

Toward an Adventist Theology of Trauma

by Elise Linné Harboldt

Does Seventh-day Adventist theology have something uniquely valuable and healing to offer to victims of mistreatment, abuse, and trauma? Can anything particularly relevant to trauma survivors be found in the distinctive cluster of theological beliefs that form the architecture of Adventism? These questions have captured my interest for the past decade due to my own journey wading through the devastating aftermath of complex trauma as well as my interest in helping others to do the same.

In the lives of believers, traumatic experiences will inevitably be interpreted through the lens of personal theological beliefs. A variety of doctrines influence how people of faith understand what happened to them, God's response to it, and what their own response should be. Divergent systems of belief offer varied theologies of trauma, which diversely impact the lived experiences of those who have been hurt.¹ With this in mind, how might an Adventist theology or theodicy of trauma be appropriately understood and articulated?

Any rigorous theology or theodicy of trauma will be systematic and comprehensive in nature—shaped by a variety of doctrinal beliefs that must be held in proper tension with one another. I will now provide a brief overview of six truths that collectively form my own iteration of an Adventist theology of trauma.

1. A robust understanding of human free will in the context of cosmic conflict

Adventism rejects theological determinism's claim that that all human acts, including those of sin and abuse, are mysteriously predetermined and therefore compatible with God's good and sovereign plan. One extreme form of this view is hauntingly articulated by Mark Talbot's claim that, although we don't yet understand why, God "even brought about the Nazi's brutality...and even the sexual abuse of a young child."² Adventist theology categorically contradicts this notion, understanding abuse to be a grievous misuse of human free will occurring within the context of the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan.³ The view that every act of injustice

¹ See, for example: Jessica H. Wortmann, Crystal L. Park, and Donald Edmondson, "Trauma and PTSD Symptoms: Does Spiritual Struggle Mediate the Link?" *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 3, no. 4 (2011): 442–52; Paul Maxwell, *The Trauma of Doctrine: New Calvinism, Religious Abuse, and the Experience of God* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

² Mark Talbot, "All the Good That Is Ours in Christ: Seeing God's Gracious Hand in the Hurts Others Do to Us," message at the Desiring God 2005 National Conference, 2005. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/all-the-good-that-is-ours-in-christ-seeing-gods-gracious-hand-in-the-hurts-others-do-to-us>

³ John C. Peckham, "Does God Always Get What He Wants? A Theocentric Approach to Divine Providence and Human Freedom," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 52, no. 2 (2014): 195–212.

stands entirely in opposition to God's loving character and plan for His creatures can be deeply helpful for victims of trauma who are tempted to conflate human mistreatment with God's will.⁴

2. A robust understanding of God's active efforts to protect the vulnerable

Although God respects human free will, He does not step idly back as His children mistreat one another. Rather, He tirelessly works through a variety of channels to combat sin, abuse, and evil. These include His word, His Spirit, His angels, the legal system, hopefully the church, and all Spirit-led human attempts to fight injustice and protect the vulnerable. This active engagement stands in contrast to strict classical theism's claim of divine immutability (that God does not alter His actions in response to human actions).⁵ Victims of trauma can potentially find comfort in the idea that God did in fact do everything He possibly could to intervene in their particular situations, even though His actions were limited by human free will and evil cosmic forces.⁶

3. A robust understanding of God's sovereignty in the face of evil

Adventism's cosmic conflict framework preserves the critical tension between human free will and divine sovereignty. Human freedom is often exercised contrary to God's will, yet God creatively works in broken situations to bring about as much good as possible. This truth is powerfully illustrated in the story of Joseph, who, after a series of traumatic events, ultimately claims that God has recycled the sins of others for a greater good (Genesis 50:20). Of course, not every biblical account of human mistreatment has such a positive resolution. It is trite, dismissive, and potentially inaccurate to tell victims of grievous sins or losses that more good or meaning will come out of these events than harm.⁷ Nevertheless, victims of mistreatment may find a degree of comfort in the truth that God's sovereign love is at work to bring as much redemption as possible into shattered situations.

4. A robust understanding of God's emotional response to human trauma

Strict classical theism claims that God's emotions are not changed or influenced by human experiences or feelings. This view, divine impassibility, is heavily influenced by Greek

⁴ For a poignant and tragic example of this conflation, see: Chris Bodenner, "How Can God Allow Monsters to Prey on Children?" *The Atlantic*, August 14, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2016/08/how-can-god-allow-monsters-to-prey-on-children/623366/>

⁵ John C. Peckham, "Classical Theism and Theological Method: A Critical Inquiry," *Religions* 15, no. 8 (2024): 915.

⁶ For a persuasive account of how cosmic forces also contribute to trauma, see: John C. Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 1–86.

⁷ Fiona Kau, Joanne Lusher, and Alastair Pipkin, "Meaning-making in the Aftermath of Trauma: A Narrative Review," *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews* 21, no. 1 (2024): 1205.

philosophy and notions of divine simplicity, immutability, and timelessness.⁸ God is thought to be an “unmoved mover,” because any God who would be emotionally impacted by the actions or feelings of His creatures is assumed to be contingent and weak. Mullins provocatively notes that an impassible God would meet the psychological criteria of a psychopath.⁹ Yet these notions have profoundly influenced certain aspects of classical Christian theology. As Fortin notes, Adventism is a minority among Christian denominations in its categorical rejection of the philosophical underpinnings that support divine timelessness, immutability, and impassibility.¹⁰ By contrast, Adventist theology portrays a God who is deeply moved by the suffering of His creatures. God’s omniscience and omnipresence make it possible for Him to experience comprehensive emotional attunement to each of His creatures at every moment in time. Survivors of trauma can find comfort in the fact that God is fully attuned to every detail of their experience.¹¹

5. A robust understanding of the trauma-informed nature of God’s judgement and justice

Many trauma victims experience significant distress when their hopes of justice are not realized.¹² After Jeffrey Epstein’s death prevented him from being convicted for his serial sex offenses, one of his victims said: “I will never have a sense of closure now. I’m angry as hell that the prison could have allowed this to happen and that I and Epstein’s other victims will never see him face the consequences for his horrendous actions. This stole from us the huge piece of healing that we needed to move on with our lives.”¹³

This example, and far too many like it, raise the critical question— when human justice fails, what form of divine justice would be most helpful and healing for trauma victims to trust in? Our perspectives on this question may be influenced by how much evil we have personally witnessed. Miroslav Volf writes: “I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn’t God love? Shouldn’t divine love be beyond wrath? My last resistance to the idea of God’s wrath was a casualty of the war in former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come...My villages and

⁸ John C. Peckham, “The Unchanging God Who Suffers in Love: Aseity, Immutability, and Qualified Passibility,” in *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture*, 25-72 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021); Peckham, “Classical Theism and Theological Method,” 915.

⁹ R. T. Mullins, “Is the Classical God a Psychopath?” *The Reluctant Theologian Podcast*, episode 93, August 4, 2022, audio.

¹⁰ Denis Fortin, “A Perspective on Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics,” in *Living the Christian Life in Today’s World: A Conversation between Mennonite World Conference and the Seventh-day Adventist Church 2011–2012*, ed. William G. Johnsson and Robert John Suderman, 252–54 (Silver Spring, MD: Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2014).

¹¹ Paul Bastien and Kevin Trochimowicz, “Attunement as the Core of Therapist-Expressed Empathy,” *Canadian Journal of Counselling & Psychotherapy* 49, no. 2 (2015): 155–68.

¹² Jan Ilhan Kizilhan and Johanna Neumann, “The Significance of Justice in the Psychotherapeutic Treatment of Traumatized People after War and Crises,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 11 (2020): 540.

¹³ CNN Transcripts, “Reaction to Epstein Death,” August 10, 2019, quoted statement by victim of Epstein.

cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandparently fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love."¹⁴

The biblical teaching that God condemns and punishes evil affirms that human beings deeply matter. Sexual assault survivor Rachael Denhollander speaks eloquently on this point.

"Punishment for evil does not happen because God does not love, but because he does. When my innocence was stolen as a young child, God saw that damage and he said, 'This is evil and it matters to me.' What happened to me matters and it is seen and it is heard and someone cares when no one else did."¹⁵

The doctrine of the sanctuary teaches that every act of sin and injustice is divinely condemned and punished. This has occurred in the substitutionary atonement, when all the selfishness and abuse of humanity was condemned in the person of Christ, causing excruciating pain to every member of the Godhead.¹⁶ The fact that God punished sin in Godself says to every victim of trauma: "What happened to you was not okay. You matter." Interestingly, a variety of literature affirms the psychological relevance of the substitutionary atonement for Christian trauma victims concerned with matters of justice.¹⁷

But what about the evil committed by unrepentant individuals who continue to cause harm? This evil will again be punished in the destruction of the wicked after the second resurrection. As heartbreaking as it will be for God to execute, this tragic event will clearly affirm that He condemns all oppression and abuse.¹⁸

¹⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 138–39.

¹⁵ Rachael Denhollander, "Can Faith Reconcile Justice and Forgiveness?" (lecture, The Veritas Forum, October 28, 2018), <https://opentheo.org/i/8412724103928173002/can-faith-reconcile-justice-and-forgiveness-rachael-denhollander>

¹⁶ Woodrow Whidden, "God is Love—Trinitarian Love!," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2006): esp. 118–119.

¹⁷ See, for example: Rachael Denhollander and Jacob Denhollander, "Justice: The Foundation of a Christian Approach to Abuse," paper presented at the 70th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 2018; Miroslav Volf, "The Wrath of God," in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 25th anniversary ed., 298–307 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019).

¹⁸ Jiri Moskala, "Toward a Biblical Theology of God's Judgment: A Celebration of the Cross in Seven Phases of Divine Universal Judgment (An Overview of a Theocentric-Christocentric Approach)," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15, no. 1 (2004): Article 10.

Since abusers often conceal their true character and actions, in-depth investigation is needed to determine who is and isn't safe. Similarly, the investigative judgement reveals to onlooking intelligences which individuals can safely be granted eternal life.¹⁹ Hence, the substitutionary atonement, the investigative judgement, and God's final executive judgement clearly demonstrate that the experiences of the abused and oppressed deeply matter to God.

The Need for Disclosure

Trauma survivors often wish that their perpetrators were made aware of the devastating effects of their actions. In court, individuals who have suffered serious harm are sometimes permitted to give victim impact statements. This enables victims to reclaim their voices by speaking the truth of their experiences in the presence of the perpetrator as well as the court.²⁰

God's judgment involves similar elements. Divine judgement is an act of disclosure, in which "truth crushed to the earth will rise again."²¹ "There is nothing secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light" (Luke 8:17). Although God speaks *on behalf* of the victims, He identifies so closely with them that He simultaneously makes a victim impact statement Himself. "Whatever you did to one of the least of these, you did to me." The millennium after Christ's return will also provide an opportunity for victim disclosure as redeemed individuals work through the interpersonal trauma with one another that was unable to be resolved in this life.

The Need for Closure

Eternal torment remains the official position of most Christian denominations. In this view, sin and evil never actually end. Although abusers will be exiled to hell, their sinfulness will remain a current reality rather than a distant memory. On the contrary, Scripture promises ultimate closure from all evil, suffering, and pain (Revelation 21:4).²²

Since a variety of emerging literature suggests that the teaching of eternal torment can itself be psychologically traumatizing, this particular understanding of God's justice may not be the most therapeutic one for trauma victims to adopt.²³ By contrast, a growing number of Christians are

¹⁹ Moskala, "Toward a Biblical Theology of God's Judgment," Article 10.

²⁰ Paul G. Cassell, "In Defense of Victim Impact Statements," *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law* 6, no. 2 (2009): 611–48.

²¹ William Cullen Bryant, *The Battle-Field*, in *The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant*, ed. Parke Godwin, vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1883), stanza 9.

²² Jiří Moskala, "The Current Theological Debate Regarding Eternal Punishment in Hell and the Immortality of the Soul," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 53, no. 1 (2015).

²³ See, for example: Chad Bahl, ed., *Deconstructing Hell: Open and Relational Responses to the Doctrine of Eternal Conscious Torment* (Eugene, OR: SacraSage Press, 2023).

embracing universalism. However, this perspective may feel morally troubling to some victims of trauma, as it can be seen to diminish moral responsibility, subvert justice, and compromise free will.²⁴

Rejecting dualism and the immortality of the soul, Adventists embrace annihilationism—a form of divine justice that avoids the issues associated with both eternal torment and universalism. From this perspective, God resurrects, confronts, and ultimately extinguishes the lives of the wicked. This is viewed as a tragic and yet loving act on God’s part, not only because it contributes to the emotional closure and safety of victims, but also because unrepentant abusers could never be happy in His presence.²⁵

6. A trauma-informed understanding of human forgiveness

Although Scripture teaches that believers should forgive, many Christians struggle with this concept. In a recent Barna survey, 23% of believers admitted to having someone in their life they “just can’t forgive.”²⁶ Those who have been deeply hurt are often resistant to the idea of forgiveness because it seems to minimize or excuse what they suffered. Although the psychological literature describes many benefits of forgiveness, some trauma experts argue that certain misunderstandings of forgiveness can compromise the safety and well-being of victims.²⁷

It can be difficult to reach a working definition of forgiveness. If forgiveness is the refusal to take revenge or the commitment to pray for whoever harmed us, this seems potentially within our reach. If, however, forgiveness is a promise to God that we will no longer experience any anger when we remember grave injustices, things start to get much more complicated. This is especially true for victims of complex trauma, whose nervous systems have been ravaged by the injuries they’ve sustained.

From a biblical perspective, forgiveness does not mean giving up on justice, but rather trusting in divine justice. Romans 12:19 states: “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.” Martin Luther King Jr. was able to remain nonviolent, in part, because he trusted in God’s justice. “How long will justice be crucified and truth buried?” he asked. “Not long. Because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long. Because you shall reap what you sow... How long? Not long. Because the

²⁴ Moskala, “The Current Theological Debate Regarding Eternal Punishment in Hell.”

²⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 1911 ed. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 542–43.

²⁶ Barna Group, “1 in 4 Practicing Christians Struggles to Forgive Someone,” *Barna*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/forgiveness-christians/>

²⁷ Kyler R. Rasmussen, Madelynn Stackhouse, Susan D. Boon, Karly Comstock, and Rachel Ross, “Meta-Analytic Connections between Forgiveness and Health: The Moderating Effects of Forgiveness-Related Distinctions,” *Psychology & Health* 34, no. 5 (2019): 515–34; Georgina H. Mills, “Swallowing Traumatic Anger: Family Abuse and the Pressure to Forgive,” *Public Philosophy Journal* 2, no. 2 (2019): 11

arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”²⁸ Christ was also able to cope with evil by trusting in God's justice. “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:23).

Christian forgiveness is not a commitment to emotional neutrality in the face of evil. As psychologist Dominick Hankle points out, the imprecatory Psalms, as well as similar passages in Scripture, can encourage trauma victims to engage in cathartic, therapeutic lament to the God who hates evil even more than they do.²⁹

In my opinion, the church’s promotion of forgiveness should be accompanied by practical opportunities for restorative justice. This approach seeks to compassionately examine the impact of sin on the victim, to identify what needs the victim has in light of what happened, and, when appropriate, to encourage repentance, accountability, repair, and the setting of proper boundaries.³⁰ Designed to benefit all parties, restorative justice is associated with a variety of positive outcomes and may provide the church an opportunity to minister to victims in a more trauma-informed way.³¹

Conclusion

Studying these concepts for my own personal healing has deepened my appreciation for Adventist theology. It is my conviction that Adventism provides a rich and robust theological framework for understanding God’s comprehensive response to human trauma. However, in order for the therapeutic potential of these concepts to be realized, they need to be communicated in increasingly relevant ways. Since trauma occurs in the context of relationships, healing must occur there also. May God give us grace we need to reflect His compassion, His attunement, and His justice, both theologically and relationally, to those who have been hurt.

²⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., “How Long, Not Long (Our God Is Marching On!),” March 25, 1965, Montgomery, Alabama.

²⁹ Dominick D. Hankle, “The Therapeutic Implications of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Christian Counseling Setting,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 38, no. 4 (2010): 275-80

³⁰ Carrie J. Menkel-Meadow, “Restorative Justice: What Is It and Does It Work?,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 3 (2007): 161–87, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.lawsocsci.2.081805.110005>.

³¹ Thomas M. I. Noakes-Duncan, *Communities of Restoration: Ecclesial Ethics and Restorative Justice* (London: T & T Clark, 2017).