

Unsettling Truths and Exodus 20:22-26: An Appeal for more Trauma-Informed

Approaches to Racial Reconciliation in Christianity

Introduction

As a third-culture Black woman whose socialization was split between the U.S. and the Caribbean, I have struggled with the topic of race in the United States in a specific manner. By appearance I bear the weight of the racist history of this country, but by heritage, I lacked intuitive and inherited context for much of what I was experiencing.

In my ethnically diverse but monocultural corner of Christianity, there were even fewer answers. Mostly, we avoided the topic. When inevitable we were reminded that racism was a sin but then the argument shifted to parsing what constitutes racism or does not. None of this gave me much clarity on why the Christianity I experienced in the U.S. simultaneously participated in racism while vociferously declaring it to be wicked.

This paper argues that integration of a trauma lens into American Christianity's engagement with racism can offer valuable insights and enrich efforts to confront racism both within the church and in society. First, I share how *Unsettling Truths's* engagement with trauma, race, and Christianity opened lines of inquiry pertinent to racial healing. Next I introduce three elements relating to racial healing that my westernized Christianity struggled to address and how the lens of trauma gave helpful context and explanation. Finally, the paper looks at Exodus 20:18-26 as the children of Israel exhibit a trauma response and God employs some principles of trauma-informed care toward the collectively traumatized.

Caveats, Disclaimers, and Definitions

This paper uses a comprehensive definition of racism. Rowe defined it as “prejudice, discrimination, antagonism, or the systematic oppression of people and communities of color.”

(Rowe 2020, 11). The same goes for trauma, when used, it references a comprehensive concept, but specified trauma will be mentioned when applicable. This paper operates on the assumption that, as argued by other scholars elsewhere, racism is traumatic. (Rowe 2020; Winters 2020; DeGruy 2017).

In acknowledgment that Christianity is not a monolith, I clarify that in this paper I am mostly referring to a westernized folk Christianity shaped by colonialism and anti-Black racism as mostly is referenced in literature on race in America.

Finally, Christianity, has often approached racism as a matter of morality and theology that requires reconciliation. Even the conversations that explicitly address and include trauma are often wielded to illustrate the horror of racism and its effects. The purpose of this paper is not to exhaustively map this gap, but to illustrate what becomes visible when we apply the trauma lens to the discussion of racism in American Christianity in addition to the immoral nature of the issue.

Race, Christianity, and Trauma

In U.S.-based Christianity, the racism discourse incorporates a cross-section of fields. These include historical accounts (Tisby 2019; Snow 2024), social investigations (Emerson and Bracey II 2024), and expectedly, theologically minded works (Jennings 2010). Readers will also find authors like Brenda Salter McNeil and Sheila Wise Rowe who discuss racism and trauma explicitly and engage on racial reconciliation and healing. While any one of those publications evidence and even examine the traumatic impact of racism, few dwell on the implications of an entire population of people being traumatized for centuries in the United States.

In 2019's *Unsettling Truths*, Dr. Soong-Chan Rah and Mark Charles also contributed to the body of work at the nexus of race, trauma, and Christianity. Having shared Charles's example

of PTSD, the authors turned the lens onto White Americans. Using the intergenerational, collective and complex nature of PTSD (Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's Historical Trauma Response (HTR)) in minoritized populations as a template, *Unsettling Truths* posits that White Americans may be dealing with something similar: an intergenerational collective version of Rachel McNair's (PITS) Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (Charles and Rah 2019, chap. 11).

For Charles and Rah, the examination of racism as trauma yielded possible insight into the White American psyche and its collective struggle to even converse about race. The two also found some encouragement and an increased sense of agency and equality for minoritized persons that they believe would help the reconciliation process. (Charles and Rah 2019, 176).

The traumatized nature of the White American population may be uncomfortable for some, but if true, one cannot ignore that such a possibility would affect the complexion of racial healing efforts. It appears then, that Christians like me who desire to be a part of the racial solution in the U.S. could benefit from an expansion of the perspective through which we tackle the issue. We should continue the ethical and theological repentance from Christianity's role in the development and proliferation of racism. We can also further this work by facing racism as a traumatic force and confronting folk teachings that might be hampering wholistic healing.

Conceptual Integration of Racism as Trauma Lens

Non-linear progress

One adjustment Christians in western circles may have to make when examining racism through the lens of trauma is from linear thinking to cyclical. Linear time assumes that time "mov[es] from the past via the present to the future following an irreversible and unidirectional path, without returning to previous states." Whereas "Cyclical time suggests that events recur,

following some pattern” (Lammers and Liu 2025, 1–2). Christianity, as Lammers and Liu assert, is often seen as having propagated a linear perspective. The two even label “the Christian view of history, running from creation to the end of days via a single divine plan” as “incompatible with a cyclical time perspective.”(Lammers and Liu 2025, 2).

Western minds primarily conceiving of time in the linear fashion grants some cultural context as to why, when asked for their emotions about reparations, 4 of the 16 open responses from White Christians invoked time (i.e. “in the past,” “of the past,” and “history cannot be changed.”) (Emerson and Bracey II 2024, 87). The cultural paradigm where the past stays in the past is less capable and willing to revisit the past even if it will help in the present.

Inconveniently, racism, following the typical behavior of trauma, tends to follow a non-linear pattern. In fact, as Mark Wolynn illustrates in *It Didn't Start With You*, leaving the past behind without full integration into the present self is more likely to perpetuate the recurrent cycle of trauma. As Herman states “traumatic events ultimately refuse to be put away, at some point the memory of the trauma is bound to return, demanding attention.” (Herman 2015, 187).

Through experience, African American thinkers have known for a while that racism tends to follow a cyclical pattern of progress and regression. In fact, the African-American community speaks of the U.S.’s pendulum frankly. There are Reconstruction periods where Black people in America make progress, and then there is a backlash where there is regression. The back and forth over race is so expected, it has acquired the moniker “‘whitelash’: a reactionary impulse of many White voters toward racial equality movements and societal shifts they perceive as excessive” (Smith 2020, 3).

Seeing racism’s cyclical nature is imperative because if good faith Christians engage in racial restorative efforts on the premise that the past must be behind us, then the cyclical

boomerang of racial trauma will continue to ricochet between progress and regression endlessly. Furthermore, the ongoing cycle will create more traumatized people and new trauma patterns as the earlier sins continue to “stalk vulnerable prey into the next generations.” (Wolynn 2017, 19).

Bystander Conversation

Reframing racism as a mass trauma also gives insight into the status of the bystander. Like many with immigrant backgrounds, I often felt like a bystander when it came to racism in the U.S. I might be present for a traumatic event, but since I was neither a perpetrator nor the intended victim (Bush et al. 2019, 208), I had “the opportunity to either condone, intervene, or do nothing” (RodenhizerStämpfli et al., 2018; Barnyard, 2011, as cited in Henson et al., 2020). In retrospect, my Christianity mostly conditioned me to prioritize not being the sinful perpetrator and my humanity greatly desired not to be the victim either.

Christian ethical guidelines like the golden rule demand that bystanders participate in harm mitigation, but an understanding of trauma furthers the perspective. Racism as trauma means racial healing attempts must take into consideration impact and not just culpability. Between intergenerational trauma (Palmer et al. 2023, 20), vicarious trauma (Herman 2015, 115–21) and the stress experienced by bystanders (Janson and Hazler 2004, 249; Emdad et al. 2013) and witnesses (Stephens 2021), trauma leaves impact way beyond the right and wrong of perpetrator and victim or even the traditional and limited narrative of Black vs. White.

For Christians living in America and dealing with race, this means at least a few things. No longer can the sentence “no one alive was a slave and no one alive had slaves” shut down conversations about how we can heal from racism. All must self-examine to see how racism has had impact in our lives and our societies. Christianity cannot buy into the delusion that we can escape by carefully avoiding becoming the victim and stepping out of the role of perpetrator. If

humanity or Christianity considers itself a body of Christ, then the impact of racism on one people group isn't solely the problem of that people group. The whole body suffers, compensates, and if the body wants to heal, all must invest in healing the wounded parts.

Black Anger and the Healing Process

Finally, Christians making the shift to seeing racism as trauma may well see a shift in how they perceive the role of Black anger. “Ever present anger” was named as part of DeGruy’s PTSS (DeGruy 2017, 115), Rowe included a chapter named rage (Rowe 2020, chap. 4), and in an edited volume assembling Christian perspectives on anger, anger relating to race got its own essay (Cook, Jason 2021).

There is general acknowledgement that there is room in Christianity for righteous anger. But as Cook expresses, not only do “Christians often regard anger as a negative emotion to be avoided.” (Cook, Jason 2021, 139)... the legitimacy of anger in the victims of social injustice becomes clouded because other emotions like bitterness, hatred and desire for revenge complicate the matter.” (2021, 139).

Cook attributes some of the western societies’ objections to anger to the idealization of “rational logic over emotion, concerns about the destructive possibilities that anger can unlock, and the temptation for anger to engender further anger” (139-140). In addition, Christians often wield verses reminding people, especially those they would rather keep silent, that “the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” (James 1:20) and repeat calls for forgiveness and to love thy neighbor (Matt 22:39).

Mercifully, the trauma lens is very clear that that anger is an expected part of post-trauma process. Especially when the trauma remains unresolved. However, even treating anger as little more than an inevitable step in the recovery process may be underselling the utility of this

emotion. Integrating trauma, not only can Christians see Black anger and the expression thereof as helpful, but even as a hopeful sign that some racial healing is in fact taking place.

In 2025, Tharp et al. published an article on how social power influences emotional regulation, specifically anger and sadness. Across three studies, they found that when participants imagined themselves to be in an asymmetrical power dynamic as opposed to one of equal power, “[they] reported using more suppression, less acceptance, and more reappraisal for anger and sadness.” (Tharp et al. 2025, 12). The studies show that this effect was at least partially mediated by their sense that those emotions would not be appropriate in an asymmetrical power dynamic. (Tharp et al. 2025, 13).

Though it would be interesting to see what sort of data Tharp and company might attain if race were an added variable, there is something interesting to postulate based on this research. Assuming that anger is more likely to be suppressed or reanalyzed in asymmetrical power-dynamics as opposed to equal power dynamics, then perhaps the expression of anger or even its increase is a sign that those who are angry are feeling less unequal than prior. In addition, since the studies indicate suppression or reappraisal of anger is influenced by concerns for propriety, then an increase of expressed anger could indicate that concerns of propriety have been hiding the true nature and scope of the anger that Black people have regarding the trauma that is racism in the U.S. As such, an increase of anger could be interpreted as providing a more accurate measure of reality and allows for healing to begin in a more authentic and accurate manner.

Ex 20:22-26 and Divine Trauma Informed Care

Summary

Exodus 20¹ finds the children of Israel some three months removed from their Exodus from slavery and camped at the Mount where God, would meet them and speak to them. The chapter begins with God giving the decalogue – 10 commands/promises from the mountain to the people. In verse 18, we read that those people, experiencing the thunder, lightning, and noise, were struck with fear, “trembled and stood afar off.” In the next verse they request that God not speak to them directly because they were scared they would die; requesting that Moses instead function as intermediary. Moses tries to calm their fears, but to no avail. The people stay afar off while Moses approaches God.

The next passage verses 22-26 are as follows:

“Then the Lord said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘You yourselves have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven. You shall not make other gods besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves. You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stone for Me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it. And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, so that your nakedness will not be exposed on it.’”

Exodus 20:22-26 (NASB)

¹ Exodus 20 is understood as part of the covenant ceremony between YHWH and Israel. For some scholars (Bacchiocchi 2019, 80), the event is seen as a bridal ceremony the two. For this reason, and because the God of Hebrew Scripture also refers the nation as His bride, this paper will be incorporating this imagery into this exploration of the passages in question.

Analysis

Traditionally verses 18-21 and 22-26 of Exodus 20 are evaluated separately, with 18-22 presented as a transitional passage on Israel's fear and verses 22-26 as the beginning of something new - the Book of the Covenant. However, looking at verses 22-26 as a response to the fear shown in verses 18-21 links these two passages.

Narratively, the author of Exodus chose for the reader to encounter the altar laws immediately following the fear of Israel. The simplest reason for this is verses 22-26 follow the 18-21 verses chronologically. Alternatively, even if verses 22-26 do not follow 18-21 chronologically, the author chose to place them immediately following Israel's declaration of fear. I conclude then that there is sufficient narrative continuity between the fear passage and the altar instructions to propose an interpretation where the latter is a divine response to the former.

There are also two other reasons for this choice. The two pieces of scripture feature 2 thematic links that also speak directly to trauma-informed care; relationship and empowerment. In verses 18-21, the divine agenda for this relationship faces a challenge. The Israelites, whom God has brought unto himself, are terrified of Him beyond the point of being reasoned with. To reframe using the wedding motif, after God recites His vows to the bride, she cowers in fear. The next thing readers see is the bride requesting that Moses, an attendant, serve as intermediary between herself and the Bridegroom.

The altar laws, which some say are understood as guidelines for individual and family worship (Simeon Chavel 2015, 185), then list the appropriate ways to construct an altar. Plainly, this is a rule for acceptably approaching God. But coupled with the relational rupture that occurred prior, an instruction manual for worship isn't just about dos and don'ts of acceptability to God. As Tigay proposes, those instructions "revolve around the means of securing God's

presence...and bringing God near to bless his worshippers” (Tigay, n.d., 196, 202). Considering that the bride has just rejected close contact with God, the altar laws can be seen as God giving his terrified bride a step-by-step tutorial on the best way to call for the divine presence even amidst her fear-fueled withdrawal of verses 18-21.

Another thing happens that mirrors present-day convictions on trauma. In response to the Israelite request for some distance, God does not rebuke. Instead, God respects the request and keeps the door open for connection. As Herman shares, “trauma impels people ... to withdraw from close relationships” (Herman 2015, 66), but “recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (2015, 146). She counsels those who are charged with supporting the survivor through the healing journey to do what readers see God do here... “show some tolerance for the survivors’ fluctuating need for closeness and distance and some respect for her attempts to reestablish autonomy and self-control.” (Herman 2015, 70)

Finally, I am linking these two passages together because of the lens of empowerment. As Herman sees it, “psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless.” The Israelite company no doubt had experienced its share of trauma and feelings of powerlessness. Their experience included even in the triumph of the Exodus, it is God, and to some extent, Moses, who appears to be in power.

It is reasonable to speculate the display of divine power at Sinai which, struck them with terror, was a typical trauma response. Much like the relational remedy embodied in the altar laws, God’s again meets the traumatic moment by fulfilling the criteria Herman lays out as the first principle for trauma recovery – empowerment of the survivor (Herman 2015, 146). As I have presented, God is willing to let Israel have the space they have requested, an act that allows Israel some control (and therefore power) in regulating the bride-groom relationship. But in

verse 24b the promise God makes is also an empowering one. God promises that “in every place where I cause my name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you.”

Davidson sees as God’s promise in verse 24 that “wherever Israel may worship God by building an altar in one of the places where He has revealed Himself in an extraordinary way (and caused His name to be remembered) “[He] will come to [them] and bless [them].” (Doukhan and Davidson 2025, 1071). Tigay is even inclusive saying that “in every place where you invoke My name, I will come to you and bless you.” With the altar serving as the locus and symbol of God’s presence. (Tigay, n.d., 204–5).

Either way it appears that this groom is empowering the traumatized bride. Effectively God as husband acknowledges that the bride is not ready for such a close encounter. They accede to the request and promise that whenever she summons his presence in response to divine awesome acts, then He will accept the invite, meet her, and bless her. Framed that way, we can see how much power is being shared. The most powerful being the universe is willing to wait until His presence is explicitly requested before He shows up with gifts.

This passage also shows elements of the official principles of trauma informed care. Trauma informed care speaks of care that acknowledges the pervasive nature of trauma and incorporates the following 5 principles. Safety, Trust, Choice, Voice, Strengths and Resilience. (3 *Pillars & Principles Of A Trauma-Informed Approach* - CTRI 2025) Choice and Voice were somewhat covered in the previous paragraphs, but other elements are also present in how God cares for his bride here.

For example, by this point in the story the Lord has already done something key for the felt safety of the People of Israel. God has removed them from their abusive and traumatizing environment – Egypt. God has also destroyed the army attempting to overtake them and return

them to the land of their enslavement and through Moses God has promised that they will never see them again.

Maria Yellow Horse Brave heart, when presenting on Trauma Informed Care from the Historical Trauma (collective trauma) paradigm did not discuss all 5 points as trauma informed care but she had many similarities. These include “understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of trauma.”(Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart 2017). She too mentions the critical need for safety but adds an element that addresses the peculiarity of this type of collective and communal trauma. For Brave Heart, trauma-informed care includes an integration of the culture and history.

To this point, Davidson contributes a perspective that speaks directly to God incorporating their history into the story going forward. As Davidson points out, the altars built by the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were likely altars of earth or natural stone, (Doukhan and Davidson 2025, 1069) usually erected after some revelation of God or one of the marvelous works that cause God’s name to be remembered. Since collective traumatization sometimes leads to a disregard of community rituals, (Abramovitz as quoted by Birnbaum 2008, 541). one wonders if one of the reasons God reestablished this specific worship practice was to reestablish a connection to their pre-slavery heritage and ground them as they rebuilt their identity and lives post-Egypt.

Some may allege that reading trauma into the Bible through a 21st century lens is a risky proposition. But there is evidence that while Christianity has sometimes contributed to traumatic environments, the Bible also includes some principles that speak into dealing with trauma even in the present day. The reading of Exodus 20 and God’s trauma-informed way of handling the situation sets the bar high for His followers. God, who is not the perpetrator of Israel’s long term

trauma attends to the people in a trauma-informed way. How much more is the obligation of Christians and corporate Christianity to face the trauma it has caused as perpetrator of the historical trauma that is racism and enact trauma-informed practices in its attempts to work toward racial reconciliation?

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for the inclusion of a trauma-informed lens when looking at the matter of race in the United States. I presented not only how this lens has illuminated key points of inquiry in *Unsettling Truths* but how trauma brings clarity to conversations where the folk westernized Christianity has sometimes missed the mark. These were the cyclical nature of the trauma of racism, the necessity of addressing the impact of racial trauma in all people in addition to the moral positioning of perpetrator and victim and the utility and hope to be found in Black Anger. I also closed by sharing how God has sometimes met the challenge of trauma in a people group by showing how Gods response to Israel in Exodus 20 gives evidence of the place that trauma-informed care can have in the process of creating a new identity in a post-traumatic setting.

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