

EXCERPT



Comfort in the Ashes *Explorations in the Book of Job to Support Trauma Survivors*

January 14, 2025 | \$26, 208 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1034-1

“Biblical scholar Michelle Keener has taken up the book of Job and made it sing. And the song it sings, in the hands of this trauma survivor, is surprising and tender. It is a song of grief and loss expressed, of friendship that succeeds and fails, of a shattered world painfully reconstructed. Above all, this book sings of a Scripture that is sensitive to survivors of trauma, and a God who meets them in the ashes.”

—Helen Paynter, executive director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence

Trusted Listeners

Trauma can be an isolating and lonely experience. A survivor can feel utterly alone in the midst of their suffering. The reality is that this may not be a feeling at all; it may be fact. Trauma has a tendency to push people away, whether by the survivor's choice or because the situation is too uncomfortable for others. We may say we are giving a survivor space, but in reality we may be giving ourselves space because we don't know what to say. We may be trying to avoid the ashes. Talking about trauma can bring people together or drive them apart. Trauma survivors may find themselves isolated and struggling to heal without any social support. We see this illustrated in the book of Job when Job is alone on the ash heap. His experience of trauma has set him apart and distanced him from his community. He occupies a liminal space, a place of neither here nor there. He is no longer the man he was, but he is not yet the man he will become after the trauma. He is in a transitional phase, a man without a place. His physical isolation ends when his friends arrive and sit with him in the ash heap, but once the words start to flow, Job's separateness will become obvious again as he and the three friends discover how far apart they are in their beliefs about Job's suffering.

After seven days of silence, Job launches into the poetry of Job 3. His curse against the day of his birth and his use of the de-creation metaphor points to the shattering of his worldview and his inner schemas. He cries out from a place of trauma and suffering, and his friends are stunned. We can only speculate about what his friends thought Job would say when he finally broke his silence. What we do know is that they were not expecting this. Job's words shock his friends, and their reaction sets the tone for the coming contentious debate in the dialogue cycles. They cannot accept Job's perspective. His claims that his losses and suffering are unwarranted and unjust are too much for their theological worldview. Job's version of the events is threatening to them. It challenges their fundamental assumptions, and they cannot embrace that. In order to protect their worldview and their understanding of God, his friends have to prove that Job is wrong. Because if Job is right . . . their whole world will turn upside down too.

Now, again, before we pile on Job's friends and point out what a terrible job they did, we need to pause for a moment. First, they were the only ones who showed up. These were the friends who heard about Job's suffering and did something about it. They deserve acknowledgment for that. Second, we also need to acknowledge that we are all wounded comforters. We all bring our own pain, our own baggage, and our own scars to every conversation. I can't pretend to know what was going on with the friends, but I do know they were deeply entrenched in a Retribution Principle worldview. When Job challenged that theology, he was challenging the very foundation of their beliefs. That was probably terrifying. So, while we're going to look honestly at where things went sideways with the friends, I want to be as compassionate to them as I can be.

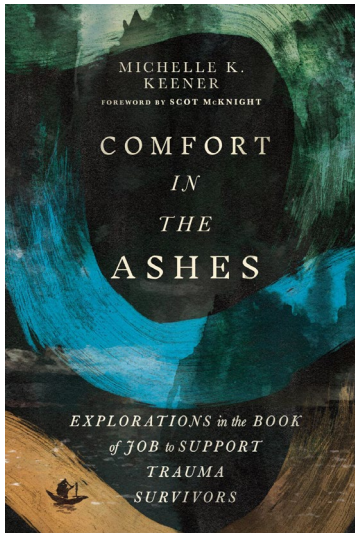
With that said, what we see in the friends' reactions is a failure to act as trusted listeners. A trusted listener is someone who can listen to a survivor's story without agenda and without judgment. This listening other provides the survivor with a safe place to process their trauma and work through what it means and how it has affected them. A trusted listener is a vital element in trauma resolution and healing. Job's friends were able to demonstrate compassion and support by their presence, but they stumble when it comes to listening. They cannot hear and accept Job's story because of the implications it has for them. Trauma can be threatening. In order to alleviate their own discomfort and protect their own assumptions, the friends must explain Job's trauma in a way that maintains their theological agenda. While there is value in wise counsel, and it will always be necessary to speak truth in dark circumstances, what we see here is the imposition of an agenda, in this case a theological agenda. It is an imposition that causes further harm to a trauma survivor in an attempt to preserve the status quo.



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Before we delve into the theological agenda of the friends, let’s take a brief moment to address the ramifications of this idea of imposing an agenda. In the book of Job, Job’s friends are pushing a theological agenda, one that will explain away Job’s suffering as a just and deserved punishment for his sins. However, the idea of imposing an agenda on a trauma survivor’s experience goes beyond just theological categories. As pastors and church leaders, we can impose a business agenda on a trauma survivor, putting the reputation or business platform of the church ahead of a trauma survivor’s needs. As witnesses to trauma, we may impose relational agendas on a survivor in an attempt to preserve family, friends, or network relationships. As comforters we may impose social agendas in order to preserve or press our understanding of authority, marriage, or gender roles. The specific agenda can take many forms and it may not even be a conscious attempt at undermining the trauma survivor, but the bottom line is the same. Sometimes, as trusted listeners, pastors, and comforters, this imposition is unintentional. These agendas are simply so much a part of our belief systems and worldview that we may not recognize that our impulse to provide an answer is really an attempt, well-intentioned as it may be, to impose our perspective of the situation on a wounded survivor. We may be so sure that we understand what’s happened that we focus on getting the survivor to accept our view of the situation. We may even have a whole pile of Bible verses to back up our opinion. The difficulty is that the imposition of an agenda, no matter the motivation, asks a survivor to accept *our* view of the situation. It runs the risk of silencing the trauma survivor’s voice and depriving them of the necessary opportunity to express and understand their own experience.

What we see in the book of Job, and what applies to the church, is the ripple effect of trauma. A trauma survivor’s experience can have an impact on those around the survivor and on those with whom the survivor chooses to share their story. Trauma feels, and often is, isolating, but its effects can reach into the lives of those who surround the survivor. This recognition of the ripple effect of Job’s traumatic experience is illustrated in the text. When Job begins to question everything he thought he knew about God, creation, and the order of the world, the friends cannot support him. The friends know Job, they know his reputation for righteousness and blamelessness, yet they refuse to question their understanding of the doctrine of retribution even when they see the suffering of a man whom they know to be righteous. Their stubborn devotion to their particular understanding of God leads them to immediately discount Job’s view of his experience. (Is anyone else thinking of social media debates at the moment?) The friends do not give Job a safe place to work through his experience, instead they attempt to impose their understanding of the events on Job. When Job refuses to go along with it, the verbal fireworks commence.

—Taken from chapter three, “The Ministry of Presence”



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Q & A



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Michelle K. Keener (PhD, Liberty) is an associate research fellow with the Kirby-Laing Centre for Public Theology and the director of discipleship for a growing church in Las Vegas. She is an award-winning novelist and devotional author. Keener and her family live in beautiful southern Nevada.

Navigating Trauma in the Old Testament and the Church

In *Comfort in the Ashes*, biblical scholar Michelle Keener explores the intersection between trauma theory and the book of Job for Christian communities. Rachel Hastings, assistant academic editorial director, asked her a few questions in advance of the book's release:

This book is adapted from your dissertation. Tell me a little bit about how you got into this topic and why you felt it was important to adapt this project for a broader audience?

Michelle Keener: This book started out as a research paper on the book of Job for an Old Testament writings class, and I fell in love with the topic. I had never really enjoyed the book of Job prior to starting this research. It had always struck me as a repetitive and confusing text, but when I started looking at it from the perspective of trauma, it suddenly clicked for me. I was about halfway through my dissertation when I started seeing how understanding trauma can have a significant impact on how the church responds to and ministers to trauma survivors. So, once I finished the dissertation, I immediately started working on adapting it for pastors, church leaders, and believers, and I was so excited that you and IVP Academic saw the value in it.

When we worked on developing your manuscript, we talked a lot about audience. You and I both felt like the message of the book was for ministry leaders who are working with those who have experienced trauma, but also for trauma survivors. How is this book beneficial both to those who are survivors of trauma and to those who are in a ministry context working with survivors of trauma?

Keener: We did have lots of conversations about how to create a book that would appeal to both ministry leaders and survivors and how to offer each audience something relevant and helpful. I hope one of the ways this book does that is to offer an understanding of what trauma is and what makes it unique. Survivors can read this book and see some of their own experiences in the pages and hopefully discover that they are not alone and they are not broken. Ministry leaders can read this book and gain some understanding of what trauma responses may look like and how they can support trauma survivors in their ministries in a healthy and biblical way.

Some people may think that you're reading a modern concept onto an ancient body of text. You convinced me as your editor that the trauma lens was not just a compelling line of inquiry, but an incredibly helpful and hermeneutically responsible way of reading the text for the life of the church. What would you say to readers that might be skeptical of the intersection of trauma studies and OT studies?

Keener: That's a fair question. The author of the book of Job, or any of the other biblical texts, didn't have access to modern trauma theory or mental health discussions. But the biblical authors were certainly familiar with trauma. War, famine, exile, rape, murder, and traumatic events are everywhere in the Bible. There can be great interpretive benefit in looking at the human experience of trauma and suffering in the biblical texts and working to understand how those experiences may have impacted the text and how that, in turn, impacts the church today.



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In your research, what did you find most surprising about the book of Job and what it tells us about trauma?

Keener: I think I was most surprised by the rawness and realness of Job. When I started looking at the text through the lens of trauma, I was captivated by the resonances between the book of Job and the way we process traumatic events. The connections are amazing.

What do you want ministry leaders and those who train pastors to take away from this book?

Keener: I would like pastors and ministry leaders to see in this book an opportunity to learn how to better serve the people God has brought into their care. Instead of trying to rush people through their pain and get them back to “normal” as soon as possible, I would love to see pastors reach out to those who are suffering and meet them where they are. Trauma and suffering can be messy, and the church needs to be okay with that. If we can learn to embrace those who are hurting and sit with them in their pain, the church will truly be a place of healing and restoration.



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