Trauma Studies Offer Fresh Insights on Mental Anguish in Scripture

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As necessary as historical and linguistic insights are for understanding Scripture, an additional element is particularly useful for its cases of trauma and suffering. Recently, scholars have begun to appropriate forms of “trauma hermeneutics” that help bring to life the humanness of mental suffering in the Bible, which in turn ministers to readers who suffer today.1 Acutely helpful for understanding biblical themes of mental anguish is the developing field of study on the unseen wounds of mental trauma called moral injury (MI). This new area of research offers promising interdisciplinary collaboration between trauma theory and biblical studies, one that helps bring to life the real humanness of suffering in Scripture.2

The term “moral injury” helps to verbalize crises of personal identity when a person’s moral values are compromised. Whereas previous trauma studies focused on fear-based physiological impairments (such as post-traumatic stress disorder), MI focuses on axiological violations or wounds of conscience. Initially referred to as “trauma theory,” moral injury originated in the works of Veterans Affairs psychologist Johnathan Shay.3 Inner struggles of shame, guilt, betrayal, and doubt have been customary findings from MI, extending past the typical fear resulting from a traumatic experience. These mental scars are often caused by submitting to immoral orders from a superior, conflicted tensions within one’s occupation, or witnessing and/or participating in acts of betrayal. Such wounds of conscience, often associated with acts of remorse, have been customary findings from MI research, offering fresh insights on the mental trauma lying behind many of Scripture’s most noted characters. These modern insights explaining the humanness of varied mental suffering illuminate a common human experience transcending time and culture.

Though still emerging from infancy, the developing field of MI has begun to open fresh vistas for biblical studies. Originally confined to the behavioral sciences, the bulk of MI research has been spent on studying the effects of afflictions of conscience endured by returning war veterans in areas previously unconsidered in fear-based trauma research.

Recently, Old Testament scholars have begun to employ MI as an interpretive frame of reference to cases of mental trauma in biblical scenes depicting characters engaged in high-intensity scenarios where moral values are challenged. For instance, Brad E. Kelle appropriates MI theory to Saul in the OT as a way to humanly explain Israel’s first king’s descent into madness and finally suicide.4 Viewed through MI, Kelle suggests Saul’s demise resulted from his perceived betrayal by Samuel and even Yahweh.5 Also included in Kelle’s treatment is the psychological importance of certain post-war rituals captured in the OT, such as appropriating spoils of war, purifying oneself after battle, and the spiritual power of lament and forgiveness.6

Jill Firth has offered a primer of moral injury in relation to the prophet Jeremiah.7 Because of Jeremiah’s disrupted social setting, where violence and war enveloped his ministry, vocabulary embedded with themes of shame, dismay, and other expressions of moral injury permeate the book. Firth suggests that while the prophet’s sense of “right and wrong” is never transgressed by his own actions, the book underscores the moral complexities involved when a leader is caught between God and the people.8 Moral injury helps to uncover Jeremiah’s experiences that seem analogous to that of a soldier who has moral discomfort, highlighted by the prophet’s complaints of confusion and deception, even possibly feeling betrayed by God at points.9

Appropriations of MI are no longer restricted to texts highlighting martial contexts of war and...
violence. Non-martial settings, such as troubling family environments, employer and employee relations, as well as other community group settings, have now been enlightened by MI research.\(^\text{10}\) Gabriella Lettini points out that “people develop moral injury not because they are soldiers, but because they are human beings with a moral conscience.”\(^\text{11}\) As such, due to the social tensions Jesus and the disciples experienced, the Gospels in particular offer prime potential for engagement of moral injury theory. However, not much interdisciplinary work has been done in the Gospels to date.\(^\text{12}\)

One of the few to approach the New Testament through MI is Warren Carter, who offers a perspective on the differences between Peter’s and Judas’s betrayals of Christ.\(^\text{13}\) Viewed through MI theory, Carter draws insightful observations regarding Peter and the internal injury of conscience he endured surrounding his denials of Jesus, followed by his “repair” by Christ in the concluding chapters of John. Peter suffered personal guilt and shame to such an extreme, Carter shows, that only a personal visitation by Jesus could restore him and bring relief.

Scholars appropriating MI to their theological work have found that it can also amplify core biblical doctrines customary to Christian theology, such as human sinfulness and depravity. Brian Powers, for example, engages MI from a modified Augustinian position on sin and demonstrates resonances between moral injury and human sinfulness.\(^\text{14}\) Defending Augustine’s conception of original sin, Powers suggests that every person’s discernment of moral good is continually susceptible to profound distortion and that MI helps to expose resulting emotions and behavior of those disfigured by the moral chaos of high-stakes tension. But, as Powers contends, hope is not lost. God’s grace provided in Christ offers avenues of eternal hope and inner healing.\(^\text{15}\)

As this brief survey has shown, trajectories suggest that it is certainly possible, even beneficial, to integrate MI insights with the interpretation of Scripture. However, the few exceptions notwithstanding, MI largely remains an untapped vista for biblical scholarship. The examples here reveal the biggest strength of MI theory: it offers a hermeneutical perspective taking into account the full humanness of suffering in Scripture, helping readers to slow down and consider the inner trauma that historical people must have experienced that lay outside the realm of retribution theology. In so doing, readers today resonate with the commonly shared bond of human suffering endured by God’s people throughout the ages. \(\text{D}\)

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12. There are several dissertations beginning to emerge that approach NT texts through the lens of moral injury. For example, my dissertation on the theme of suffering believers in John incorporates extensive MI research to cases of mental trauma in the Fourth Gospel (the first to do so in Johannine studies of which I am aware). See also, Cory M. Marsh, “Moral Injury and the Suffering Basilikos of John 4:46–52” (paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature Pacific Coast meeting, virtual, 2020). It also has come to my attention that Morling College in Sydney currently has at least one PhD candidate writing on MI in the Pauline literature.


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**CORY M. MARSH** has recently completed a book on a theology of suffering and trauma in the Gospel of John (currently under review).