Becoming Ruth or the Lamenting Psalmist: Finding Hope in Pain

June F. Dickie
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Abstract

The need for trauma healing has significantly increased in recent years, and new innovative and cost-effective ways must be found to help sufferers, particularly those in economically challenged areas. In this study, literature trauma theory is applied, using the biblical story of Ruth and some lament psalms, to help sufferers find a measure of healing. It was found that engaging with the emotions experienced by the characters in the biblical text enabled sufferers to express their own pain and to identify with the way God interacted with the biblical characters. The approach also provided a creative interaction with the text which participants enjoyed. In these days of increasing emotional challenge, it is a means worth exploring in various contexts while using relevant biblical texts.

1. Introduction

Positive intervention for trauma healing has become increasingly urgent and widespread since the COVID-19 pandemic. But even before then, many people in South African townships and informal settlements have found themselves living in situations of great trauma with poverty, aggression, crime, and seemingly hopeless vulnerability. In response to this, empirical research was done to see if exposing interested persons to some biblical stories and poems could help them. Rather than simply listening, the idea was to allow the participants to engage with the stories at an emotional level, through performing the text. Performance has many advantages, particularly for young people with a low literacy level, as a powerful means of expressing

https://www.sats.ac.za/conspectus/
This article: **https://www.sats.ac.za/conspectus/becoming-ruth-lamenting-psalmist**
https://doi.org/10.54725/conspectus.2023.3.4

Conspectus

Keywords
Trauma healing, Ruth, lament psalms, empirical, community

About the Author
Dr. June F. Dickie (Ph.D., UKZN) is a Bible translator and researcher with particular interests in the Psalms, Performance, and Psychological Hermeneutics. She has worked in various communities since 1994, mainly in Africa. Currently, she is part of a team developing a new methodology for translating Psalms, using orality and performance.
One of the pilot studies is with the colored community (RSA), helping them to translate the Bible into their language, Kaaps.

E-mail: junedickie@gmail.com

SATS
Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

the emotions underlying actions. Further, it also permits cultural nuances to enter the story, making it more acceptable and appropriate.

First, two groups (one consisting of grade seven learners and the other of adults) from two townships in Cape Town were invited to learn and tell the story of Naomi and Ruth through drama. Second, various groups of burden-bearers in two provinces of South Africa were given the opportunity to use the form of biblical lament to compose their own lament poems. Both exercises produced significant benefits for the participants.

In this article, attention is first given to the basic theories underlying this approach. Five aspects are addressed: first, the value of using biblical literature to contribute to trauma healing, and the benefits (both psychological and physical) of performing the biblical text in meeting the basic principles of healing (as outlined next); second, the foundational steps to (psychological) trauma healing, as proposed by the psychiatrist, Judith Herman (1992); third, the steps outlined by pastoral theologians for spiritual healing of soul abuse; fourth, the theory underlying biblical lament; and fifth, the value of experiential storytelling. Then the empirical studies are briefly outlined, one at a time, with the outcomes resulting in the lives of the participants. Finally, a conclusion compares this approach with some other current approaches to trauma healing using biblical literature and suggests that this methodology has advantages in certain contexts.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1 Literary trauma theory

Literary studies are opening new ways for exploring the role and function of texts (Frechette and Boase 2016, 4). Literary trauma theory is concerned with the ways that texts encode trauma and bear witness to trauma. As Rahim (2016, 90) observes, literature facilitates an empathetic context for remembering and mourning, two processes that are important to the healing process. For recovery and resilience, it is vital that the traumatic experience be expressed, and yet neurological disturbance following trauma often makes it difficult for the trauma survivor to find the words to convey the problem and the associated emotion (Soelle 1975, 71–72). In such cases, literature can significantly help, as linguistic symbols allow traumatic memories to be confronted "at a distance [allowing for] a 'safe' confrontation with the traumatic experience" (Granofsky 1995, 6–7). Thereby literature can facilitate recovery and resilience for both individuals and communities (Frechette and Boase 2016, 10–11). The narrative of Ruth can be useful in this regard (Frechette and Boase 2016, 14). For example, victims of sugar daddies could imagine the thoughts and fears of Ruth as she went down to the threshing floor for an encounter with Boaz in chapter three.

It is necessary to relive the traumatic experience (in an environment of safety) to activate the emotional and cognitive processes associated with the trauma, in order to gain dominance over them (Allen 2005, 262; González-Prendes and Resko 2012, 22). The emotion provided in such texts can help sufferers express their own pain and find a fellow sufferer in the biblical character. Further, such texts often show how survivors preserve their agency and demonstrate a "capacity for resistance, survival, and recovery" (Claassens 2016, 20), all of which can encourage victims in their own situations. Consequently, such texts can have a "restorative capacity" (Strawn 2016, 143–160).

Apart from these narrative texts, the biblical psalms have also proven of great value in providing burden-bearers with the words and prayers that resonate with their experience. For example, Psalm 13 expresses deep pain that persists over a long time. Indeed, this psalm begins with four rhetorical questions of the form "How long?" Many burden-bearers resonate with these emotions arising from prayers that seem not to be answered. The

ultimate lament is that of Christ on the cross when he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Miller (2005, 22) believes that all cries of lament are included in Christ's lament, and thereby authenticated and validated. Indeed, the many different laments in the biblical text contribute to healing by either expressing the words that the sufferer battles to find, or by serving as models for one's personal expression.

2.2 *Herman's (1992) three steps toward emotional healing*

Judith Herman (1992, 155, 175–177) notes that, in the case of individual traumatization, there are three fundamental stages of recovery: establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connections between survivors and their community (i.e., reconnecting with ordinary life and being able to move forward).

Clearly, a person who has been abused or violated needs to know they are safe (emotionally and physically) before they will open up and allow the healing process to begin. Then, second, they need to "remember and mourn" (Herman 1992, 175). The goal is to reclaim the memory, with all its associated emotions and bodily sensations. Although the person must be exposed again to the trauma trigger in order to relive the experience, it must be done in an environment of safety. Towards this end, exposure must be balanced with containment (Allen 2005, 250). As Herman (1992, 176) asserts: "There is a need to constantly maintain a balance between preserving safety and facing the past." Literature can be useful in this regard in two ways: first, a carefully selected story can facilitate the sufferer identifying with the pain of another and also with the way God intervened in their situation, but at the same time the pain is kept at some distance. Indeed, finding resonance with characters in biblical texts enables a safe exposure to the emotions provoked by the situations the characters find themselves in. The second way in which literature can help a trauma sufferer to revisit the trauma in order to experience healing is through either providing the very words that she battles to find (as in using a lament psalm to express one's pain) or by offering a form for them to use to write their own lament. Both of these methods are explored in the empirical work.

The third step in trauma healing responds to the need to connect with others socially and be able to move forward in one's life. Trauma freezes one's capacity to make decisions and plan a future and leaves a person feeling isolated. Herman (1992, 214) notes that "Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between the individual and community." As Sweeney (2011, 227) notes, "One of the greatest human pains is the loneliness of being alone." Thus, when a group of people who have experienced a common trauma can share together, participants report the solace they feel simply being present with others who have endured similar ordeals. Through connecting with others, their sense of self, of worth, and of humanity is restored (Herman 1992, 215). Being able to talk about their traumatic experience provides the opportunity for them to be heard, thereby reducing the sense of social isolation (Allen 2005, 252, 266). As West (2016, 220) observes, "Validation is a vital component [of the healing process]." Indeed, the safe and supportive presence of others as witnesses and dialogue partners can be crucial for advancing the process of reinterpreting the traumatic experience (Frechette and Boase 2016, 7).

Herman (1992, 195) warns that this approach to healing takes time and is never complete: "Interventions based on storytelling … have no claim to an immediate healing power. Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete." However, significant improvement can result when the survivor has shifted the traumatic memory to the past and can give attention to the present and future, with hope and zest.

2.3 *Pastoral theology's response to soul abuse*

Emily Lyon, a clinical psychologist and church worker, with over twenty-five years of experience helping abuse survivors, maintains that there is a gaping ignorance of psychological research on the part of many spiritual-care workers. Further, clinical treatment programs utilizing methods of psychotherapy give little, if any, attention to the *soul damage* that abused people suffer. This damage to the soul arises from the interpersonal evil at the root of abuse, "a theological problem which only the church is equipped to address" (Lyon 2010, 239). Grand (2000, 4–5) asserts that the act of abuse causes "the collapse of the survivor's self," a kind of "extinction," an "internal space of catastrophic loneliness imbued with hate and fear and shame and despair." The person's sense of identity and of having a personal history is fragmented or confused (Lyon 2010, 236). A sense of trust and safety has been shattered, resulting in a mangling of the soul (Becker 2014, 22).

Lyon (2010, 240–241) suggests that in order to address the needs of those whose souls have been wounded, new liturgies including sacramental actions are needed which would "involve reparative relationships." Towards this end, the social environment must be supportive, facilitating a positive relationship between the survivor and others. Lyon (2010, 240–241) also advocates attention being given to the person's sense of shame and injustice, and opportunity being provided for "transcendent and transformative spiritual experience."

Beyond the ideas suggested by Lyon, soul therapy may also incorporate poetry, rhythm, song, movement (as in dance), and creative expression through drama. All of these can contribute to the social, emotional, and spiritual healing of an individual in pain (Dickie and Zogbo 2022). Further, to encourage soul healing, attention should be given to promoting neural development (to negate the effect of toxic memories) by including a moderate level of stimulation, as is inherent in creative tasks (Dickie 2018a, 154; 2019, 888–891).

2.4 *Lament theory*

The distinguishing features of biblical lament are that the person addressed is God, and the prayer includes complaint (i.e., deep emotional pain). The lamenter may accuse God or enemies of being the cause of her pain. When traumatized people accuse God, God seems to accept that their pain and anger make them likely to rage not only against the perpetrators but also against God as the powerful one who did not prevent their suffering.[1]

Modern psychotherapy recognizes that expressing lament is part of healing (Westermann 1994, 91). Lament psalms both reflect crises and provide a way to pass through a crisis (Mandolfo 2002, 3–5). However, to have therapeutic value, psalms need to be read as performance literature with attention to the different voices (5). This enables the sufferer to identify with the pain of the lamenting psalmist and provides her with another voice which may help her see her situation from a different perspective.

It is also necessary that the space and time for lament be sacred, set apart from the ordinary, and that there is a sense of safety for all participants. In particular confidentiality is a key element. Frechette and Boase (2016, 16) argue that people can best appropriate biblical texts through the use of ritual, which is performance enacted in spaces and times set apart from the ordinary. They also advocate the need to "create a sense of solidarity," and thus the use of communal lament payers in a public setting (as part of worship) can be very helpful.[2]

1 See also Herman 1992, 94–95.
2 See also Mandolfo 2002, 6–7.

Indeed, this has been found to bring about a change in the persons praying and the audience (Dickie 2020b, 58–60; Corvin 1972, 145). Presenting a lament as a sacramental action (in the company of others who care) can lead to stronger relationships within the church community and a place of safety within the liturgy for all those battling various issues. This suggests the value of lament becoming a regular ritual within the weekly worship service, thereby providing a liturgical opportunity (in the company of the believing community) for burden-bearers to unload their burden as part of their worship of and trust in God.

The need for public lament in the church is important not only for the sufferers to be able to express their pain and be heard (Grand 2000, 5), but also for the other members of the community to hear the pain, and if necessary, be convicted when they hear about the pain. As many researchers have noted (e.g., Seto 2008), many abusers were themselves abused. The one who was sinned against becomes the one sinning against another. Thus, in the church, those who need to lament may at other times need to hear the lament of others and accept their own sin. Furthermore, in order to cultivate a caring community in the church, all need to hear and pay attention to the pain of others in their midst.

Lament may be expressed not only in words but also through ritual acts. For example, an oppressed group in Korea developed a communal dance of lament which was performed annually. This ritual dance provided an opportunity for the women to comfort one another, and to encourage one another to resist injustice and not give in to resignation (Choi 2007, 8). Lyon suggests that such rituals could also be very helpful for oppressed and abused men and women today. In addition to the emotional release, the new and energetic patterns of movement and the crying out of anger and grief would provide the stimulation that the neural systems of abused people need to break old habits and form new avenues for free expression.

Another example of *body lament* was part of a communal response in a Cape Town church to the spate of domestic violence in August 2019. Congregation members were invited to go to the front and add a pinch of salt to a bucket of salt water, representing the tears of God and those of the people. As they added their tears to the communal pain, they could express the particular burden on their heart, aloud or silently, as a prayer accompanying their symbolic action (Dickie 2021, §3.2.2).

2.4.1 Applying advances in neuro-research to lament theory

The right hemisphere of the brain dominates for organizing the human stress response (Wittling 1995, 55–59), and for integrating unconscious affects into a more complex implicit sense of self (Schore 2009, 144). Thus, when the function of the right brain disintegrates (which happens when trauma is experienced), the *implicit*-self collapses, resulting in an instant loss of a sense of safety and trust (126). Moreover, during traumatic experiences, there is an over-production of bio-chemicals, resulting in hyperactivity in the amygdala and the normal action of the hippocampus being blocked (McNally 2003, 137). As a result, new events are not processed by the hippocampus (Hug 2007, 232), but the (trauma) memories are stored by the amygdala as unprocessed, noxious emotions and other sensory fragments. This results in invasive, disturbing flashbacks when triggers cause the traumatic events to be reactivated.

However, several researchers (e.g., Doidge 2007; Schore 2009, 142) are showing that the brain has an enormous capacity for *plasticity*, enabling itself to heal. Under certain circumstances, hormones are released which stimulate the development of neurons to replace those destroyed during

trauma. The release of such hormones is stimulated by "moderate levels of stress such as that involved in new learning" in a positive interpersonal environment (Cozolino 2002, 24). Other researchers (e.g., van der Kolk 2006, 225; Hug 2007, 232) also claim that there is an optimum level of stimulation that facilitates a shift to right-brain processing, and maximum integration of memories into the hippocampus (Schore 2009, 140).

I would suggest that composing and/or performing a biblical lament can also provide the necessary creative stimulation to bring about healing, particularly as it also takes place within a positive interpersonal environment. Moreover, the right brain seems to be associated with religious experiences (Hug 2007, 234), and thus the exercise of studying biblical psalms and composing one's own lament can be expected to promote the healing of the soul (Lyon 2010, 238).

2.5 *Experiential storytelling*

The empirical work that follows in the next section is an application of Experiential Storytelling, a body of theory that has been explored by researchers in many fields of study. With reference to experiencing Bible stories, Brophy (2007, 149) notes the following:

> The Bible is full of story piled on story … and all are stories with a point. Stories, quite simply, are one way of depicting reality and of revealing what lies beneath the surface of events. They are interested in meaning rather than the recitation of "facts." They help us to explore what is significant. They take full account of the human dimension.

Brophy (2007, 150) continues: "The fascination of stories lies in their connectedness to our own lives. They appeal to experience." Frankfurter (2017, 95–96) agrees, claiming that "the performance of narrative is traditionally imagined as bringing a power into the world" and "[the power is] an efficacy in the *experience* of people" (emphasis mine). Thus, the choice of the biblical story is important if the hearers are to be able to enter into the experience of the characters described.

The story of Ruth was considered to be particularly relevant to the experience of participants in the empirical work for many reasons. These include the following:

- The text includes much ambiguity in terms of motivation and emotional response, which allows readers/hearers to explore their own personal responses in such situations.
- The traumas experienced by the two women (Naomi and Ruth) are those many women in Africa face today—vulnerability (without a male protector), bereavement, being a foreigner, being hungry, and a complex relationship with her in-laws. Moreover, the appearance of an older male with means (like Boaz), willing to help a young, helpless woman (like Ruth) presents many temptations and risks that young African women face.
- The book of Ruth is one of the few biblical texts that expresses the agency of women. Further, its position in the canon, after the book of Judges, when "everyone did what they thought was right" (21:25 CEV), highlights the role of women in a world where men dominate and yet are not assuming their leadership roles in the home, thereby pushing (or enabling) women to assert themselves. As this is the context in which many girls and women live today in Africa, it was felt that the message of the book would speak to young and old, of both genders.
- The biblical text is largely dialogue and so makes for an easy transition to drama on the stage.

Brophy (2007, 155) highlights that "We learn from one another by telling the stories of our experiences and listening to the experiences of others." The focus of this article is on the latter. As Hannabuss (2000, 222) comments, "[listening to stories] allows for … reflexivity. It encourages reflection on the *outcomes* of decisions" (emphasis mine). Thus, in the empirical work, we encouraged participants to reflect on the *consequences* of decisions made by characters in the story.

2.6 Application of this theory in the empirical work

Psychology, pastoral studies, and biblical laments have indicated the need for burden-bearers to 1) become an agent and tell their story in a safe environment, 2) build relationships with others, 3) have a sense of justice restored, and 4) experience God in their situation. The two approaches described in this article meet these needs by either helping participants to compose (and perform, in some cases) their own laments or by expressing themselves through drama and song/dance as they engage with biblical stories and enter the characters' emotions.

The first criterion of establishing safety is achieved in the empirical work by allowing participants to engage *at a distance* with the traumas of characters in the biblical story of Ruth or the lamenter in Psalms. Pain is contained in that it (initially) is the pain of another person in focus, either Naomi/Ruth or the lamenting psalmist. Nevertheless, indirectly, the texts facilitate resonances, situations with which the participants can identify emotionally.

Herman (1992, 155) also refers to the importance of agency or finding one's voice. This is addressed in the empirical work by providing space for the sufferer to give her version of the traumatic event, either in words as in a lament or through the choice of language as well as non-verbal and paralingual cues when performing a story. Further, by doing so in the company of others who are fellow sufferers or sensitive persons who listen well, the burden-bearer is released from the agony of isolation and can build relationships with others again.

Finally, when burden-bearers learn to write a lament poem to God, they can hand over the question of recompense to God when they appeal for justice. Since a lament is a prayer, it is two-directional and thus facilitates a transformative spiritual experience, providing an opportunity not only to bring one's pain to God in prayer (and be released from a sense of helplessness) but also to hear God respond (Dickie 2020a, 14).

3. Empirical Studies

3.1 Becoming Ruth

Two workshops were held in Cape Town using the performance of the biblical book of Ruth to help participants identify, and resonate, with the traumas and struggles of Naomi and Ruth. One of the advantages of using performance is that a character on stage must show some response to the actions or words of others, and this requires actors to *dig deep* and consider their emotions in such a situation. For example, when the biblical text does not clarify Naomi's response to Ruth's whole-hearted commitment to her, how does that make Ruth feel? For young African women, often trapped in a dominating mother-in-law relationship, such a situation could provoke familiar fears within them. Having the opportunity within a group to discuss their concerns, and imagine how Ruth might have dealt with them, can provide new resources for young women today.

The first group were grade seven learners from Westlake Primary School, and the other group were adult members of a Bible-study group,

mainly from Capricorn Township.[3] Over several months (approximately one hour once a week), the participants slowly went through the story, internalizing the events. It was hoped that they would then be able to tell the story from memory, but this was not possible given the time constraint. Thus, in the end, they performed a *dramatic* reading, with short sections (such as Ruth's commitment to Naomi) memorized well.

Within the drama, an inquirer[4] interrupted the story at key moments, to ask the audience how they felt the various characters were feeling at that point. For example, after Ruth had been instructed to go down to meet Boaz at the threshing floor at night, the inquirer asked, "How do you think Ruth felt at that time?" The boys in the school audience, and the men in the Bible-study group, responded, "Excited!" However, when the girls were asked, their response was, "Frightened!" Not only could the girls identify with the possible fears of Ruth, but they could also see how God cared for her in that situation. And the boys could have their eyes opened to other perspectives, and the possible traumas experienced by others.

As the story progressed, the audience (and actors) were faced with situations of bereavement, hunger, vulnerability (having no man to care for the two women who returned to Bethlehem), and the dangers and stress of being a foreigner (first Naomi in Moab, then Ruth in Bethlehem). In response to the inquirer's careful questions, the audience was given the opportunity to express how such a character (one like them!) would feel in such a situation. Thus, they were able to express their fears (giving them agency) and to receive a sympathetic hearing, recognizing they were not alone because the audience, as well as the characters in the story (having had experiences similar to theirs), were also present. The opportunity to discuss issues raised in the drama meant there could be ongoing reflection and sharing.

A workshop based on Ruth was also recently held with women in Ivory Coast, all of whom had been through two periods of war and suffered bereavement, hunger, vulnerability, and the lack of a man to help them. Over a period of six days, we went carefully through the biblical text in their own language. After about an hour of study and discussion, the women were divided into two groups. One group worked on a dramatic performance of the story and the other group worked out a song to capture the essence of what had happened and what can be learned from it. Each day the two groups performed their creative efforts for one another, and recordings were made on video for them to watch in the evenings for their own enjoyment. This repeated exposure to the story and its deeper resonance for them in their situation meant that the women really entered the emotion of the story, both the difficulties and seeing how God intervened to bless the women and care for them. When reporting back at the end of the workshop, a number of the women said, "I am Naomi!" By saying this, they were expressing: I have been there; I have suffered in those ways; I am learning to see how God cared for her, and for me.

3.2 Becoming the/a lamenting psalmist

Many lament workshops have been conducted over the past five years, in KwaZulu-Natal and Cape Town. In each case, one or two lament psalms were first studied. Psalms 3 and 13 were usually used since both are short and include the speech-acts typical of biblical laments. As noted, Psalm 13 begins with four highly emotive rhetorical questions, clearly complaining because God was slow in responding to the psalmist's felt need. Many

3 Westlake and Capricorn are two townships in Cape Town.
4 A person who stands upfront, but who does not form part of the drama.

participants found these rhetorical questions raised their own personal questions, usually also of the "How long, O LORD?" type. For example, one refugee, having studied Psalm 13, wrote:

> For how long, God, will you allow the enemy to do whatever he wants towards my life? For how long, God, will you allow the enemy to attack my family spiritually? (Dickie 2018b, 14)

Further, Psalm 3 includes an element of justice. Psalm 3:7 calls for the enemies to have their teeth broken, thus no longer being able to mock, as in verse 2. This is also an extremely helpful insight—that a lamenter can hand over justice to God and thereby be set free to forgive and be enabled to move forward in their lives.

Moreover, it was noted from these psalms that the lamenting psalmist used language that may seem "shocking" for the Bible. Indeed, the Psalmist did not hold back in complaining to God and sometimes in accusing God, and brought his emotions, raw and uncensored, to God in prayer. Participants came to understand that God welcomes people who bring their pain, frustration, fear, and anger to God, and that as they do so, they experience relief. Not only do they find that God speaks to them in their situation, but they also experience a greater wholeness as they become more spiritually authentic (Dickie 2020c, 528–533). Participants also noted the metaphors used for the LORD in Psalm 3:3, that he is a shield and the one who lifts the head of those who have been shamed. They were encouraged to try and find images that spoke to their situations. Some were extremely poetic, as in the following excerpt from example 1 further down:

> For how long will people play me? They make me like a car that won't start.

In particular, we noted that biblical laments typically include four elements. The two distinguishing ones are that they have an address to God, and a complaint, usually against God or against an enemy. They often also contain a request for God to act in some way which may include executing justice against the enemy. The fourth element that is almost always present in a biblical lament is an affirmation of faith or confidence in God's character. For example, in Psalm 3, the psalmist begins by crying out "O LORD" (ESV) and then complains "How many are my foes!" (v.1 ESV). They continue complaining in verse 2, even quoting the words of the enemy against them. However, in verse 3 we notice a remarkable change of mood, to one of confident trust in the LORD: "But you, LORD, are a shield about me" (ESV). Clearly, something has happened between verses 2 and 3. It would seem that the lamenting psalmist has heard God's voice reminding them of God's character, promises, or former acts on behalf of the psalmist or the people of God. However, for this exercise, what is important is that participants recognize that the psalmist is able to affirm something they know about God, which gives them confidence that God might respond to their complaint (and request).

With these four aspects of a biblical lament in mind, participants then use the following questions to help them relate to these elements and compose their own prayer to God.

1) What worry, frustration, or difficulty are you dealing with that seems unjust to you? That is, if God comes and sits next to you and says, "How is it going?" What would you say?
2) What one big thing would you like God to do for you?
3) What would you like God to do in regard to those who caused you pain?
4) What do you know about God that gives you confidence that God might act in your situation?

Example 1 below gives the lament of a Zulu woman in the HIV+ support-group and indicates her response to these questions incorporated into her lament prayer. An English translation follows:

> *Nkosi, kanti ngiyohlupheka kuze kube nini?*
> *Ngiyodlala abantu kuze kube nini bengenza imoto engadumi emile engen msebenzi, kuyoze kube nini?*
> *Ngisabathe ngizama ukuhlanganisa impilo kodwa ayhlangane.*
> *Wena ukhona uyabukela njekanti kwalangoshiwo yini kuthi wena uwumaphendula asabele kodwa uyaphuza ukuphendula, kanti kuyoze kube nini.*
> *Kanti kuyoza kube nini Nkosi mina ngiphila impilo yokuhluphela abanye bayasizakala kodwa mina.*
> *Ngiyazi Nkosi kumanele ngilinde kodwa akuvami ngizohlalela ethembeni ngoba wena uwukhukhanya wami.*
>
> 1. Lord, till when will I suffer? For how long will people play me?
> 2. They make me like a car that won't start, a useless one. Till when?
> 3. Every time I try to put things together, life is not coming together. And you are there, just looking.
> 4. Didn't they say that you listen when you are called?
> 5. But you are taking long to answer, But … till when? Till when, my Lord—me leaving my poverty?
> 6. Others do get help, but me—I'm not.
> 7. I know my Lord, I have to wait, but it's hard.
> 8. I will stay in the hope, and you are my light.

In the English translation, we can note her address to God (line 1) and her heartfelt complaints (lines 1–6) which include rhetorical questions as she accuses God and an enemy of causing her pain. There is no clear request, but her rhetorical questions (lines 1–2, 4–5) imply a request for God to intervene and relieve her of her situation of poverty. The last two lines suggest an affirmation of faith (although line 7 contains a veiled complaint), with the last clause reminding God of God's place in her situation.

The poet's use of rhetorical questions in lines 1 and 2b perhaps shows the influence of Psalm 13:1–2, giving her a means to express her deep frustration. And the strong metaphors she introduces in lines 1b and 2a reveal her sense of being abused. Moreover, composing her own personal lament not only enables her to call upon divine aid as a means of dealing with her pain, but it is also a means of physical healing (as noted in section 2.4.1, Cozolino 2002, 24). Indeed, after sharing their poems with others, many commented on how released they felt, and supported by those listening with empathy.

Another example shows how important it is for the speaker to include an appeal for justice. One poet, a Zimbabwean woman who lost her job as a result of falling pregnant, includes the following line in her lament: "Lord, let Mr. X feel the same pain as I experienced when I lost my job." By trusting that God would take care of her need for justice, she was able to release the burden of ensuring that justice is served. Her thinking was impacted by Psalm 3, particularly the lively enactment of the enemies mocking the psalmist (v. 1) and then having their teeth shattered (v. 7). She felt that she had permission to ask God to likewise deal with her enemy. Such is the power of performance, entering the deepest emotions and bringing release.

4. Benefits of this Approach

Becoming a biblical character, as in the two methodologies discussed, is an indirect approach to trauma healing and has several advantages over other methods, including those that also use stories, whether biblical or other.

The main strength is that participants can identify at a deep (emotional) level with the problems or pain that the biblical person experienced. Some approaches to trauma healing are more *content-based,* dealing with ideas that only address the mind but not the soul or the body, as in performance. Moreover, the sufferer can also see God's response to the biblical character (e.g., directing events to help Ruth), and thus be able to appropriate such for themselves (thereby having a transformational experience with God).

Such an approach also avoids a *didactic* approach which can appear condescending and fails to consider the rich insights that people can make when they are free to respond openly, rather than coming up with pre-determined (content-based) answers. Moreover, this approach avoids the confrontation and exhausting introspection that often accompanies traditional trauma healing. By reflecting on characters in a story, the sufferer has some distance and objectivity to evaluate the situation without feeling personally exposed or vulnerable. Indeed, the story serves as a container but also as a bridge. It *contains* the powerful negative emotions by keeping them at a slight distance and yet serves as a bridge to allow the person to explore these emotions when she feels ready to do so.

Moreover, most Africans enjoy drama, song, and dance, and it has proven helpful to give them the opportunity to express themselves creatively, following biblical patterns, which have the advantage of seeing the positive change that happens when God intervenes. Also, for younger people, being on stage results in improved self-confidence and may lead to the discovery of strengths they were not previously aware of.

5. Conclusion

A key element of the empirical work described in this article is the use of performance—to enter fully into the emotions behind the biblical text. In the first case, this occurred through performing the biblical story of Ruth, and in the second, by using lament psalms to serve as a framework for expressing one's own feelings. Both methodologies proved to be ways for people in bleak situations to find hope as they handed over their concerns and pain to God and received some encouragement for the way forward.

The methodology of using performance, as a way of experiential learning, has application beyond trauma healing. As a translation consultant, I have been exploring the use of performance in every stage of the translation process, to clarify the exegesis, and particularly for participants in Psalms workshops to enter the emotions of the poet.

But as a trauma healing approach, the agency afforded to burden-bearers when they use the psalms or biblical text to express their own pain is significant. It was interesting that almost without exception, the laments written by hurting young women included those forms of speech that are apparent in biblical lament, thereby showing that the need to express pain/complaint is a critical part of healing, along with the fact that the pain is expressed to God, one who has the capacity to do something about the problem. Also, for many of the participants, there was a need for justice (e.g., example 2 above). Participants' prayers usually included a request for deliverance, whether the provision of a job or relief from poverty. However, often just being able to release the emotional load was sufficient to bring relief.

What is exciting is that these positive shifts took place in simple, low-cost workshops, with minimal counseling expertise. Trauma healing or counseling for abuse is often beyond the financial means of sufferers in South Africa, but this methodology allows participants to experience healing through their identification with characters in a story.

Many communities in South Africa and further afield could benefit from this approach. Thus, this article seeks to encourage youth workers, teachers, and other concerned adults to provide opportunities for those

battling various difficult situations to engage, through performance, with a relevant biblical text. The need is great, and innovative, low-cost methods can be found. The poetry of the psalms, and biblical stories, have much to offer. All that is needed is people with a heart and a vision to experiment!

Works Cited

Allen, Jon G. 2005. *Coping with Trauma: Hope Through Understanding*. 2nd ed. Washington: American Psychiatric Association Publishing.

Becker, Eve-Marie. 2014. "'Trauma Studies' and Exegesis. Challenges, Limits and Prospects." In *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions. Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond*. Vol. 2 *of Studia Aarhusiana Neotestamentica*, edited by Eve-Marie Becker, Jan Dochhorn, and Else K. Holt, 15–29. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666536168.15.

Brophy, Peter. 2007. "Narrative-Based Practice." *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 2(1):149–158. https://doi.org/10.18438/B8S591.

Choi, Jae H. 2007. *Ancient Korean Women's Hanpuri (Healing) Spirituality: Kanggangsulae Dance*. Comprehensive Examination II, Interdisciplinary Studies. Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union.

Claassens, L. Juliana. 2016. "Trauma and Recovery: A New Hermeneutical Framework for the Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13)." In *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*. Semeia Studies, edited by Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, 177–192. Atlanta: SBL Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1h1htfd.13.

Corvin, Jack. 1972. "A Stylistic and Functional Study of the Prose Prayers in the Historical Narratives of the Old Testament." Ph.D. diss., Emory University.

Cozolino, Louis L. 2002. *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Building and Rebuilding the Human Brain*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

Dickie, June F. 2018a. "Lament as a Contributor to the Healing of Trauma: An Application of Poetry in the Form of Biblical Lament." *Pastoral Psychology* 68:145–156. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-018-0851-z.

———. 2018b. "African Youth Engage with Psalms of Lament to Find Their Own Voice of Lament." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 160:4–20.

———. 2019. "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories." *OTE* 32(3):885–907. https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2019/v32n3a7.

———. 2020a. "Performing Psalms of Lament: Does God (Off-Stage) Respond to the Complainant's Cry?" *Scriptura* 119(1):1–17. http://dx.doi.org/10.7833/119-1-1601.

———. 2020b. "Building Community in the Church Between Insiders and Outsiders." *Acta Theologica* 40(1):49–67. https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v40i1.4.

———. 2020c. "The Practice of Biblical Lament as a Means Towards Facilitating Authenticity and Psychological Well-Being." *Pastoral Psychology* 69:523–537. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-020-00928-z

———. 2021. "Translating Psalms for Performance and Their Use in Various Ministries Within the Church: Examples from South Africa." *The Bible Translator* 73(1):6–25. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20516770211066935.

Dickie, June F., and Lynell Zogbo. 2022. "Interacting with and Performing the Book of Ruth as a Pathway Towards Trauma Healing: An Empirical Study from Côte D'Ivoire." *Ethnodoxology* 10:1–14. https://artsandchristianfaith.org/index.php/journal/article/view/127.

Doidge, Norman. 2007. *The Brain that Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science*. New York: Penguin Books.

Frankfurter, David. 2017. "Narratives That Do Things." In *Religion: Narrating Religion*. Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks: Religion, edited by Sarah Iles Johnston, 95–106. Farmington Hills: Macmillan.

Frechette, Christopher G., and Elizabeth Boase. 2016. "Defining 'Trauma' as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation." In *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, edited by Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, 1–23. Atlanta: SBL Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1h1htfd.4.

González-Prendes, A. Antonio, and Stelle M. Resko. 2012. "Cognitive-Behavioral Theory." In *Trauma: Contemporary Directions in Theory, Practice, and Research*, edited by Shoshana Ringel and Jerrold R. Brandel, 14–40. California: Sage.

Grand, Sue. 2000. *The Reproduction of Evil: A Clinical and Cultural Perspective*. Hillsdale: The Analytic Press.

Granofsky, Ronald. 1995. *The Trauma Novel: Contemporary Symbolic Depictions of Collective Disaster*. New York: Lang.

Hannabuss, Stuart. 2000. "Being There: Ethnographic Research and Autobiography." *Library Management* 21(2):99–106. https://doi.org/10.1108/01435120010309425.

Herman, Judith L. 1992. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books.

Hug, Edward. 2007. "A Neuroscience Perspective on Psychodrama." In *Psychodrama. Advances in Theory and Practice*, edited by Clark Baim, Jorge Burmeister, and Manuela Maciel, 227–238. London: Routledge.

Lyon, Emily. 2010. "The Spiritual Implications of Interpersonal Abuse: Speaking of the Soul." *Pastoral Psychology* 59:233–247. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-009-0238-2.

Mandolfo, Carleen. 2002. *God in the Dock: Dialogic Tension in the Psalms of Lament*. JSOT Supplement 357. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

McNally, Richard J. 2003. *Remembering Trauma*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Miller, Patrick D. 2005. "Heaven's Prisoners: The Lament as Christian Prayer." In *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Publics Square*, edited by Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, 15–26. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

Rahim, Jennifer A. 2016. "Reflections on Contemporary Christian Theologies of Suffering and the Value of Trauma Literature." M.A. thesis, Toronto School of Theology.

Schore, Allan N. 2009. "Right-Brain Affect Regulation." In *The Healing Power of Emotion: Affective Neuroscience, Development and Clinical Practice*. Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology, edited by Diana Fosha, Daniel J. Siegel, and Marion F. Solomon, 112–144. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

Seto, Michael C. 2008. *Pedophilia and Sexual Offending Against Children: Theory, Assessment, and Intervention*. Washington: American Psychological Association Press. https://doi.org/10.1037/11639-000.

Soelle, Dorothee. 1975. *Suffering*. Translated by Everett R. Kalin. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Strawn, Brent. 2016. "Trauma, Psalmic Disclosure, and Authentic Happiness." In *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, edited by Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, 143–160. Atlanta: SBL Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1h1htfd.11.

Sweeney, Daniel S. 2011. "Group Play Therapy." In *Foundations of Play Therapy*, edited by Charles E. Schaefer, 227–252. New Jersey: Wiley & Sons.

Van der Kolk, Bessel A. 1996. “The Body Keeps the Score: Approaches to the Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.” In *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society,* edited by Bessel A. Van der Kolk, A. C. McFarlane, and L. Weisaeth, 214–241. New York: The Guilford Press.

West, Gerald O. 2016. “Between Text and Trauma: Reading Job with People Living with HIV.” In *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, edited by Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, 209–230. Atlanta: SBL Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1h1htfd.15.

Westermann, Claus. 1994. *Lamentations: Issues and Interpretation*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Wittling, W. 1997. “The Right Hemisphere and the Human Stress Response.” *Acta Physiologica Scandinavica*. Supplementum. 640:55–59.