8).

During the monarchy, trauma was experienced largely from the acts of injustice by the leaders of the people, those in authority, and their greed and abuse of power. The case of David and Bathsheba comes to mind, especially the terrible killing of Uriah her husband, who was a loyal servant in David's army. The story of Tamar and her domestic abuse by her half-brother also stands out as a case of trauma in biblical literature. A similar case is the injustice of the powerful against the powerless, as in the case of Naboth during the reign of King Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel. Such injustice and abuse of power is portrayed as a story of trauma in biblical literature.

Yahweh raised the prophets in order that they would become the mouthpiece of God, who requires justice and righteousness for all people. In prophetic literature, there are so many prophetic utterances and oracles of judgement that sound traumatising for the people. Such can be seen whenever there is a prophetic speech that announces the coming of an oppressive nation to be used by God to judge the people of Israel or other nations. The judgement of God is necessary whenever God brings it upon the people, but the tool that God uses in order to carry out such judgment is what often becomes the point of concern. This is seen especially in the story of Habakkuk prior to the rise of the Babylonians, who come as Yahweh's tool of judgment upon the Israelites. Similarly, Isaiah also saw and announced the rise of the Assyrians as Yahweh's metaphoric razor to cut the hair of Israel, in other words to come and humble the people from their pride and arrogance (Isa. 2–4).

In Hosea there is the case of Yahweh's own trauma as a husband to his unfaithful wife Israel. This can be seen also through the book of Ezekiel (cf. 16–23). The prophetic books of Isaiah, Micah, Hosea and Ezekiel present many instances of the trauma of Yahweh resulting from a broken love-relationship that resulted in the loss of the people to the worship of idols, which are only symbols of systemic oppression and exploitation. The insecurity and oppression of the people become the central concern of Yahweh, even though, ironically, sometimes Yahweh organises the judgment and brings those who are to carry it out in a brutal and disturbing manner. Nevertheless, Yahweh, as can be seen for instance in Jonah, is a loving and compassionate God who longs to see the restoration and flourishing of all people. Yahweh's heart of compassion and grace is always open, even to those who are oppressive to the covenant people, Israel. The news of the destruction of Nineveh was traumatic to the inhabitants of the great city (Jon. 3), but their repentance brought back the gracious hand of Yahweh to turn away from the evil that was already planned against them. Ironically, Yahweh's compassionate love and forgiveness turned out to be a traumatising problem to Jonah the prophet (cf. Jon 4). Jonah was actually distressed, and he found a place to sit in order to see what would happen to the city. In his conversation with Yahweh, Jonah shows contempt for the people of Niniveh against the love and compassion of Yahweh.

In the New Testament, there are many cases of trauma that are too numerous for me to discuss in this short space. But for the purpose of illustration I mention a few instances. Firstly, the human condition of the Jews under the Roman government was so oppressive and traumatic that many people were poor and neglected among the people. Jesus had to call attention to the care of the poor as those who are specially blessed and gathered by God (cf. Luke 4:16–19). The entire ministry of Jesus for the sake of all the suffering was

an extension of the graciousness of God for all those in need. Secondly, the passion of Jesus on the cross was a case of trauma, especially to Mary his mother, to his siblings and also to his disciples. Thirdly, the descriptions of persecution of the church found from the book of Acts to the General Epistles describe how Christians live at the margin of the society. They lived as the oppressed and traumatised others. From the moment of his conversion, Paul (who was Saul of Tarsus) also lived a “traumatic life” (Rance 2014:15). Yet he was able to live through and cope in order to be a useful encouragement to people who also found themselves in various situations of suffering.

With such cases of trauma among the people of God, we can see that the people of God are historically the pilgrim people who were always on the margin of society. Thus, the need for providing care and hope for them remains an urgent responsibility. In what follows, I turn to the pastoral care model for the restoration of hope among all those who suffer with special implication to the ongoing traumatising sufferings experienced in African contexts.

Pastoral Care as a Paradigm for the Healing of Trauma Memories

The two important questions that this section seeks to address are as follows: How is trauma described in an African context, or how do African people experience and express trauma? And secondly, how can pastoral care be used as a paradigm for trauma healing?

Trauma as a life-threatening psychological and social stress and discomfort is described as both an individual and a communal experience of “pain and stress” (Motsi & Masango 2012:3). It is an experience of disorder in the self (or in an individual sense of being) and a social disorder or disorientation. It may be experienced as a result of illness, disease, disaster, or the loss of social/communal network for life and flourishing. In their research and reflection on the problem of trauma within the African context, Motsi and Masango (2012:6) observe that “[p]eople from traditional cultures are more likely to perceive themselves as part of a larger whole and trauma and illness are viewed as being externally caused and ongoing, which is linked to the largely society.”

The African condition has turned out to be traumatising at many levels, and as a result, many people have been individually and communally affected. “There are literally millions of survivors who needed and still need help today” (Motsi & Masango 2012: 5). An intentional engagement in trauma healing is the “help” that many people need today. From a Christian practical-theological perspective, Louw (2008) argues that care of life is the primary need of the suffering people in Africa and beyond. He calls for the presentation of hope as the gift of life that is able to restore and renew the suffering and even dying person/people. Louw has been active in pastoral care-giving as practical engagement in response to trauma crisis.

Pastoral care is a central aspect of Christian spirituality for trauma healing and the gift of hope as a new paradigm for the sustenance of life. Christian psychology scholars, such as Harvey (2024) and Worthington et al (2024), have suggested important ways in which Christian spirituality can contribute to human wellbeing and offer solutions to traumatic experiences.

The writing and performance of lament has been suggested as a psychotherapeutic practice in the process of healing trauma memories (Dickie 2019:885–907). In particular, for psychological emphasis, Dickie observes that “[t]he impact of trauma in the brain” (Dickie 2019:888). She examines the application of “trauma therapy theory”

and emphasized the fact that “[m]uch in the theory of trauma therapy supports the possibility that the very act of composing (and then performing) lament can be helpful in contributing to healing for those bearing the pain of some trauma” (Dickie 2019:902). Dickie contributes to the development of human voice in naming tragedy and finding better ways of survival. The act of lament is seen as a possible way of voicing out and finding relief and moving beyond the tragic. “Thus lament can play a part in the post-trauma healing process, helping suffers to improve all their relationships: with themselves, with others and with God” (Dickie 2019:903).

Dickie (2019:889–92) contributes to “trauma healing using cognitive psychotherapy”. “Cognitive therapists seek to do this by reconstructing the trauma memory, removing the associated negative emotion, and integrating it into the person’s personal biography as an event in the past” (2019:889). Dickie’s specific engagement was done by means of “verbal approaches to healing trauma.” “Creating trauma account not only serves to restore agency to the victim, but it also reduces the sense of isolation, providing opportunity to be *heard by someone*.” (italics in the original) (2019:891). Such verbal engagement of voicing out trauma involves “composing a lament poem as a means of healing” (2019:895). This is one of the practical and even pastoral-psychotherapeutic methods of “helping the survivor to shift the traumatic memory to the past”, which “enables him/her to give attention to the present and the future, with hope” (2019:891–92).

A pastoral care perspective of healing trauma memories involves the following four practices: visitation, prayer, sharing the word/preaching, hoping together. To visit the victim is to recognise them and give them dignity of belonging to a loving and caring community. To pray with and for the victim is to be pastorally active in upholding them to God for divine healing and intervention. This enables the care-giver to practically perform a mediatorial role between the victim and God. Such prayer is a sacramental act of love and grace. To share the word of God or to preach, especially in congregational context, is to be prophetic in presenting the word of pardon, love, forgiveness and restoration that mends the old wound of the past and invites the victim to live with hope and a new vision for the future. Lastly, to stand in hope together is to perform an act of solidarity in vulnerability. This should not be done in self-pity but rather in a way that will heal and uphold the victim to a new state of being refreshed and blessed by the performative participation of the care-giver, pastor or fellow witness to their life of vulnerability and brokenness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article explores various types of trauma that can be found among various peoples across various contexts, not least the African context. I have discussed trauma theory in relation to the African contexts, with special emphasis on South African and Nigerian social and political history. Trauma is also seen as part of the experience of biblical characters from ancient times. Yet, even then in the past history and their struggle for survival they found important and especially prophetically guided ways and words of grace and encouragement that helped in healing their trauma. Among modern pastoral care and psychotherapeutic methods of engagement, I have discussed how Dickie suggests lament as a practical participatory method in healing trauma memories. I also suggest four pastoral care methods in healing the trauma memories that would be

useful for people in African contexts. Solidarity in vulnerability is a way of life together that seeks to encourage hoping together, by which dangerous past memories are healed and new possibilities are opened for better life in the world, in the presence of God.

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