

## **The Hidden Wounds of Structural Violence: Exploring an Intersectional Understanding of Violence in Jeremiah 4-6**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Beyond the virulent portrayal of imperial violence in Jeremiah 4-6 that is rightly described as "terror all around" (Jer 6:25), one also finds other forms of violation that are no less injurious (cf. the repeated reference to "wounds" in Jer 6:7, 14). This paper proposes that it is important also to recognize forms of structural violence in this text that take into consideration factors such as gender, race and class that manifest itself as hidden wounds, which, if left unattended, may fester and return with a vengeance. This paper argues that a more nuanced and multi-faceted understanding of violence in the book of Jeremiah is helpful in dealing with the complex manifestations of violence in many contexts today. Such an intersectional understanding of violence recognizes that the deep wounds caused by poverty, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia will come back to haunt us if we do not engage in what Shelly Rambo calls "wound work" (Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Aftermath of Trauma, p 92), i.e., surfacing and attending to the wounds caused by structural violence.*

**KEYWORDS:** Jeremiah, Violence, Trauma Hermeneutics, Gender, Poverty

### **A INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, Stellenbosch University has faced, together with other South African Higher Education institutions, its share of protest movements in the form of #OpenStellenbosch and #FeesMustFall that grew out of the initial #RhodesMustFall movement, which started at the neighbouring University of Cape Town, and spread to other campuses across the country. In the classes I taught during this time, we had many fascinating conversations sparked by the issues and concerns inspiring and generated by these protests, centring also on the issue of violence.

For instance, as a dedicated pacifist, I would draw on theorists like Judith Butler who has been quite vocal about the importance of non-violence, arguing that acts of violence toward property as well as others are causing great harm not

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only to the recipients of such acts of violence, but also to those who engage in destructive acts.<sup>1</sup>

Students then would remind me that while I may be critical of acts of direct violence such as bodily harm, emotional abuse, and destruction of property, I am blind to the great structural violence they are enduring on a daily basis. The slow violence of poverty.<sup>2</sup> The insidious trauma of racism, sexism, economic inequality and homophobia.<sup>3</sup> Indeed Žižek has said that it is far easier to talk about subjective violence with an easily definable agent(s) rather than structural violence.<sup>4</sup>

Actually, as biblical scholar, I have found that broaching difficult subjects such as the hidden wounds caused by structural violence, literature, and specifically biblical literature, may be a good point of entry. It is often easier to enter the world conjured up by a narrative or poetic text, flexing one's interpretative muscles, daring to notice what forms of violence are festering below the surface, before returning to one's own context with new insights into complex problems. In this regard, Martha Nussbaum has poignantly written that

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler argues eloquently about the importance of "nonviolent resistance" that not only "say[s] no to a violent world, but crafts the self and its relation to the world in a new way, seeking to embody, however provisionally, the alternative for which it struggles," *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 187.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Nixon has employed the notion of "slow violence" in order to describe the effects of poverty and particularly as it pertains to environmental concerns, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Cf. also Steven Lee, "Is Poverty Violence?," in *Institutional Violence*, ed. Deane Curtin and Robert Litke (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 5–12, [http://genevapeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Is\\_Poverty\\_Violence.pdf](http://genevapeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Is_Poverty_Violence.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Maria P. P. Root describes "insidious trauma" as the ongoing and cumulative acts of micro and/or macro aggression experienced especially by women and people of colour in terms of systemic racism, sexism, and homophobia, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality," in *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals* (ed. Laura S. Brown and Mary Ballou; New York: The Guilford Press, 1992), 230-240. Concerning the trauma of racism, cf. the powerful essay by Dan Hague, "The Trauma of Racism and the Distorted White Imagination," in *Post Traumatic Public Theology* (Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo eds.; Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 89-114.

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2008). Cited in Yvonne Sherwood, "'Tongue-Lashing' or a Prophetic Aesthetics of Violation: An Analysis of Prophetic Structures that Echo Beyond the Biblical World," in *The Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets* (ed. Julia M. O'Brien and Chris Franke; The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies; London: T&T Clark, 2010), 91.

"the reader or spectator of a literary work is reading or watching the work but at the same time reading the world and reading the own self."<sup>5</sup>

Few biblical books are as steeped in various forms of intersecting layers of violence than the prophet Jeremiah.<sup>6</sup> I argue that insight into a multi-faceted and intersectional understanding of violence in the book of Jeremiah may be quite helpful in having conversations regarding how to deal most productively with the complex manifestations of violence in many contexts today. For instance, beyond the virulent portrayal of imperial violence in Jeremiah 4-6 that is rightly described as "terror all around" (Jer 6:25), one also finds other forms of violation that are no less injurious (cf. the repeated reference to "wounds" in Jer 6:7, 14). For the purpose of this article, I will use Jeremiah 4-6 as a type of sounding board, making a case for the importance of developing a more nuanced understanding of violence that recognizes forms of structural violence that take into consideration factors such as gender, race and class. Such an intersectional understanding of violence recognizes that the deep wounds caused by racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia will come back to haunt us if we do not engage in what Shelly Rambo, in her recent book *Resurrecting Wounds*, calls "wound work," i.e., surfacing and attending to the wounds caused by structural violence.<sup>7</sup>

Continuing my ongoing work on feminist and trauma hermeneutics, I moreover propose that these reading strategies are particularly suited to the often difficult conversations regarding the hidden wounds of structural violence, not only in the biblical text, but also in the context in which I live and work. This article is dedicated to my colleague Willie Wessels whose work on the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible over the years frequently addressed themes important to our context such as the role of class, inequality, power, in addition

<sup>5</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 243-244.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of scholars seeking to make sense of violence in the prophets and specifically the book Jeremiah abound. Cf. e.g. Kathleen O'Connor, "Reclaiming Jeremiah's Violence," in *Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets* (ed. Chris Franke and Julia M. O'Brien; Sheffield: T&T Clark, 2010), 37-49; Amy Kalmanofsky, "'As She Did, Do To Her!': Jeremiah's OAN as Revenge Fantasies," in *Concerning the Nations: Essays on the Oracles against the Nations in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (ed. Else K. Holt; Hyun Chul Paul Kim, and Andrew Mein; London: Bloomsbury), 109-127; Christopher G. Frechette, "The Old Testament as Controlled Substance: How Insights from Trauma Studies Reveal Healing Capacities in Potentially Harmful Texts," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69/1 (2015): 20-34. Cf. also L Juliana Claassens, "God and Violence in the Prophets," *Oxford Handbook to the Prophets* (ed. Carolyn Sharp; Oxford University Press, 2016), 334-349.

<sup>7</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Aftermath of Trauma* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 92.

to the uncomfortable, and even dangerous relationship, that exists between violence and religion both in the biblical traditions and in our time.

## **B THE DEVASTATION OF IMPERIAL VIOLENCE**

In the first part of the book of Jeremiah, descriptions of wound-inflicting violence abound. For instance, in Jer 4:20 we read the following harrowing first person account:

20 Disaster overtakes disaster,  
whole land is laid waste.  
Suddenly my tents are destroyed,  
my curtains in a moment.

We learn through the prophet's repeated warnings that the devastating destruction reflected in the first chapters of this book is coming from a nation from a land of the north (Jer 6:22. Cf. also Jer 4:6), a great nation who is "cruel and have no mercy" (Jer 4:23). These enemy invaders, sweeping through the land, are described in Jer 5:6 in terms of wild animals that capture the viciousness and the destructiveness of their violent acts that are documented throughout, what Kathleen O'Connor calls the war poems in Jeremiah 4-6 (cf. e.g. the reference to cutting down trees and destroying palaces in Jer 6:5-6):

6 Therefore a lion from the forest shall kill them,  
a wolf from the desert shall destroy them.  
A leopard is watching against their cities;  
everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces (cf. also Jer 4:7)

These vivid illustrations indeed manage to capture the extent of this devastation in terms of the recurring theme of "terror is all around" (Jer 6:25. Cf. also Jer 20:3, 10; 46:5; 49:29). There is no escape from the imperial violence inflicted by the mighty Babylonian war machine that exhibits no respect for personal property or human life. Cities are turned into ruins; fertile lands into wastelands; even the birds have flown away (Jer 4:23-26). Just how all-encompassing the destruction proves to be is evident in the reference in Jer 4:28 that the whole earth is mourning and the heavens have turned black.

In her book, *Terror All Around*, Amy Kalmanofsky outlines how the notion of infected, incurable wounds (Jer 6:7, 14; 10:19-20; 30:15. Cf. also Isa 1:6; Mic 1:9) as well as the repeated reference to unburied, decomposing corpses (Jer 9:21; 19:7-8; 25:33) is used to powerful rhetorical effect to capture "the horrific unravelling of the organic universe."<sup>8</sup> Both the image of wounds and corpses signal on a very literal level the violence and destruction experienced by

<sup>8</sup> Amy Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around: The Rhetoric of Horror in the Book of Jeremiah* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 79.

the broken people – “the images of dead bodies torn apart by birds and dogs” as well as the open and festering wounds caused by military onslaught evoking disgust in those who see it.<sup>9</sup> Indeed the destruction that came by the hand of the Babylonian invasion was widespread, leading to great injury and loss of life. However, as part of a “rhetoric of disintegration and decomposition,”<sup>10</sup> the motif of wounds and corpses is also used on a metaphorical level to depict the devastation Israel and her neighbours experienced, which are imaged in Kalmanofsky’s words, as “broken, sick entities, disintegrating like decomposing corpses.”<sup>11</sup>

## C UNCOVERING THE WOUNDS OF STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Beyond the devastating effects of imperial violence portrayed in this book, there are also other levels of violence that should be recognized as well. For instance, the pervasive notion of structural violence that is deeply embedded in this text and its context can be said to be just as damaging as direct violence.<sup>12</sup> It is thus important to recognize amidst the harrowing descriptions of imperial violence also the wounds caused by violence associated with aspects such as class, gender and ethnicity. Even though seemingly less overt, these forms of structural violence are responsible for inflicting wounds of their own that are festering just below the surface, and if not attended to, likely to threaten the health of the entire community.

### 1. The Slow Violence of Poverty

A first form of structural violence that is lurking below the surface in Jeremiah 4-6 regards the slow violence of poverty and injustice. So we see in Jer 6:7-8 how the images of sickness and wounds are used metaphorically to capture the injustice that quite distinctly is linked to violence and destruction:

7As a well keeps its water fresh,  
so she keeps fresh her wickedness;  
violence and destruction are heard within her;  
sickness and wounds are ever before me.

Similar also to other prophetic texts such as Isa 5:8-10, 23 and Amos 5:11-12; 8:4-6, one finds particularly in Jeremiah 4-6 how the slow violence of poverty and injustice have caused considerable harm to the people. In Jer 5:1, the speaker notes how a fervent search throughout the streets and squares of Jerusalem has yielded not a single person who acts in justice. In this regard, Fanie Snyman

<sup>9</sup> Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 78-79.

<sup>10</sup> Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 79.

<sup>11</sup> Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 72.

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Ho, “Structural Violence as a Human Rights Violation,” *Essex Human Rights Review* 4, no. 2 (2007): 1–17, Available at <http://projects.essex.ac.uk/ehrr/V4N2/ho.pdf>. Accessed 27 August, 2018.

argues that the reference to "violence and destruction" (Jer 6:7) should be read in terms of the references to "oppression," "wickedness," "sickness," "wounds" in Jer 6:6-7). As he argues, this is "a society that is sick and wounded. Violence and destruction are symptomatic of a sick and wounded society suffering from the oppressive measures exercised by the powerful ones in society upon the rest of the people."<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, from Jer 6:21 it is evident that the wounds caused by the structural violence of poverty are neither recognized nor tended with care:

21 They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,  
saying, "Peace, peace,"  
when there is no peace.

In the book of Jeremiah, these words are often used in terms of the contrast drawn between true and false prophets. In Jer 14:14-16, it is evident that the false prophet is the one who sees no famine, nor sword, and thus fails in helping the people face the reality of death and destruction in their midst.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, the true prophet, like Jeremiah himself, is the one who acknowledges the wounds of the people, and moreover, helps them to face also the wound-producing circumstances.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, it seems as if the ancient prophets in particular were in tune with the impact of poverty and injustice on its victims.

In this text it is ironic that those who have inflicted wounds upon others will themselves be wounded in the wake of military invasion. Throughout Jeremiah 4-6, the ongoing destruction is framed in terms of God's judgment as a clear connection is made between the structural violence of poverty and injustice and imperial violence, which with great force is unleashed upon those responsible for wounding the poor and needy. So Jer 5:6 offers the following explanation for the fierce attacks by the Babylonian invaders that we have seen earlier is imaged in terms of ferocious wild animals: "Their transgressions are many, their apostasies are great."

However, the complexity involved in this particular interpretation of events is evident in the fact that God's wrath in Jer 6:11 extends to everyone:

<sup>13</sup> S D Snyman, "A Structural-historical Investigation of חמס ושיד in Jeremiah 6:1-8," *HTS* 58/4 (2002): 1602. Cf. also Walter Brueggeman, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 70-71.

<sup>14</sup> Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 79.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the important work by Kathleen O'Connor and Louis Stulman that employs trauma hermeneutics in order to outline the role of the prophet as helping the people to face the devastating effects of the trauma that is threatening to annihilate the world as they know it. For two good overviews of their thought cf. Louis Stulman, "Reading the Bible as Trauma Literature: The Legacy of the Losers," EGLBS Presidential Address, *Conversations with the Biblical World* 34 (2014): 1-13; Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Surviving Disaster in the Book of Jeremiah," *Word & World* 22/4 (2002): 369-377.

children, young men and women, old people and the very frail. Kalmanofsky rightly points out that "the inclusion of the babies, women and the elderly emphasizes the helplessness of many of God's victims."<sup>16</sup> Actually, one should not forget that also those individuals who for years suffered from the violence of poverty and injustice, also fell victim to the direct violence associated with the imperial invasion. This inherent ambiguity may prevent one from merely uncritically accepting the direct association that is drawn between sin and suffering in the prophet's interpretation of the devastating events surrounding the Babylonian invasion.

Perhaps a contemporary example is helpful in thinking through the complexities involved in terms of the relationship between structural and direct violence. The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in the city of New Orleans by some has been interpreted as a sign of God's judgment.<sup>17</sup> Even though such theological interpretations are greatly problematic, and may inflict even more harm upon those who are already suffering, Shelly Rambo rightly points out that amidst the destruction caused by this natural disaster, one should not miss the strong link to structural or systemic violence that exacerbated the effects of the hurricane, causing a large proportion of black and poor people to fall victim to the effects of the hurricane. Who can forget the haunting pictures of these individuals being displaced, and suffering great harm in the Dome to which the hurricane victims were evacuated? In some sense the tragedy reveals what Rambo has called the "hidden wounds" below the surface that also show the importance of acknowledging the intersecting nature of race and class in terms of structural racism and the slow violence of poverty that continue to plague many communities in her context of the United States.<sup>18</sup> And those of us living in South Africa know all too well how race, class, gender and poverty intersect in particular painful ways in our country that still is haunted by its colonial and apartheid past.

## 2. Uncovering the Wounds Left on Female Bodies

A second form of violence not always recognized is the way in which gendered language is used to represent the violence conducted against the city of

<sup>16</sup> Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Michael M. Homan, "Rebuilding That Wicked City: How the Destruction, Exile, and Restoration of New Orleans Elucidates Judah in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries B.C.E.," in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts* (eds. Brad E. Kelle, Frank R. Ames, & Jacob L. Wright; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 211. Cf. also Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), 44, 149.

<sup>18</sup> Shelly Rambo, "Introduction" in *Post Traumatic Public Theology* (eds. Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo; Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 10-11. Cf. also Shelly Rambo, "Saturday in New Orleans: Rethinking the Holy Spirit in the Aftermath of Trauma," *Review and Expositor* 105/ 2 (2008): 229-244.

Jerusalem. According to Kalmanofsky, in Jeremiah 6, amidst the description of direct horror as evident in the overbearing display of imperial violence, one also finds included images of indirect horror pertaining to the violence inflicted upon the female figure of Zion, and specifically, the maternal body.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, amidst the display of imperial violence, distinctly female images are used to communicate the sense of sheer vulnerability associated with this City and her people. For instance in Jer 4:31 (cf. also Jer 6:24), the image of a woman in labour is used to express the experience of being trapped and unable to yield to the command in Jer 6:1 to flee from her attackers.<sup>20</sup> The violent acts of cutting down trees, turning fertile lands into wastelands, destroying property is described in Jer 6:2-4 in metaphorical terms as shepherds and their sheep attacking a luscious green pasture:

2 I have likened daughter Zion  
to the loveliest pasture.  
3 Shepherds with their flocks shall come against her.  
They shall pitch their tents around her;  
they shall pasture, all in their places.  
"Prepare war against her; up, and let us attack at noon!"  
Moreover, in Jer 6:4-6, a full-blown attack is launched against the  
City:  
4 "Prepare war against her;  
up, and let us attack at noon!"...  
5 "Up, and let us attack by night,  
and destroy her palaces!"  
6 For thus says the Lord of hosts:  
Cut down her trees;  
cast up a siege ramp against Jerusalem.  
This is the city that must be punished.

It is important to recognize that among those the victims of imperial violence cited above would be also the poor and needy, women and children.

<sup>19</sup> Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> According to Kalmanofsky, the woman in labour metaphor emphasizes the feeling of vulnerability experienced by Daughter Zion. She argues as follow: "Within the context of the description of the powerful and deadly enemy, the personal address to Daughter Zion emphasizes Israel's vulnerability. These superhuman, male warriors face weak, female Daughter Zion," *Terror All Around*, 123. Cf. also two essays I have written on the metaphor of the woman in labour in the book of Jeremiah, L Juliana Claassens, "Like a Woman in Labor: Gender, Queer, Postcolonial and Trauma Perspectives on Jeremiah," in *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (ed. Christl Maier and Carolyn Sharp; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 117-132; "The Rhetorical Function of the Woman in Labor Metaphor in Jeremiah 30-31: Trauma, Gender and Postcolonial Perspectives," *JTSA* 150 (2014): 67-84.



Women and children indeed are most affected by the violence of war, forced migration and also poverty as aspects such as gender, class and race contribute greatly in making already vulnerable entities even more vulnerable during times of war and/or natural disaster.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, it has been well documented how rape often in ancient as well as contemporary communities is employed as an instrument of war.<sup>22</sup>

However, once again, the wounds of structural violence are used metaphorically to depict the violation people experienced by the hand of imperial forces. As Kathleen O'Connor writes, "by depicting the war as an attack on a woman, the poems capture the powerlessness of victims and their humiliation as a defeated people."<sup>23</sup> This troubling display of violence against a female body goes even further when the violent acts of breaking down the City's walls, entering the City and her buildings are imaged in terms of an act of sexual violence.<sup>24</sup>

Just as disconcerting as the violent imagery that speaks about war in terms of a war against a female body is the way in which this violence is justified in terms of making a connection between sin, impurity, sexuality and violent punishment. Continuing the metaphorical portrayal of daughter Zion as an unfaithful wife in Jeremiah 2-3, the image of a cistern swallowing all that is evil and vile in Jer 6:7 is used to emphasize the wickedness of the City and her people.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. e.g. the work done by Gemma Tulud Cruz that specifically attend to the intersection of gender, race, and class in *An Intercultural Theology of Migration: Pilgrims in the Wilderness* (Studies in Systematic Theology 5; Leiden: Brill, 2010). Cf. also her essay "Old Challenges, New Contexts, and Strategies: The Experience of Migrant Women," in *Toward a Theology of Migration Social Justice and Religious Experience* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 33-52.

<sup>22</sup> Diana Milillo, "Rape as a Tactic of War: Social and Psychological Perspectives," *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work* 21/ 2 (2006): 196-205. In terms of the Hebrew Bible cf. Paul Bentley Kern who highlights the effect of war on women and children: "Rape was the ultimate violation of women, marking the complete possession of them by the soldiers who had taken possession of their city... All warfare has a strong sexual undercurrent, but siege warfare was an explicit battle for sexual rights... The raping that frequently followed the fall of a city starkly symbolized total victory in total war," Paul Bentley Kern, *Ancient Siege Warfare* (Bloomington: Souvenir Press, 1999), 81. Quoted in Ruth Poser, "Embodied Memories: Gender Specific Aspects of Prophecy as Trauma Literature," in *Prophecy: Bible and Women 1.2* (ed. Irmtraud Fischer and L. Juliana Claassens, Atlanta, GA: SBL), forthcoming.

<sup>23</sup> Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Reclaiming Jeremiah's Violence," in *Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets* (ed. Chris Franke and Julia M. O'Brien; Sheffield: T&T Clark, 2010), 43. Cf. also Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 124.

<sup>24</sup> Brad E. Kelle, "Wartime Rhetoric: Prophetic Metaphorization of Cities as Female." in *Writing and Reading War: Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts* (ed. Brad E. Kelle and Frank Ritchel Ames; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2008), 98-100.

As Kalmanofsky rightly notes, it is this "broken, diseased, and female body" that is responsible for God turning away in disgust (Jer 6:8). And even more disconcerting for inflicting violence as a means to punish the wayward City.<sup>25</sup>

Once more, one is faced with the difficulty of honouring the instances of structural violence embedded in the text, all the while sharply distancing oneself from the connotations propagated by the use of these metaphors that are rooted in some very troubling gender constructions. As Yvonne Sherwood rightly remarks, the portrayal of "abused bodies of women have returned to speak with a vengeance"<sup>26</sup> as evident in the multiple expressions of oppression and abuse that many women till this day have to endure.

#### **D FACING THE TERROR ALL AROUND AND THE TERROR WITHIN**

So, what is the reader to do with these examples of structural violence that are to be found just below of the surface of the text, in many ways intersecting with the overbearing displays of imperial violence that threaten to utterly annihilate Judah? And moreover, in what way does this interconnected, intersectional understanding of violence in the text help us to be more mindful of the hidden wounds of structural violence in our respective communities?

The various intersecting levels of violence in the text of Jeremiah 4-6 helps us to, on the one hand, recognize the tragedy of the imperial violence which the prophet sought to explain in terms of the theological framework of his day. But without fully embracing the prophet's explanation for the tragedy that left no one unscathed, it also challenges us to dig deeper, and to notice the wounds caused by the ongoing, insidious forms of structural violence.

In this regard, the work of Shelley Rambo on the necessity of uncovering "hidden wounds" below the surface is particularly helpful. Rambo reflects on the "haunting" image of ghosts as representative of past wounds of structural violence that in her context specifically pertain to the United States' painful history regarding slavery, segregation and the more recent manifestations of #BlackLivesMatter.<sup>27</sup> Probably one of the most vivid examples of the haunting power of ghosts in dealing with the wounds of past racism and slavery is found in Toni Morrison's epic novel *Beloved*. In the figure of the ghost of Beloved, a

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<sup>25</sup> Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 108. Cf. also Deryn Guest's classic essay "Hiding Behind the Naked Women in Lamentations: A Recriminative Response," in which she shows how the personification of the city as a violated woman is used as a rhetorical strategy to cast the male elite members of society as a sexually violated and battered woman, so drawing a connection between sin, suffering, and divine judgment, *BibInt* 7 (1999): 413-448.

<sup>26</sup> Sherwood, "'Tongue-Lashing,'" 94.

<sup>27</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, 71-73.

child murdered by her mother so as to prevent her child from experiencing the pain of slavery, one finds a vivid example of the history of past wounds that continue to haunt the characters in the present.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Rambo reads the "surge of racialised violence" currently experienced in the United States as evidence of the unattended wounds of the past as "ghosts who are returning to demand justice in the presence."<sup>29</sup> As she poignantly writes with regard to the story of Jesus' appearance to his disciples post-resurrection in John 20:19-28: "to welcome ghosts into our reading is to mark this passage for its capacity to witness to complex histories. Ghosts signal unsettled memories coming forward."<sup>30</sup>

In Jeremiah 4-6, the presence of the poor and the violated bodies of women similarly can be described as "unsettled memories coming forward" to haunting effect. Haunting though is not necessarily a negative thing, for as Rambo reminds us, "ghosts do important work of resurrecting pasts in order to heal them."<sup>31</sup> To recognize the wounds of structural violence simmering below the surface of the text, to honestly and courageously attend to both the effects as well as the causes of these violations is essential if this process of healing is going to take place.

At the same time, one also is called to engage with the overwhelming display of imperial violence that in the text is understood in terms of divine punishment. Sherwood highlights the importance of interrogating such acts of justifying the gross display of imperial violence in terms of moral retribution according to which divine violence is seen as a way in which "the global/cosmic order [is] righting itself, by way of retaliation or legitimate defence."<sup>32</sup>

In this regard, I have found helpful recent developments in trauma hermeneutics that reframe the link between God and violence as "normal" response to the "abnormality" of extreme trauma that causes the world to become undone as reflected throughout most of the book of Jeremiah. So, Kathleen O'Connor in a way tries to make sense of the devastating portrait of imperial violence in the war poems in Jeremiah 4-6, and views this expression of divine violence as punishment as a type of coping strategy that in the first instance views God to be in control of a terribly out-of-control situation. Moreover, closely associated with this explanation of imperial violence in terms of God's judgment

<sup>28</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, 78.

<sup>29</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, 38.

<sup>32</sup> Sherwood, "Tongue-Lashing," 110. Sherwood explains as follows: "My argument is not that we should believe, or dissent from, the structures and logics in the Bible and the Prophets (what kind of rhetorical power/[ violence?] would be required to enforce that kind of argument, or that decision on anyone else's behalf?), but that we should become more conscious of the relationship between acts of violence (or power) and acts of faith," (p111).

is the coping strategy that Stulman describes in terms of the notion of "self-blame" according to which the victims justify the destruction in terms of their own sinfulness, so reasserting that there is some rhyme and reason after all for the turmoil they had experienced.<sup>33</sup>

These hermeneutical strategies encourage one to maintain a delicate balance between understanding attempts of the prophet and his people to face the disaster brought about by the military violence that crushed the people of Judah, while not yielding to the temptation to follow the prophet in a singular explanation that maintains a direct correlation between tragedy, sin and God's judgment. Adding to this complexity, is the fact that amidst the greatest national crisis, images of injustice prevail as the victims of structural violence of poverty and gender-based violence continue to vie for recognition.

Finally, to embrace a more nuanced understanding of violence that recognizes the deep wounds caused by racism, sexism, and also homophobia and xenophobia is to be done in service of the overarching goal of healing and recovery. From Rambo's work it is evident that it is not sufficient to merely uncover and/or confront the wounds of the past. In order for true wound work to occur, one needs to move toward the healing of wounds. In the final section of this article, I will thus offer some preliminary thoughts on how the response to the multi-layered wounding in the book of Jeremiah may be helpful in our own thinking through our difficult journeys to deal with the wounds of structural violence.

## **E. TOWARDS THE HEALING OF WOUNDS?**

In the context of the painful conversations in the United States regarding race, violence and police brutality that resulted in the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Yolanda Pierce composed a powerful litany in her blog post called "A Litany for Those Who Aren't Ready for Healing:"

Let us not rush to the language of healing, before understanding the fullness of the injury and the depth of the wound.  
Let us not rush to offer a band-aid, when the gaping wound requires surgery and complete reconstruction....

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<sup>33</sup> Louis Stulman, "Reading the Bible through the Lens of Trauma and Art," in *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions: Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond*, ed. Eve-Marie Becker, Jan Dochhorn and Else Holt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 185. Stulman says it well: "the prophetic inclination to blame this 'tiny country' for all its troubles and explain its political misfortunes by way of moral causality is a rigorous attempt to recreate symbolic coherence in times of social convulsion" with the primary goal of survival" (pp 185-186).

Let us not speak of reconciliation without speaking of reparations and restorations, or how we can repair the breach and how we can restore the loss...

Let us not value a false peace over a righteous justice.

Let us not be afraid to sit with the ugliness, the messiness, and the pain that is life in community together.

Let us not offer clichés to the grieving, whose hearts who are being torn asunder."<sup>34</sup>

Dan Hague writes that Pierce's poignant litany, "reflects not only the pain of racial injustice itself, but the additional compounded pain caused by white efforts to move too quickly to a state of reconciliation and healing, without desiring to fully understand the depth and breadth of the suffering."<sup>35</sup>

Actually, it is quite interesting that when considering Jeremiah 4-6, healing seems to be nowhere on the horizon. In terms of the literary structure of the book, healing, or at least the hope for healing, will only appear in what has been called the Little Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 29-33). However, amidst this painful journey towards healing that starts with courageously facing the trauma and uncovering the wounds, one finds a number of references in the text that may be helpful in the conversation on the healing of the painful wounds of structural violence in our respective contexts, which as Pierce reminds us, we should not jump to too fast.

First, it is significant that it seems that the only proper response in Jeremiah 4-6 to the devastating violence can be said to be lament. So we read in in Jer 6:26 the following imperative:

26 O my poor people, put on sackcloth, and roll in ashes;  
make mourning as for an only child,  
most bitter lamentation:  
for suddenly the destroyer  
will come upon us.

This call to weep and mourn like a mother who has lost her only child is a powerful means of capturing the extent of the effects of the trauma upon the people. These people, who a couple of verses earlier had been compared to a

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<sup>34</sup> Yolanda Pierce, "A Litany for Those Who Aren't Ready for Healing," November 25, 2014 on Yolanda Pierce Blogspot: Reflections of an Afro-Christian Scholar. Available at <http://yolandapierce.blogspot.com/2014/11/a-litany-for-those-who-arent-ready-for.html> Cited in Hague, "The Trauma of Racism," 104.

<sup>35</sup> Hague, "The Trauma of Racism," 104-105. Hague writes that "both black theologians and critical whiteness scholars challenge any approaches to healing the wounds of racism which obscure general white complicity, or privilege the interpersonal therapeutic relationship over addressing racism as an oppressive system," p 93.

woman in the painful throes of giving birth (Jer 6:24), are now said to lament bitterly like a woman mourning the death of her only child.<sup>36</sup>

One should not forget that embedded in these images one finds the suffering of real men, women and children that is taken up and eternalized in literary form. These images that speak of pain, suffering, tears and lament challenge the reader to respond with empathy, to feel something of the pain of the wounds that were inflicted by the multi-layered forms of violence that were outlined above. Interestingly enough, in Pierce's litany, she calls upon people to mourn, lament and weep at the loss of life of black and brown men and women; at the failure of the justice system. In the spirit of the prophet Jeremiah, she poignantly writes:

Let us call for the mourning men and the wailing women, those  
willing to rend their garments of spirit and ease, and sit in the ashes  
of the nation's original sin.<sup>37</sup>

And secondly, it is significant to note that amidst the sharp words of judgment by the prophet, one finds how the prophet acknowledges the pain and suffering of the people to whom he is speaking. In the lament cited above, it is significant that the prophet uses the term "daughter of my people." Rather than recoiling in disgust, the prophet sympathizes on a deep level with Daughter Zion's suffering and draws "emotionally closer to her."<sup>38</sup> It is telling also that the prophet includes himself in what is happening to the people when he emphasizes how the "destroyer will come upon *us*," so serving as a profound example of solidarity and compassion.<sup>39</sup> It is evident in these text that the prophet is seen standing with victims of so many different levels of violence – both the most apparent forms of imperial violence, but also the various forms of structural violence hidden below the surface.

In Pierce's litany, this call to solidarity is also evident in the way in which she ends her litany for those who are not ready for healing with the following first person account:

God in your mercy,  
show me my own complicity in injustice  
Convict me for my indifference  
forgive me for when I remained silent

<sup>36</sup> Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 126.

<sup>37</sup> Pierce, "A Litany for Those Who Aren't Ready for Healing."

<sup>38</sup> Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 125. Kalmanofsky shows how also in Isa 22:4; Jer 4:11, 6:14, 26, 8:11, 19, 22, 23, 9:6, 14:7; Lam 3:48, 4:3, 6, 10 the reference to "daughter of my people" is used to describe "a wounded or dejected Israel."

<sup>39</sup> Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around*, 126.

equip me with a zeal for righteousness  
 Never let me grow accustomed or acclimated to unrighteousness.<sup>40</sup>

I propose that this call to lament as well as solidarity with those who suffer that features in Jeremiah 4-6 is vital in the conversation of moving towards the healing of the wounds of structural violence. While Shelly Rambo reiterates the importance of uncovering the wounds of the past, which will come back to haunt us if we do attend to them, Rambo also speaks of the necessity of gently touching and cleaning painful wounds, of applying healing ointment that stops infections from spreading.<sup>41</sup> These actions, uncovering and tending to wounds, have the sole purpose of ensuring that painful, life-threatening wounds ultimately may heal and turn into scars. Scars that signal that what has happened had marked us, but making it possible for us to live fruitful and productive lives once more.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Pierce, "A Litany for Those Who Aren't Ready for Healing."

<sup>41</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, 92.

<sup>42</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, 52.

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