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ABANDONED BY JESUS: THE TRAUMA OF JESUS' ASCENSION

The First and Second Trauma

Christians today rightfully mourn the crucifixion and note its injustice in process and outcome, and trauma on the disciples and wider community. Paul notes that it becomes a stumbling block and folly for those within and outside of the Jewish community (e.g., 1Cor 1:18). For good reason, Good Friday is acknowledged as a day of mourning in Christian calendars around the world. The ascension of Christ is equally marked in Christian calendars but treated very differently: It is seen as a joyous occasion—Jesus glorified and sitting at the right hand of God (e.g., Acts 7:56; Rev 4–5)—often also in connection with Pentecost.

These modern responses to the events are understandable and theologically justifiable, but was this the experience of the Jesus' followers: the immediate twelve as well as the larger group of followers including secret disciples (e.g., Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea), family members and women (Acts 1:14)? The responses recorded in the gospels and Acts to both events—Jesus' death and ascension—are surprisingly similar: The followers disband from the location and relocate to Jerusalem (Mark 14:50; Acts 1:12), lock themselves in an upper room (Acts 1:13), contract to a limited core group (Luke 24:33; Acts 1:13–14) extending minimally beyond the twelve; find unifying elements as well as diverse responses (Acts 1:14, but also see the diverse approaches of the women, Peter, Thomas, John, the Emmaus disciples and Judas; Luke 24:13–35; Mark 16:8; John 20:24–29) and try to process the preceding events using narrative recounts, to a large extent.[1]

The events certainly parallel each other in their narrative storylines. In both instances the disciples approach the impending trauma with high hopes: Jesus triumphant entry in Jerusalem (Luke 19:28–40) and the question of the disciples "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) illustrate the disciples' expectations of the restoration of a Davidic monarchy.[2] Secondly, Jesus disappears

[1] For the significance of narrative recounting see Dori Laub, "An event without a witness: truth, testimony and survival." In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. Routledge, 1992: 75–92.

[2] Schnabel notes three aspects that are implied in the disciples question: "In the context of Jesus' messianic ministry and in the context of his postresurrection explanations about the kingdom of God, the disciples naturally think that (1) the kingdom is about to be restored to Israel, i.e., that Israel's royal rule will be restored in Zion/Jerusalem, and (2) Jesus will accomplish this. The disciples evidently assume that once Jesus the Messiah has restored Zion, Israel will finally be supreme among the nations (cf. Isa 49:6–7;

abruptly—at least for his followers, and is presumably gone forever or at least for a substantial period.[3] Thirdly, in Jewish messianic movements, there is no possibility for succession. A leader has been divinely "anointed." Contrary to political movements, where a succession plan is pre-determined or assumed, as in monarchies, or embattled, often in coups or counter-establishment groups, "anointing" cannot be automatically passed on to the next in-line. Finally, the social impact of having participated in a failed movement is devasting. In honor and shame cultures the social status and the livelihood is diminished or destroyed for generations to come.

That the disciples' response to both departures is similar is surprising itself as there are significant differences leading up to the abandonment: Jesus had repeatedly alerted the disciples to his impending death and given instructions for dealing with trauma both individually and collectively beyond his death (Luke 22:31–32; Matt 16:19; 18:18; 24:15–28; John 14–16). Repeatedly, the stories inform us that the disciples understand messages of Jesus in hindsight that Jesus had presented in foresight (e.g., John 12:16). But for the ascension Jesus shares no clear prior information.[4] Nor is there a sense in Acts or the epistles that the disciples could retrieve sayings of Jesus to help them navigate his second absence. In several ways then, the second abandonment is more severe: Jesus is gone for an indefinite time; Jesus seemingly did not prepare them for the ascension; there seems to be no parables or instructions to decode after the fact; and Jesus' departure is voluntary rather than forcibly imposed by soldiers. The only comfort to the disciples in the aftermath of the ascension, is the fact that they had gone through a similar experience a few weeks earlier. Or is this a situation of "what, again"?

Exploring the passage first through the traumatic experience of the early followers, rather than a subsequent theological framework, can shed a better understanding on both the response of the disciples as well as the theology. While

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Dan 7:14, 27 even speak of Israel's rule over the nations). Moreover, they assume that since Jesus is indeed the Messiah and since he saves Israel from her sins, it will be Jesus who grants Israel this exalted status." Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 76.

[3] In the aftermath of several ascensions (John 20:17; 1Pet 3:18–20) a comparative analysis of these and how the first followers would have understood these, would be a worthwhile further study.

[4] In John's recount of the Lord's Supper Jesus' shares final instructions to the disciples for the impending crisis in which they will "weep and lament" (John 16:20). He likens their distress to the pain of giving birth, but joy will overcome distress (John 16:20–24). Jesus' instructions looks deep into the future including future expulsion from synagogues (16:1), persecution by the world (John 15:20) and death (16:2–3). But Jesus also predicts hopeful events such as the coming of the comforter (16:7–10; 13–15) and the witness of the disciples about Jesus (John 15:27). Jesus' time referent though is limited to his death and resurrection: "A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me" (John 16:16). In retrospect Jesus conflates the developments of the first century, including the ascension, into what appears to be a singular event. Jesus here moves dynamically through events in first century (e.g., Matt 24), but from the disciples' perspective the death and resurrection would have fulfilled Jesus' time frame.

recognizing some of the limitations of literary trauma,[5] modern trauma studies[6] can shed significant light on the experience of Jesus' followers from the recorded reflections in the gospels and Acts.[7] Erich Linnemann's classic definition of trauma—"the sudden, uncontrollable disruption of affiliative bonds"— is a helpful starting point.[8] Jesus' unexpected departures—at the cross and at the ascension are the primary bonds broken inevitably followed by a series of additional, social and religious disruptions.[9]

The Disciples' Response

The response to the ascension will be the exploration of the remainder of this paper. The immediate response to the ascension has been noted above: attachment rupture leads to initial withdrawal—Jesus' followers return to the upper room.[10] Peter's

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[5] "Literary trauma theory is an artifact of the studied way in which texts are read, words that are never able to capture what they signify. The narrative is broken before it begins. In real trauma, it is human attachments that are broken after they have been established." C. Fred Alford, "Literary Theory is not Trauma Theory," *The Montreal Review* Nov 2023. https://www.themontrealreview.com/Articles/Literary_Theory_Is_Not_Trauma_Theory.php#:~:text=Literary%20trauma%20theory%20is%20an,love%20that%20is%20worth%20remembering. See also the critique of Stef Craps that the existing theories are predominantly built on Western definitions, ideals and experiences from medical and psychological perspectives. Stef Craps, "Wor(l)ds of Grief: Traumatic Memory and Literary Witnessing in Cross-Cultural Perspective," See also Stef Craps, "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age." In *The Future of Trauma Theory,* eds. G. Buelens et al. (London: Routledge, 2014), 45–60.

[6] David G. Garber explores the intersection of trauma and biblical studies going back to 1877 exploring post-exilic writings, particularly Ezekiel. At first a medical approach, later a Freudian psychoanalytical approach were employed. Modern trends, starting in the 2000s, explore the literary aspect anchored in the reality of the historical settings. "Smith-Christopher suggested that one examine the book in the context of sociopolitical events and consider the prophet's behavior in the light of the 'actual traumatic circumstances' of the exile." David G. Garber, "Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies," *Currents in Biblical Research*, *14*/1 (2015): 24-44.

[7] The recorded accounts that we have are terse and incomplete, and yet they do offer an honest recollection of traumatic experience and thus can act as an accurate witness. The importance of listening, even in disjointed and non-linear narratives, is essential to the resolution of trauma. See the importance of witness, testimony and narrative. Dori Laub, "An event without a witness: truth, testimony and survival." In Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, London: Routledge, 1992: 75–92.

[8] Erich Lindemann, "Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief," *American Journal of Psychiatry,* vol. 101 (1944): 141–149. More specific literary definitions are varied: "Biblical interpreters recognize manifold aspects of trauma, which include not only the immediate effects of events or ongoing situations but also mechanisms that facilitate survival, recovery, and resilience." Christopher G. Frechette and Elizabeth Boase, "Defining 'Trauma' as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation." In *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma,* eds. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette (Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 2.

[9] David W. Peters explores the Gospels through the lens of the post-traumatic Jesus. Exploring parables and healing stories, he engages those that have experienced trauma to give them hope of a "healing Gospel." But his exposition stops short of the ascension (though briefly mentioned in Luke's Gospel). David W. Peters, *Post-Traumatic Jesus: A Healing Gospel for the Wounded.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2023. Similarly, see

[10] Luke's expression that the followers experience an intense sense of unity post-trauma, is the first part of a restoration process in which the first followers bond closely with each other. This text should thus be treated very cautiously as a framework for all interactions within the community (see subsequent events

address to the assembled group of 120 (Acts 1:15—22) marks a shift from withdrawal to reorientation and becomes the verbalized processing to this second trauma. The speech contains two parts: the first is a narrative retelling—rendered in gruesome details—of Judas Iscariot's demise; the second half an appeal to fill his missing position amongst the disciples.

The Testimony

The Judas narrative (1:15–20) is disturbing in two aspects: First, in an honor and shame culture association with a traitor would diminish standing of any individual or community. Recounting a shameful act would further lower the standing of the disciples to the hearers and reader (1:16–17). Second, the recounting explores unnecessary gory details (1:18–19). The testimony paints a vivid picture of Judas' body, as having fallen headlong, split open in the torso, and "all his bowels gushed out." F. F. Bruce argues that this should be viewed as a parenthetical phrase of Luke as "Peter did not need to tell his hearers in the upper room what had happened to Judas."[11] But trauma studies offer a different perspective: The testimony—the recounting of a traumatic event—and its witnesses—those willing to listen—are an essential part of the recovery process for traumatic experiences.[12] Through the Judas story the gathered followers can confront the trauma of Jesus' death, Jesus' ascension, as well as their own collective culpability.[13]

But Judas' demise serves more than recounting the past, it also allows a way to move forward: Peter frames the story as prophetic fulfilment (1:16). "Both the defection of Judas and the necessity of replacing him are viewed here as subjects of Old Testament prophecy."[14] Peter's proposal to fill Judas' position, allows the community to move forward.

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that balance unity against other ethical or scriptural values Acts 4; 5; 7; 15). Garber, reflecting on OT experiences, notes: "The community offers a cushion for the pain and serves as a repository for building traditions, an insight that is quite important when considering the corporate nature of the production and transmission of texts." Garber, "Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies."

[11] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 45.

[12] Cathy Caruth has been formative in exploring testimony after traumatic events. Her central thesis is that trauma disconnects memory from time. Memories arise as symptoms not as stories. Trauma is reexperienced in flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety and physical tension but not as stories. Alford disagrees: Comparing David Boder's 1947 interviews of Holocaust victims with later recollections, he notes "Many victims of terrible trauma can give a coherent narrative account of their experience in the recent aftermath of their ordeal." Alford, "Literary Trauma is Not Trauma Theory." See also Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History*. (New York: Praeger, 1998).

[13] On the significance of witnesses to the testimony—in the Acts account the larger group of 120 followers, see Dori Laub, "An event without a witness."

[14] "Both the defection of Judas and the necessity of replacing him are viewed here as subjects of Old Testament prophecy. The use of messianic "testimonies" from the Old Testament texts which had found their fulfilment in the story of Jesus and its sequel and therefore had great evidential value in witnessing

The Solution

Peter's proposal seems obvious to modern readers, but it is surprising in two ways: First, it indicates the continuous relevance of the community. This is contrary to the natural response to a missing Messiah, namely disbanding.[15]

Secondly, Peter urges the disciples to understand themselves as a prophetic New Covenant community. Peter's emphasis on filling the vacant "office" points to a recognition that Jesus' selection—though a larger number of followers was available to Jesus—has prophetic significance. The allusion to the twelve tribes of Israel as covenant community of the OT, is obvious. There is no other significant reference to twelve in the OT context. Peter calls for the perpetuity of Jesus' calling, recognizing that they are to be the covenant community in a new era.

But Peter goes one step further: In his use of Psalms, he points to a new understanding of covenant community. They are not to be just a continuation of the old in a new era; they are to be a New Covenant community. The reference to the Psalms is surprising: In light of allusions to the Abrahamic covenant, Peter justifies his actions based on the Psalms 69 and 109. Hermeneutical questions arise: Why draw from the wisdom literature and does the LXX reference to *episkopē* (Psalm 109: 6) justify the position of disciple?[16] Peter here expands the realm of fulfillment language and opens the door for a continued expansion. In his next speech (Acts 2) he will expand his justification to the prophets (Joel 2), as will James later to justify the inclusion of the gentiles without circumcision citing Amos 9 (Acts 15:16–18). Additionally, Jesus had repeatedly drawn from the Psalms throughout his ministry and especially in the passion narrative. In fact, the very Psalm Peter quotes from is on Jesus' lips in his final address to the disciples (Psalm 69:4 in John 15:25) depicting the hatred that will lead to his execution. "Peter's quotation from Psalm 69:25 (LXX 68:26) is part of this exegetical tradition. Things said of David or of righteous sufferers more generally in the psalms were interpreted as having their ultimate fulfillment in the life of Jesus as Son of David and Servant-Messiah."[17]

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to Jews was a prominent feature of primitive Christian testimony and apologetic." F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 44.

[15] The Gospel of John recounts the initial response of the disciples in the aftermath of the first trauma: They return to their homes and resume their livelihoods prior to the calling of Jesus (John 21:1–2). Note similar responses to other Jewish messianic movements of the first and second century.

[16] For a discussion of the use of *episkopē* in the OT and NT see the dictionary discussion of Eike Mueller, *episkopos* in SDABTD (forthcoming).

[17] David Peterson, The Acts of the Apostles, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 124. C. H. Dodd goes further to note that "Psalm 69 was one of the major blocks of OT material used by the earliest Christians on the topic of 'The Servant of the Lord and the Righteous Sufferer', and applied to Jesus the Christ, the Servant and the Righteous Sufferer par excellence." *According to the Scriptures. The Sub-Structure of the New Testament* (London: Nisbet, 1952), 61–108. For more recent discussions, see D. J. Moo, 'The Problem of Sensus Plenior', in D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (ed.) *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 179–211.

Peter's hermeneutics are Christological in the sense then that they lead to Christ, but also interpreted by and through Jesus. If Jesus can employ the psalm passages to make sense of his impending death, Peter demonstrates that they can also make sense of past trauma.

The implications of the New Covenant community will be gradually unraveled in the remainder of the book of Acts. But already now Jesus' answer to the disciples' kingdom question receives some meaning: They are to share the good news in ever expanding realms (Acts 1:8). In the face of trauma, the community has a purpose and a meaning.[18]

Peter's approach then opens the way to coming to terms with the trauma of the absent Jesus, the "*Deus absconditus."* This includes a new understanding of the community in light of scriptural fufillment. These at times obscure passages present a continuation of a hermeneutic developed in this early response to trauma. As such Peter's first speech is a profound summary of a theological understanding that occurs in the silence—for us—of the upper room. It lays for the cornerstone to understand the working of the Holy Spirit in miraculous events as well as future conflicts in the book of Acts.

Summary

It has often been stated that the Pentecost event is the foundation of the proceedings of Acts and chapter 1 functions as little more than an aperitif. This paper argues though that the most significant event in Acts is the theological and hermeneutical reimagination in the aftermath of trauma. Dealing with the absence of Jesus leads to new identity that produces results: The working of the Holy Spirit in the Pentecost event[19] is an affirmation of the theological reconceptualization expressed in Peter's speech. Chapter 2 then is the first of many developments and outward manifestations of a new identity.

In many ways the rest of the New Testament addresses different perspectives of why Jesus left, what he is now doing, and how we should live in the present reality. In practical terms, as has been noted by trauma specialists, testimony and witness—even if painful—are essential to recovery; but Peter reminds us that a biblical understanding of the self and the community in and through Christ is an essential aspect for Christians to live and recover from trauma.

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[18] On the importance of meaning in light of trauma, see the work of Victor Frankl. E.g., Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning. (*Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

[19] It must be affirmed that this is only the first outwardly visible act of the Holy Spirit. Peter's reference to the Holy Spirit in his opening line (Acts 1:16) and the implied action of the Holy Spirit through prayer (Acts 1:14) and lots (Acts 1:26) exemplify the Holy Spirit's continuous action in Acts.