

On traumatised mothers and children? Re-reading Lamentations through the lens of trauma

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Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10 are biblical texts described as 'texts of terror' as well as traumatic biblical texts where 'tender-hearted women have eaten their children' (NLT). As Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10 mention a traumatic event, a trauma biblical approach will be utilised to read these biblical texts. The biblical trauma hermeneutics challenges the traditional and judgemental reading of traumatic events as well as the social, cultural and intellectual power of those who tell the stories of the traumatised victims in the Bible and contemporary society. This study will demonstrate the ways in which trauma theory when applied to reading these biblical texts, challenges and subverts the narrator's version of these biblical texts. Ultimately, the mothers in these biblical texts will be presented as victims of biblical collective trauma rather than as mere murderers and eaters of their children.

Transdisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study displays intersections between Psychology and Biblical Studies. In this article, Trauma Theory is used to read and interpret Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10. This study is interdisciplinary because I make use of psychology and trauma scholars to read Old Testament texts.

Keywords: Biblical trauma hermeneutics; trauma theory; Cannibal Mothers; children; Lamentations.

Introduction

There has been a tendency among Biblical Commentators to ignore cannibal texts of Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10. Many Bible commentaries focus on Lamentations 3 as a poem of hope, while they ignore other poems (chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5) (cf. Harrison 1973:224 & Lalleman 2013:337). Where Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10 are attempted to be interpreted, women are often blamed as murderers and eaters of their children. However, reading these biblical texts through the lens of trauma assists in identifying Lamentations as trauma and disaster literature. It considers the so-called cannibal mothers as victims of collective trauma. The trauma approach as part of psychological hermeneutics will be used in reading Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10. Trauma Theory will specifically be utilised in interpreting these biblical texts to subvert judgemental and androcentric interpretations that blame the mothers of these texts as murders instead of victims of trauma and disaster in an exilic context (Janzen 2012:38).

Brief history of psychological approach to the Bible

Providing a brief historical overview of the psychological approach to the Bible is vital. When the 20th century had come to an end, three elements were important to the revival of a psychological approach to reading biblical texts, that is, demarcating the field in its entirety, determining and collating the scholarly contributions that have been already published as well as setting up a study group that will write and publish new scholarly work (Rollins 2007:17). This led to the formation of the Psychology and Biblical Studies research unit in the Society of Biblical Literature in 1991. Such a formation was seen as part of a new way of engaging in biblical criticism that began towards the end of the 20th century. Other new forms of biblical criticism included 'ideological, feminist, rhetorical, social-scientific, cultural, and canonical criticism, as well as psychological criticism' (Ellens 2012:21). Wayne Rollins was elected as the chairperson of the Psychology and Biblical Studies research unit and henceforth began a long journey of collaboration in seeing psychological criticism of the Bible emerging in different parts of the world (Rollins 2007:17). Psychological criticism of the Bible sought to go beyond the limits historical-grammatical, literary, archaeological and theological approaches that have been popular in biblical studies for many years (Ellens 2013:21). Thus, such a hermeneutical project included questioning the historical and social context in which biblical texts came from,

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noting the ways in which biblical interpretations differ because of multiple cultural contexts (of biblical writers and interpreters), identifying 'gender biases in scripture' as well as realising the power of biblical texts in personal and public life (Ellens 2012:21).

Although there has been significant progress in psychological biblical criticism since 1991, there have not been adequate psychological approaches to the biblical texts written from the African perspective. For instance, reading biblical narratives in light of disasters such as the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa. Even though there are a few South African and African-based biblical scholars whose research is on psychological criticism, their work did not reflect on the South African and African context of collective trauma (cf. Van Aarde 2015:481–492 & Viviers 2010:1–7). Often the psychological approach to the Biblical texts is utilised by scholars who are based in America and Europe reflecting on disasters such as Jung and the Holocaust (cf. Ellens 2012). There is a need for a South African and African-centered psychological approach to biblical texts.

The trauma approach as a lens to read and interpret Biblical texts

It is important to locate the use of Trauma Theory in biblical studies, not as a new methodology but as a lens for reading and interpreting biblical texts within the auspices of the psychological criticism of the scriptures. Thus, the utilisation of Trauma Theory as a lens for reading and interpreting the devastating texts of the Bible started at the beginning of the 2000s (Garber 2015:24). This does not mean that trauma reading of biblical texts is a new methodology but rather a 'frame of reference, when combined with other methodologies (e.g., psychology, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, refugee studies etcetera) can yield innovative results' (Garber 2015:24). Although Trauma Theory was initially applied in exilic texts and narratives of the Old Testament, it is now being used in reading other parts of the Bible. The experiences of forced migration, displacement, loss of land and the temple, dismemberment and the traumas that surround led Old Testament scholars to consider using Trauma Theory in reading exilic texts. Thus, trauma reading of biblical texts comes from and within the context of psychological criticism of the Bible – Trauma Biblical Approach as part of psychological hermeneutics and not as a separate methodology. Trauma reading of Biblical texts should not be seen as something outside of other approaches and methodologies. The trauma approach is not necessarily a method of interpreting scripture but is an 'interpretative lens' where insights from psychology are used to read and interpret a biblical text. For instance, the book of Ezekiel has examples of episodes that call for the utilisation of the psychological and trauma biblical approach because of the strange actions of the prophet as well as the violence exhibited in the book (Garber 2015:25). Biblical scholars realise that these events and experiences describe the characteristics of trauma and disaster (Frechette

2015:26). In the Old Testament, there are stories of sexual violence, siege, famine and cannibalism. Frechette (2015:26) observes that Lamentations exhibits a picture of individual and collective trauma. Deuteronomistic History's Narrative recorded the experiences of Babylonian exile and forced migration of Israelites, which accounts for 'traumatic memories' (cf. 2 Ki 6:24–32). This led some biblical scholars to read such texts through the lens of trauma.

While the need for biblical trauma hermeneutics is realised, Claassens (2021:577) observes that there is a need for the decolonisation of trauma biblical approach. She notes that the strides achieved in postcolonial criticism must be considered when we embark on a trauma biblical approach. For me, in as much as there has been work done on reading biblical traumatic stories in light of calamities that took place in the Western and Eastern world such as the Holocaust and Vietnam War, there is a need to read biblical traumatic events in light of massacres (as far as they affect women and children) that took place in South African as well as other African countries (cf. Ngqeza 2021).

The views from trauma theory can assist biblical scholars in reading and interpreting 'potentially harmful texts' in ways that heal communities (Frechette 2015:20). Reading problematic texts through the lens of trauma further helps in dealing with the challenges faced by trauma and disaster survivors. Thus, it is vital to approach Lamentations as a trauma and disaster literature.

Lamentations as a trauma and disaster literature

There is a submission in biblical studies to demarcate Lamentation as trauma and disaster literature. Williamson (2015:8) recognises Lamentations as a book that was written after the experiences of communal and collective trauma. Thus, Lamentations is not so much about individual trauma but is about the trauma of Israelites as a people or nation that suffered forced migration, loss of the land, temple and was in Babylonian exile. It is in the after-effects of collective trauma that the five poems or dirges (funeral songs) were written. Lamentations struggle to articulate a response to the catastrophe that was experienced by the community of God's people after the desolation of Jerusalem by the Babylonian empire in 587 BCE (Williamson 2015:8). According to O'Connor, the 587 siege was more devastating than all the sieges experienced in the world of the Old Testament and that this siege occurred over a couple of years and led to many young and old people dying because of hunger while a legion of men died in the war. Lee (2008:34) also agrees with O'Connor (2002:27) by noting that the poems of Lamentations were possibly written during the devastating event that took place between 597 and 586 BCE in ancient Israel. Hence, Garber (2015:29) also argues that Lamentations must be read as survivor literature.

Linafelt (2000b:18) defines survival literature as 'literature produced in the aftermath of a major catastrophe and its accompanying atrocities by survivors of that catastrophe'. Thus, Lamentations could be the work of a person or people who witnessed and survived the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem and the forced migration of Israelites. This could be the reason it is written in poetic form rather than as prose.

Reading Lamentations as survival literature is to recognise that it is the work of the traumatised poet(s) writing about the experiences of ancient Israelites in the face of the 'traumatizing God' (cf. Lm 1 and 2) (Linafelt 2000b:18). Thus, Linafelt (2000a:267) warns us from 'surviving' the book of Lamentations by focussing more on the few words of hope in chapter 3 or over-highlighting the questions of theodicy that rise in the book. The poems in Lamentations are more concerned with how suffering is expressed rather than with seeking to explain its (suffering) meaning. Lamentations disturb 'the reader's theology or notions of how religious language should sound' (Linafelt 2000a:267). For instance, in Lamentations 2, Daughter Zion blames God for the forced removal and disaster that Israelites were facing. She needs Yahweh to reply regarding Israel's forced migration and famine experienced by women and their children (Lm 2:20 & 4:10). This can lead biblical scholars to avoid this book or only deal with chapter 3 of Lamentations as this chapter exhibits hope rather than lament.

O'Connor (2008:27) considers Lamentations as possibly the poems of the survivors who were in besieged and occupied Jerusalem. Thus, five poems that make the book of Lamentations exhibit words and images of 'loss, of outrage, of desires for revenge' except for chapter 3 where hope appears (O'Connor 2008:27). Furthermore, Lamentations offers an invitation to the reader to see and witness these traumatic images and voices (O'Connor 2008:30). Lamentations is composed of the genre of lament. Lament as a genre is not unique to ancient Israel; it was initially performed on various occasions in the Near East (Lee 2008:34).

Middlemas (2019:345) also concurs that the poems of Lamentations were written after the disastrous fall of the city of Jerusalem. including the 'destruction of the city's infrastructure including the royal palace, the temple, and the razing of the city walls, the loss of the Davidic king, the deportation' as well as the immigration of many people to Babylon. Many people became refugees to nearby countries while their cities and homes were destroyed. These are the reasons for Middlemas (2019:245) to view Lamentations as disaster literature. However, for many years, the status of Lamentations as a disaster and trauma literature has not been taken seriously by Bible commentators. In my view, approaching Lamentations as trauma and disaster literature has the potential of going beyond 'meaning making' into appreciating the storytelling of survivors who invite us to see the pain and trauma of God's people in Lamentations.

Furthermore, trauma subverts the versions of biblical narrators who tell traumatic events in a non-traumatic language (Janzen 2012). In the following section, I explore how Bible commentators have read and interpreted Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10.

Recent discussions on Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10

It is helpful to look at how Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10 have been read by Bible commentators. Whether Bible commentators considered the trauma surrounding the Cannibal mothers and their children (during the Babylonian empire) is an issue to be explored. Linafelt (2000a:269) notes the possibility of the effect of the interpreter's gender during the process of interpreting the biblical text. He further notes that as most Old Testament scholars are men, it is possible that there would be androcentric biases in their reading of the maternal cannibal texts of Lamentations. Often these Biblical scholars read Lamentations in ways that preserve the 'ideological core' rather than showing the 'lament' of the poems on issues of war, forced migration and famine, as well as the trauma of considering eating your own child. When trauma is not considered, women are blamed as murderers and eaters of their own children.

Harrison (1973:223) observes that Lamentations 2:18 introduces the sudden thematic transition by the 'author calling on the distraught city to make supplication to God'. The poet calls Jerusalem to cry unto the Lord. Harrison (1973:224) notes the value of tears as a 'profoundly therapeutic activity' during times of sorrow. I find Harrison going beyond just 'surviving' Lamentations by rushing into the hope that is found in chapter 3. But this approach is short lived, at least in Harrison (1973:224). He acknowledges the death of children because of hunger. Hence, Zion appeals to Yahweh as even mothers had to eat their children. Harrison does not question the fact that it is mothers who have to eat their children. He (Harrison 1973:225) generalises by arguing that 'the extremes to which the capital had been reduced seem implied by the reference to cannibalism'. For Harrison (1973:225), it is 'the Hebrews' (and not women or mothers) who considered cannibalism 'as a last desperate resort' after there were no longer food supplies. It is also interesting to observe that Harrison (1973:225) speaks of extreme conditions that led to cannibalism instead of 'child or maternal cannibalism'. Harrison (1973:224–225) avoids the gender and age aspects of Lamentations 2:20. His comments on this biblical text are androcentric (male centered) and adult centred. He also does not consider the trauma of a caring mother considering eating their child. It is also intriguing that Harrison (1973: 224–225) does not question the absence of fathers of the 'eaten' children in this text. Regarding Lamentations 4:10, where it is said 'The tender-hearted women have cooked their own children. They have eaten them to survive the siege' (NLT). Harrison does not say anything much except to say that this text was a fulfilment of Deuteronomy 28:53. It was, therefore, a result of a broken covenant by the Israelites.

Lalleman (2013:337) does not say anything regarding the social positioning of women and children in this text. He does not mention any trauma aspects as this text was in the context of siege, forced migration and extreme poverty. Instead, Lalleman (2013:337) notes that Lamentations 2:20 is the same horrible and shocking situation mentioned in 2 Kings 6:24–29 where two women bid to eat their children because of siege and hunger. Like Harrison (1953:225), Lalleman (2013:351) also argues that the idea that women ate their children in Lamentations 4:10 is a fulfilment of the curse mentioned in Deuteronomy 28:53–57 because of disloyalty to the law of Yahweh. Lalleman (2013:351) further makes two observations regarding Lamentations 2–4:10. He argues that there are two ways in which people die under the circumstances of hunger. Firstly, hunger has the ability to kill people. Secondly, people kill each other in situations of hunger; hence, women ‘have cooked their own children and eaten them’. I find two problems with Lalleman’s submissions on Lamentations 4:10. Firstly, he is confusing in the sense that on one hand, he regards this text as a fulfilment of Deuteronomy 4:53–57. On the other hand, he regards maternal cannibalism in this text as part of how ‘people kill one another’ in circumstances of hunger. Furthermore, Lalleman labels the mothers of this text as those who kill and eat their children simply because people kill each other in situations of hunger. Lalleman does not consider the trauma that these women were facing and the possibility that true cannibals in these biblical texts may be those who created conditions of siege, forced migration and poverty.

It is interesting to observe that Dearman (2002:379–382) says nothing about Lamentations 2:20 in his exposition of the second chapter. Regarding Lamentations 4:10, Dearman (2002:394) notes the terrible ‘changes that had happened to families with children’ as a result of the Babylonian siege. This led to children begging for food in the streets (Lm 4:4). When it comes to women eating their own children in Lamentations 4:10, Dearman (2002:394) further notes that ‘the emotional impact can hardly be overestimated’. He does not say anything further.

Smith (2006:17) accuses the mothers of Lamentations 2:20 as part of the Jewish people who ‘sank into the lowest kind of human behaviour, cannibalism’ because of being punished by Yahweh. For Smith (2006:17), the dire situation was calling on Yahweh to ‘intervene when men are driven to the point of consuming one another’. I find Smith, too, ignoring the gender, age as well as trauma aspects of these biblical texts. These texts are not about ‘men consuming one another’ as he states but about women who are pushed to the social and economic periphery to the point that they have to face the trauma of considering eating their children. Regarding Lamentations 4:10, Smith (2006:27) argues that because of poverty and hunger these mothers ‘have forgotten their maternal affection’. He further argues that their survival strategy was to cook and eat their children (Smith 2006:27). It seems that Smith blames women as those who feed on the

flesh of their children without looking at the circumstances of war, forced deportation, siege, poverty, and how such events are traumatic.

Defining trauma theory and how it helps us read biblical traumatic events

Trauma comes from a Greek word that denotes ‘wound’ (Eyerma 2013). In health sciences, trauma is:

[U]nderstood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind – a wound inflicted by an emotional shock so powerful that it breaches the mind’s experience of time, self and the world and eventually manifests itself in dreams and flashbacks. (p. 43)

Thus, an event, conceptually, is regarded as traumatic not only because of its strongness or dangerousness but ‘because it is unthinkable’ and therefore cannot be comprehended simply (Eyerma 2013:42).

The relationship between trauma and memory is concerning. It appears that trauma has the potential to destroy memory. Trauma comes with the suppression of memory that can arouse the symptoms. This does not mean that traumatic events did not take place but rather Eyerma (2013:42) indicates that they ‘overwhelm and against which the mind and the body must defend itself’. Eyerma (2013:42) further argues that despite the numbness (a situation where the ability to feel pain is for a short while missing), ‘amnesia and repression are defences of the mind against such an intrusion’. Thus, the victim of trauma forgets or refuses to believe or remember that the traumatic event happened. This forgetting or refusal to remember a traumatic event by the victim may not last forever as the event may come back whether in dreams or somewhat different ways. It is therefore clear that there is a relationship between trauma and memory and that trauma as an ‘unthinkable’ event cannot be explained understood and explained in simple terms.

Regarding reading and interpreting traumatic events, Bistoën et al. (2014:839) argue that the traumatic event cannot be understood entirely from within the interpretive background that is present at the moment of its occurrence. Thus, the ‘traumatic truth’ cannot be understood by using the intellect and memory. This is important as traumatic experiences ‘destroy the symbolic identity of the affected person’ (Bistoën et al. 2014:839). Trauma invites readers and interpreters to a new way of seeing which, is different from the interpretive methods and cognitive framework that preceded the event. One cannot interpret trauma events in the same way as they do to non-traumatic circumstances.

In terms of trauma and biblical interpretation, Groenewald (2018:804) observes that trauma smashes and destroys all frameworks of interpreting texts (whether it is biblical or not). This causes a predicament for theologians and biblical scholars who have the task of interpreting the tragic experiences of people. Commitment to following traditional

exegetical steps scholars follow and use in the process of interpreting non-traumatic texts is challenged by trauma. This further poses a challenge to a kind of theology or biblical scholarship that considers itself a 'meaning-making enterprise' (Groenewald 2018:804). Thus, trauma destroys the ability to strive to make meaning and sense in our theologising and interpreting biblical texts. Trauma is beyond the violent event in the past, but it is 'what remains' (Rambo 2010:15). It is the pain that remains after the traumatic event. This is the new world in which trauma invites its survivors, interpreters and communicators. The suffering of trauma cannot be properly explained in discourse and literary means that are clear. For Groenewald (2018:806), when Lamentations and Jeremiah are read as trauma and disaster narratives what matters not so much what is said but mostly what is not said by biblical narrators and commentators. Thus, in many instances, there is a tendency to jump into hope and happy-ending biblical passages while ignoring the pain and suffering biblical communities suffered especially in the exilic and post-exilic contexts. Using trauma theory provides bible interpreters with a language and approach to reading and interpreting biblical events of trauma and disaster. In the next section, I will apply trauma theory to read and interpret Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10.

Applying trauma theory in Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10

Applying trauma theory in reading Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10 needs a biblical exegete to acknowledge these poems as trauma and disaster literature. These biblical texts must be understood as a presentation of pain. Thus, a move from mere interpretation to the presentation of pain in these biblical texts is necessary (Linafelt 2000b:43). Seeking to interpret Lamentation texts without acknowledging the trauma and the pain exhibited in these texts will lead to judgemental interpretations where Daughter Zion, the cannibal mothers are blamed as murders instead of victims. Thus, the victims and survivors of trauma are often blamed that they are suffering as a result of the sin they have committed. This is what the poet does in Lamentations 1:1–11. The poet blames Daughter Zion for her suffering.

There is a tendency to read the maternal cannibal texts of the Old Testament (and in this case, Lm 2:20 and 4:10) to interpret the meaning of mothers eating their children. Often these interpreters want to establish whether these mothers are guilty of being murderers and eaters of their children. They have no intention to 'see' from the perspective of Zion and her children as victims as well as the trauma and disaster survivors. Yet, what the trauma and disaster survivor needs is for Yahweh and the reader 'to see' instead of seeking 'meaning' (cf. Lm 1:9c & 1:12c). That is evident in Lamentations 1:9. In Lamentations 1 and 2, the poet sees Daughter Zion's suffering as a result of her guilt while Daughter Zion asks for Yahweh to 'see and pay attention' (cf. 1:9c, 1:11c, and 2:20). There is an invitation for Yahweh and the reader to see the suffering 'in the words of Zion' (Linafelt 2000b:44). Daughter

Zion seeks solidarity and attention from Yahweh rather than forgiveness as resistance to the poet's view that she is suffering because of her guilt.

There are indeed various interpretations for Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10 but what trauma theory helps us with is to value Daughter Zion's 'presentation of pain as pain rather than as the raw material for ruminations on guilt' (Linafelt 2000b:44). While Daughter Zion asks Yahweh to see and pay attention to her pain, the reader is also invited to see the pain of Daughter Zion and her children as 'pain' rather than statements that affirm her guilt and the need of repentance. The trauma approach to reading these biblical texts calls biblical scholars to the posture of solidarity rather than that of being judgemental. The trauma approach enables biblical scholars to see the mothers and children of Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10 as victims and survivors rather than as perpetrators.

O'Connor presents several interpretations of these biblical texts. Firstly, it is possible that the mothers contributed to cannibalism to 'feed other starving children' (O'Connor 2002:62). Secondly, these mothers may have cooked children who were already dead to provide food for surviving children (O'Connor 2002:62). Thirdly, Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10 may be 'symbolic fulfillment of a curse in Deuteronomy 28:53–57' where both mothers and children would as a result of a curse eat their children (O'Connor 2002:62–63). Furthermore, O'Connor is concerned that fathers are not mentioned in these cannibal texts. This may mean that men left women and children dealing with the aftermath of trauma while they (men) ran away. The argument posed by this study is that whatever interpretation one may lean towards, these poems do not provide us with sufficient proof and information for a reader to decide. They do not even give an inadequate account of the suffering women and children may have faced while men were absent. Thus, the trauma approach helps us to see the pain of these mothers and children as a reflection of communal pain in the face of empire, forced migration, dehumanisation and defeated society. That even 'tenderhearted' [רחמינית] women are said to have boiled and eaten their children is confirmation of collective trauma suffered by women and children. It is a call for the reader to 'see and pay attention'.

Implications of trauma and memory for reading and interpreting Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10

The relationship between trauma theory and memory has implications for utilising trauma to read Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10. For instance, the American Psychiatric Association mentions a variety of symptoms that relate to traumatic circumstances. These symptoms include 'recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic events, recurrent dreams in which the content and/or effect of the dream are related to the traumatic events' (American Psychiatric Association 2013:271). Often the memories of the traumatic event will replay in the mind of

the victim whether through dreams and/or nightmares. It is also possible for the victim to seek to avoid being among 'people, places, conversations, objects, situations' that would remind them of the traumatic events they have experienced (American Psychiatric Association 2013:271). Furthermore, the victim of trauma experiences an 'inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic events' (American Psychiatric Association 2013:271). The 'inability to remember' should not be understood as a result of brain damage, drunkenness or drug abuse that sometimes the victim consumes after experiencing trauma (American Psychiatric Association 2013:271). But it is many times a consequence of 'dissociate amnesia' (American Psychiatric Association 2013:271). Thus, forgetting (especially the important parts of the traumatic events) is part of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To tell the stories of traumatised is very complex, but it does not mean that the traumatic event did not occur. The trauma approach does not deny or question the stories of the traumatised people and communities. Instead, it questions the accurateness of the narrator's version including that of the poet of Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10. If trauma theory includes forgetting, avoidance of 'external reminders' as well as exaggerating, we cannot take the versions of the narrators and poets of trauma stories as truth. This is important if we are aware of the social, cultural and intellectual power of those who tell the stories of traumatised people and communities.

Therefore, when Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10 are read from a biblical trauma approach, there is a possibility that the mothers of these biblical texts under the stress or anxiety of the trauma of siege-related hunger and poverty could not think rationally anymore and consequently opted to eat their children. The traumatic situation of these mothers influenced their memory of good parental behaviour. In other words, trauma had a destructive impact on the ability of these mothers to act motherly to their children.

There is a tendency to judge the mothers of these biblical texts on whether their actions were right or wrong. Both Janzen (2012:59) and Rambo (2010:10) argue that traumatic events disturb and destroy the language of morality and meaning-making in storytelling. Thus trauma as a social category renders meaning-making as indescribable and inarticulate. (Li et al. 2020:260). This is the reason the narratives of trauma cannot be interpreted by employing a 'language of morality' that is used in non-traumatic texts. A biblical exegete cannot use a 'right or wrong' approach to read traumatic events as far as choices and actions made by trauma victims as well as survivors (cf. Gobodo-Madikizela 2012:258). Therefore, using this aspect of trauma studies in reading Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10 implies that the actions of the so-called cannibal mothers (at least in the version of the narrator) cannot be seen as good or bad. Such a category (of good or bad) does not fit in these traumatic poems simply because trauma destroys the language of morality and meaning-making. Using ethical language in reading these biblical texts leads to judgemental and androcentric interpretations.

Conclusion

Using the trauma approach in reading and interpreting these texts helps demonstrate how traumatic texts are complex and open to a variety of interpretations. Reading Lamentations 2:20 through the lens of trauma assists in resisting judgemental and androcentric interpretations of these texts that label mothers as mere murderers and eaters of their children. The trauma approach helps to see the mothers of Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10 as victims of collective trauma in a besieged city. This interpretive lens helps us doubt whether the mothers really ate their children while it is open to other interpretations that acknowledge the ways in which traumatic events are complex.

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Z.N. is the sole author of this research article.

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