

Introduction

“TRAUMA” IS ONE OF THE MAIN CATEGORIES currently used (and often misused) to describe disruptive events and their aftermath. Over the last few decades, the great archipelago of scholarly inquiries known as trauma studies has shed new light on literary texts about individual and collective catastrophes, including biblical texts.¹ The present book intends to contribute to biblical trauma studies by researching the language of trauma in the book of Psalms. This is not a book about the psalmists’ psychological distress and how their alleged traumas became manifested in the texts of the Psalter. As explained in the next chapter, we cannot say much about the psyches of the psalms’ authors. Nor can we presume the psalms are autobiographical texts, voicing the authors’ and redactors’ own vicissitudes. Nonetheless, the experience of suffering represented in the psalms is arguably akin to what we nowadays call trauma, regardless of whether this experience arises from their authors and redactors, from other actual individuals and groups, or from a literary and theological construction. This book therefore parses how the experience currently called trauma is linguistically expressed in the Psalter, how the psalms’ language of trauma is embedded in the culture of ancient Israel and its *Umwelt*, and how the psalms’ language contributed to shaping the cultural trauma of Yehud in the Persian period. After briefly introducing the concept of trauma in this introductory chapter, I address one of the many controversial issues in the field of trauma studies—namely, the relationship between trauma and language. The last section will situate the present work within the ongoing research on the Psalms in light of the category of trauma and will provide an outline of the book.

Some of the ideas expressed in this introduction can be found in Danilo Verde, “Trauma, Poetry, and the Body: On the Psalter’s Own Words for Wounds,” *Biblica* 101 (2020): 208–30.

1. For an overview of biblical trauma studies, see Markl, “Trauma/Traumatheorie”; Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies”; Garber, “Trauma Studies.”

Trauma: Individual, Collective, and Cultural Dimensions

The term “trauma” comes from the Greek term for wound (τραῦμα). Besides indicating physical injury, the words “trauma” and “traumatic” are commonly used to refer loosely to stressful and painful events, or simply to refer to undesirable experiences. In specialized literature, however, the category of trauma does not apply to all kinds of distress, and trauma is not just an emphatic word for suffering. To put it simply, traumatic events are always profoundly painful, but not all experiences of pain and suffering qualify as traumatic. Due to space constraints, it is impossible to summarize the plethora of studies on individual, collective, and cultural trauma. A basic *explicatio terminorum*, however, is necessary to clarify what the word “trauma” technically implies.

The term “trauma” was introduced in the fields of psychology and psychiatry at the end of the nineteenth century to describe both the psychological condition of hysteria and a syndrome caused by railroad accidents (so-called railway spine).² It was then used to indicate the shell shock syndrome afflicting the soldiers of World War I, the psychological distress suffered by veterans of World War II and the war in Vietnam, and the psychological condition of Holocaust survivors. Psychologists and psychiatrists observed that these victims shared common symptoms such as delirium, persecution delusions, amnesia, hallucinations, motor dysfunctions, and sudden, uncontrolled anger. These symptoms were later included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III, 1980) under the entry “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD). The definition of PTSD has significantly changed in the DSM-IV (1994) and DSM-V (2013), reflecting the many controversies among psychologists and psychiatrists about the diagnosis of trauma. In order for a person to have suffered PTSD, the DSM-V requires that the individual must (1) have experienced or been exposed to “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence”³ and (2) present specific symptoms, which must begin or worsen after the traumatic event.

The way psychologists have described trauma is crucial to clarifying the difference between the concept of psychological trauma and the many other forms of distress that we may experience throughout our lives. Sigmund Freud’s definitions of trauma as “a *breach* in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli” and as “a *foreign body* which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work” have been very influential and resound in many subsequent studies.⁴ In the early 1990s, for instance, the

2. For the history of trauma, see Luckhurst, *Trauma Question*.

3. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 271.

4. Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 23; Freud and Breuer, “Studies in Hysteria,” 6 (emphasis added).

American psychosociologist Kai T. Erikson defined trauma as “a *blow* to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so *suddenly* and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively.”⁵ As the metaphors of *breach*, *foreign body*, and *blow* suggest, trauma is caused by sudden, disruptive external events that make the individual’s defense system collapse, causing significant changes in the organism on all levels and having severe consequences for the wellbeing of the victim long after the traumatizing event.⁶ In particular, the abrupt and involuntary reexperience of the traumatic event seems to be the trauma signature. The past traumatic event breaks into the present in unexpected ways: new experiences can trigger the memory of the past traumatic event, which is not merely remembered but experienced again, often eliciting strong reactions of terror and rage. Psychologists have emphasized that trauma is not just a problem related to memory; rather, it compromises the entire organism, the mind, the brain, and the body.⁷

Trauma, of course, can also affect a wider population. The phrases “collective trauma,” “historical trauma,” and “national catastrophe” are often used interchangeably to indicate the psychological and social effects of traumatic events on groups, societies, and entire peoples. Erikson defined collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality.”⁸ He argued that there are similarities and dissimilarities between individual and collective trauma. On the one hand, collective trauma develops slowly and does not have the aspect of suddenness that usually characterizes individual trauma. On the other hand, similar to individual trauma, collective trauma has the power to shatter the social organism, tearing asunder the entire social fabric. As Erikson put it, in experiences of collective trauma, “‘I’ continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. ‘You’ continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But ‘we’ no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body.”⁹ The Turkish-American psychoanalyst Vamik D. Volkan, on the contrary, emphasized that one of the main characteristics of traumatized collectivities is actually a social bond. Volkan used the expression “chosen trauma” to refer to the choice of a

5. Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” 459 (emphasis added).

6. More recent studies, however, pointed out that what makes an event “traumatic” is not the event as such but the individual’s experience of the event. A particular event may be experienced as traumatic by one individual and not by another. As the SAMHSA’s Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative Workgroup put it, “How the individual labels, assigns meaning to, and is disrupted physically and psychologically by an event will contribute to whether or not it is experienced as traumatic.” SAMHSA, *Concept of Trauma*, 12.

7. See van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*.

8. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path*, 154; Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” 460.

9. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path*, 154; Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” 460.

large group to add the mental representation of a catastrophic event to its own identity. The chosen trauma has the extraordinary power of binding members of a traumatized group and their ancestors (the actual victims) via their grief, even if they are separated by several generations. Volkan argued that “the historical truth about the event is no longer important for the large group, but what is important is that through sharing the chosen trauma, members of that group are linked together. In other words, the chosen trauma becomes woven into the canvas of the ethnic or large-group tent.”¹⁰

More recently, the American sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander pointed out that the shaping of collective identity through the memory of past collective catastrophes is a very complex process in which many factors and actors play a crucial role.¹¹ Alexander developed the notion of cultural trauma, which he defines as follows: “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.”¹² The major new aspect in Alexander’s approach is his strong reaction to what he calls “the naturalistic fallacy.”¹³ Whereas we generally assume that trauma is generated by catastrophic events, Alexander points out that, on the cultural level, trauma is not generated *sic et simpliciter* by events.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, history divulges plenty of catastrophic events that did not shatter the identities of peoples, nations, and social groups. According to Alexander, in order to become *cultural* traumas, collective catastrophes need to be narrated in a way that utterly damages the victims’ belief system. Cultural traumas, therefore, are the result of persuasive symbolic representations and metanarratives of catastrophes and are produced by carrier groups who have an interest in creating that belief. It is important to underscore that cultural trauma studies do not deny the horrific reality of those events that are claimed to be traumatic. Nor do cultural trauma studies investigate whether such claims are historically accurate. Rather, they focus on the social processes and agents that play a role in turning *collective* traumas into *cultural* traumas.

Contrary to the indiscriminate use of the term “trauma” in everyday conversations, specialized literature does not treat trauma as an emphatic synonym of

10. Volkan, “Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas,” 88. For a broader and more detailed view of collective trauma studies, see Hirschberger, “Collective Trauma”; Lerner, *From the Ashes of History*, 25–64; Theisen-Womersley, *Trauma and Resilience*, 147–73.

11. See Alexander, *Trauma*. For other research paradigms within the field of cultural trauma studies, see Madigan, “Theories of Cultural Trauma.”

12. Alexander, *Trauma*, 15.

13. Alexander, *Trauma*, 24–26.

14. To be fair, that an event, no matter how catastrophic, is not sufficient to generate trauma is widely recognized also within psychological trauma studies. See note 6.

sorrow, suffering, pain, or distress. On the individual level, trauma is a very specific psychological condition and an experience of suffering in which “everything is undone.”¹⁵ On the collective level, it is a cataclysmic event disrupting the lives of social groups and entire peoples and producing a profound crisis of meaning that requires a redefinition of the victims’ collective identity and memory. On the cultural level, trauma is the result of complex social processes through which the self-perception of a certain group is entirely reshaped by narratives and metanarratives.

On the Relationship Between Trauma and Language

One of the most controversial issues in trauma studies is the relationship between trauma and language. It is essential to address this issue here because it impacts the possibility of approaching trauma texts from a linguistic perspective.

It is often claimed that the experience of trauma is inherently unsayable and unrepresentable. Consequently, trauma texts are largely seen as characterized by fragmentation, contradiction, and aporia. The supposed failure of representation has been emphasized by the pioneers of literary trauma studies, especially by Cathy Caruth, whose understanding of the relationship between trauma and language has become the paradigm of theoretical reference for many scholars.¹⁶ Caruth repeatedly used Pierre Marie Félix Janet’s concept of dissociation and Freud’s concept of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) to point out that trauma is a belated reaction to the traumatic event. The belatedness is due to the fact that traumatic events are too shattering to be processed in real time.¹⁷ In this view, since trauma is not integrated into consciousness as it occurs, and its registration is only possible belatedly, the victims are incapable of (1) remembering what really happened, (2) fully understanding the event, (3) communicating their experience through conventional modes of representation, and (4) providing a comprehensive and comprehensible narrative.

This idea, according to which the victim’s failure to process the overwhelming event results in a severe impediment to remembering and putting the event into words, was grounded not only in nineteenth-century psychoanalytic approaches to trauma (most notably in Freud’s understanding of trauma) but also in more recent works of prominent psychologists such as Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk.¹⁸ In Caruth’s view, literature does have

15. Taylor, *Trauma Therapy and Clinical Practice*, 2.

16. See Caruth, *Trauma*; Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*.

17. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 62, 133, and 141.

18. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*; van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Weisaeth, *Traumatic Stress*.

the capacity to bear testimony to trauma thanks to its linguistic peculiarities, which do not fall within ordinary models of referentiality. Joshua Pederson has noted that Caruth's theory of trauma ultimately resulted in "a ringing endorsement of the testimonial power of literature."¹⁹ The same applies to the work of literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman, who, on the one hand, emphasized the fissure between the experience of trauma and its linguistic representation and, on the other hand, noted that "literary verbalization . . . still remains a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible."²⁰

The understanding of trauma as inherently unsayable is widespread and has inspired a number of valuable studies. More recently, however, this understanding has been called into question. The American psychologist Richard McNally, for instance, has been critical of the definition of trauma as the unsayable: "It is ironic," he argued, "that so much has been written about the biological mechanisms of traumatic psychological amnesia when the very existence of the phenomenon is in doubt."²¹ According to McNally, trauma is memorable and speakable. Traumatized people may choose not to talk about their traumas or may have difficulty remembering and verbalizing their experience, especially when it comes to remote events, but in his view no evidence suggests that trauma *ipso facto* results in a failure of representation, nor does neuroscience research support this claim. McNally's is not the only critical voice. Other scholars question the scant evidence supporting the phenomenon of amnesia and the impossibility of verbalization or suggest that the verbalization of trauma should be located along a spectrum that may range from fully structured accounts to fragmented discourses.²²

Apart from neuroscientific debates on the brain, there are other challenges to the mainstream understanding of the relationship between trauma and language as well as to the tenets of the first wave of literary trauma studies. Psychoanalysis has typically been characterized by a profound skepticism regarding the possibility of knowledge and seems to have found confirmation of the constitutive weakness of human knowledge and language in accounts of trauma.²³ The fissure between experience, language, and knowledge was one of the leitmotifs of the Belgian philosopher Paul de Man and, more generally, the Yale school of deconstruction. According to de Man, linguistic forces in a text "tie themselves into a knot which arrests the process of understanding."²⁴

19. Pederson, "Speak, Trauma," 334.

20. Hartman, "Trauma Within the Limits of Literature," 259. See also Hartman, "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies."

21. McNally, *Remembering Trauma*, 182.

22. Pederson, "Cognitive Approaches to Trauma and Literature."

23. See Roth, "Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion."

24. de Man, "Shelley Disfigured," 44.

Within the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis and deconstruction, the pioneers of literary trauma studies insisted on the ineradicable gap between traumatic experience and linguistic representation; in their view, what we learn from trauma is the crisis of truth, the not known, the collapse of understanding, and the inaccessibility of history—namely, all the main leitmotifs of the Yale school of deconstruction. We cannot fail to notice that there is some circularity in this discourse on language and trauma: suspiciously, the hermeneutical premises about language and knowledge are also the results of the observations of trauma language and literature. It seems to me that, on the one hand, the pioneers of literary trauma studies used trauma as a pretext to reaffirm their philosophical positions and, on the other, psychological research on trauma provided them with everything they needed to carry out their ready-made theory of language and literature.²⁵ Undoubtedly, the work by Caruth and others has been very successful and influential, as attested by the subsequent number of psychoanalytic and deconstructive literary studies that managed to find all the workhorses of those theoretical paradigms (i.e., fragmentation, contradiction, aporia, distortion, elision, etc.) in the most varied literary works. This is hardly surprising, since when we wield a hammer, everything may look like a nail.

The *ménage à trois* between literary trauma studies, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction—a triad that in the 1990s constituted the strength of the first literary research on trauma—has recently come to be considered one of its main shortcomings. Many scholars observed that the traditional literary approach to trauma only works if it is grounded in the psychoanalytical definition of trauma and in poststructural hermeneutics.²⁶ Additionally, Stef Craps complained that literary trauma studies have thus far been too Eurocentric, taking for granted the Western construal and postmodern aesthetics of trauma.²⁷ According to Craps, whereas the pioneers of literary trauma studies intended to foster cross-cultural solidarity, scholars (including the pioneers themselves) failed to keep this promise, mainly because “they often favor or even prescribe a modernistic aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma.”²⁸ Even though trauma belongs to the human experience as such, the conceptualization of trauma, as well as its linguistic and literary representation, varies from culture to culture.²⁹

25. See Kansteiner, “Genealogy of a Category Mistake”; Rothe, “Irresponsible Nonsense.”

26. See, for instance, Leys, *Trauma*; Balaev, *Contemporary Approaches to Literary Trauma Theory*.

27. Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism,” 51.

28. Craps, “Beyond Eurocentrism,” 46.

29. For recent studies on the cultural dimensions of traumatic experience, see Theisen-Womersley, *Trauma and Resilience*, 113–46.

Trauma generates many different discourses and strategies of representation that should be identified and analyzed rather than being forced into poststructural hermeneutics or the psychoanalytical model. In this regard, the analysis of conventional linguistic expressions and strategies of composition is crucial for recovering culturally specific ways of thinking and talking about trauma.

We should consider that there is something rhetorical in the emphasis on trauma as being something especially unspeakable. Many human experiences seem to be unspeakable, yet we cannot stop talking about them. Especially in the Romantic period, love and the sublime were considered unspeakable, and yet love poems and novels saturate the history of literature.³⁰ Mystical experience may be regarded as unspeakable by definition, but the impasse seldom deterred mystics from talking about their union with the divine. Pain is also said to be unspeakable: the language of pain “runs dry,” according to Virginia Woolf, and the experience of pain resists and even destroys language, says Elaine Scarry.³¹ Nonetheless, pain is very prominent in human discourse. It seems that the deeper the experience, the more the experience is perceived as unspeakable, yet this is exactly when humans attempt to find *the* words capable of expressing that experience once and for all. Trauma may certainly be perceived as one of these unspeakables—perhaps even the unspeakable par excellence. Yet whether or not trauma is inherently unsayable for neurological reasons, the emphasis on this aspect within literary trauma studies easily becomes redundant, forcing us to chase and speculate on what is allegedly missing rather than focusing on what has actually been spoken. The contribution of linguistic analysis may lie in providing tools to investigate the language of trauma texts, thereby liberating the analysis from the constraints of the poststructural paradigm.

Trauma and the Psalter

Due to the number of laments in the Psalter, the book of Psalms has received remarkable attention from the perspective of trauma hermeneutics.

By drawing on modern psychology and psychiatry, both Brent Strawn and Christopher Frechette have contended that the Psalter is marked by extensive descriptions of traumatic events and functions therapeutically not only for its composers and former readers but also for future supplicants as a means of healing and recovery.³² Rebecca Poe Hays has analyzed Psalm 78 in light

30. Stampfl, “Parsing the Unspeakable.”

31. Woolf, “On Being Ill,” 228; Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 8.

32. Frechette, “Destroying the Internalized Perpetrator”; Strawn, “Trauma, Psalmic Disclosure, and Authentic Happiness.”

of Judith Herman's trauma therapy approach, arguing that by linking history and wisdom Psalm 78 aims to create a safe environment in which the traumatized community can reorient itself toward the covenant with God.³³ In 2018, Alphonso Groenewald authored an article on the poor in books 1 and 2 of the Psalter from a trauma perspective, arguing that the redaction of the Psalter is a record of broken and marginalized people within Judean society that aims to restore dignity and hope to victims.³⁴ More recently, in 2021 Nikolett Móricz published a monograph on the phenomenology of trauma in Psalms 22, 88, 107, and 137.³⁵ Taking these few psalms as case studies, Móricz's main argument is that traumatic events have affected the psalmists' psychology and the psalms' aesthetic of representation. The psychological perspective is also adopted by Xi Li, according to whom textual evidence shows that the speaker of Psalm 137 is in a process of post-traumatic growth.³⁶ Noteworthy is L. Juliana Claassens's insightful article on the metaphor of divine adoption in Pss 68:5 and 27:9–10, in which she convincingly shows how psychological studies on trauma can in some cases provide keys to a better understanding of biblical texts.³⁷ Finally, the psalms of communal lament have recently been explored from the perspective of trauma hermeneutics by Chwi-Woon Kim in his rich article "Psalms of Communal Lament."³⁸ According to Kim, "The psalms of communal lament bear witness to ancient Israelites' transgenerational transmission of their ancestors' unresolved trauma rooted in historical experiences of divine anger."³⁹ Certainly, there is still room for further research, especially with respect to (1) whether and to what extent we can speak of psalms of trauma within the Psalter, (2) which psalms can be considered psalms of trauma, (3) the main linguistic and cultural features of these psalms, and (4) why these psalms were put together and transmitted. The present book is devoted to these research questions.

After providing a definition of psalms of trauma and briefly commenting on the psalms that, in my opinion, belong to this category (chapter 1), I focus on two of the psalms' main linguistic strategies: the ubiquitous references to the body (chapter 2) and the use of both conventional and unconventional metaphors (chapter 3). This, of course, in no way implies that language of the body and metaphors are only used to represent trauma in the Psalter. Nor does it imply that trauma psalms use a different kind of language from that used in

33. Poe Hays, "Trauma, Remembrance, and Healing."

34. Groenewald, "Trauma Perspective of the Redaction of the Poor."

35. Móricz, *Zur Phänomenologie des Traumas*.

36. Li, "Post-Traumatic Growth." See also Brown and Collicutt, "Psalms 90, 91 and 92."

37. Claassens, "Metaphor of Divine Adoption."

38. Kim, "Psalms of Communal Lament."

39. Kim, "Psalms of Communal Lament," 531.

other psalms—for example, in laments. Rather, the driving idea of the present book is that the Psalter represents trauma by drawing on its own poetic resources and linguistic repertoire as well as conventional ways of describing human suffering—that is, those ways that were widely used and deeply entrenched in the culture of ancient Israel. Finally, I investigate the pragmatic dimension of the psalms of trauma in light of cultural trauma studies (chapter 4). By focusing on the psalms of communal lament in books 2 and 3 of the Psalter and reading these psalms against the background of Persian Yehud, I argue that the communal laments were transmitted primarily to wound deeply the community that would pray with these compositions in order to ensure that the Babylonian trauma persisted as the defining cultural trauma of later generations. Whereas in the first chapters the term “cultural” denotes the shared linguistic and conceptual heritage through which the psalmists represented the experience of trauma, in the last chapter “cultural” denotes the collective wound that the composition and redaction of these psalms inflicted on Yehud’s identity.