

MEANING-MAKING, HOPE AND RESILIENCE: READING THE OLIVET DISCOURSE (MATT 24–25) AS A TRAUMA NARRATIVE IN AN AGE OF ANXIETY

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Biblical scholarship has long faced the challenge of finding constructive ways to discuss the disturbing stories of violence, warfare and suffering that abound in the Bible. In recent years, trauma hermeneutics has opened new vistas for engaging this topic in fresh and creative ways. The conversation brought together scholars from a range of disciplines, including psychology, medicine, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and literary studies. Roger Luckhurst, a literary theorist, insightfully observes that trauma is “a [complex] conceptual knot that binds together multiple strands of knowledge and which can best be understood through plural, multidisciplinary perspectives.”¹

Biblical studies is a latecomer to this conversation. The Society of Biblical Literature established a unit dedicated to the study of trauma as a hermeneutical lens only in 2013, which significantly intensified research in this area.² Notably, Old Testament trauma studies are far more developed than New Testament trauma research. This is largely because the Old Testament devotes considerable attention to the Babylonian exile which was a major traumatic experience marked by forced displacement and the loss of the temple as Israel’s national and covenantal centre, which shattered in core Israel’s identity. In the New Testament, research has been done particularly on the passion of Jesus, the traumatic events such as the killing of children in Betlehem and the suffering of Paul and early Christian communities.³ Surprisingly, the eschatological discourse of Jesus, though prompted by his prophecy of the destruction of the Second Temple and linked with a whole range of distresses, has received no attention in trauma studies.⁴ This is striking, because the

¹ R. Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), 4.

² Some of the earliest, in-depth considerations of the topic were Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010); David Janzen, *The Violent Gift: Trauma’s Subversion of the Deuteronomistic History’s Narrative*, LHBOTS 561 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012); Eve-Marie Becker, Jan Dochhorn and Else Holt, eds., *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions: Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond*, SANT 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, SemeiaSt 86 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2016).

³ For a comprehensive, but not so recent overview, see David G. Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” *CBR* 14 (2015), 24–44.

⁴ In my knowledge, no study has been undertaken on the trauma reading of the Eschatological Discourse of Jesus, in whichever of the three Synoptic Gospels. The closest work is Adele Reinhartz’s study entitled “The Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple as a Trauma for Nascent Christianity” (in *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions*, eds. Eve-Marie Becker, Jan Dochhorn and Else Holt, 275–288).

destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE is regarded as one of the most traumatic events in Jewish history, and one that was formative in the development of early Christianity.

This study seeks to fill a gap in trauma research by reading the Matthean Eschatological discourse (chs. 24–25), the fullest and longest synoptic representation of the teaching of Jesus on the eschaton, as a trauma narrative.⁵ Seventh-day Adventist interpretation has traditionally focused on the prophetic elements of this discourse, culminating in the parousia of Jesus. However, approaching the eschatological discourse through the lens of trauma promises to offer fresh insights, since different kinds of questions are asked in engaging with the text.

1. TRAUMA AS AN INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

Basic to trauma is an extremely distressing event that inflicts an inner wound and overwhelms the individual's or group's internal resources to cope.⁶ As a result of the woundedness, our inner world and fundamental assumptions are shattered to the core and “the confidence in the existence of a stable, ordered, and meaningful existence” is taken away from us.⁷ As Emanuel points out, “These are not surface-level ruptures. In many instances, they are cuts so deep into one's sense of self that their integrity – their lucidity as a self-thinking, self-functioning human – becomes disorganised.”⁸

Importantly, trauma as a reading lens is not a method per se but rather a heuristic framework. It is a “new mode of reading and of listening,”⁹ which shows sensitivity both to the historical aspects of traumatic events and to their representation in the biblical literature.¹⁰ A trauma text may function either (1) as a witness to trauma or (2) as an interpretation of trauma. When a text serves as a witness (e.g. Lamentations), attention should be paid not only

However, this short study does not engage directly with the text of any of the three versions of the eschatological discourse of Jesus (Matt 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21), but is historical in its interest.

⁵ The difference between the length of the three synoptical rendering of the Eschatological Discourse is astonishing. While Mark's (606 words; 37 verses) and Luke's (497 words; 32 verses) versions are not very far from each other, Matthew's version (1577 words; 97 verses) is incomparably longer. Expressed in percentages, the Matthean text is 260.23% longer from Mark's and 317.3% longer from Luke's version.

⁶ This reflects the assessment of John Briere and Catherine Scott (*Principles of Trauma Therapy: A Guide to Symptoms, Evaluation, and Treatment*, 2nd ed. [Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014], 10) that “an event is traumatic if it is extremely upsetting, at least temporarily overwhelms the individual's internal resources, and produces lasting psychological symptoms.”

⁷ Fred Alford, *Trauma and Forgiveness: Consequences and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10.

⁸ Sarah Emanuel, *Trauma Theory, Trauma Story: A Narration of Biblical Studies and the World of Trauma*, Brill Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 4.

⁹ Caty Caruth quoted in J. Roger Kurtz, “Introduction,” in *Trauma and Literature*, ed. J. Roger Kurtz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1–17(1).

¹⁰ Frechette and Boase, “Defining ‘Trauma,’” 13.

to what is spoken, but also to what remains unspoken. The gaps, repetitions and aporias within the text may reveal the impact of the trauma itself, which is often difficult to articulate directly. On the other hand, some texts may function as a means of generating hope and facilitating resilience and meaningful living beyond traumatic events, both for individuals and for communities (e.g. Book of Revelation).¹¹

There is no single trauma theory. In her recent study, Elisabeth Boase identifies five different theoretical frameworks which are currently utilized within biblical studies. While she observes certain layers of overlap among these approaches, she demonstrates how each one highlights different interpretive nuances.¹² The table on the screen summarizes the key areas of emphases and principal representatives of these approaches:

	Trauma Frameworks	Key Areas of Emphases	Key Representatives
1	Literary Trauma Theory	Disruptive impact of traumatic events on individuals; failure of language in the face of trauma	Cathy Caruth
2	Symbolic Possibility in Literary Trauma Theory	Trauma can be confronted “at a distance” through a symbolic power of language	Ronald Granofsky
3	Cultural Trauma Theory	Confronting trauma through constructive meaning-making (texts interpret events and redefine identity)	Jeffrey Alexander
4	Psychopolitical Theory	Intergenerational transmission of trauma and the role of communal narratives	Vamik Volkan
5	Embodied Expressions of Trauma	Impact of trauma as an extreme suffering on bodies in everydayness of life	Arthur Kleinman and Veena Das

While some of these approaches propose conflicting understanding of the dynamics of trauma, some scholars have managed to eclectically combine several of them in their engagement with biblical texts. Nevertheless, Boase’s warning about the danger of uncritically collapsing the distinct approaches into a single, harmonised trauma theory should be heard.¹³

¹¹ Christopher G. Frechette and Elisabeth Boase, “Defining ‘Trauma’ as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation,” in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, eds. Elisabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, 1–23(11).

¹² Elisabeth Boase, *Trauma Theories: Refractions in the Book of Jeremiah: Refractions in the Book of Jeremiah*, HBM 10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2024).

¹³ Boase, *Trauma Theories*, 21.

In my reading of the eschatological discourse of Jesus, I will be closest to cultural trauma theory, because of the nature of the discourse: it does not simply narrate a series of traumatic events and responses as a witness but offers a framework of meaning that shapes understanding of identity and motivates for certain intended responses of Jesus's followers.

2. TRAUMATIC SITUATIONS IN THE TEXT

The starting point of the eschatological discourse of Jesus is the prophecy of a major traumatic event that shattered to the core assumptions of Judaism regarding its worldview, its narrative about itself and its vocation in the world. The polemic in the temple in Matthew 23 culminates in Jesus's statement: "see, your house is left to you, desolate" (23:38). The expression "your house" (οἶκος ὑμῶν) is clearly synonymous with "temple" (ἱερόν) in 24:1, of which Jesus said: "Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." The events of 70 CE, fulfilling this prophecy, inflicted a profound collective injury by violating the central locus of power within Judaism and disrupting Jewish identity in ways that demanded reconstruction.

But were the events of 70 CE traumatic for the Palestinian Jewish Christian community? Some would argue that they were not, since Jesus had predicted them and instructed his followers to leave the city with utmost urgency when they saw "the abomination of desolation ... standing in the holy place" (24:15–20; ESV). Furthermore, it has been proposed that the identification of the Christian church as the new temple, with God's presence dwelling in the midst of Jesus's followers (Matt 18:20; 1 Cor 3:16–17; Eph 2:19–22; 1 Pet 2:4–5), was at the heart of early Christian self-understanding as the renewed covenant people of God. Consequently, the loss of the temple building may not have been perceived as a major theological problem.¹⁴ Nevertheless, I suggest that when a person is forced to flee for their life, losing a home, property and source of income in the context of war, and experiencing the severing of human connections as a result of forced displacement, trauma appears as an appropriate category for describing such an overwhelming situation.

Furthermore, the eschatological discourse of Jesus abounds in indicators of traumatic experiences that the church is to endure. The overall structure of the first, prophetic part of the discourse (24:4–31) suggests that the destruction of Jerusalem is only the beginning of the suffering. Even the events preceding the fall of Jerusalem (wars, famines, earthquakes; 24:6–

¹⁴ Richard Bauckham, *The Jewish World around the New Testament*, WUNT 233 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2008), 188–189.

7) are depicted through the metaphorical imagery of the “the beginning of the birth pangs” of a woman in labour (24:8). The intensity of the situation in 70 CE is further illustrated by the imagery of pregnant women fleeing under life-threatening circumstances “in those days” of distress (24:19). Moreover, the period following the destruction, leading up to the parousia, is described as a time of “great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world ... and never will be” (24:21). In addition, the church is to face internal challenges, including the deceptive activities of false prophets and false messiahs (24:4–5, 11, 23–24), betrayal and apostasy (24:10), alongside external pressures such as persecution, torture and martyrdom (24:9).

Experiencing the combination of these challenges and pressures has the potential to shatter human beings at the deepest level, confronting them directly with their finitude. Under such an intensive pressure, questions arise regarding God’s character and one’s sense of personal purpose may be threatened. Consequentially, one’s rootedness in God can be seriously undermined and spiritual life compromised.¹⁵

3. MEANING-MAKING AS A MITIGATING STRATEGY

Since experiencing of conflict and life-threatening situations have the potential to inflict traumatic wounds, Jesus prophetically engages in meaning-making to mitigate in advance the impact of the overwhelming pressures on his followers.¹⁶ The essence of his strategy lies in presenting a coherent counter-narrative that functions as an explanatory framework for the coming trauma situations. In other words, he tells a “new story” through which the coming experiences are to be understood. Emmanuel perceptively notes that “storytelling is ... a stimulant of structural change ... Stories, creating their own networks of cause and effect, generate new networks of orientation within us.”¹⁷ Since stories have the power to create and deconstruct worlds, shifting our perspective, hearing “a different story is what breeds hope.”¹⁸ Through a counter-narrative, the traumatic events gain meaning, shattered identities are reconstructed and individuals are empowered to respond with courage.

¹⁵ M. Jan Holton and Jill L. Snodgrass, “Introduction: Expanding Psychospiritual Understandings of Stress, Trauma, and Growth,” in *Reframing Trauma: A Psychospiritual Theory and Theology*, eds. M. Jan Holton and Jill L. Snodgrass (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2025), 1–12(5).

¹⁶ On meaning-making as a concept, see Crystal L. Park, “Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and Its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Events,” *Psychological Bulletin* 136 (2010), 257–301.

¹⁷ Emanuel, *Trauma*, 9.

¹⁸ Emanuel, *Trauma*, 15.

I suggest that Jesus's counter-narrative has four cardinal aspects. First, Jesus ensures that a safe ground is established that enables his followers to respond with resilience to the anticipated pressures. In his counter-narrative, God is positioned as the principal acting agent of the story. While human agents may engage in violence, deception, betrayal and threats, they function only as secondary participants in the story. God's sovereignty is strongly indicated through a variety of literary and grammatical markers: divine passives (24:22; 40–41; 25:34, 41), the use of *δεῖ* ("must") to indicate necessity ("for this must take place"; 24:6), his control over timing (24:6, 8, 36), appeals to human responsibility (24:42, 44) and divine judgment (25:31–46). It is consistently emphasized that regardless of the challenges in the human history, God's purposes will certainly triumph, and the end of the evil order is assured (24:14, 29–31, 36–44; 25:13, 31–46).

Significantly, Jesus's counter-narrative is not concerned only with the present and future but is deeply rooted in the language of past. The eschatological discourse abounds in Old Testament allusions – not without a reason. Its narration of history is saturated with motifs from the book of Daniel¹⁹ and with Day of the Lord language,²⁰ reinforcing its continuity with Old Testament prophecy. These intertextual links are significant, because they underscore God's ongoing activity in history. As such, they provide a sense of security and confidence in Jesus's conceptual framework that gives meaning to the traumatic events and fosters rootedness in God.

Second, in the wake of traumatic experiences, Jesus highlights horizons of hope, prompting the readers to root themselves in God through embracing hope. The discourse identifies four specific situations of hope: (1) the possibility of salvation for "the one who endures to the end" (24:13); (2) fleeing in the context of the Judean war (24:15–20); (3) the promise of a shortening of the days of "great suffering" (*thlipsis megalē*; 24:21–22); and (4) the coming eschatological end, climaxing in the fulfilment of the promise of gathering of God's people (24:14; 24:29–31). Thus, God's people experiencing traumatic situations should not be stalled in victimhood; rather, they can live with expectancy, embracing hope that gives meaning to their life. Through a hopeful attitude, they have the potential to be simultaneously broken and redeemed, experiencing new life that offers resilience and healing.²¹

¹⁹ See e.g. Lars Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted: The Formation of Some Jewish Apocalyptic Texts and of the Eschatological Discourse Mark 13 Par.*, ConBNT 1 (Lund: Gleerup, 1966), 145–177; cf. Hans K. LaRondelle, *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible* (Sarasota, FL: First Impressions, 1997), 34–60.

²⁰ See e.g. David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 581–582.

²¹ M. Jan Holton and Jill L. Snodgrass, "Psychospiritual and Trauma: A Theoretical and Theological Foundation," in *Reframing Trauma: A Psychospiritual Theory and Theology*, eds. M. Jan Holton and Jill L. Snodgrass, 13–34(33).

Third, because traumatic situations can shatter to the core one's assumptions, Jesus underscores belonging through affirming the identity of his people as his own (e.g. through the use of the designation "the elect" [*hoi eklektoi*]; 24:22).²² However, belonging is fostered not only through turning to God, but also through turning to others. God's people are depicted not merely as recipients of divine care but as agents of meaningful action.²³ Rather than being passive, suffering objects, they function as partners of God in his mission. They are portrayed as instruments in the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom, offering hope amid the pressures of an overwhelming present (24:14). In the parousia parables, as well as in the final judgment scene, God's people are consistently depicted as called to act, embodying their faith and hope (24:45–25:46). Tellingly, in the final judgment scene, the only crisis that truly matters is feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and coming to those in prison (25:31–46).²⁴ Through these acts of solidarity, as well as through proclaiming the gospel (24:14), God's people not only practise a mental self-care, but also model a better way of living as humans.

Finally, the treatment of trauma is facilitated by naming the perpetrators of harm and serving justice. Not only individuals, but also unjust, tyrannic structures that generate suffering must be exposed, embracing "God's continuous engagement in the fight against life-limiting, oppressive forces."²⁵ Notably, the eschatological discourse concludes with a judgment scene (25:31–46), emphasizing God's vision of justice and human accountability. The scene makes clear that God has the final word in human history and his commitment to justice will bring about a great reversal, inaugurating a just future. This conviction provides not only eschatological hope but also an ethical orientation for the present.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR LIVING IN AN AGE OF ANXIETY

Traditionally, trauma has been understood as a wounding by a single event or a series of extremely distressing experiences. However, from recently there has been increasing

²² Robert J. Schreiter ("Reading Biblical Texts Through the Lens of Resilience," in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, eds. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, 193–207[194]), following the lead of Carr, argues that "resilient power" is bestowed by the concept of chosenness.

²³ Eunil David Cho ("Psychospiritual Stress, Trauma, and Migration: Understandings for Displaced Communities," in *Reframing Trauma: A Psychospiritual Theory and Theology*, eds. M. Jan Holton and Jill L. Snodgrass, 109–130[128]) notes that "work is a significant act of self-care in coping with chronic pain."

²⁴ Significantly, the pastoral part of the discourse (24:32–25:46) is far longer and developed from the prophetic part (24:4–31), which reveals where Jesus's emphasis lies.

²⁵ M. Jan Holton and Jill L. Snodgrass, "A Reframed Psychospirituality of Stress and Trauma: Honoring the Complexity of Lived Experience," in *Reframing Trauma: A Psychospiritual Theory and Theology*, eds. M. Jan Holton and Jill L. Snodgrass, 205–221(207).

discussions of “traumatic stress,” a category describing “the psychological impact of living in conditions in which there is a realistic threat of present and future danger, rather than only experiences of past traumatic events.”²⁶ The 21st century, marked by geopolitical instability, environmental crisis, nuclear threats, the technological challenge of AI, pandemics, economic fragility and social polarisation, has appropriately been described as an age of anxiety.²⁷ In such an age, the sense of disorientation, alienation, vulnerability and loss of control has generated an “increasing perception that traumatic experience marks the [contemporary] human condition itself.”²⁸ The complexity of the contemporary lived experience justifies recognising not only life-threatening incidents as traumatic, but also non-life-threatening prolonged conditions that overwhelm the individual’s capacity to cope.

The eschatological discourse of Matthew 24–25 functions as an important map of orientation in an age of anxiety, for it presents Jesus’s eschatological counter-narrative to the dominant narratives of our time. As such, it serves as a valuable resource for making sense of the character of the present age and for interpreting its pressures meaningfully. Importantly, the discourse directs attention to God as the primary point of orientation in whom human beings are called to be grounded. Embracing the reality of his presence and work in human history enables human beings to face stress and trauma with hope and resilience, viewing complex life-situations as opportunities for growth. The horizons of hope presented in the discourse do not negate pain; rather they integrate it into God’s larger story of ultimate hope. The awareness that history is not random chaos but is overseen by a God who is faithful to his creation mitigates existential anxiety and fosters resilience.

Finally, the eschatological discourse offers not only a meaning-making theological horizon but also a call to active participation in our wounded society as agents of hope. God’s people are portrayed not as passive victims who withdraw cynically in self-protection, but as those who discern, endure, pray, proclaim, watch and serve (24:4, 13–14, 20, 42, 44; 25:13, 31–36).²⁹ Through acts of solidarity, they function as carriers of hope and facilitators of resilience for those overwhelmed by fear and the effects of their wounds in the age of anxiety.

²⁶ Garth Stevens, Gillian Eagle and Debra Kaminer, “Continuous Traumatic Stress Syndrome: Conceptual Conversations in Contexts of Global Conflict, Violence and Trauma,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 19 (2013), 76.

²⁷ On how living in an age of anxiety necessitate reframing our reading of the Bible, see e.g. Laszlo Gallusz, “Existential Fear, Existential Hope: Reading Biblical Apocalyptic in an Age of Anxiety,” *Ministry* (February 2023), 10–13.

²⁸ Garber, “Trauma Theory,” 39.

²⁹ The intended actions, required from God’s people are expressed mostly through imperatives in the discourse.

For them, hope is not a passive expectation but a lived participation in the mission of God, marked by compassion and justice.