

## Trauma Shall Be No More: A Rhetorical-Canonical Reading of Isaiah 35:1-10 and 40:1-5, 10-11

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### Abstract

*This article engages the reading of Isaiah from a trauma hermeneutical perspective. It presents a reading of Isaiah with special attention to the comforting message of Yahweh to the exiles in Babylon for the dawn of the new time of their release and restoration to Jerusalem. The argument of the article presents a response to Rambo (2010) and Groenewald (2018) on the question of trauma. The fact is that trauma shall end with the coming of the Lord as the God who frees people from the place and state of trauma. This argument projects the possibility of the end of trauma, which remains a further theological-ethical stimulant for biblical interpreters to participate in the healing process and the restorative actions of God. As typical of the prophetic books, the book of Isaiah is both a book of judgement and a book of restoration. It presents the goodness of life in the acts of God's gifts of freedom. The sensitivity of God helps us to reimagine the image of God in the context of the suffering of his people. Isaiah 35:1-10 and 40: 1-5, 10-11 is the good news of hope that helps its readers to rejoice for the coming time of true freedom and the tender care of God.*

**Keywords:** Trauma; Cultural Trauma; Exile; Joy; Redemption; Hope; Healing

### Introduction

The book of Isaiah over so many decades of biblical and theological studies has been the point of attraction to so many critical scholars. Since Bernard Duhm (1892; cf. Childs 1979:318), the crucial difference in the genre of the book that served as the point of departure for the major division into the first and second Isaiah continually became the pointer to many other reflections and possible debates that followed. Christopher Hays (2011) has given an interesting overview of the flow of the argument around the book of Isaiah by different scholars at different times and possibly in different directions. This is the growth of scholarship in the modern period. Even though older trajectories that were discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were not totally abandoned, some of the main arguments are no longer persuasive, for example, on the idea of source criticism, almost every turn of the argument remains speculative and hypothetical, which means that questions on the nature and texture of the book are given more priority than answers (cf. Firth & Williamson 2009; McKinon 2004; Mallen 2007).

Hays strongly argues that, “The most prominent tension in recent scholarship on Isaiah is between interpreters and interpretations that emphasize the diversity of the book, and those that emphasize its unity” (Hays 2011:549). Nevertheless, Ronald Clements (1982:117–29; 1985; 101f; Sommer (1998), among others, still sees literary elements of the connection between the two main sections of the book. But if the

historical questions are taken seriously, then the diversity of first, second and third sections of the Isaiah traditions cannot be avoided (Baer 2001; Baltzer 2001; Berges 2008, 2010; Elliott 2007; Goldingay 2001, 2005).<sup>1</sup> In what remains the canonical approach to the book of Isaiah, Brevard S Childs (1979) noticed the theological, linguistic and thematic connections of the book, yet, even he cannot easily collapse the walls of history that still stand in between the major sections of the book.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the walls are porous; they cannot hinder a careful reader access to the canonical force of the book as a whole if only that remains the option of the reader at a given point in time.

The diverse approaches to the study of Isaiah, for example as seen in Hays (2011), from the many contributions of scholars demonstrate the quest for more grounds in studying this particular biblical book, and the entire biblical prophetic corpus as that which is still open and deeply engaging. The basic trajectories of historical approaches and literary-critical approaches on the form or compositional nature and various textures of the book have made the beauty and richness of the book easier to be appreciated. The theological-canonical approach is one within which one reads the book as a resource for faith in constant awareness of the basic acts of God as central in the fabric of the text, which keeps it moving in many interesting dimensions. What for me would be the sociopolitical and theological-philosophical dimension of reading Isaiah today would be to see its link to existential questions of humanity. One of those aspects has been in the relation of trauma theory studies to biblical studies.<sup>3</sup> In one of his recent contributions on the link between trauma studies and biblical studies, with particular interest in the prophetic literature, Alphonso Groenewald presents an interesting and thought-provoking article with the title “Trauma is what remains.” This contribution comes up as a hopeful response to his article with special interest in S. Rambo’s work (2010, 2017) in Groenewald (2018:89) and also to Groenewald (2018:99), seeing as he only mentions the prophetic book of Isaiah once alongside Micah as prophets of hope for the coming era of peace (cf. Isaiah 2:4 & Micah 4:3, perhaps in the estachon) for the people of Judah and the entire world. Another important contribution has been made by Esterhuizen and Groenewald (2021), focussing on trauma studies as a lens of engagement to read Isaiah 7:18-25. This is a demonstration of the effect of trauma within a social context of looming danger with devastating effect on a particular people. Their article does more on showing the presence of a traumatic situation in an ancient context with some similar

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald E. Clements (1985:95) argues that the book of Isaiah in modern scholarship is found to generally stimulate harmony due to its history of composition. Though now we receive it in its final form, in his own words, “The book of Isaiah has come down to us as a work of sixty-six chapters and it is noteworthy that our earliest complete Hebrew manuscript of an Old Testament text of this size, namely the famous Isaiah Scroll found at Qumran (1QIs<sup>a</sup>), is of this book, and presents it to all intents and purposes in the form in which we know it. Yet, concerning this book, unlike many Old Testament literary works, there has emerged something akin to a consensus among critical biblical scholars that the book does not derive from a single author, the eight-century Isaiah of Jerusalem, and that the presence of material from much later than the eighth century BC is unmistakably evident.”

<sup>2</sup> Childs (1979:316) highlights how crucial and important the book of Isaiah has been in terms of historical critical study, saying, “In the light of the great importance attached to the book of Isaiah, especially by the Christian Church, it is not surprising that the historical critical study of the prophets began with Isaiah. Indeed the battle over the right of critical research during the nineteenth century was fought over the book of Isaiah with an intensity second to the Pentateuch.”

<sup>3</sup> Juliana Claassens (2017 cf. Alexander 2012; Eyerman 2013, 2004), Alphonso Groenewald (2018) and Elizabeth Esterhuizen (2017) have presented good resources that have opened my eyes to the need for incorporating trauma studies to biblical hermeneutics.

link to the modern period in the wake of Covid 19 as a life-threatening pandemic. But presently, this article hopes to provide a continuation of the arguments on the link between trauma theories and biblical studies, not only to see trauma as a case in point that provides a particular lens to read a biblical text but also the reverse. It is my intention to present a rhetorical-canonical reading as key to providing a biblical response to a trauma problem. It is not my intention to deny the presence of trauma, and not to be live in fear of situations which bring trauma or sustain it.<sup>4</sup> I hope that my engagement with Isaiah 35 and 40 (in this order of reading) will help to point to the path to the end of trauma. Thus, the intention is to argue at the end not that trauma is what remains (cf. Groenewald 2018) but also to say with the visionary apostle of hope in Rev. 10:6, “time shall be no more.” This “time” in context is the *kronos* which is the ongoing history that actually includes the history and the experience of trauma. Thus the end of time or history will surely be the end of the experience and memory of trauma.

I dedicate this article to Professor Juliana L. M. Claassens of Stellenbosch University, South Africa, who has been a leading scholar in biblical interpretation from trauma hermeneutical perspectives. Her vision and contributions to human dignity and gender justice continue to inspire me to think of human suffering only in search of ways of healing. Within such avision, I add my voice to also continue to listen to all voices that sing, speak, cry; and with them to incorporate trauma theories in biblical studies in search of new words and perspectives in responding to the challenges.

### **Trauma Theories in Biblical Studies**

Trauma studies have been given attention from the field of human psychology into other related fields of critical studies including theology. Following S. Rambo (2010), and Herman (1992) Groenewald (2018:91) observed that “the phenomenon of trauma has always been part of the history of humankind.” This is agreeable because trauma has always been the resultant effect of human actions or inactions toward other human beings in different contexts of life. Only the discovery of its meaning and its devastating effect on the psychology, faith, and self-esteem or the sense of human dignity of human beings has not been discovered until recent times of modern critical studies. This is why “the study of trauma is relatively new and spans just over a century” (Groenewald 2018:91).

It is worthy of our attention that “Trauma studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were dominated by the war cycles of that century” (Groenewald 2018:92; cf. O’Connor 2012). Christian thinkers and theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, Johann Baptist Metz and Dorothee Sölle, among many others, have experienced the devastating effect of the Nazi regime and the terrible experience of dehumanisation that came with it.<sup>5</sup> The holocaust hashad a terribly lasting effect on the lives of different people, whether they were Germans or Jews or others. In the case of the Germans, their self-image and sense of pride in their land has been confronted with unimaginable history of evil that will continue to taint the history of the period. This is because it was a history of the evil of humanity against

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<sup>4</sup> These could be the continual human experiences of the problem of evil, human brokenness and inconsistent behaviour in different contexts.

<sup>5</sup> The experiences of these scholars have moved them in surprising ways to find better ways of articulating their suffering and overcoming the deadliness of resentment or despair. Through their contributions we have very critical and useful theological works that shape our lives in theological reasoning after Auschwitz. For specific works from them, please see (Moltmann 1993abc, Metz 1998, Sölle 1990)

humanity (cf. Arendt 1963, 1968). In the case of the Jews, figures like Elie Wiesel, who has been known as the survivor of the holocaust and an educator in avoiding the repetition of the evil that was carried out, have written several memoirs and given speeches with a great sense of meaning and emotions that call attention to the needs for human sensitivity to how we think and act toward people around us. In the case of all the Jews in history after Auschwitz, they will, time and again, look back in history with unsatisfiable longings for the return of their loved ones and the reversal of time. Memory will serve them well at times, but at other times it will only torment them in its vividness, dimness and distance. The political and social history of the last century has been tainted with the terrible legacy of human inhumanity against their fellow humans. Even children suffered the trauma and horrible effects of evil from the Nazi period. Different pockets of Auschwitz have been replicated in many other contexts, like the contexts of Africa during the colonial period and the apartheid regime of South Africa. Humanity is divided along racial, social, and cultural lines of difference. These forms of segregation have a lasting negative effect on different people, which have ended up traumatising them beyond mere human understanding. The works of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South have done a lot in revealing the deadliness of human acts of terror, or even mere mistakes and negligence and how they can grow into full acts of terror that will end up traumatising their victims.

The ongoing religious and political crises of Nigeria and other West African regions are sad elements that continue to traumatise people. Trauma is the result of suffering. It has been seen as the inner wound, pain or affliction of life that comes into the psyche of human beings who have experienced terrible treatment and loss from the actions of other human beings (cf. Eyerman 2004, 2013, Alexander 2012, Rambo 2010). Trauma is like a hole in the life of a person who comes out of a bad experience. It is an open wound that needs to be treated. It is the feeling of actual depravity of right, privilege and dignity because of how one has been treated by others have treated. This has lasting effects beyond what we can easily analyse. Trauma has a way of disorienting a person, alienating the person totally from the good company of other human beings, and it has the capacity to linger throughout life if it is not addressed.

Social scientists and scholars of the humanities with an interest in human relations have done good studies on the nature and categories of trauma. There could be individual and collective trauma. In this article, our attention will be focused more on collective trauma, which can also be described as “cultural trauma” (Claassens 2017; Saul 2014).<sup>6</sup> The works of Kathleen O’Connor (2012), Louis Stulman (2005), and Juliana Claassens (2017) are examples of works on the trauma themes and potential for further reflections in new dimensions on the book of Jeremiah. These studies have shown us how the Bible contains an inner discourse pattern as a literature of survival. Trauma in many ways is a near-death-resultant experience in life. It is a form of disorientation from the loss of something or someone valuable in life. This loss of something or someone has a significant effect, even to the point of touching the identity of the person in question. Trauma has been experienced by many as a “loss of identity and meaning” in life (Claassens 2017:28). Trauma moves those who experience it to “counter claims” in order

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<sup>6</sup> For an example on the study on “cultural trauma” in Jeremiah (cf. Claassens 2017:27 cf. Eyerman 2013 and Alexander 2012).

to recover from the loss that has brought it in their lives (Claassens 2017:29). “Trauma, whether individual or collective, is structured by complex emotional feelings, thoughts of fear and behavior that becomes a new distorted ‘normal’” (Groenewald & Esterhuizen 2021:2).

Trauma as a deadly feeling or situation of human imprisonment to the sense of deprivation and the abuse of dignity is as dangerous as killing the person who has become the victim of its terrible force. Nevertheless, trauma as a situation can be overcome or healed (Altmaier 2019; Herman 1992; Luckhurst 2008; Jones 2009). This is good news that must be taken seriously in order that we can work hard to provide the new alternative of the good life that we all yearn for in the midst of the brokenness of our world. Trauma is something that takes hold of the whole person in the mind and the body, it moves back and forth within time schemes, thus, “Any study of trauma, therefore needs to focus on the potential return of such an event in the present, as well as its impact on both the present and the future” (Groenewald 2018:93).

It is worthy of notice here that the field of biblical studies is a “latecomer on the scene of integration of trauma and biblical studies” (Groenewald 2018:94). Yet, it is now a vital aspect of engagement with the biblical text in terms of its rhetoric and canonical shape when it comes to addressing the problem of trauma in the human search for healing and the actualisation of the good life. The Bible as the collection of survival narratives and poetry is one that has deep and vivid elements of trauma experiences within its characters. These experiences may be distant from ours in time, but circumstantially they are still connected to our experiences of evil, human abuse of life, and the resulting destruction thereof. This makes it necessary for biblical exegetes to incorporate trauma studies as aspects of humanities in responding to the challenges that plague our lives today. According to Groenewald (2018:96), “A biblical trauma perspective has developed from a dialogue with several other disciplines and theoretical interpretations which all had an impact on the manner in which biblical trauma hermeneutics employ the lens of trauma.”

The occurrence of events that cause suffering leads to the situation of trauma experience especially in the face of death or a near death experience. Hope is the healing process of trauma; thus there is an interesting connection between the relationship of “suffering and hope” (Groenewald 2018:96; cf. Esterhuizen 2017). “Prophetic literature, therefore, is more than only war and disaster literature; it also lives on as meaning-making literature, giving hope for the victims of war and exile” (Groenewald 2018:98) “When prophetic texts are read as disaster and survival literature, they become meaning-making literature, empowering their hearers and readers to overcome their traumatic experiences” (Groenewald 2018:100). It is good to note from Groenewald in the foregoing thought that survival is possible and trauma can be overcome. This we see as the new turn of the prophetic literature. In what follows, we shall explore two chapters in the book of Isaiah, namely chapters 35 & 40, as survival texts. These are texts that provide us a new alternative to the tragedy and dehumanisation situation of trauma. The alternative rhetoric of these chapters is healing and reviving. Thus from a rhetorical perspective, we shall closely read the text and observe the force of its grammar on the way to new life. And we shall also take note of its canonical shape in order to see what kind of message these chapters present and how a believing community of faith like the church should use these texts in order to provide healing and restoration from the

alienating danger of trauma. In this exegetical consideration, we shall argue on the negative to Rambo's phrase as found in Groenewald (2018) that "trauma is the suffering that remains," but in this alternative vision we shall see that time is coming according to the schedules of Yahweh that trauma shall be no more. But instead of trauma and alienation only freedom and the joy of living will remain.

### **The Joy of the Returnees (Isa. 35)**

Isaiah 35 punctuates the oracles to the nations with a new turn to the miraculous acts of Yahweh. The book of first Isaiah (1–39) is basically the coming judgement of Yahweh upon Judah and Jerusalem and the nations that surround them. The injustices of the people within themselves and even toward the law of the Lord shall be thoroughly judged (1–12), and the Lord will send judgement among the nations (13–23) and to the whole earth (24–27), and furthermore, the threats of judgement to Jerusalem will also be enacted (chap. 28). The Lord confronts Israel for being wayward and careless with his word (chap. 29). This is the polemic of Yahweh against empty rituals that do not lead to the obedience of the heart and the transformation of the lives and actions of the people. The distraction of Israel, a focus on Egypt, demonstrates its faithlessness in Yahweh (30–34), thus his judgement must come upon them in order to redirect their focus and movement, no longer to trust in Egypt and her idols but rather to focus on Yahweh alone as the only true God of Israel. The judgement of the Lord upon his people in the face of other nations would come to them as corrective actions for the zeal and jealousy of the Lord for his own honour in the midst of his people. The main judgement upon the people would be the coming oppression by the hand of Assyria (chap. 7:18–25, 10:1ff cf. Esterhuizen 2017) and the coming of the Babylonians also to plunder and judge the city of Jerusalem and take away its people to exile in Babylon (chap. 39). This new turn of events as the coming judgement of Yahweh by means of the exile is surely a serious move with traumatic effect. The exile is symbolic of not only the vulnerability and abandonment of Israel but also its actual disgrace among the nations. The exile is a moment of serious trauma and disorientation for the people of Israel. The strangeness they encounter through the exile is not only that of place and language but also of cultural identity and the shattering of ancestral traditions and hopes (Terblanche 2008).<sup>7</sup> The exile is the practical disempowerment of Israel and its woundedness into serious trauma.

Nevertheless, chapters 35 and 40 are given specially by Yahweh in order to address the case of Israel and deliver them from exile. These two postexilic chapters are pointers not only to the end of the exile as a historic event but also to the end of the trauma caused by the exile. Yahweh announces the new turn of history as the new dawn of the end of exile and the renewal of the people (35:1–2). The personification of the "desert", "parched land" and wilderness" as being "glad" and rejoicing to the point of actual blossoming in the soon-to-come future is one that shows the active intervention of Yahweh in the deadliness of the exile. The natural elements will "shout for joy" as a sign of actual freedom of being recreated from the low point of disgrace and abandonment to the new point of renewal. There will be just redistribution of "glory" among the lands. The lands which were abandoned for a long time will now "see the glory of the Lord" and "the splendor of our God." This shows the contrast between the

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<sup>7</sup> Terblanche (2008:482) describes the experience of the exile as a form of displacement and imprisonment.

postexilic period and the exilic period. During the exile, nature also suffers and the glory of the Lord and his splendour are obscured. The inability to see the glory of the Lord during the exile shows the distance of the Lord from them (cf. Ezek. 10). But now, after the time of the exile, they will be given renewed vision in which they will be able to behold and “see” the glory of the Lord. This is more than a physical sight of something that has not been seen before the time, but rather it is an intense enjoyment and free delight in the richness of the glory of the Lord.

The new message of hope and rehumanisation is given to the remnant to share among themselves (35:3–4). The post-exilic period is a period of great survival. It was the time of recovery for those who had “feeble hands” and “knees” that “give way.” This is a description of disability during the time of the exile. This can be both literal and figurative. The exile rendered so many people weak and unstable. Many became useless to themselves and to others. They lived in a state of disability, brokenness and trauma because of their experience of oppression from their enemies. Now the time has changed; the time of renewal for them has come. It is interesting that the message is given to the same people to share among themselves. This means that God, who gave them over to the state of disgrace and terrible judgement, is now coming to restore them and take away their fear and disgrace. The good news to the remnant is this, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance, with divine retribution, he will come to save you” (Isa. 35:4). The coming of God will make all the difference. The coming of God is the coming of justice. Prior to this announcement, they might have been thinking that their God must have been dead and disabled, thus unable to help them. They might have lost all confidence in the possibility of justice, but this announcement is a new call to new life. The coming of God is the announcement of the coming of justice for all who are oppressed and dehumanised. What God will give will be “retribution” to all the enemies of his people. Retribution here reminds us of the reigning ideology of justice in which all people will receive a just reward for their actions. The coming of the Lord to “save you” means that you have now been reconsidered as one of the true people of God. The exile meant rejection, and the coming of God means restoration.

The coming of God to save his people will transform the face of the earth and the situation of his people. The blindness and deafness of his people that depicted their waywardness and rejection shall be reversed (vs. 5 cf. Smith 2013). The opening of the eyes and the unstopability of the ears of the people demonstrate an unimaginable freedom to perceive and understand that which brings life, goodness and progress among them. The “lame” and the “mute” shall also experience the renewing blessing of God (vs.6). The freedom of the disabled in the new state of life shall bring them joy like a “deer”. The deer in this context does not depict thirst or need (cf. Ps. 42:1f) but rather the new freedom of life after deep trauma. The former mute tongue shall “shout for joy”, which means there will be new songs on the horizon because all of life is now released into its fullness. The wilderness and the desert shall be transformed into places of abundance of water which gushes forth from them (vs. 6b). Their bad experiences of the land will be turned into pleasant ones (vs. 7).

The growing of the grass on the playground of jackals is a sign of a new blessing and the freedom of nature to be itself without disturbance (vs. 7b). A new Highway of “Holiness” as the new order of the day will be made possible (vs. 8). The sense of “Holiness” will be made possible for those who “walk in that way.” Those who will be

excluded from that great Highway are the “unclean” and “wicked fools.” In the animal kingdom, “No Lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast.” This brings a contrast to Isaiah 11, in which even dangerous animals like lions will be present, but they will not express their dangerous status over the people or anything. Verse 9 here speaks of the creation of a new space of life and not death and evil. The good news will be that the exile will not be total destruction of the people of God but rather “those the Lord has rescued will return.” Their return to Zion will be a time of great celebration with good songs of great joy. It is worthy of attention to see that “everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (vs. 10). The experience of the exile and all its terrifying events brought serious trauma to the people. But now that this time of disgrace shall come to an end, the good news is that trauma shall not actually be the pain or suffering that remains. Trauma shall be no more, only gladness and joy shall remain. It is interesting to note that “sorrow and sighing will flee away.” This shows that all undesirable and dehumanising experiences shall never again remain with the people of God. The end of the exile was actually the end of the exilic trauma.

### **The Redemption of the Captives (Isa. 40:1–5, 10–11)**

Isaiah 40 opens the second main section of the Isaianic tradition, which scholars have generally described as Second Isaiah (40–55), first Isaiah being Isaiah 1–39 and Third Isaiah being 56–66. This classification is done mainly in terms of the themes or focal points of the sections. This helps the reader to understand the prophetic move within the corpus, namely from the words of confrontation, judgement and rejection to the new turn to love, comfort and guidance. This chapter presents the message of hope and comfort to the exiles in Babylon. The chapter opens with great words of “comfort, comfort my people” (40:1). The relationship that was earlier broken because of the sinfulness of Israel, which brought distance and rejection, has now been healed. The trauma of the exilic situation is now going away. The Lord now addresses them as “my people” and he is now “your God.” This is reminiscent of the first covenant with the nation of Israel when the identity network was established based on the call and demand for obedience to the Law so that the people will remain “my people” and the Lord will be “their God” (Exod. 19: 5,6). When Isaiah is addressed on how he should mediate between God and Israel to convey the good news to her, he is asked to “speak tenderly” to Jerusalem now as the new bride of Yahweh. The time of harsh speech and condemnation has passed. It is now time to speak words of healing, love and restoration. The prophet is called to “proclaim to her” the announcement of the end of her hardship in the hands of the Lord. This idea of proclamation is key to demonstrating how firm and serious the resolve to restore Israel has been. God has set aside the feeling of resentment or hostility toward his people and is now willing to let them hear something new and to engage in a restorative imagination. The “hard service” of Israel during the time of the exile is symbolic of a traumatic situation. But the completion of that is now the new turn of life to jubilation and satisfaction. The fact that Israel is meant to hear that “her sin has been paid for” and that “she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (40:2) is quite ambiguous. If the sin of rebellion has been paid for, why then take notice of other sins that will make her receive double judgment? I take this verse as highly idiomatic to say that Israel has paid for her own sin during her years of servitude in Babylon. The

Lord sold her into exile only for a time so that after the time of travail or purge she will be restored back to him. The good news for healing of the trauma is the announcement of the satisfaction of the Lord from the judgement of the exile. It is now time for a new turn of history, the new experience of life and the new imagination of God. The patriarchal imagery of God as a harsh husband is now set aside for a new imagery of God as an adoptive parent who will surely love and care for his people (cf. Claassens 2023).<sup>8</sup>

Verses 3–5 form a new unit of the announcement of the new turn of history in which the exiles are released and are to experience a new march of hope and jubilation for their freedom to go back to their land. The unit opens with “a voice of one calling”; this is the new prophetic voice that calls for a new vision, new possibility and new emotions after trauma. The message of the prophet now says, “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (vs. 3). The prophet presents his message full of new imagination that brings new speech and new possibility to reality. The announcement is to make or prepare “the way” or “highway” in the wilderness/desert. This is a transformative message in that the desert or wilderness that was known to be a symbol of lack, loss and confusion is now going to be reconstructed into the way and even a highway for the Lord. The fact that the Lord is the object of the sentence means that God himself is part of the exiles. The return of the Israelites from the house of exile is the return of God also from the same place of disgrace and dishonour. This is the demonstration of divine solidarity that restores the dignity of the people and provides for them the real comfort they have always needed to understand the reality of God as their God. In verse 4, there is the transformation of mountains and valleys in order to make them useful in making the experience of the home-coming of the Israelites from exile not only possible but also smooth. The imagery of every mountain, hill, valley and rough ground is a symbol of a distorted creation that makes it hostile to the flourishing of human life. These harsh and hard places shall become “level”, and “the rugged places a plain.” This will make life possible to enjoy and to flourish on the way to the new place of freedom and rehumanisation.

The act of divine solidarity and the gracious remaking of nature to be useful and to make the return of the exiles comfortable and jubilant is leading to a climax, which is the revelation of the “glory of the Lord” (vs. 5). The trauma that came when Israel fell shows also the exile of the glory of the Lord (Ezek 10); as in the story of the birth of the boy in the house of the old priest Eli, the glory of Israel departs (*Ikavod*) during the exile. But now the end of the exile is the complete reversal of the history of trauma. It is the time of new vision and new emotions for the restoration of the presence of the Lord to

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<sup>8</sup> By way of a quick summary of her perspective on the theology of God as adoptive parent, Claassens (2023:2) explains that, “This article argues that when considering the rhetorical and theological significance of the metaphor of divine adoption in the Hebrew Bible, it is important to keep in mind the complexities associated with this metaphor, which includes not only the multiple layers of trauma associated with the origin and reception of this metaphor but also the trauma associated with the adoptive process and the ongoing relationship between parent and adopted child that may be fraught with ambiguity. Read in the context of individual and collective trauma, this article makes a case for the interpretative potential of this metaphor in times when people literally and figuratively have felt, and still may be feeling, like motherless (and fatherless) children.” Claassens further discusses “The Trauma of adoption and God as adoptive parent” (p. 5) and warns that, “The metaphor of divine adoption carries with it a range of connotations associated with the adoption process that in itself is a greatly traumatic experience that affects all partners involved” (p. 5).

the people. The glory of the Lord shall be “revealed” and “all people will see it together.” This latter phrase points more to the eschatological experience of the glory of the Lord than just for the time of the end of the exile. But in a sense, it is deeply symbolic of the restoration of harmony, identity, and right emotions to the people of God for the return of God to and with his people after a long time of serious abandonment and unimaginable trauma.

The jubilant announcement continues in verses 10 and 11, which are meant to heal the trauma of the exiles and give them new comfort and a new vision of life. The call to “See” twice in verse 10 points to the eminence of the dawn of the new time of freedom for the people of God. This is the “new thing” of Yahweh in their time and in their midst, which they found hard to “perceive” or actually understand. The idea is to awaken their senses to the reality that God is not dead and cannot be defeated. But rather God is coming “for” them and not “against” them. The Lord is coming “with power” in order to establish his promised “rule”, and he will “reward” and “recompense” his people accordingly. This announcement is meant to give them a new insight that will lead to a sigh of good relief from the trauma of the past and the then-present trouble of exile.

The imagery of a good shepherd is used in order to convey how the Lord “tends” his “flock” (his people). He no longer abandons them, nor does he neglect their troubles, but rather “He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (vs. 11). The idea of gathering the lambs in his arms now provides a new vision of love and intimacy between the Lord and his people. The new Israel of God is now like a flock of lambs. This is an imagery that depicts their innocence and vulnerability at the same time. The Lord gathers them back to a special position “in his arms” which depicts their position of love and honour and no longer that of distance and rejection. Their being carried “close to his heart” restores their dignity and identity as the new-found people of God. His gentle act of care to those that have young is the enactment of the tenderness with which he earlier asked the prophet to speak to them and to treat them. The future is given to them now: they did not perish in the land of Babylon but they will even be able to bear young ones (vs.11). In this message of comfort and freedom, the people of Israel are given a new future in which they will not only be restored to their land in safety and peace but also be restored to a healed relationship with their God.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, how should we read the book of Isaiah from a trauma hermeneutical perspective? Firstly, we need to begin with acknowledgement of the contestation of the book as a whole, that the book of Isaiah is a complex material that deals with the complexity of the history and theological life of Judah. The time of carelessness and rebellion met its match in the judgement of Yahweh (chaps. 1–39). This was a time of terror from the Lord. In the announcement of the coming of terror and exile, the Israelites were plunged into serious trauma (Esterhuizen 2017). Their experience of life in Babylon was like that of those gone already into the abyss. Yet, the Lord was gracious and compassionate: the Lord sent Isaiah with new words of forgiveness, comfort, and deliverance from the place of trauma and from the situation of trauma. The possibility of the healing of trauma is demonstrated in the history of the people of Israel, which gives

the biblical text its living character of continual instruction of hope for readers of all generations.

Secondly, the canonical nature of the book of Isaiah is a good warning to all people of God then and now to be serious in their commitment to God and to work for that which brings peace, goodness, progress and harmony. Trauma is disruptive, but peace is healing. The book of Isaiah is a critique of human nature, the nature of idols, the futility of idolatry, and the fragility of the world. Its canonical texture opens us up to the unsettling reality of God and the certainty of God's justice. This is rooted in God's covenantal love and faithfulness, which still preserves the world.

Thirdly, to a postcolonial reader of the book of Isaiah, from trauma theory perspective, it is evident that colonising forces are all consuming. They appear very successful when they come from an ideology of retribution. Nevertheless, the good news is that their days are numbered. Yahweh uses the enemies of Israel to judge them only for a time, but then from a compassionate heart of love, God provides them freedom and great joy. Trauma came as a result of their injustice and rebellion against the love of God and the purity of his law. Yet, God in gracious love ended their time of exile, cleared the highway for them, and sent a good news messenger to announce the message of their release from the agony of exile and the trauma and dehumanisation.

What remains for us in African contexts of deep corruption, injustices and hypocrisy that often depress and dehumanise us is to be like the prophet Isaiah, who eagerly waited with the exiles for the coming of the new time, for the new speech of freedom and joy for the people. We need to resist all forms of dehumanisation and evil that would traumatise us and others, and work for an inclusive healing for all people and the good creation of God. It is at the end of exile, at the end of trauma that the new feeling of relief came to Israel, all sorrow and sighing shall flee away, and only joy and everlasting freedom will remain (Isa. 35:10). Until then we must work for the healing of all the oppressed around us and even those far off, keeping hope alive within the certainty of the coming end of trauma. Our actions of goodwill now will open the doors of freedom and give strength to the weak and captive to help them understand that there is more, something much more than the trauma that they experience.

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