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# Implications of Historical Trauma for Biblical Interpretation: Resilience in Scripture and Community Life

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## Introduction

As scholars and practitioners have examined and treated trauma in recent decades, I have observed the effects of this trend in daily life. When trauma comes up as a topic in undergraduate and graduate classrooms, students perk up and resonate deeply with the discussions. Online, memes and links on the topic are quickly reposted, and lively commentary takes place after the posts. In social settings, acquaintances connect over naming and delving into the experience of trauma. I feel collective sighs of relief around the ability to openly express something that has had a profound impact on lived experience and yet has, in many contexts, been repressed.

On the research side of things, I have been enthusiastic to investigate different kinds of trauma, and how they are caused, expressed, and processed or healed. In the realms of biblical studies, theology, and ministry, I know that trauma research has the potential to transform how we express empathy, care, and love for our fellow humans and ourselves. In this piece, I provide some suggestions for how understanding historical trauma can form how we think about biblical interpretation, and how we engage biblical literature in community. In my biased opinion as a biblical scholar, careful and empathetic biblical interpretation should permeate preaching, scripture reading and study, and praxis. I will first define historical trauma, and then explore how it can be brought to bear on macro-level interpretations and applications of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible.<sup>1</sup>

## Historical trauma: The basics

Historical trauma is experienced by an entire community across multiple generations, and therefore distinguishes itself from other categories of trauma, including acute and complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), communal trauma, and intergenerational

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family trauma. PTSD is a diagnosis applied to individuals, communal trauma applies to a group experience that may not be cross-generational, and intergenerational trauma applies to multiple generations of a family unit but is not common to a whole social group. Indigenous social work professor Teresa Evans-Campbell describes historical trauma as “a legacy of numerous traumatic events a community experiences over generations and encompasses the psychological and social responses to such events.”<sup>2</sup>

Many of the present-day communities around the world experiencing historical trauma are communities that have been relocated, dispersed, and/or destroyed through processes of colonization. In American contexts, prime examples of whole communities that have experienced numerous and continual traumatic events over multiple generations include Indigenous populations and African American populations. The shared experience of historical trauma can be traced across generations genetically, epigenetically, and

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1. For purposes of practical ministry, this article is a reapplication of research I have already published: Lisa J. Cleath, “Rebuilding Jerusalem: Ezra-Nehemiah as Narrative Resilience.” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2023): 1-27.

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2. Teresa Evans-Campbell, “Historical Trauma in American Indian/Native Alaska Communities: A Multilevel Framework for Exploring Impacts on Individuals, Families, and Communities,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 23, Issue 3 (March 2008), 320.

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culturally, including continuing impacts upon cultural identity clarity, community health, and family systems.<sup>3</sup> The causes and effects of historical trauma are simultaneous and intertwined in most cases, as the structures that produce the trauma are ongoing and the effects must be negotiated even as they perpetuate.

One of the cultural responses to historical trauma is the formulation of community narratives that account for the trauma. Scholars of historical trauma highlight how communal trauma events are carried forward in time “through public narratives that not only recount the events but individual and collective responses to them.”<sup>4</sup> Continually adapting public narratives, which emerge through lived events as well as recorded media, process community trauma with an internal logic that links historical experience to present suffering or resilience.<sup>5</sup> Social scientific studies have demonstrated that community narrative can play a significant role in mitigating the effects of historical trauma by improving cultural identity clarity and encoding resilience in the community.<sup>6</sup> The narratives are able to improve psychological well-being due to integration of community-specific traditions of both traumatic wounding and resilience.<sup>7</sup> For example, in Indigenous American communities,

Narrative speaks directly to the ruptures of cultural continuity that occurred with the systemic suppression and dismantling of indigenous ways of life that resulted in a profound sense of dislocation and despair. Narrative resilience therefore has a communal or collective dimension, maintained by the circulation of stories invested with cultural power and authority, which the individual and groups can use to articulate and assert their identity, affirm core values and attitudes needed to face challenges, and generate creative solutions to new predicaments.<sup>8</sup>

Effective cross-generational community narratives are characterized by this past-to-present logic, engagement with specific community wounding and resilience, and representation of diverse perspectives that respond to trauma. Understanding these variations as part of postcolonial response helps us to explain the meta-discourse that is taking place between different voices in biblical literature. Postcolonial scholar Ania Loomba observes that “[a] growing body of work... [suggests] that sites of resistance are far from clearly demarcated and that particular subjects may contribute to diverse and even conflicting traditions of anti-colonialism, nativism and collaboration.”<sup>9</sup> A mottled picture of responses to colonization makes space for descendants of a common ethnic group to develop varied traditions following a common core of experiences. This notion of narrative resilience proves applicable to interpreting ancient biblical contexts as well as cultivating inclusive and resilient congregational cultures.

### Historical trauma and Old Testament interpretation

Learning how historical trauma functions in the wake of community colonization can help interpreters of the Bible to understand why the corpus of biblical literature maintains a diversity of voices, and why a community needs to pass its traditions from generation to generation. I would also suggest that the diversity of voices in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible provides inclusive access to the text for a wide variety of human experiences, which means that we should carefully consider the positionality of the voices in the text and how we relate to them from our own positions of privilege. I will focus on the literature of the Hebrew Bible, since that is my area of expertise, and will call it the Hebrew Bible since my comments relate to its Jewish history—but the literature in the Hebrew Bible is the same collection that is in the Christian Old Testament, although the books are ordered differently.

The Hebrew Bible is an anthology of literature that emerges from an ethnic group’s varied diasporic and postcolonial experiences. Although source critics debate precise dates and contexts for specific traditions within the Hebrew Bible, scholarly consensus

3. Cultural identity clarity is terminology used by psychologists to express an individual’s subjective impression of clarity around their cultural identity; cultural identity clarity has demonstrable impacts upon an individual’s mental health and general well-being.

4. Mohatt et al., “Historical Trauma as Public Narrative: A Conceptual Review of How History Impacts Present-Day Health,” *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol 106, (April 2014), 5.

5. Evans-Campbell, “Historical Trauma in American Indian/Native Alaska Communities:” 320. One example of a re-developed community narrative is the Mohawks of Kahnawake, located in Québec, who rebuilt themselves in the wake of colonization according to traditional narrative through “community efforts to strengthening links with a proud heritage and rebuilding communal institutions based on the values and principles within the Creation Story and the Kaianera’kó:wa (The Great Law of Peace)” (for additional examples, see: Kirmayer et al., “Rethinking Resilience From Indigenous Perspectives,” *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, [February 2011], 56, 2: 87).

6. Mohatt et al., “Historical Trauma as Public Narrative,” 10.

7. Some Indigenous scholars, starting from the visioning of Gerald Vizenor, prefer to frame native experience as “survivance” rather than “resilience,” in order to focus on an “active sense of presence over historical absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent” Gerald Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1. Here I use the term “resilience” not to frame the whole of a community’s experience, but to articulate the psychological ability to do well despite adversity.

8. Kirmayer et al., “Rethinking Resilience from Indigenous Perspectives,” 85–86.

9. Ania Loomba, “Overworlding the ‘Third World,’” *Oxford Literary Review*, July 1991, Vol. 13, No. 1: 180.

generally places the composition, redaction, and collection of this biblical literature across a period of continual, successive colonization of Jewish communities throughout the ancient Middle East. The impact of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires is evident in the events and themes of the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings), and the Persian and Greek Empires certainly affect the content and transmission of later traditions in the Hebrew Bible (Daniel, Esther, Ezekiel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, and more). The Dead Sea Scrolls present a glimpse of how one Jewish community in the Hellenistic period collected and transmitted a large body of varied community texts, including literature that would end up in later Bibles as well as other Jewish literature that responds to the socio-politics of the time. In other words, the thematically and formally diverse literature of the Hebrew Bible itself and the manuscript evidence we have for it leads us to view it as arising from cross-generationally dispersed and colonized Jewish communities.

For purposes of interpreting the literature of the Hebrew Bible, we should consider the effects of historical trauma not only among its authors and redactors, but also in the collective cross-generational purpose of its transmission. It is important to consider that the authors and redactors of the literature arose from a variety of colonized contexts and perspectives. Just as descendants of colonized communities today may respond in disparate ways to the experiences of colonization, so did ancient, colonized communities. When it comes to the Hebrew Bible, this gives us a framework for understanding its diversity of traditions, collected together as a multigenerational Jewish community corpus.

Variations in postcolonial response can correspond to differences in geographical location, generation, socio-economic status, linguistic community, gender constructions, and more. I have observed generational differences in the way my Chinese American family narrates its identity. My grandparents' and some of my parents' generation express pride in their ability to acculturate to American culture, while my generation tends to take pride in maintaining our Chinese American identities. One could trace these differences in narration to a range of factors, and it is almost guaranteed that individuals within just one of those generations would explain these tendencies differently.

In a similar manner, the literature of the Hebrew Bible narrates community history and group identity in diverse ways. The Babylonian exile is a clear example of a colonization event in Jewish history—a community-specific wounding—that gets narrated in different and even conflicting manners. The Deuteronomistic History interprets it through a lens of retribution theology to emphasize that the Judahites deserve the punishment of exile, while Second Isaiah invokes community-specific comfort and renewal to a destroyed Jerusalem. Perhaps these differences in emphasis arise from different generations, or different locations. Likewise, the books of Ezra-Nehemiah<sup>10</sup> and Ruth appear to respond differ-

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ently to exile and colonization. Ezra-Nehemiah famously creates an exclusivist vision of a covenant community in Jerusalem that solely includes repatriated Judahite-descent deportees to Babylon, while Ruth imagines a past for Israel that welcomes mixed-ethnic marriage in the ancestry of David. Even the materials edited into the book of Ezra-Nehemiah appear to arise from different sources that are not always consistent with each other. I have argued elsewhere that the composite narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah serves as a cross-generational postmemory that constructs and perpetuates earlier generations' responses to trauma.<sup>11</sup> I believe that we can take such internal variation as representative of a multigenerational community process that maintains its varied traditions by editing them into a diverse whole.

The community process that composed and edited the texts of the Bible also includes a process of collection. The modern practice of referring to “books” in the Bible is a constant reminder that “The Book” of the Bible is historically a selection of separate compositions that were edited and then collected together as a corpus. The ancient manuscript evidence available to us—including the previously mentioned Dead Sea Scrolls—demonstrates that the canon of our present-day Hebrew Bible came together over time. This process of canonization responded to Jewish community needs and cross-community discussions, as the literature was composed and transmitted through interaction with community wounds and resilience. By collecting a diverse canon of voices, Jewish communities represented perspectives across a broad swath of Jewish contexts and responses to ongoing colonization. In sum: the collection and transmission of the corpus of literature in the Hebrew Bible could provide narrative resilience for Jewish communities due to the variety of voices represented.

When Christian communities affirmed acceptance of the rebuild the temple and the city and rededicate the covenant community.

11. Cleath, “Rebuilding Jerusalem,” 6.

10. While Ezra and Nehemiah are separate books in modern Bibles, the earliest manuscripts that include their full text unite the books as a single story of Judahite exiles who repatriate to Jerusalem to

whole of the Hebrew Bible, rejecting Marcion's second-century attempt to alter the contents of the Christian Old Testament, that record and practice of Jewish narrative resilience was preserved.<sup>12</sup> The Christian New Testament similarly came together through a community process, although over much less time than the Hebrew Bible, and in different colonial contexts.

From a lay perspective, this variation in the Bible can be hard to understand. For those whose theology of scripture values consistency in the Word of God, it may be useful to frame scripture not primarily as a meta-narrative, but rather as a meta-discourse within the community of God. The literature of the Bible is grounded in human experience, not just individually, but communally. There is a relatability in the diversity of community voices, and perhaps a model to imitate in developing inclusive congregational life. What is more, the responses to colonization in the Bible speak to our twenty first century context, in which we are dealing with the deep and wide-spread effects of European colonization. The interpreter bears the responsibility of doing historical work to contextualize biblical texts carefully, and they must also bring such historical work into conversation with the voices in their community. From the perspective of historical trauma studies, the diversity of voices in a community's traditions serves as a source of resilience. So I believe we should take the meta-discourse of the Hebrew Bible, filled with varied voices and narratives, as a model of community resilience, not as a source of tension to be feared. In our communities today, as in biblical literature, diversity can feed resiliency.

### Applications for communal interpretation of the Bible

Each community of faith has its own traditions and structures for reading the Bible, so it is difficult to generalize about practices of scriptural interpretation. Moreover, communities that are dealing with collective historical trauma will have different needs and processes than those that have current communal trauma. Those communities experiencing historical or communal trauma will have different needs and processes than those communities who focus on inclusion of individuals with PTSD. And certainly, there are those communities that exist with combinations of each of these types of trauma. However, I am certain that any community will have variations in how individuals interpret portions of scripture—on top of the different perspectives already built into the meta-discourse of biblical literature. My comments here can relate to the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament, which also presents a range of voices. Since historical trauma research finds resilience in diversity of particularized perspectives, I would suggest that a community that makes space for and takes ownership of their own diversity in biblical interpretation will build resiliency. In many communities of faith, reading the Bible is a

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12. The scope and length of this article does not permit me to delve into how Christian communities have variously reinterpreted the Hebrew Bible, but I do not wish to obscure that Christian reinterpretation of the Hebrew Bible has often misapplied texts of the Hebrew Bible, to the direct detriment of Jewish communities.

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nexus of self-reflection and community narrative building, so the modes in which we read together are significant.

To formulate community approaches to scripture that allow for the inevitable variation in perspectives, I find the following questions useful:

1. *Managing Biblical Meta-Discourse*: How can we interpret individual passages or books of the Bible in conversation with other parts of the Bible? How can we best utilize our resources that explore the differing perspectives in the biblical literature?
2. *Interpreting Positionality of Biblical Voices*: How should we determine if a biblical voice is speaking from a position of power or from the margins of its historical contexts? Once we do determine positionality, how should this influence how we interpret and apply the identified voice? Which positions, wounds, or resilience in the text should our community members relate to?
3. *Negotiating Challenging Texts*: How can we make a thoughtful community space for encountering biblical texts that are difficult to interpret, and even potentially harmful in our community? How might other biblical voices provide context or contrast for interpreting a single challenging text? What are the best settings for such encounters, and how should they be managed?
4. *Structuring Interpretive Accountability*: How can we create accountability for reading the Bible in community? How do we avoid centering a single reading of the text to the exclusion of other interpretations, while also engaging our theological priorities?
5. *Valuing Multiplicity of Perspectives*: How might we create a culture that values diverse textual voices and interpretations? How can we engage difference of perspective as an opportunity

to evoke communal growth? How do we negotiate seeming conflicts of interpretation?

6. *Creating an Adaptable Process*: How often do we need to re-evaluate our scriptural reading practices? What signals should lead to such reevaluation, and who will be responsible for the assessment process?

From my perspective, each of these questions references processes that a community needs to continually engage with. I believe it is possible to create structures and guidelines for inclusive scripture reading in each community. As communities attend to both historical and ongoing traumatic impact, they can adapt their approaches to communal reading. The power of scripture resides in its richness and relatability, its inherent potential to encounter and challenge humans throughout their changing circumstances. Throughout the history of Christianity, the text of the Bible has been wielded for good and for harm, so it is wise to develop careful practices of interpretation. A strategic approach to reading the Bible in community can contribute to the long-term resiliency of a congregation.

## Conclusions

Overall, historical trauma research tells us that communities find a source of resilience in collective formulation and performance of public narrative. Moreover, that narrative finds its efficacy by including a multiplicity of voices that transmit a variety of responses to specific trauma. The discourse of the Hebrew Bible represents one such collection of voices that can operate at the core of a life of faith. We also learn from social scientific studies how intergenerationally interconnected we are, to the past and the future. This conclusion presents a meaningful challenge to the extreme individualism of dominant American narratives. It suggests that we are each positioned in our current society, with our various structural privileges and traumas, in part due to people who came before us, and that we will make choices that will affect those after us. Biblical discourse models this intergenerational responsibility for wounds and resilience, as prayers in the Hebrew Bible repent for ancestors by invoking a past-to-present logic and asserting how the present community may now live (Psalm 78, Psalm 106, Jeremiah 14:20, Ezra 9:5-15, Nehemiah 9:6-37).

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When we seek to create communities that welcome diverse experiences and voices, we make space for ourselves to consider our individual positionality within the range of voices. This self-reflection may also inform our interpretation of biblical discourse, as we consider which characters we relate to, and which voices represent our respective privileges and challenges. Perhaps the application questions I have posed here will assist communities in processes of biblical interpretation that will contribute to community resilience. I will leave studies of congregational health to sociologists and psychologists, but I believe there are powerful implications for resilience that arise from the co-presence of healing and wounding in communal narrative. The study of historical trauma teaches us that well-being is possible even as trauma and its effects persist.