

# TRAUMA AND THE FAILURE OF HISTORY

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Number 94



TRAUMA AND THE  
FAILURE OF HISTORY

Kings, Lamentations, and  
the Destruction of Jerusalem

David Janzen



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For Patricia

and for my parents



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## Abbreviations

1QIsa <sup>a</sup>	Isaiah <sup>a</sup> (Great Isaiah Scroll)
4QLam	4Q111
ABC	<i>Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles</i> . Albert K. Grayson. TCS 5. Locust Valley, NY: Augustin, 1975.
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ABS	Archaeology and Biblical Studies
AIL	Ancient Israel and its Literature
ANEM	Society of Biblical Literature Ancient Near Eastern Monographs
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
ASB	<i>Austin Seminary Bulletin</i>
ATANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BCP	Blackwell Companions to Philosophy
BEATAJ	Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testament und des antiken Judentum
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum theologicarum Lovaniensium
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BibOr	Biblica et orientalia
BibSem	The Biblical Seminar

<i>BR</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CHANE	Culture and History of the Ancient Near East
CIS	Copenhagen International Seminar
<i>Clio</i>	<i>Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History</i>
CMP	Cultural Memory in the Present
<i>ComCrit</i>	<i>Comparative Criticism</i>
<i>CovQ</i>	<i>The Covenant Quarterly</i>
<i>CriInq</i>	<i>Critical Inquiry</i>
CSALC	Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture
CSS	Cambridge Social Studies
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
DSM-5	American Psychiatric Association. <i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i> . 5th ed. Washington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013
Dtr	The Deuteronomistic History
<i>Enc</i>	<i>Encounter</i>
ESHM	European Seminar in Historical Methodology
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FCI	Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GN	Geographical name
HBM	Hebrew Bible Monographs
HBS	Herders biblische Studien
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>HS</i>	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
HThKAT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>HvTSt</i>	Hervormde Teologiese Studies
<i>IBHS</i>	Waltke, Bruce K., and M. O'Connor. <i>An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i> . Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990
<i>IJPA</i>	<i>International Journal of Psychoanalysis</i>

<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
ISBL	Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature
JANES	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JHebS	<i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
LCBI	Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LSTS	The Library of Second Temple Studies
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NEAEHL	<i>The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land</i> . Edited by Ephraim Stern. 4 vols. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society & Carta; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993
NLH	<i>New Literary History</i>
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OG	Old Greek
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
OtSt	Oudtestamentische studiën
PCI	Post-Contemporary Interventions
PEQ	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
PRCS	Parallax: Re-visions of Culture and Society
<i>Proof</i>	<i>Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History</i>
PSB	<i>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RBS	Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SAAB	<i>State Archives of Assyria Bulletin</i>
SANT	Studia Aarhusiana Neotestamentica
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLStBL	Society of Biblical Literature Studies in Biblical Literature
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology

SBTS	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study
SEÅ	<i>Svensk exegetisk årsbok</i>
SemeiaSt	Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
SPEP	Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy
SPOT	Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament
SSN	Studia Semitica Neerlandica
STL	Studia theologica Lundensia
SymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
TBAT	Theologische Bücherei. Altes Testament
TCS	Texts from Cuneiform Sources
THL	Theory and History of Literature
THOTC	Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
<i>Transeu</i>	<i>Transeuphratène</i>
TSS	Themes in the Social Sciences
TThSt	Trierer theologische Studien
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>UF</i>	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplement
YCSS	Yale Cultural Sociology Series
ZABR	<i>Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZDPV	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>

# 1

## Introduction: The Nature of History and the Nature of Trauma

“When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago,” writes Kurt Vonnegut near the beginning of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, “I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen.” What he had seen and survived as a prisoner of war was the Allied bombing of the city in 1945, which may have killed as many as twenty-five thousand people, but, he continues, “not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough to make a book, anyway. And not many words come now, either” (Vonnegut 1969, 2). This novelist, whose career was built on finding words for stories, could, despite his best efforts, find none for his own, as he tells us in the opening pages of the book, and so he writes a different story instead, one that begins,

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. (23)

Billy Pilgrim is an American soldier captured by the Germans who survives the bombing of Dresden as a POW, just as Vonnegut did. Billy, however, lives an achronological life, constantly and uncontrollably moving back and forth in time, to and from the story that makes its way through the novel and culminates in the destruction of Dresden. The joint not-story of Vonnegut and story of Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* tells us something about trauma, for there are no words for it, not even from skilled novelists. It is not simply a matter of reporting what one has seen, as Vonnegut discovered. But trauma is a powerful force, returning victims to events for which they can find no words, events that they cannot in fact

remember but that they are forced to relive, just as Billy Pilgrim, come unstuck in time, is continually returned to the events of his capture on the battlefield, his time in a POW camp, and the destruction of Dresden.

In this monograph we explore the nature of trauma that cannot be remembered or articulated but only relived, and we contrast it with history, the study of which has been so central to the modern field of biblical studies. The following chapters argue that trauma is antihistory, not merely what history is not but something that rejects historical explanations and that cannot be comprehended by historical narrative. The nature or essence of history is explanatory narrative that conveys meaning; it is the production of a true past that reflects a writer's and culture's worldviews and concerns. But unlike history, trauma cannot be formed or understood in narrative created by the belief systems of worldviews, in part because trauma is not something victims can believe. If one could speak of a nature or essence of trauma, then it would be an absence of meaning and knowledge that stems from victims' failure to fully experience the events that traumatized them, a failure that has prevented the trauma from becoming part of the past at all. In this part of the book we juxtapose the natures of history and trauma not only to clarify and explain the differences between them, but to demonstrate how they are manifested differently in response to great traumatic events. Histories create and explain those events in particular ways, and function to reinforce or reform the worldviews that bind communities together in shared belief systems, since the explanations are rooted in ways of making sense of things defined by those worldviews. For a community to agree that a history has presented the past as it really happened is for it to tacitly assent to the validity of the worldview that has shaped it. But for trauma victims who have failed to fully experience and know those events, there is no explanation, and so history fails in the face of trauma.

One of the ways that we examine how history and trauma react differently to massive traumatic events is to read both Kings and Lamentations, two works composed in the wake of the same basic catastrophe, the geopolitical disaster that annihilated Judah in the sixth century BCE. In 587/6 BCE, the Babylonians besieged and destroyed Jerusalem, and the slaughter and destruction throughout Judah in the early sixth century was horrific. The population of Judah at the beginning of that century was about 110,000 (so Lipschits 2005, 59),<sup>1</sup> but by the end it had fallen by 70 or 80

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1. By Oded Lipschits's (2003, 267–71) calculations, at the beginning of the sixth

percent.<sup>2</sup> Concerned with Egyptian influence in the Levant, Nebuchadnezzar largely wiped out fortified settlements in Judah and the Philistine coast, as well as in Ammon and Moab; after this point, the Philistines seem to have disappeared entirely, and by the Persian period their territory was controlled by the Phoenicians (Lipschits 1998; Stern 2004, 274–75; Faust 2012a, 23–32). Benjamin, the northern part of early sixth-century Judah, largely seems to have escaped this massive destruction (see, e.g., Stern 2001, 321–22; Carter 2003, 310; Lipschits 2003, 346–55),<sup>3</sup> and Oded Lipschits (e.g., 2004b; 2011a, 191–94; 2011b) argues that many rural areas in Judah managed to survive,<sup>4</sup> yet archaeologists rightly link the widespread depopulation of Judah and surrounding regions to the Babylonian incursion and its concomitant aspects: the famine and disease that accompanied it, as well as the removal of some of the inhabitants to Mesopotamia.<sup>5</sup>

If the Judean communities in Palestine and Babylonia were to survive, then they had to demonstrate to their members that their worldviews were able to make sense of the horrific suffering they had witnessed and undergone in this sixth-century disaster. One can see, for example, that a belief system that maintained that YHWH controlled historical events might be badly shaken by an invasion and occupation that killed off a significant part of the population and forced others to migrate to Mesopotamia, but a failure to make sense of those events through the community's worldview

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century about ninety-five thousand lived in the area that would make up the Persian-period province of Judah.

2. Lipschits (2003, 355–64; 2005, 267–71) puts the population of the area covered by early sixth-century Judah at about thirty thousand by the end of that century, a 70 percent drop in the population of the region, while Avraham Faust (2012a, 119–47; 2012b, 118–21) puts the population decline in the wake of the Babylonian invasion at 80 percent.

3. Faust (2012a, 209–31), however, argues that Benjamin suffered a massive decline in settlements in the wake of the Babylonian invasion as well.

4. Lipschits points to Ramat Rahel as an administrative center in Neo-Babylonian Judah, where taxes in kind were gathered from the province, and argues that some rural sites continued to exist to supply the products collected there as tax. Faust (e.g., 2003; 2012a, 45–48, 56–57), on the other hand, argues that most rural sites in Judah were destroyed by the Babylonians. See also Valkama, 2010, 43–44.

5. For the factors that led to the massive population drop in Judah, see Middlemas 2009, 174–75; Faust 2011. The region was so deeply shaken that the archaeological record provides evidence for important societal changes, such as, for example, the four-room house disappearing entirely at the end of the Iron Age (see Faust 2004; 2012a; 2012b).

might well cause group members to doubt its validity, leading them to demand important changes in the society or perhaps to abandon it altogether. The book of Kings provides one explanation of the disaster, an account that, for those who assent to the author's worldview, explains what really happened, but to read Lamentations is to come across successive rejections of explanations for the victims' suffering, which repeats over and over in the book's poems as they relive their trauma. An examination of Kings and of the Deuteronomistic History as a whole shows a work that supplies and explains a past, whereas Lamentations provides only an ever-present trauma of suffering in which attempts to explain it fail and are drowned out by the survivors' repeated articulations of their pain. For Lamentations as a whole, we could say, there is no past disaster to explain, only the continual repetitions of a present and unexplainable trauma. The reactions of Kings and Lamentations to the same basic set of events could not be more different, and this is because Kings can be seen as part of a history, something that confirms the ability of the group's worldview to make sense even of the disaster that struck Judah, while Lamentations is largely a series of testimonies to trauma that reject history.

We begin our study of the antithetical natures of history and trauma in chapter 2, where we explore the nature of history and see that histories are narrative creations of the past that readers recognize as meaningful insofar as they understand them to provide true representations of what really happened, not just in regard to the events they discuss but also in the explanations and causal relationships the narratives claim existed among them. Not all readers can acknowledge the same writing to be a history, for not all readers can believe that it is true; the pasts created by historians are formed by their worldviews, which limit the ways they can understand and explain things, and only readers whose belief system overlaps significantly with the author's are able to understand a given writing to be a history rather than a work of fiction. If, for example, one encounters a work that explains past events with descriptions of divine intervention, one is only in a position to accept it as an account of what really happened if one shares the author's beliefs concerning the work of the divine in history. For an atheist, it would be a work of fiction. The past can only exist for us in ways we find to be meaningful, and so it can only exist for us in stories that cohere with the worldviews we hold, although we can, of course, be convinced to change some of our important beliefs and alter our worldviews.

One's belief system is thus key in determining what one can understand to be a true account of the past, a point discussed not only in chapter

2 but also in chapter 3, when we examine how Dtr, and particularly the book of Kings, creates a past of traumatic events for its ancient Judean readers, some of whom would have been able to recognize it as a work of history that accurately explained the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem they and their community had survived. The Deuteronomist's worldview, which shaped the past he or she produced in the writing, seems to have been based on features of a belief system broadly shared by Judeans, at least as far as other biblical writings would lead us to conclude. There were particular aspects of the Deuteronomist's worldview, such as a belief in the eternal divine support for Davidic rule and the innate sinfulness of the people, that resulted in a creation of a past that perhaps not all sixth-century BCE Judeans could have accepted, but for those who saw a true past in Kings and Dtr as a whole, the work relates events that really happened and correctly explains the suffering the sixth-century exilic community in Babylonia had undergone.

The book of Lamentations responds to the same basic set of traumatic events that Dtr does, yet our reading of Lamentations through the lens of trauma theory finds not narrative, explanation, and history, but a failure and rejection of such things. We begin our contrast of trauma with history in chapter 4, with a discussion of why trauma results from victims' failure of experience of traumatic events, thus leading to an absence of knowledge and meaning of those events. So as we apply trauma theory to Lamentations in chapter 5, we embark on a sort of analysis different from our reading of Kings and Dtr, where we are interested in examining the narrative that creates and explains a preexilic past, as well as the Deuteronomist's worldview that resulted in the formation of this particular past. In Lamentations we do encounter attempts on the part of some of the speakers to create explanations for readers' suffering in the destruction of Jerusalem and its aftermath, only to see such explanations fail as they are contradicted or ignored or trail off into repetitions of the victims' pain. Applying what we know of trauma to Lamentations allows us to see not the explanation of history but history's failure to incorporate trauma into explanatory narrative. In Lamentations, trauma remains unknowable and so outside history, but repetitively present to the book's speakers, who, like Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, never seem to escape the time of their suffering, which cannot become past for them and so cannot be history.

As a note of clarification, I should mention at the outset that the book discusses both collective and psychological trauma and that these are two different things. I have already referred to psychological trauma as an

absence of experience, knowledge, and meaning, but collective trauma is really a kind of history, one that focuses on traumatic events, and as such its essence is explanatory narrative. Collective trauma does not only create the events of a traumatic past; it explains them as it identifies perpetrators and victims of them. Collective trauma and psychological trauma are therefore not two species of the same genus but two incompatible things, and part of our analysis of Lamentations shows victims of psychological trauma repetitively rejecting the attempts of other speakers to impose the history of collective trauma that would mark them as the perpetrators of their own suffering. The root of psychological trauma is the missed experience of the traumatic event, and thus it is “unclaimed experience,” as Cathy Caruth (1996) puts it, a powerful but unknowable force in the lives of survivors that exists outside meaning and narrative. But since collective trauma is a kind of history, it is the conscious creation of explanation and meaning in narrative, the claiming of a society’s experience, to put it another way, and it should not be equated with the sum of the suffering of individual trauma victims within the group.<sup>6</sup>

One reason why it is important to make the distinction between history/collective trauma and psychological trauma in the context of the study of the Hebrew Bible is that biblical scholars using trauma theory have not always recognized how radically different they are. Works produced in the field sometimes assert that the explanatory narratives of collective traumas could have provided therapy and healing to victims of psychological trauma, claiming their experience on their behalf, as it were. As one example of this tendency, we can look to three rather recent collections of essays that include studies of Hebrew Bible texts through the lens of some sort of trauma theory: *Bible through the Lens of Trauma* (Frechette and Boase 2016) includes ten such essays, *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions* (Becker, Dochhorn, and Holt 2014) has seven, and *Interpreting Exile* (Kelle, Ames, and Wright 2011) has four.<sup>7</sup> Of these twenty-one essays, about half make the argument or at least assume that

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6. See, for example, the comments in Alexander and Breese (2011, xiv–xxii) that refer to the ways in which the essays in the collection they introduce have distinguished between social narratives about trauma and the collective suffering of group members.

7. Although the essay by Daniel Smith-Christopher in Kelle, Ames, and Wright 2011 does have the word *trauma* in its title, it focuses more on social and psychological approaches in general than on reading biblical texts through the lens of one kind of trauma theory, so I am not including it in the count of essays.

the unclaimed experience of psychological trauma can be claimed by the narrative of collective trauma in the sense that victims would have found narrative explanations of traumatic events therapeutic, either through accepting the meaning they found in such narratives<sup>8</sup> or by looking to some of the texts and their narratives as models to promote recovery.<sup>9</sup> Claims such as these rest on the assumption that psychological trauma can be healed as victims adopt the meaning of someone else's story, but, as chapter 4 discusses, psychological trauma is so different from the history of collective trauma that this is not possible. The use of social narratives to provide meaning for traumatic events tends only to repress the trauma; this is what Dtr appears to do, for it creates no space for psychological trauma at all, while the trauma victims who speak in Lamentations ultimately cannot accept the incipient narratives of collective trauma they are offered, narratives that could fit quite well in Dtr. Some victims of trauma certainly do publicly assent to social narratives that provide explanations of the events that traumatized them, but this is not equivalent to therapy.

Beyond the explanation of the distinction between history/collective trauma and psychological trauma, there are a number of other reasons why those who study the Hebrew Bible might find this sort of analysis of trauma in the context of reading biblical texts useful. That neither we nor

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8. In *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, see Boase 2016 (note particularly her discussion on p. 51, where she refers to Judith Herman's work on the recovery of victims from psychological trauma) and Odell 2016 (on pp. 113–14 she states that narrative helped individual traumatized Judeans in the process of "genuine healing"). In *Trauma and Traumatization*, see O'Connor 2014 (on pp. 213–17 she focuses on Jeremiah's prose and poetry as providing individual victims of trauma with explanations that promote "healthy functioning"). In *Interpreting Exile*, see Morrow 2011 (on pp. 281–83, 289 he claims that narratives in response to trauma can "help to rebuild a shattered sense of self"); Carr 2011 (on pp. 299–302 he focuses on prophetic literature as aiding the exiles as a community and as individuals to trust and to deal with shame); and Rumfelt 2011 (on pp. 325–29, she discusses the "narrative healing role" for individual victims of trauma as part of a discussion of biblical narratives).

9. In *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, see Frechette 2016 (on p. 74 he points to the "healing function" of Isa 47 for individuals) and Strawn 2016 (pp. 154–55 are the conclusion of an argument that claims that "psalms can be seen, not simply as evidence of a therapeutic process but as that process itself" in regard to individuals). In *Trauma and Traumatization* see Nielsen 2014 (on pp. 68–69 she argues that Job provides a model for "how a traumatic experience can be worked through") and Frechette 2014 (pp. 71–72 form the introduction to a larger argument that some psalms "could have a healing function for people who have been traumatized").

the biblical writers nor the survivors of massive traumatic events such as the disaster that destroyed Judah and Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE could grasp the totality of those events, if only because the trauma that resulted from them cannot be grasped, is potentially of some importance. That both an ancient writer such as the Deuteronomist and modern historians and interpreters of the Bible might ignore the trauma of events such as the sixth-century disaster altogether, since trauma can enter neither narrative nor understanding, is also significant. The difficulty with ignoring or overwriting trauma is that this denies the existence of the trauma associated with the events, the events' key reality for trauma victims. The victims then become not victims but an "abstract element"<sup>10</sup> of the pasts that the worldviews of modern or ancient writers prompt them to create. The reality of their trauma then disappears entirely, replaced by the pasts that the writers, ancient and modern, prefer to see, pasts without trauma and so without trauma victims.

Lamentations, however, reflects the persistent articulation of an unknowable and unnarratable trauma in spite of attempts by some voices in the book to repress and overwrite it in collective trauma. Because this psychological trauma is not explainable and cannot be contained by narrative, historians could not integrate it into their stories of the past even if they wished to do so. But this does not mean, as we discuss in chapter 6, that they cannot make room for it beside their histories. Carving out space for trauma beside a history will not help to explain the trauma and, if anything, will result in a questioning of the conclusions in regard to the past that the histories present. Interpreters of the Bible interested in explaining Judean reactions to the sixth-century disaster can do more than include a discussion of Lamentations along with analyses of other writings that respond to it, such as Dtr, and can read Lamentations intertextually with such works, allowing the testimonies of trauma victims to jar and grind uncomfortably next to the explanations that would repress their trauma. This intertextual reading will not allow us to know the trauma, but it gives us some sense of how incompatible the trauma victims found totalizing explanations of the events with their own nonexperience of them. An intertextual reading gives us some sense as well of the difficulty they might have had accepting and believing the truth claims of a work such

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10. See Saul Friedländer's (1997, 2) comment that Holocaust histories can turn victims "into a static and abstract element against a historical background."

as Dtr, and some sense as to how the suffering of their trauma repeated and potentially even drowned out such explanations. In such intertextual readings, at least, trauma victims are not reduced to an “abstract element” of factual data, and even if we cannot integrate trauma into the pasts that we create as historians and interpreters of the Bible, we can at least place it next to our histories and readings of texts to leave space for its unspeakable silence.