

L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Narratives in Conversation.*

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Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation is a theoretical and hermeneutical exploration of the intersections between trauma and gender. L. Juliana Claassens engages in a dialogical reading of biblical texts and contemporary stories to illustrate the devastating and often debilitating effects of systemic violence enacted against women across contexts, resulting in what she terms “insidious trauma.” A second focus, as suggested by the title, is on the act of reading trauma narratives to process and assuage the impact of these traumas. By reading these stories dialogically, Claassens illustrates that contemporary narratives are useful to help readers imagine the impact of trauma on biblical women.

Claassens makes a precise yet powerful assertion in her acknowledgments that is maintained throughout the rest of the book: both writing and reading trauma narratives are acts of survival (ix). In the introduction, Claassens defines trauma and elucidates some of its effects on individuals and collectives; she introduces readers to trauma theory and how it has been applied in biblical studies; and she introduces her method of dialogical reading which creates the space to assess and honor how biblical and contemporary writers have endeavored to signify and process traumas. Claassens illustrates how literary techniques in contemporary trauma narratives have been employed to recognize the difficulty of representing trauma in narrative form (7). She identifies some techniques in the introduction: intertextuality, the appearance of ghosts which symbolize the haunting nature of past traumatic memories, and symbolic language (7-8). Clarifying her assertion that writing is an act of survival, Claassens asserts, “narrativized descriptions of trauma may serve as a companion or a guide in the process of claiming unclaimed experience, which is essential if those trauma victims, who have been deeply affected by shocking occurrences, have any hope of moving on beyond trauma” (12). Finally, Claassens identifies a second aim of her book, to explore the intersection of trauma and gender. Drawing on feminist understandings of trauma and womanist biblical interpretive methods, Claassens is intentional about analyzing the intersecting roles of gender, ethnicity, class, and space in the oppression and traumatization of women. She emphasizes that she is interested in the “secret experiences that women encounter in the interpersonal realm” in both ancient and modern contexts (14).

Citing Louis Stulman, Claassens maintains that “biblical literature can be characterized as ‘meaning-making art’ that serves the purpose of helping traumatized individuals make sense of their suffering.” (4) To illustrate this point, across five chapters, Claassens outlines instances of individual and collective trauma among biblical women and draws comparisons with contemporary trauma stories of female characters to illustrate a bridge across space and time and between ancient and contemporary contexts. Claassens focuses on the traumas of reproductive loss, the appropriation of women’s wombs, rape (in general and as an instrument of war)

and gender-based violence against metaphorical female figures, namely cities that are imagined as female entities in prophetic literature.

In the first chapter, Claassens paints a vivid picture of the origins of two of Israel's enemies, the Moabites and Ammonites. They are born in a context marked by patriarchy, exclusion, violence, and incest, as Lot's daughters, who escape "wound-inducing circumstances," (26) get Lot inebriated and sleep with him to secure a future for themselves. Claassens maintains that their shocking actions illustrate the psychological impact of the unresolved trauma they have escaped. Consequently, there are textual echoes in the story of Ruth that can be understood as unresolved traumatic memories that resurface in future generations (27). Similarly, Florence Green in *The Bookshop* finds herself seeking to enter a close-knit relationship to rebuild a shattered life after becoming a widow (28). By reading these stories intertextually, Claassens illustrates that "the ghosts of the past have quite an effect on the present and next generations" (33).

In the second chapter, Claassens explores the grief of Rachel in Genesis, who experiences infertility, and Isabel in *The Light between Oceans*, who experiences reproductive loss. She argues that infertility and the loss of children are hidden traumas, not traditionally processed out loud. Moreover, Claassens argues that there are no clear-cut resolutions and rarely happy endings in these situations. Yet, this chapter illuminates that there are ways to embrace beauty which may mitigate some of the pain: having a child, adopting, or raising a child, and/or reframing traumatic memories by substituting them with positive images. Citing Serene Jones, Claassens provides an example of reframing with positive imagery, facilitated through an imaginative conversation between Rachel and Mary. Jones focuses on Mary's proclamation that she is blessed in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55. Jones 2009). According to Jones, both women suffered reproductive loss in some way, yet Mary helps Rachel to discover a glimpse of grace and believe that new possibilities are around the corner (68). While I appreciate this example of positive reframing, I wonder if Hannah's story and song (I Samuel 1-2) might illustrate the tragedy of infertility and subsequent beauty in more nuanced ways.

In the third chapter, Claassens introduces Antjie Krog's "Three [Love] Stories in Brackets," and mimics Krog's method of inserting brackets within the stories of Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah to emphasize that women's lives and traumatic experiences are often characterized by silence and frequently take place in secrecy and in places unknown to readers. At the same time, the brackets remind readers that the voices heard are not the women's' voices but someone else's (73). Claassens then outlines similarities between the biblical figures and characters in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: women in both contexts experience fertility issues and both stories depict a virulent patriarchal regime that limits the freedom and agency of women. Moving beyond individual analyses of trauma, Claassens begins to assess how the women's lives are interconnected and observes how the more privileged women internalize gender oppression and perpetuate it by appropriating the wombs of less privileged women to solve fertility issues and, in some instances, to gain the love of a man.

Claassens opens chapter four by presenting a history of interpretation of Dinah's story. She contends that Dinah is raped, which constitutes a deeply traumatic experience. Moreover, Dinah's story is embedded within a culture of war, as her brothers employ violence to avenge the rape. Similarly, Middle Sister in Burns' *The Milkman* is stalked and threatened with sexual violence in a context marked by "a

constant state of intertribal (interreligious) warfare” (102). Much like Middle Sister, who is blamed for the unwanted attention of her stalker, Claassens illustrates how Dinah has been blamed for experiencing rape because she exercises agency to visit the daughters of the land, which is understood as rebellion. Dinah is sometimes perceived as having prostituted herself by leaving and having sexual relations with a person outside of her tribe (101). Claassens notes that Jacob fails to do anything about the rape of Dinah. Claassens further illustrates that the individual stories of Dinah and Middle Sister reflect what transpires in the community as a whole, which shows the pervasiveness of already battered communities and clearly illustrates how intertwined individual and collective trauma are (118).

The final dialogical conversation, between Daughter Zion and Lucy and Melanie from Coetzee’s *Disgrace* takes place in the fifth chapter. Claassens identifies the acrostic forms of Lamentations as a rational reflection on the horrifying situation Daughter Zion experiences as a victim of Babylonian attacks, invasion (metaphorical rape), and destruction. Claassens asserts that Lamentations 1 uses symbolic language to transform traumatic experiences into a seemingly coherent narrative about female suffering in exile. Zion is depicted as a split or fragmented person who grieves her destruction and violation. Yet she mirrors the actual suffering of women, men, and children as she represents their pain and corporate agony (132). Similarly, Lucy and Melanie experience rape, which has deleterious effects on their bodies and psyches. Claassens argues that to lessen the impact of those effects, the women “talk back,” challenging the master narrative and generating counter stories wherein they reclaim a sense of self and agency once diminished by trauma (145-6).

In the concluding chapter, Claassens skillfully summarizes her main points using a metaphor appropriated from Toni Morrison’s novel *Jazz*. Coming to terms with trauma is an “ongoing process of improvisation in which traumatic memories are told and retold from different viewpoints,” much like the techniques of jazz, until traumatic memory is transformed into narrative memory (153). These techniques further enable the traumatized to get “unstuck, by reframing traumatic events,” and possibly permit them to imagine futures wherein all hope is not lost (154). Claassens effectively and brilliantly models these jazz techniques throughout the book as she identifies often hidden and secret traumatic experiences and brings in contemporary narratives. She helps readers identify and imagine how women reframe traumatic events and improvise new forms of community in the face of insidious traumas. At the same time, Claassens pulls readers into the world of the traumatized characters, enabling us to discern how our lives intersect with theirs and invites us to use our power and agency to transform systemic violence and oppression, especially against women. In this way, we all illustrate that reading, writing about, and responding to trauma narratives are acts of individual and collective survival. This book further contributes to the ongoing trend in biblical studies of putting biblical texts and other literature into conversation about the impact of trauma on individual and group identities.

Reference List

Serene Jones, 2009. *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.



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