

## Book Review

***Trauma Talks in the Hebrew Bible: Speech Act Theory and Trauma Hermeneutics.* Alexiana Fry. Lexington Books, 2023. vii+137pp. \$90.00 (hardback). ISBN: 9781666900552.**



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*Trauma Talks in the Hebrew Bible: Speech Act Theory and Trauma Hermeneutics* by Alexiana Fry is for integrative therapists, theologians, and students interested in the intersection between theology and psychology. This is an in-depth study on how speech act theory can be utilized as a hermeneutical lens for understanding traumatic narratives in the Hebrew Bible. The “very task” of Fry’s book is, as she argues, to “[recognize] texts as sites where communities use language to shape their identities, where the texts are both affected by trauma while also being the vehicle by which ‘re-making’ occurs” (29).

In the first chapter, on methodological concerns, Fry uses trauma as a hermeneutical lens by blending the use of trauma theory and speech act theory to understand biblical texts in a new light. She begins with an overview of the basics of trauma, highlighting the “fight, flight, freeze, fawn, and flop” spectrum (15). Defining trauma as literature and narrative, Fry explains that the depth and extent of trauma manifests in an individual and community (21). Continuing with speech act theory (SAT), she offers an overview of it, defines its basic terms, and explores its history. Fry shares helpful categories for performative speech to describe the intention and function of a text. This is especially related to how ancient texts, like the Bible, are “not just literature but survival literature” (25). Therefore, the summary thesis of this chapter is that “[in] combining trauma as a hermeneutic with the use of SAT, we are both witnessing and receiving trauma through language” (28).

Fry argues that by utilizing trauma and SAT as interpretative lenses, readers come *through* the process of hermeneutics changed. This same chapter explains how embracing empathy as a reader of the text is vital to experiencing the voice of the text along with its author (30). Reckoning with indirect trauma is also highlighted as a necessary precursor to understanding ancient texts and the effect—from and in the text—that trauma has on the reader (32).

Chapter 2, “Hashtag Does Her Body (Still) Speak: Judges 19 and Hosea,” utilizes the methodology from Chapter 1 to explore the texts of Judges 19 and Hosea intertextually. Fry explores the specific traumas within these texts and how they are related to each other. Fry begins by exploring the trauma text involving “the sin of Gibeah” in the book of Hosea. Then

utilizes Judges 19 to support the Hosea text. Fry explains, “The effect in both ancient and modern contexts may have very similar implications, as the texts come from and speak of collective traumas happening in the world inside and outside the text” (47).” Fry argues that reading these texts through a trauma hermeneutics and SAT-influenced lens displays how complex the effect of trauma-texts have on the reader. Fry goes on to explain many details of the historical background of Hosea and Judges 19, displaying how the historical world of the text invites, impacts, and leaves the reader transformed.

Fry uses Hosea and Judges to demonstrate how the literary features of the characters make their mark on the text by the use of their bodies through non-verbal speech acts (51). As she asserts, “The supposed newness of his method of moving through the middle of the thick is to land in the uncomfortability of having many interpretive options and to see all as viable responses within the community that received them” (56-57). Fry argues for the imperative expressed in Judges 19:30: “Consider her, take counsel, and speak!” (51), therefore calling on a response. This is what Fry does exactly at the end of this chapter. She calls on a response from the reader: do not let these traumatic narratives—both ancient and contemporary—remain as hashtags; rather, be responsive in ways that are proactive to such terrors (59).

Chapter 3, “Moral Injury, YHWH, Saul, and a Witch: 1 Samuel 28,” explores the trauma of moral injury through the actions of Saul. By focusing on the speech act between Samuel, Saul, and YHWH as being influenced by trauma, the effects of shame and fear develop as expressions in dialogue. Chapter 4, “We Are All Witnesses: Joshua 24,” explores Qohelteth’s meaning-making, *marshal*, for self and others. Fry lands on *hebel* as that which is senseless and leads to embracing the unknown that exists in trauma.

Fry is part of the commencement of biblical scholars looking deeper at the effects of trauma as it relates to biblical narratives. Fry not only does this well, but she also exceeds expectations by diving deep into rich biblical texts and highlighting nuances related to trauma. The research and utilization of supported texts and sources are helpful sources for readers. For example, Fry utilizes the text, *Trauma Narratives and Herstory* by Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicin-Ortún, to support the ability to locate the presence of trauma and trauma responses in a writer within the text they have written. The “Tools for *Us*” appendix is unique and helpful. Not only does Fry give ample information regarding the effects of trauma from biblical narratives, she additionally displays tools that may be relevant to her readers.

The difficulty facing interdisciplinary work is the integration of theories. Fry does this well throughout this text. However, something to note on Fry’s exposition of shame, especially within the context of biblical literature, is that it is quite narrow and underwhelming. More can be said about the relationship between trauma, moral injury, and shame, especially as it connects to the historical context of the Hebrew Bible (67–74). It is important for readers to be aware that there are several grammatical and spelling errors that can distract from the content.

As Fry states herself, “This book is, by no means, exhaustive. The purpose of this book is to encourage a broader and more extensive means of grasping the slipperiness of trauma, awareness of the ways in which trauma touches and leaves a mark on everything, and perception of our own bodies and selves as not just a miniscule part of this interpretative process. This is an opportunity and invitation to revisit the stories we tell” (39). Through the plethora of examples

within the Hebrew Bible, Fry suggests leaning into the dialogue between trauma and text. This text would be helpful for integrative theological and psychological higher education settings.

Mariah T. Cushing  
Fresno Pacific University, Biblical Seminary



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