

Post-Traumatic Jesus

A Healing Gospel
for the Wounded

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*To the people of St. Joan of Arc Episcopal Church.
It is good to be in the side-wound of Jesus with you.*

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Content warning: *Several chapters in this book discuss violence, rape, abuse, and self-harm.*

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Acknowledgments

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, I thought I would write several creative books from the isolation of my home. I also thought I would finally achieve my best marathon time with “nothing else to do.” I thought I’d get in the best shape of my life! I did a few “around the house marathons” and then quit running for a year. I also found myself profoundly uncreative. It was all I could do to tune in to the latest awful news story, then tune out.

It was during this time that I started working on this book, which had been percolating in my mind ever since I published *Post-Traumatic God*. With the insight and encouragement of Valerie Weaver-Zercher, this book came into being. I’m so thankful to Westminster John Knox Press for publishing it, and for the sharp and insightful editorial skills of Jessica Miller Kelley, who made this book so much better for the reader. Kathleen Niendorff, my agent, kept me writing through some very difficult times, and she always challenges me to keep swimming.

Much of this book emerged from a course I taught at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas, a few years ago, “Ministry to People with PTSD.” It’s likely I learned more from my students than they learned from me, and I’m thankful they are out in the field today. Thanks be to God for seminaries like SSW that teach their students about trauma.

I’m thankful for my family and all the brilliant writers whose encouragement and friendship have inspired me to keep going, notably Chris Tomlinson, Logan Isaac, Mary Lowery,

Bryan Mealer, and Keri Blakinger. I'm thankful to the people of St. Joan of Arc Episcopal Church, a new church plant I've had the honor to shepherd. Most of what I have learned about the post-traumatic Jesus I have learned from them.

Introduction

The post-traumatic Jesus is the only Jesus Christianity has ever known. In Greek, *trauma* means “wound,” a tearing of the flesh, or, metaphorically, an injury to the soul. From Thomas who wants to touch Jesus’ wounds to the Moravians who described their church services as “being in the wound,” the wounded, traumatized Jesus brings healing and hope to traumatized people. While other, more sanitized versions of Jesus have been presented over time, often by people of great privilege, it is the post-traumatic Jesus who has endured. Indeed, in recent years we have witnessed a variety of perspectives on Jesus, including Black, liberationist, mujerista, womanist, and feminist perspectives to counter the white- and male-centric versions of Jesus that have been presented over time, often by men of great privilege. As a white male myself, I realize I have so much to learn from these perspectives, many of which process the trauma of Jesus’ life through their own traumatic experiences.

Ever since I came back from the Iraq War, I’ve read Scripture through a post-traumatic lens. This reading has not only helped me process my own traumatic experiences but also

offers a window into how the original writers of the Gospels understood the story of Jesus and how the original readers read these texts. The brutal Roman military occupation of Jesus' homeland, the First Jewish-Roman War of AD 66, and the unrelenting violence of a world lit only by fire were ever present in the minds of Jesus' hearers and the early Christians who followed him, many to their own traumatic deaths. This book examines the stories in the Gospels through the lens of trauma, paying careful attention to how the authors used these stories to cultivate hope and healing for traumatized people, preserving the story of the post-traumatic Jesus who extends his wounded hands to us.

Until now, reading Scripture through the lens of trauma has been an academic discipline. In 2016, the Society of Biblical Literature published *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, a collection of essays exploring this way of reading Scripture.¹

In 2012, a conference, "Trauma and Traumatization: Biblical Studies and Beyond," was held at Aarhus University, Denmark, contributing significantly to the field. I hope this book bridges the gap between this scholarship and the readers who need to know they are not alone in their post-traumatic world. Furthermore, I hope this book will help you see your traumatic experiences as having spiritual significance, a point often overlooked in trauma therapy.

The study of trauma is constantly evolving, as is the public discussion of it and how it affects people. In my lifetime, the events of 9/11 and the Afghanistan and Iraq wars that followed made PTSD a household term. Since 2016, the COVID-19 pandemic and the civil unrest after the police killings of Black people have revealed to the general public how trauma can be experienced across communities. The collective experience of racism after 400 years of slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration (sometimes called the New Jim Crow), and more can be considered a form of complex PTSD (C-PTSD)—the type that affects hostages and those who have endured long-term domestic abuse.

We have all been traumatized by this pandemic, if not by the disease and death itself then by the callous disregard for human

life from those who have not taken it seriously. The threat of an invisible killer in supermarkets, schools, churches, and our relatives' living rooms leaves us hypervigilant at the sound of a sneeze or cough. Stories of moral injury in health-care workers and the subsequent suicides are starting to emerge. Moral injury is a component of trauma for caregivers. The feeling that "I should have done more" or "If only I had done X instead of Y, this person would be alive," can be overwhelming. One only needs to listen in on a nurse telling a family member not to come to the hospital as their loved one dies to feel the weight of moral injury. Jesus was a healer, and his healings addressed not only the physical symptoms but the spiritual and emotional symptoms too. His lonely but public death also stands in solidarity with the victims of COVID-19 who say good-bye on FaceTime as a nurse holds the iPad with a trembling hand.

Add to the pandemic the assault on the U.S. Capitol seen live on TV, the vacuum of withdrawal of our military from Afghanistan, and the relentless toll of mass shootings by lone gunmen trying to make their ideological points by murdering schoolchildren and supermarket shoppers. Stories of domestic abuse, sexual assault and harassment, and child abuse where the perpetrators often go unpunished all take their collective toll on our minds and hearts, and we wonder if it will ever end. The impact on specific victims is worse than our secondary trauma, but it is often equally debilitating. We wonder, Are things getting worse? Unaware that one of the signature wounds of trauma is a foreshortened future where we cannot see anything good ever happening to us again, it is the death of hope we grieve, although we cannot always name it.

Religion has never been perceived as less relevant to people's day-to-day lives than it is today. Mainline churches lament how far attendance has fallen from the crowded Sunday schools of yesteryear and wonder what gimmick they can pull to lure in young families. Meanwhile, Americans seem to be OK as they sip coffee and read the *New York Times* or schlep the kids to a soccer game on a Sunday morning. For many, the only time they have an intense thought about religion is when they recoil

at seeing far-right evangelicals praising Trump or his surrogates, or saying God sent COVID-19 because of abortion and the gays. There are many reasons for the decline in organized religion, but one is clearly the failure of many churches to genuinely connect the gospel to people's most wounded parts.

For too long, preaching and writing about the crucifixion have been uncomfortable in progressive Christian circles, mainly for fear that it highlights the penal substitutionary atonement theory that is likened to child abuse of God the Father upon the Son. I hope this book presents the post-traumatic Jesus in such a way that Christians can reclaim this territory from the fundamentalists, who have shamed too many into praying the sinner's prayer. The goal of this book is to connect the secular and religious Jesus with contemporary traumatic experiences so that readers can connect their own stories to Jesus' story. This is no easy task, as the Jesus of history has been gilded and gelded with both religious and secular themes that move traumatized people further from the Jesus who was nailed to a cross by Roman soldiers and left to die for six hours on a Friday afternoon. We have to face the trauma of our lives head on, and the people of Jesus' time knew trauma.

Rome was brutal in a way it is hard to imagine today. Every soldier of Rome was a killer, a disciplined fighting machine. These soldiers stayed in formation and threw their javelins. The javelins had thin steel necks so if they missed, they would bend out of shape upon impact with the ground, rendering them unusable by the enemy. If they hit an enemy shield, they would make the shield unwieldy, and soon thrown to the ground. Then Rome closed in on the enemy. The Spanish sword was short, thick, and sharp. Each legionnaire trained with it every day, ready to wound its victims with gashes and meat cleaver-like chops. The damage it inflicted on human bodies recalls the machete-hacked bodies in mass graves in the Rwandan Genocide.

The survivors of Rome's wars were sold into slavery. During major campaigns, the huge numbers of enslaved people would flood the market, driving down prices. Some went to

the mines, some to the fields, and some to the beds of their masters. To be a slave was to lose all bodily autonomy. Slaves had no rights in ancient Rome and could be tortured, beaten, raped, and crucified. There was no escape or rebellion. Spartacus tried this and failed spectacularly and heroically. He died in the final battle, and soon 6,000 of his followers were crucified along the Appian Way, their vulture-picked bodies bearing witness that Rome's war machine always wins.

Jesus was born in a Roman province, just another little life consumed by Rome's gluttonous appetite, and ultimately crucified like so many rebels for daring to defy the ultimate power of the Roman war machine embodied by the emperor.

Many years ago, my four-year-old son came home from preschool upset. When I asked him about it, he said, "My friends laughed at me, they pushed me, then they put me on the cross." He spread his arms wide. I didn't know what to say. What could I say? He understood the symbol in a way that it would take me many years to understand. Even after serving in the army during the Iraq War in Baghdad, coming home to a shattered marriage, and acting out my untreated PTSD on everyone around me, I couldn't do what my son did—to see my trauma somehow being connected to Jesus' traumatic life. But as my certainty in God disappeared in the fog of trauma, my connection to the cross became stronger. Now I read the Gospels through my own post-traumatic lens, and so many of the stories now make more sense to me.

For this reason, we begin at the end, with the lens through which the rest of Jesus' story is viewed—and our stories too. Like the writers of the four Gospels, I also read my own life's story through the lens of my trauma. In many ways, our trauma is the beginning of our story, but it is not the end of our story. The post-traumatic Jesus I see through the lens of my own trauma has drawn me to himself. Perhaps he will draw you too.

1

Skull Hill

We can see Skull Hill now, a macabre place if there ever was one. It was called *Golgotha*, Aramaic for “skull.” In Greek it is *Kranion*—“cranium,” in our modern anatomy class. With the Romans we call it *Calvariæ*, for it is like the dome of bone on a human head.

The Jolly Roger pirate flag, the Punisher sticker on a pickup truck window, Dan Aykroyd’s personal vodka brand—all skulls. The *Totenkopf* (literally, “dead’s head”) was the last thing that Jews, crowded into the gas chamber, saw on the collar of the SS guard as he peered through the dirty glass. You will find skulls on countless military unit insignias the world over, as well as on bottles of poisonous liquids and countless other places. Shakespeare’s Hamlet holds up a skull and says, “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him,” and the despair and sadness of death is visible.¹ Skulls remind us of our impending death. As we look into the hollow eye sockets, they look into us.

And so Skull Hill is a fitting place for a Roman crucifixion. A plaque written in Aramaic, Greek, and Latin is nailed to the top of the middle cross. It proclaims, “Jesus of Nazareth, King

of the Jews.” And beneath that multilingual placard hangs a crucified man.

His body is nailed to the wooden beams of the Roman torture device. His eyelids are swollen nearly shut from being beaten about the head. There is a crust of dried blood on his skin, and new blood oozes with each fainting heartbeat. He is alive, thus in *excruciating* pain, crucifixion being at the root of this word for unbearable pain.

Beneath his cross the soldiers who did the actual work of crucifixion are rolling bone dice for his cloak. They are drinking cheap wine, soldier wine, to take the edge off. They have gotten drunk in many lands and far-flung territories of their empire. With every sip, every buzz, every loud war story, they numb all feeling and sympathy for what they do. They take another drink, in hopes this drunk will touch the sadness down below the cruelty. They jokingly offer some to the man on the cross. How could they not have heard that his first miracle was turning water to fine wine at a wedding?

Others insult the crucified man, taunting him with his powerlessness over what is happening to him. Some spit, others stare. Some women are there, his mother and some others. From the nails of the cross, the crucified man speaks through his pain, “Woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple John, “Here is your mother” (John 19:26–27). He is asking his friend to watch over her, she who bore him into the world and gave him his first bath. She says nothing. What could she say in the trauma of the moment? Her silence is our silence in the face of horror. He is powerless. She is powerless. It is hard to tell who is in the most pain.

His dehydrated mouth croaks words, and the crowd cannot understand him. Eventually they hear, “I thirst,” and someone runs and gets a sponge. The sponge, a carcass of a sea creature who is rooted to one place for life, only to be plucked up by divers and used to clean, is that day dipped in the soldier wine and mixed with a bitter substance that may numb his pain a bit. The act of mercy is a double-edged sword, as the crucified man never knows if it will relieve pain or prolong pain.

There is a loud cry, and he dies. Six hours is short for the torture of the cross. It seems too short, too good to be true for the bureaucrats who want all the bodies down from the cross before the approaching festival. They cannot take down live bodies, for then the victims would not have died by crucifixion. Their sentence of death by torture must be carried out in all its details. The morality of torture is rigid, exacting, precise, and completely devoid of human love. A spear is rammed into his side by a soldier to confirm his death. The fluids that gush forth from his body cavity confirm his clinical death in their death-filled minds.

The trauma of Jesus, often called his passion—these gruesome six traumatic hours on a Friday afternoon on Skull Hill—are reenacted, rehearsed, recited, and remembered by over a billion people during Holy Week every year. A mother writes a note to her son's principal excusing him from class so he can walk the stations of the cross with his youth group. A grandfather kneels in an empty church thumbing a rosary with a crucifix at its center. A construction worker cuts 4x4s in his garage with a circular saw to shape into a cross and put on the lawn of his Baptist church.

Add to these billion all those who have meditated on this story in the two millennia before us—refugees, soldiers, kings, peasants. This symbol of a crucified man is placed above the cradles of babies and on coffins, hot cross buns, and Affliction T-shirts, as well as tattooed on human skin. It is this symbol that the burning Joan of Arc begged to be placed before her as she died in the fire. It is this symbol, the first depiction of Jesus we have, that some joker carved on the wall of a Roman house around AD 200. The picture is of a crucified jackass with a man named Alexamenos, a Christian, looking up at it. The words "Alexamenos worships [his] god" bear witness to the young man's absurd faith. The cross is the symbol that an ICU nurse prays before in the hospital chapel while she tells me she has always planned her own suicide so she will not have to die with a tube jammed down her throat.

The cross speaks to our human condition better than most other symbols. A helpless victim, an unjust trial, a gleeful

cruelty, a silent god—these are not only what happened at the crucifixion; they are the hallmarks of traumatic experiences that most humans experience in our short lives.

While the teachings of Jesus about not worrying and about being kind, and the actions of Jesus such as turning water into wine are wholesome and exemplary, these stories of his life and teachings recorded in the four Gospels were written through the post-traumatic lens of his crucifixion. The Gospel writers knew how the story ends. One of Christianity's earliest theologians, St. Paul, preached very little about Jesus' parables and life events. He had one central message, "We proclaim Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). While this message was offensive and foolish to many who heard it, it drew a dedicated band of followers from enslaved people and the lowest classes of society, all of whom would have had significant trauma from living on the bottom rungs of the Roman social ladder.

As Mary Beard writes in her monumental work *SPQR*, the Roman world was terrifyingly vicious and is alien to us: "That means not just the slavery, the filth (there was hardly any such thing as refuse collection in ancient Rome), the human slaughter in the arena, and the death from illnesses whose cures we now take for granted; but also the newborn babies thrown away on rubbish heaps, the child brides and the flamboyant eunuch priests."² We cannot underestimate how traumatizing this reality was for people living in the world of Jesus. The loss of their political autonomy and judicial recourse, the violent moods of occupying soldiers, and the inability to get ahead because of the tax burden are just a few ways the Romans traumatized the people in Jesus' world. This traumatized world was where the stories of Jesus first circulated, offering a compelling alternative to Rome's violent, traumatizing presence.

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