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Critical Empathy and Interpreting the Bible During War: Reading Gloating in Obadiah and Nahum

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Abstract

This chapter makes a case for critical empathy with particular focus on the other-condemning emotion of gloating and its depiction in two books of the Minor Prophets: Obadiah and Nahum. It begins with the inevitability of both subjectivity and emotional responsiveness to and engagement with the world in front of the text during the process of biblical interpretation. The gravity and distress of ongoing war in present-day Israel-Gaza, of the Bible's ideological role and of the war's impact also on biblical studies are raised. Next, the chapter explores imagery of gloating in each of Obadiah and Nahum, identifying the malice of this emotion through its contradistinction with a related emotion, Schadenfreude. From there, the chapter explores empathy and advocates for critical empathy, concluding with its potential for transforming teaching, research, and knowledge of self and others.

Keywords: critical empathy – emotion – gloating – Nahum – Obadiah – radical empathy – subjectivity

1. Introduction

In her monograph *Writing and Reading to Survive* biblical scholar L. Juliana M. Claassens argues persuasively that Hebrew Bible texts are, overwhelmingly, texts of trauma (2020: 4). If this is so, these texts reflect profound and distressing emotionally- and bodily-charged experiences.[1] This chapter examines examples of such experiences – namely, of violence, shaming exposure and gloating – in two Minor Prophets: Obadiah and Nahum. Obadiah denounces Edom's rejoicing over Jerusalem's destruction and proclaims vengeance; Nahum anticipates Israel's joy at Nineveh's violent downfall. I consider this evocative and disturbing biblical imagery of gleeful brutality in the context of recent events from which, for me, it cannot be disentangled.[2] The emotive force of gloating is visceral and inflaming and this chapter explores if and how empathy – a variously defined buzzword prominent in our time – enables (weaponized empathy) or dismantles (critical and radical empathy) such force. Empathy is sometimes depicted as 'the problem'; more often,

[1] Another recent volume in the flourishing field of trauma and Bible is Alexiana Fry's *Esther Keeps the Score* (2026), the title of which recalls Bessel van der Kolk's trauma classic *The Body Keeps the Score* (2015). Both give nuanced accounts of how trauma manifests, including in the psyche, body, and intergenerationally. Claassens (2020) and Fry (2026) emphasize the imprint of trauma on literature.
[2] This is not novel. For examples of interpreting excerpts from the Hebrew Bible in new ways in response to current violent events, see, for instance, Sarojini Nadar (2025), Fry (2026: 133–140) and numerous contributions in Ed Kessler, Charley Baginsky and Josh Levy (2026). On trauma-informed pedagogy amidst war, with focus not so much on the Bible but on religion and media, see Kristi Boone (2025).

however, it is proposed as 'the solution' to averting or healing from harm. The term requires and will receive fuller examination.

First, I will emphasize that biblical interpretation is subjective and takes place in relationship with the world in front of the biblical text. From there, I turn to examining vocabulary and imagery from Obadiah and Nahum, focusing particularly on bodies: bodies that are shamed and exposed and bodies that are abuzz with gloating and jubilation. It is the body, after all, that 'moulds our subjectivity, emotions, thoughts and social interactions' (Boone 2025: 72, referencing Sari Hokkanen). Next, I draw out the malice of gloating by contrasting it with another relational emotion, Schadenfreude. From there, I say a little about the encounter between gleefully violent biblical texts of warfare and gloating in our war-filled violent present. Following this, I explore some of the ways empathy has been characterized and sub-categorized. I conclude with highlighting the positive potential of critical empathy for biblical studies and biblical scholars.

2. *In Front of the Biblical Text*

To say biblical scholarship is by biblical scholars who live in front of the texts they work with is obvious, even banal; and yet, a great deal of biblical scholarship obscures or suppresses this reality. Perhaps, this derives from established convention to project objectivity or authority, or because, ostensibly, the world *in* or *behind* the biblical text is focalized while the world *in front of* the text – either consciously or unconsciously – is, by implication, not relevant.[3]

My day-to-day working life as a biblical scholar can and does intersect and sometimes interfere with what is technically my non-work life – which happens in the reverse direction, too. This is not in the least unusual.[4] My work regularly seeps into other aspects of life – it may determine how and where I travel or spend my income, affect what I see in or how I interpret a film, or novel, or news-report, or motivate me to sign a petition or join a protest or strike. Again, there is nothing remarkable about this. My work-self is part of my whole-self, which is, on the one hand, indivisible, and on the other, made up of different roles, facets and personas. Emotions are part of this and again, impossible to prise apart from what I do, inclusive of analysis and interpretation in my biblical scholarship.

The porousness of the self that I have just sketched out is widely acknowledged in some areas of biblical studies, where, for decades by now, notions of so-called 'scholarly objectivity' have been challenged and refuted.[5] Quite simply, biblical

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[3] I point out elsewhere (Stiebert 2024: 7–8 and n.15) first, that self-referential interpretation and acknowledgement of how the world in front of the text shapes interpretation are both becoming more common in biblical scholarship and second, that even where this is *not* explicit, the world in front of the text is implicitly present.

[4] Expressions like 'work/life balance' and 'work creep' are part of everyday language of academic and other working life. On the pace and pressures of academic life, Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber's book (2017) has made a big splash.

[5] Feminist and womanist, postcolonial-critical, survivor-centred, gender- and queer critical biblical interpreters – that is, interpreters engaging embodied and justice-seeking strategies of biblical interpretation – are prominent in challenging claims to scholarly objectivity or neutrality. Feminist biblical scholar Barbara Thiede, for example, stresses that any attempts to recover or reconstruct the historical past, encounter 'inevitable and natural limitations,' and warns that 'so-called "neutrality" frequently results in reinscribing the dangerous ideologies one is "reconstructing"' (2026: 2). Thiede

studies *is not* and *cannot be* detached from the multiple worlds, experiences and events of and beyond campuses and libraries. Publications that continue to claim definitively the excavation of biblical texts' original form, meaning, setting, author, intent or purpose, or that purport to 'let the text speak for itself'[6] ignore that the Bible exists in neither a hermetically nor a hermeneutically sealed environment, or separately from where and how it is interpreted.[7] So-called 'objective' reading, instead, conceals subjectivity and often promotes ideologies that are dominant and normalized, in the process often reinforcing existing hierarchies and inequities in our field. Hand-in-hand with this, overtly subjective methods of criticism, such as womanist, feminist, queer, or postcolonial criticism, which own and accentuate political positions and identities, are sometimes maligned for, or implicated as being, 'less scholarly.'[8] As I will go on to develop, emphasizing emotion and empathy has been critiqued in analogous ways.

The world outside of the biblical text has over many years of teaching entered my classroom. Sometimes this has taken the form of students' intense curiosity about a Bible-related publication that penetrated wider popular culture – Michael Drosnin's *The Bible Code* (1997) and Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* (2003) are examples that spring to mind. In both cases, such curiosity created opportunities to explore the Bible and its impact, influence, and authority.[9] Political events have also invited lively classroom discussion – including the ways appeals to the Bible have been instrumentalized to underscore, for instance, Labour Party promises and the implementation of Brexit. Even the object of 'the Bible' is instrumentalized as a shorthand for claiming a particular narrative: examples are Donald Trump's brandishing of a Bible to assert his precarious authority at the height of the Black

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gives examples of such dangerous ideologies grounded in claims to neutrality with reference to biblical vocabulary and depictions of sexual violence (2026: 1–4). Concerning porousness of the self, in 1984 already, Phyllis Trible describes her motivation for writing *Texts of Terror*, by now a classic of feminist biblical studies: 'hearing a black woman describe herself as a daughter of Hagar outside the covenant; seeing an abused woman on the streets of New York with a sign, "I am Tamar"; reading news reports of the dismembered body of a woman found in a trash can; attending worship services in memory of nameless women.... All these experiences and others have led me to a land of terror from whose bourn no traveler returns unscarred' (1984: 1–2).

[6] Like plenty of other interpreters, Saima Afzal and I hold that the Bible does not 'speak' and that meaning is not so much trapped *in* the text as interpreted *out* of it (Afzal and Stiebert 2024: 22).

[7] Any claim to be presenting a biblical text's 'plain meaning' tends to alert my suspicion, because this can be a front or strategy for deploying the text's authority for a specific ideological agenda. On how this operates in some conservative evangelical interpretation, see Afzal and Stiebert (2024: 15–16). A volume by Jill Hicks-Keeton and Cavan Concannon (2019) extends and nuances this discussion yet further with discrete focus on The Museum of the Bible, demonstrating how this institution hides behind claims of archaeological evidence and of neutrality while strategically promoting a distinctly evangelical Christian agenda.

[8] I develop this, at its worst, abusive deployment of so-called objectivity in a chapter co-authored with Thiede (2026).

[9] Drosnin's drivel of new age prophecy is a blast to teach. The claim of the book that there is a single authoritative Hebrew text of 'the Bible,' which can be used to computer-generate prophetic word finder grids that allegedly enable one to search for persons and events and then 'discover' prophetic messages that intersect with these, lends itself beautifully to teaching about textual transmission, textual variants, the phenomenon of biblical prophecy, consonantal script, and a host of other topics, all while debunking Drosnin's thesis. Brown's page-turner, meanwhile, is a great way in to teaching on visual exegesis, the synoptic problem, and on how gaps in narrative are filled.

Lives Matter protests, and Russell Brand's performative display of a bookmarked Bible when facing yet more accusations of sexual abuse.[10]

In my own working life of teaching on the Bible, no event, however, has weighed as emotionally heavily and painfully as the atrocities of and since 7 October 2023. While tensions and atrocities in the region of Israel-Palestine long predate 7 October 2023 and while this had led in prior years, too, to discussions and sometimes disagreements and heat in my work and life spaces,[11] intensity has sharpened significantly since this date.

Here, a few snapshots. On 16 October 2023 I received a WhatsApp message from a colleague in Uganda, showing an image of a page from the book of Amos with 1:6-8, beginning with 'The Lord says, "Gaza has sinned again and again, and I will not forget it. I will not leave her unpunished any more,"' circled in red and with the accompanying comment, 'How Africans are making sense of Israel Gaza war.' On 5 November 2023 I agreed (with trepidation) to speak on the radio about Benjamin Netanyahu's inflammatory reference to Amalekites (BBC Radio 4); several colleagues had declined to be publicly drawn on the matter. As the bombardment and devastation of Gaza and the human toll of Gazan casualties continued on and on, a church-going acquaintance of mine, who had never, over very many years, commented much on any political events, said with passion, 'when there are songs in church that call on us to praise Israel, I won't join in!' In the 2024 UK general election the Labour Party in particular lost a significant share of voters, with five seats won by pro-Gaza independents. On our university campus, as on other campuses, there was an encampment to show solidarity with Palestinians. There were also other regular campus actions, the majority of which expressed outrage at Israel's regime and called for divestment. There were smaller, usually commemorative gatherings led by Jewish students, calling for the release of hostages. There were frictions in our university's chaplaincy (cf. Boone 2025: 76–77) and tensions with the University's media team. The Equality-Diversity-Inclusion team only now began to roll out staff training on antisemitism and Islamophobia. My School for the first time, released guidance on 'teaching sensitive subjects.' And the Society for Old Testament Study hosted its online presentation and discussion on 'Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in Times of Conflict' (8 January 2026) with precautions – such as muting and having all audience members off-camera – which were not practised for any of the other presentations and panels. There have been

[10] In the UK general election campaign of 2015, opposition leader Ed Miliband revealed what has become mockingly known as EdStone: a limestone stele containing Labour's pledges, reminiscent of Hollywood depictions of the Mosaic Tablets of the Law (BBC 2015). In 2019, meanwhile, Tory Member of Parliament and Brexiteer Boris Johnson urged Prime Minister Theresa May to 'channel Moses' and tell the European Union to 'let my people go' (Morris 2019). The third example refers to President Trump's photo opportunity outside St. John's Church in Washington on 1 June 2020 (Pengelly 2020). Russell Brand, meanwhile, who made a show of converting to Christianity in 2024, appeared at court to enter a not-guilty plea for yet more allegations of sexual violence, carrying a Bible sprouting colourful tabs (Camber 2026). All these examples are expressive of attempts to harness authority and 'being right(eous)' through appeals to the Bible.

[11] I was teaching at the University of Tennessee at the time of the war erupting in late December 2008. This war, lasting a few weeks, resulted in the violent killing of well over one thousand Palestinians and 13 Israelis. I recall there were considerable tensions between colleagues within our Jewish Studies cohort as well as with members of the general public during our Women in Black vigils on Knoxville's Market Square. Yet the escalation notable within days of 7 October 2023 and persisting since is considerably more intense.

pain, efforts, mistakes and avoidances. A sense of unease and tension has grown and settled in regarding everything to do with Israel-Gaza. I have felt and I have felt implicated in this – in the workplace and outside of it.

Accompanying and to some extent reflective of this tension and unease, there has been an entrenchment of views clustering around two opposite poles – one, deeming virtually all actions of Israel's Defence Force legitimate self-defence and virtually all criticism of Israel antisemitic, with only Jewish land claims to Israel defensible, and one, deeming virtually all actions by Hamas justified, violence against Jews defensible, and no state of Israel legitimate. There are positions between these poles and some constructive spaces for discussion and peacebuilding, but often these feel scarce and fragile.

Living and working in a diverse community, with the war and violence continuing on and on, bringing stories of grief and horror every day, is difficult for me even without having a direct connection to Israel-Gaza or direct experience of war.[12] Emotions, including my own, are strong – and they absolutely should be; they are also fed by multiple perspectives. Like others, too, no doubt, I have found these hard to hold and to navigate.

As a biblical scholar I see that invocation of the Bible in political and violent events is not only common (e.g. note 10) but never innocent or morally neutral. Just as there is nothing innocent about invoking the Amalekites during a war on Gaza, or about the name 'Project Esther,'[13] turning to an example from my family history, there was nothing innocent either about calling the unrelenting bombing of Hamburg between 24 July and 3 August 1943 'Operation Gomorrah.' Widely defended as the strategic destruction of a major industrial centre supporting the German war effort, the operation was also a ruthless attack on civilians and civic infrastructure. Still, the name 'Gomorrah' reduces the tens of thousands of casualties among Hamburg's citizens, many of whom died frightful deaths, some leaping into

[12] Some commentators without such direct connection report very strong identification and emotional involvement. Nadar grounds this in the parallels she sees between the siege on Gaza and South African apartheid. Given her direct experience of the latter, Nadar writes that 'the struggles of the oppressed are inextricably interconnected' (2025: xi). Boone, meanwhile, writes of the footage of the Supernova Music Festival recalling for her the trauma she experienced during the events of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (2025: 79). Boone was a flight attendant and in a hotel in central New York City when the towers were destroyed. She describes experiencing PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) in the process of staying informed about the violence in Gaza during a semester when she taught on religion and media.

[13] Benjamin Netanyahu's Amalekites reference (cf. BBC Radio 4 2023) has been defended by Israel's Prime Minister's Office as 'a description of the utterly evil actions perpetrated by the genocidal terrorists of Hamas on October 7th and the need to confront them,' as well as, such as in South Africa's charge to the International Court of Justice, a call to genocide of Gazans (Sharon 2024). The Amalekites are characterized in the Hebrew Bible as an abhorrent group (e.g. Deut. 25:16–18) that must be utterly exterminated (Deut. 25:19). It is probably not lost on many Bible readers, too, that Amalekites kidnap women and children, justifying David's retaliation, which is divinely approved (1 Sam. 30:1–20). Project Esther, meanwhile, is a US-based movement aimed at supressing pro-Palestinian protests. It is named after the biblical figure of Esther who, in the eponymous book, helps to avert the killing of the Jews of Persia. In both examples allusions to biblical characters play a strategic and ideological role. Once again, the Bible is used to harness authority and 'being right(eous)' (cf. note 10).

the city's canals to be boiled alive,[14] to the citizens of Gomorrah – that is, to a proverbially evil city that had it coming, its destruction divinely sanctioned (Gen. 19:13, 24). My father was born in Hamburg in 1940 and in my family, the stories of the bombing of Hamburg run deep, their terror passed down the generations. It is also a reminder of how an event can be constructed and focalized into different stories (of glory and of trauma), and of the limitations of a single story.[15] There are multiple stories forming now – in response to the terrors of 7 October 2023 and to all the terrors that have come before and after it – stories that cannot be harmonized into a single story and that will, like stories of World War II, resonate on long, long, for many generations. Moreover, given that biblical place names, figures, motifs, stories and ideologies are part of reporting and construction of present-day events in Israel-Gaza, for biblical scholars, engagement with these, both in and out of workspaces, is virtually inevitable. We and our discipline are drawn in and upon; this, at any rate, has been my own experience.

3. Gloating, Obadiah and Nahum

In my first monograph, I expound how shame has been called a pivotal emotion or pivotal social value of the Hebrew Bible and that occurrences of shame terminology are particularly concentrated in the prophetic corpus (Stiebert 2002). Here, I want to build on this earlier work by turning to examples from two prophetic texts from Minor Prophets, Obadiah and Nahum, where shame is inflicted and where there is some focus on the emotion of the shame-doer. Infliction of shame can take a range of violent forms, including stripping and mutilation (see Lemos 2006) but in the examples of focus here I am interested primarily in the act of gloating, an embodied state of heightened emotion in response to shaming another person. Thomas Kanzen's three-fold division of emotions is helpfully concise here. Kanzen distinguishes other-condemning emotions (the category to which gloating belongs) from the oppositional second type: namely, other-praising emotions. Shame falls into his third category: self-conscious emotions (2019: 53). Gloating in Obadiah and Nahum is intended to incite shame.[16]

The book of Obadiah begins with an announcement of war to come and of the *belittling* and *scorning* or *despising* of Edom (v.2)**.** The verb is a qal passive participle of *b-z-h*, meaning 'to be utterly despised.' Edom is lofty and arrogant (v.3), but the deity announces bringing Edom down (v.4). The anticipated destruction will be total (vv.5–9). There is conflation here of place and person – that is, of Edom with Esau. Similarly, Esau's brother, Jacob, represents Judah, with 'Israel' (nowadays most often used as a toponym) being Jacob's other personal name (cf. Genesis 32; 35).[17] At verse 12, Jacob is, however, associated more precisely with Judah, not

[14] The shocking toll on human lives, complete with survivor accounts, is recounted vividly by Bahnsen and Stürmer (2004) and Lowe (2007). The German title of the former translates as 'the city that was meant to die,' while the main title of the latter is *Inferno:* both convey something of the excess of horror inflicted on Hamburg.

[15] Chimamanda Adichie in her wonderful TED-talk articulates especially poignantly, 'how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story' and, therefore, how dangerous it is to tell a reductive, single, definitive story. Instead, she makes clear, 'Stories matter. Many stories matter' (Adichie 2009).

[16] I discuss 'shame' both as an emotion (when it is often contrasted with guilt) and as a mechanism for social control (when it is often contrasted with honour) fully elsewhere (Stiebert 2002).

[17] Gili Kugler has conducted extensive and important work on the biblical brother motif, including, with reference to Esau and Jacob, exploring the siblings from a psychological angle (2023: 298–302)

Israel. Personifying a place is very common in the Hebrew Bible, as in ancient West Asian literature more widely – including, feminization of place, such as Woman Babylon (Isa. 47), Nineveh (Nah. 3:4-7, see below) and Daughter Zion (e.g. Lam. 1–2).[18] The personal name Esau appears repeatedly in Obadiah (vv. 6, 8, 9) and the reason given for the fierce and vividly dramatized horror to come upon Edom/Esau is his violence perpetrated against Judah/Jacob. Edom will be covered in shame *(tekasseka bushah* [from *k-s-h*) and will be cut off forever *(nikrata le'olam)* for his violence *(chmas)* (v.10). Edom/Esau stood by when *zarim* and *nakrim* – that is, strangers – entered Jacob's gates and cast lots for Jerusalem (v.11). He behaved not like a brother but like one of them. He entered the gates of *'immi*, 'my [that is, God's] people,' (v.13); he gazed with glee and gloated at Judah's misfortune and disaster (vv.12–13). For this Edom/Esau will be punished – it will be done to him as to Judah (v.15). Actually, worse will be done, because Esau will be straw and *completely* and *violently* devoured and destroyed (v.18). And the victors will go up to Mount Zion and judge Mount Esau and God will be in power. What is envisaged is a merciless, utter annihilation, justified by asserting Edom/Esau's unnatural and vicious conduct – but (as I will return to below) without the harm caused *to* Judah instilling in Judeans any pity,[19] fellow feeling, or empathy.[20]

The Book of Nahum also begins with images of divine power: power over nature and power over adversaries (1:1–11). Again, Judah will be vindicated and invaded no more (2:1, MT). Jacob will be restored; again, there is conflation of Jacob and Judah (2:3, MT), and again there is mention of Judah's humiliation precipitating violent events to come. Judah has been ravaged by ravagers (NRSV translation) – the verb is from *b-q-q* (2:3, MT) – *beqaqum boqqim*, meaning 'to be laid waste' or 'to be emptied out' by waste-layers or emptiers (cf. Isa. 24: 1, 3).

The humiliation of the ravager, Nineveh, comes to the fore in chapter 3. The city is described as exceeding in depravity – expressed in sexualized terms (*merov zenuney zonah*, 3:4), repeating here the root *z-n-h*, used of deviant sex and, analogously, of deviant worship. In Obadiah a brother did not behave as a brother should and is punished; here, too, a place, Nineveh, is depicted as a deviant person, this time as a woman.[21] And because the city's sins are depicted in sexualized terms,

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and, with focus on Numbers 20 and Deuteronomy 2, from a text-critical perspective that exposes tensions between, on the one hand, fraternal conflict and competition and, on the other, kinship and the possibility of constructive coexistence (2025). Kugler has also illustrated how biblical kinship terms, including those pertaining to brotherhood, are appropriated with an emotional charge in contemporary Israeli political discourse (2024).

[18] Such personification has been widely discussed in scholarly literature (e.g. Galambush 1992; Magdalene 1995).

[19] I am grateful to my colleague Jamie Dow for prompting me to turn again to Aristotle's comprehensive accounts of both shame *(Rhetoric* Book 2, vi) and pity *(Rhetoric* Book 2, viii). For Aristotle, pity can derive from fellow feeling regarding something 'a person might expect himself or one of his own to suffer' (Reeve 2018: 73). Aristotle, interestingly, describes that being 'wantonly aggressive' or 'feeling intense fear' can both cancel out the capacity for pity (Reeve 2018: 74).

[20] There are other passages of personification that, arguably, are more suggestive of pity (e.g. Jer. 31:20, of Ephraim), as well as passages suggesting empathic fellow feeling (e.g. Lev. 19:34). Lamentations, meanwhile, gives a heart-wrenching account of suffering in the first person, expressing also the bitterness and humiliation of experiencing mockery (e.g. 3:14–15, 3:45–46). As Jennifer Glancy (2017) discusses, experience in and of itself, even when strongly and corporeally felt, does not automatically transpire in empathy.

[21] Aristotle *(Rhetoric*, Book 2, viii) describes that when something is 'dreadful' (possibly, like the deviance recounted here, in Obadiah and Nahum) then it ceases to be 'pitiable' (Reeve 2018: 74).

Nineveh's punishment is sexualized, too: depicted as a lifting up of her skirts, to expose her nakedness and her shame. The verb is of the root *galah*, 'to uncover,' and the noun is *qalon*, 'disgrace' (3:5).

Sexualization of humiliation is clear here; in the passage of the brothers in Obadiah there was also shame and exposure but sexualization is not explicit in Edom/Esau's punishment. Arguably, Edom/Esau is accused of being like a rapist – he behaves not like a brother but like one of the foreign invaders entering Jacob's gates (v.11), or the gate of God's people (v.13). F. Rachel Magdalene has argued that the gate is the opening of a city and that entering gates in military conquest is understood in terms of rape. She makes this case in reference to an equation with cities and women and gates with women's genitalia (1995: 333).[22] If there *is* a hint here of Edom/Esau participating in the metaphorical rape of his brother, Jacob, this would accentuate his deviance and brutality yet more and sharpen the punishment of being *cut off* (from *k-r-t),* which is a punishment for sibling incest – albeit of a man who consorts with his sister or half-sister – a crime for which they are also cut off (Lev. 20:17).[23]

It is not surprising that punishment in the case of the *feminized* personification is more overtly sexualized; explicit sexualization of feminized figures occurs elsewhere in prophetic texts, most prominently in the lengthy woman metaphors of Ezekiel 16 and 23 (Stiebert 2002: 133–161). Nineveh will be exposed and humiliated – verse 3:6 has: *wehishlekti 'aleyk shiqqutsim wenibbaltik wesamtik kero'i:* (God is speaking), 'I will cast upon you detestable things,[24] and I will despise you [a piel from *n-b-l]* and make you a spectacle.' Just as in Obadiah, there is emphasis on a *display* of humiliation. Vivid images continue – of exile, captivity, dashed infants (cf. Ps 137:9),[25] casting of lots, fetters, and fallen fortresses. There is, as in Obadiah, reference to open gates that make enemy access easy (3:13).[26] And Nineveh, too, will be devoured, cut off *('kl, krt*, 3:15). The final verse refers to those

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[22] Magdalene sees the clearest example of this in Isaiah 3:17 and 26, where opening (from *p-t-ch)* signifies genitalia in the first and gates in the second instance.

[23] Inferences drawn from the Hebrew Bible suggest that rape perpetrated by men against men, indeed penetrative sex between males all up, is considered deviant. According to Leviticus 20:13, the death penalty is prescribed for both male penetrator and male penetrated (apparently, irrespective of whether the scenario is one of rape). The narratives of Genesis 19 and Judges 19 imply that male-female rape is less deviant than male-male rape. For a full discussion, see Greenough (2021). Sexualized punishment of males receives mention using euphemistic allusions to either grinding, or millstones (e.g. Lam. 5:13; Judg. 16:21). The root *y-ts-ch* (from which is derived the name Isaac) can have sexual overtones (e.g. Gen. 26:8, possibly Judg. 16:25). Given that Sarah reacts forcefully and spontaneously by evicting Ishmael along with his mother when she observes him 'playing' (NRSV, translating a verb from *y-ts-ch)* with his just-weaned younger brother, Isaac, it could be that she sees or interprets Ishmael committing a sexual(ized) action. If so, this could be, alongside the instance in Obadiah, an example of implied incestuous action perpetrated by a dominant brother.

[24] NRSV has 'filth,' the word refers to things associated with detestable idolatrous practices and unclean things.

[25] Ps. 137 recounts the Judeans' sorrow and their tormentors' taunting (vv.1-4). Both Edomites (v.7) and Babylonians (v.8) are reviled.

[26] Recalling Magdalene's argument for an association between openings/gates and women's genitalia and between military invasion and rape, with both invasion and rape constituting forms of humiliation, there is a possibility that this verse in Nahum (3:13) implies male-male rape in warfare. First, the male population (NRSV 'troops') is called 'women,' which is likely to signify diminishment of masculinity, agency and status; and second, this is likened to becoming opened (again, from *p-t-ch)* to one's enemies. This could imply that the male population is not only militarily overpowered but – in the terms of the proposed gender ideology – feminized and humiliated through rape.

hearing of the humiliation clapping their palm over her *(tiq'u kap 'aleyka),* because her past evil has been so great – this, probably, is a gesture of triumph and gloating.

There are, alongside distinctions, similarities between these two passages. With both there is a looking forward to vindication in the form of the utter destruction of a people and place whose crimes are depicted as momentous, unforgivable – Edom/Esau, a deviant brother, and Nineveh, an abhorrent and cruel foreign woman. Both will be humiliated and destroyed, and this is imagined vividly as a way to avenge or rectify experience of profound indignity – the entering of one's gates, humiliation and destruction endured. Two parallels are notable for the purposes of my examination of empathy to follow: first, the absence in both passages of any fellow feeling for Edom/Esau and Nineveh, and second, related to this, the voyeuristic glee in envisaging their fall from a great height. Both occur in spite of acknowledgment of Judah's own suffering, with no hint that this suffering softens perceptions of either adversary's plight. Instead, what is happening here has edge and vitriol; what is vividly and eagerly imagined is an enemy's utter degradation, a degradation justified by past deeds and where the enemy is *only and thoroughgoingly* despicable. Evocative bodily language is prominent, which, arguably, invites the texts' audiences – be these listeners or readers – to conjure up and gleefully participate in punishment. In Obadiah, invitation is procured through the imperative 'rise up!' *(qûmu*, v.1), which summons to physical action. This is underscored by justifying Edom/Esau's punishment (e.g. vv.10-14) and emphasizing divine agency and divine support (e.g. vv.8, 15). Hence, the brutal punishment is depicted as rightful, inevitable, divinely ordained. Nahum, too, asserts the inevitability of divine punishment (e.g. 1:2-11). In this book, there is an abundance of vivid, sensory images, conveying movement, clamour and noise (e.g. 2:3-5; 3:2-3). For all Nineveh's military strength, however, in the end Nineveh is depicted as a sole, defenceless woman, publicly stripped and pelted with filth (3:5-6). Here, invitation is procured through stressing repeatedly that 'everyone' is united against Nineveh: this is asserted to be the right stance, because it is YHWH's stance and because Nineveh's arrogance allegedly requires violent punishment. Repeatedly, 'all' *(kol)* recognise (are invited to recognise? are presumed or coerced to recognise?) this (3:7, 19). As I will go on to argue, it is the absence, or perhaps, the active suppression, of empathy that makes this invitation to gleeful collusion with extreme violence especially disturbing.

4. Other-Condemning Emotions: Gloating and Schadenfreude

Vitriolic edge, lack of empathy and a call to either participate in or condone the infliction of humiliation are all on display in both Obadiah and Nahum and signify elements characteristic of the other-condemning emotion of gloating. Such features differentiate gloating from the related emotion of Schadenfreude. A study from clinical psychology, conducted and accessibly written up by Colin Wayne Leach, Russell Spears and Antony S. R. Manstead (2015), makes the distinction clear. The authors explain Schadenfreude to be distinguished from gloating in terms of levels of activity. Hence, Schadenfreude typically centres on *passively* observing and enjoying another's misfortune, whereas with *gloating* there is pleasure in *actively* contributing to and participating in others' adversity. Active participation is clearly imagined in Obadiah: there is a call to battle (v.1) and to bringing Edom low (v.4); there is imagining of pillage (v.6), pursuit (v.7), destruction (vv.8-9, 18) and retribution (v.15). It is also clear in Nahum where, once more, violent destruction and revenge are vividly imagined, including the divinely facilitated exposure and

humiliation of Nineveh, with nations looking upon her shame (3:5) and clapping their palms over her (3:19). The instigation may be from the deity but there is active mention of human activity – of swords and burning and exposing and clapping.

Another difference between Schadenfreude and gloating pertains to marked difference in terms of social relationality. Both emotions delight in something horrible that befalls someone else. In gloating – but not always with Schadenfreude – those whose adversity brings pleasure are cast as an out-group. But with Schadenfreude, mirth can be, and sometimes is, borne, at least in part, out of fellow feeling and empathy: one laughs at something happening to another that could easily have befallen oneself, or which one can imagine befalling oneself. But in the gloating of Obadiah and Nahum empathy is absent or utterly suppressed. Edom/Esau and Nineveh are, instead, determinedly othered.

Additionally, the suffering of the other is related to in different ways for each emotion. Schadenfreude and gloating both navigate the terms of one's position relative to the other party. Leach, Spears and Manstead, consequently, emphasize the *experiential* difference between the emotions. Gloating is experienced and expressed with more intensity than Schadenfreude; it brings about a sense of *wanting to flaunt* one's pleasure and of placing oneself *above* the party being humiliated or belittled. Schadenfreude, by contrast, is less intense and does not (at least not prominently) exhibit self-empowerment. Where gloating is characterized by boasting and triumphalizing, Schadenfreude tends towards being muted, and often furtive, even actively disguised.

Leach, Spears and Manstead also propose that gloating is more likely than Schadenfreude to bring direct material benefit to the self, rather than only, or primarily, psychological gain. This can be aligned with what we see in Nahum with the detailed description of Nineveh's loss of silver, gold and treasure (2:9), and of the city's fettered nobility (3:10). Finally, gloating has a particular propensity to being strongly *embodied*, such as giving rise to physical activation and arousal.[27] Gloating, thus, gives rise to feelings of being invincible, giddy, or 'on top of the world,' when rivals are defeated. Physical activation and bodily emphasis with strong overtones of violence are particularly clear in Nahum – such as in the references to moaning slave women (2:7), faint hearts and trembling knees (2:10), stumbling over piles of corpses (3:3), the humiliating exposure of Nineveh, with her skirts lifted over her face (3:5) and the dashed infants (3:10). The feeling of reaching great, dizzying heights, meanwhile, is clearer in Obadiah where Edom's humiliation is pictured as being physically brought low (vv.3-4) and where the Mount of Esau is possessed (v.19) and ruled (v.21) from Mount Zion. The characteristics of gloating make it a discomforting and ugly emotion; it may feel exhilarating, but it exists at the expense of another's pain and shame.

5. *Encountering Biblical Texts of Gloating*

I am sure many of us experience intrusive and distressing thoughts when encountering these prophetic passages of violence and gloating. It is difficult reading these vitriolic texts, in present-day violent times – especially when the geography in

[27] R. M. Whitman and J. Alexander propose that gloating is rooted in envy and expresses itself as eroticized aggression. Sexualized violence, as mentioned, is particularly clear in Nahum.

the ancient texts is in the direct proximity of where horrors are playing out. Added to this, the Bible is, while certainly an ancient text, *not just* an ancient text. It is different from some other influential ancient texts – *The Iliad* or *The Epic of Gilgamesh* – because it is an ancient text that continues to breathe into the present, to be invoked and cited for support and legitimation. As already mentioned, it is *constantly made present* to comment on events in front of the text. Moreover, shocking examples of gloating from present-day violence in Israel and Gaza are also easy to find – be this Hamas's parading of the bodies of hostages, or footage circulated by the office of Itamar Ben-Gvir showing him taunting prostrate detainees.[28] Another fixture of war and revenge is sexual assault, which, again, is darkly there – in the biblical passages, implicitly (Ob. vv.11-13; Nah. 3:13) and explicitly (Nah. 3:5) as in news coverage.[29] Executing sexual(ized) violence on whosoever is cast as 'the enemy,' who is utterly othered and dehumanized, is frighteningly routine in the long history of warfare.

It is difficult teaching texts like Obadiah and Nahum – indeed, teaching great swathes of the Bible, which is not short on violence of multiple kinds.[30] I also find it increasingly difficult to come to conferences[31] and to sit through presentations that *only* focus on semantics and historical-critical matters – particularly where texts such as the ones from the Minor Prophets I focus on here are concerned. This is not because I seek to impute that scholars who do so lack heart, sensitivity and empathy, or because I think such research is unimportant. But – returning to the point of how porous our lives and interactions are – I feel growing pressure to acknowledge often and insistently how deeply these texts affect us, as readers, learners, teachers and researchers, and to consider and think about how these texts 'land' in contemporary spaces.

A text that talks about a brother, or neighbour-nation who is so deplorable that they must be utterly brought low and humiliated; a text that describes an attack so horrendous that it justifies a counter-attack even more horrendous and that drills down into complete and shameful devastation, while claiming divine legitimation…: I don't find it possible to disconnect this from what I see and hear in daily media reports. It takes little imagination and a modicum of sensitivity to see parallels. It would be odder if I did *not* see them.

We may be *taught,* even coerced, to do our work as biblical scholars in a dispassionate, or objective, cerebral-foregrounding way – as Katherine Southwood (2026) discusses with poignant reflexivity in a chapter on her personal history of

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[28] Both have been widely publicized. I choose not to provide references to footage of these violations.
[29] A United Nations report refers to 'clear and convincing information' confirming sexual violence perpetrated strategically by members of Hamas on and after 7 October 2023 (United Nations 2025). The meticulous report by Nicholas Kristof (2026) provides compelling evidence of the rape of detained Palestinians by Israelis. Distressingly, sexual violence appears to be a common accompaniment of war and other forms of violent politicized oppression.
[30] David J. A. Clines (2020), with focus on the Hebrew Bible, makes this violence particularly clear – both in terms of the quantity of occurrences of violence vocabulary and in terms of its sheer range and semantic diversity.
[31] At the IOSOT conference (Berlin, August 2025) where I presented an earlier version of this chapter, any discussion of how the Hebrew Bible gives rise to invasive thoughts of what is happening in present-day conflicts, was almost entirely confined to discussions in the hallways. I am grateful to Claassens (2025) for sharing with me her paper, presented at the same time as my own, which also focused on Nahum, and which *does* reflect on how this text 'sits' in the violent present.

interpreting Judges 21, a chapter of battles, mass killings and mass rapes – but the ideological deployment of biblical characters and texts in the present, works on and with our emotions and emotional responsiveness. There is nothing dispassionate or objective where much of the Hebrew Bible is concerned. The passages I have focused on from Obadiah and Nahum are, indeed, *steeped* in emotion and *evoke* emotion. Emotional engagement balanced with critical engagement strikes me as justified as well as necessary.

6. *Empathy and Critical Empathy*

Both the emotion- and trauma-steeped origins and the emotion-targeted uses of biblical texts up to the present invite exploration of how critically empathetic awareness might contribute to the skillset of biblical scholarship. 'Empathy,' essential to the meaning of which is the capacity to understand another's feelings or experiences, is something of a buzzword and has received polarizing attention. In a publication from last year Jacinda Ardern, the former Prime Minister of Aotearoa New Zealand, proclaims 'Empathy is a kind of strength' (Viner 2025), while billionaire and business executive Elon Musk refers to it as 'the fundamental weakness of Western civilization.'[32] Psychologist Paul Bloom deems empathy a bad moral guide that, much like prejudice, distorts judgment (2016: 31), whereas for Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, empathy constitutes a crucial initiating impulse for restorative justice (2022: 6). Even the empathy-naysayers, however, know that *something* about empathy is quintessentially positive, testifying to a keen sense of self-awareness that negative criticism of empathy is potentially incendiary and certainly attention-bait. Tellingly, Musk makes clear that caring about people (widely regarded as a consequence or product of empathy) matters, yet he pursues the point that empathy can be weaponized, destructive, and suicidal.[33] Bloom, meanwhile, in a book titled – no doubt with strategic provocation – *Against Empathy,*[34] distinguishes between emotional empathy, which he deems unreliable, and cognitive empathy,[35] or rational compassion,[36] which he favours (2016: 39). What Bloom claims he is rejecting is 'the act of feeling what you believe other people feel' (2016: 3),[37] alongside the 'rejection of reason' (2016: 9).

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[32] The quotation by Musk is from a lengthy conversation (Episode 2281) in *The Joe Rogan Experience* (February 2025), broadcast as a podcast and on YouTube.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Bloom is quick to point out that he is neither against being 'nicer to one another,' nor to 'getting inside [others'] heads and figuring out what they are thinking' (2016: 3).
[35] Bloom explains that such empathy is grounded in understanding another's pain without feeling it oneself through 'contagion of feeling' (2016: 17).
[36] Such is characterized by 'self-control and intelligence and a more diffuse compassion' (2016: 35).
[37] Keith Kahn-Harris tells of joining an organized trip to Poland, aimed at rediscovering Jewish ancestry. Expressing his feeling of a sense of lack and void in response to the trip, one of the organisers says to Kahn-Harris, '…in Chelmno, I felt the terror of a five year old child hanging to his mother's hand who wanted to live but had run out of options.' Kahn-Harris responds to this with: 'The extraordinary presumption – to know what a five-year-old about to be gassed might feel – seemed to me to be a way of filling nothingness with something. More darkly, it's also an example of how sorrow can become a kind of currency, a claim to some kind of status as mourner' (2025: 7). What Kahn-Harris is describing here is reminiscent of Bloom's negative characterization of emotional empathy – as thoughtless, and morally questionable.

The implied notion that empathy somehow 'switches off' reason is to me every bit as odd and unconvincing as the possibility, touched on already, of a pure objectivity that somehow 'switches off' all subjectivity in the process of interpretation (e.g. of a biblical text). There is certainly something arrogant about presuming to feel what others feel and yes, suspension of all critical faculties is indeed liable to transpire in poor decisions. But neither Ardern's leadership, nor Ruttenberg's model, both of which advocate for empathy and acknowledge the presence and influence of emotion, lack intelligence, reason or critical rigour. Hence, there remains here a sense that Musk and Bloom are setting up a construction (or strawman) of empathy that subordinates and undermines the value of emotion.

Quite possibly there is also a gendered undertone here. After all, the case for engaging emotion – constructed as somehow instead of, or to the exclusion of, reason – has been gendered and even caricatured in ways that tend not to work out well for anyone with a feminized body.[38] There *are* ostensibly complimentary gendered assumptions, namely the assumption that women are especially skilled at 'doing empathy.' Such expectations can have positive effects for women and for promoting empathic engagement but can also reinforce unhelpful stereotypes.[39] Dismissing women and, as part of this package, traits associated with women, can transpire in bypassing the actual addressing of injustice – such as by encouraging, even coercing, forgiveness.[40] Such can reproduce power structures without challenging them. But this is not a consequence of empathy but of a lack of empathy.

There is something to be said for keeping firmly in view that empathy *can be* weaponized, such as by reinforcing bias – because of indications that persons are prone to engaging with or disproportionately valuing the feelings of persons more like themselves. Musk's characterization of empathy as primarily and profoundly destructive, and Bloom's distinction between emotional and cognitive empathy, however, have the whiff of a divide that is both hierarchical (favouring 'reason' over 'feeling') and implausible (given that completely separating one's emotion from one's thought processes is impossible). The implied denigration of emotion by Bloom and Musk also has gendered and other identity dimensions, which is important to keep in

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[38] A feminized body is not the same as a female body. In the domains of both sex and gender, binarism is deficient (Stiebert forthcoming). Similarly, the dichotomy of emotion (= chaotic, impulsive) vs reason (= calm, logical) is most often unsustainable. Mocking feminized persons' strong emotions, such as anger – notable in such tropes as 'the Karen' – is a way to diminish or deny any reasonableness and credibility they may hold. These tropes are by far more complex than being only gendered. Emotion is read in very distinct ways that incorporate a wide spectrum of intersectionalities. On the Angry Black Woman trope, for instance, see West (2017: 149–51).

[39] Empathic leadership in the workplace, as examined by William Gentry et al (2015), carries more consequence for women than men. Their study shows that while 'women's displays of empathic concern may highlight the incongruency between their perceived feminine communal qualities and the masculine (i.e., agentic) qualities typically ascribed to leaders,' women's empathy is also sometimes rewarded 'because empathic concern aligns with women's prescriptive gender norms (i.e., the "female leadership advantage".' In line with what is mentioned above about the sheer ubiquity and generally positive evaluation of empathy, Gentry et al also conclude that empathy is an 'increasingly valued characteristic […] for both men and women leaders' (2015).

[40] Rocío Figueroa in her discussion of forgiveness in the context of healing from sexual harm in religious settings makes very clear that there is and needs to be a distinction between, on the one hand, a survivor empathizing with compassion, aimed at understanding an offender, and, on the other, justifying an offender's actions. Understanding is not justification. Empathy, Figueroa points out, can lead to 'understanding the traumas that can cause some people to traumatise others.' But this, she makes clear, while it can lead to, should not presume, forgiveness (2022: 71). What Figueroa describes is radical empathy (see Givens).

view and to resist. What others have called critical empathy fosters the conscious endeavour of establishing ethical standards while also looking for and communicating emotion (Lobb 2017: 596–97). Critical empathy is, thus, explicitly attuned to emotion *alongside* critical thinking,[41] not devaluing either but viewing them as inseparable – and as more valuable for being so. And this is a crucial aspirational step towards what Terri Givens calls radical empathy (2021), which begins with emotional vulnerability, and moves towards doing the critical work of understanding one's own biases.[42] From there, one can become open to the experience of others and go on to practise empathy. It is from this position of *both* emotional and critical learning, that Givens sees scope for constructive action and the possibility of creating meaningful change.

7. What Now?

The Hebrew Bible is full of emotion. It contains an abundance of emotion terminology, much of this, plausibly, expressive of pain and trauma – possibly, because individual and collective traumas – be these of the time of the biblical texts' emergence, or remembered from the past, or feared in the future – are in the fabric of this literary collection (Claassens 2020: 10). Sometimes trauma recollects painful self-conscious emotion (e.g. shame) but it can also manifest as other-condemning emotion, such as gloating, which has been my main focus here.

Even if gloating can be *explained*, along the lines that *experiencing* traumatic humiliation can generate the desire and enjoyment of *inflicting* traumatic humiliation, it remains a problematic and ugly emotion. It is problematic because it elevates the self at the cost of injury to another. One component in enabling this is, I have argued, the active suppression of empathy, of engaging emotionally with an other. Gloating prevents any prospect of meaningful interaction, because it is grounded on self-elevation and another's humiliation. Empathy can begin to resist these because openness to understanding an other, which is not the same as justifying all they do or have done,[43] opens up possibilities for interaction.

Empathy, as discussed, has been critiqued for a tendency to both bias and presumptuousness. Keeping these possible pitfalls in view is important. But it is also important to acknowledge that some prominent critiques of empathy are gendered, as well as dismissive of the significant role played by emotion and subjectivity, which are inevitably part of living, interacting, judging and, as has been my focus here, of interpreting biblical texts.

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[41] Concerted effort to hold together in empathic engagement *both* critical thinking *and* emotion might restrain ideologically manipulative appeals to emotion, which Mark Chancey (2019) describes with reference to Museum of the Bible trips to Israel. Such trips, he explains, promote Christian Zionism including through encouraging travellers to identify with endangered Israelis, while rendering endangered Palestinians invisible. Such emotional manipulation of identification constitutes an example of weaponized empathy.

[42] Givens's six steps towards transitional justice are clearly delineated (2021a). Givens highlights the significance of personal experience and subjectivity, alongside engaging emotion in union with critical thinking and reflection. I found listening to Givens's dialogue with Julie Lythcott Haims (2021b) very affecting. Their distillation of the subtle outworkings of systemic white supremacy, including in academia, filled me with discomforting recognition of my own biases.

[43] See note 40.

The gloating passages of Obadiah and Nahum are shocking to me. This is exacerbated by ongoing and shocking violence in Israel, Gaza and elsewhere. There was violence in these regions before 7 October 2023 but the horror of this day and the horror of what has unfolded subsequently have profoundly impacted many things including engagement with biblical texts. In my own experience, the impact of these violent events for me as a researcher and teacher has been unprecedented.[44] The Bible has not only functioned in social and news media to promote ideological agendas, but current geopolitics are also starting to emerge in academic contributions to biblical studies.[45] Very often, however, this is avoided – at conferences, in publications, in the classroom.[46] This is the case even with biblical passages such as the ones explored here, which make association between violent ancient past and violent present difficult and counter-intuitive to ignore.

There are many understandable reasons for this avoidance. What has happened and what continues to happen in Israel and Palestine is acutely painful. Even where there may be broad agreement that *both* the attack and violence of 7 October *and* the devastation of Gaza are crimes against humanity, there is often disagreement on many other matters – such as, for instance, on what terms, if any, there can be any kind of way forward, be this a one-state or two-state solution. What is described in the texts of Obadiah and Nahum is also acutely vicious and 'sits' uncomfortably among the wounds of the present. Avoidance can be explained in that the topic feels too raw, too painful and irresolvable – especially within the scope of a paper, or article, or time-limited classroom discussion. It is prone to giving rise to strong emotion – indeed, it should be – and this can make broaching it very frightening. I have certainly felt frightened and unable to hold spaces for emotional responses.

Fear and avoidance, however, cannot shift the proverbial 'elephant in the room' – be this a reading room on my own, the conference room, or the classroom. Critical empathy, I am suggesting, offers tools – eventually, perhaps, towards radical empathy, which is harder and aspirational. In terms of encountering the texts of Obadiah and Nahum, a critically empathetic reading that engages both emotion and critical thinking, being attuned to myself and to trying to encounter and understand an other, can yield or promote movement towards progress.

First, it invites me *to look for* emotion, along the way acknowledging that some emotions, like gloating, are ugly, and problematic. This can permit me to explore how I might feel and/or how I have been subjected to other-condemning emotions, and to probe the reasons for this. Jennifer Glancy aptly refers to this practice as the acquisition of corporal knowledge and/or the admission of corporal ignorance (2017: 400). Exploring *why* I and others harm and gloat and drawing on

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[44] Some of my earliest work in biblical studies reflected on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, from a setting in sub-Saharan Africa where deaths from HIV/AIDS continue to be most acute. That work, too, felt profoundly affecting and was also enmeshed in forms of violence, such as poverty and gender-based violence. To me, however, engagement in work settings with the violence in Israel-Gaza has been and has felt more volatile and even more complex.

[45] See note 2.

[46] See note 31.

self-reflection to make sense of such is for me one powerful potential of critical empathy.[47]

Second, critical empathy invites *challenging the ideology* of the text. As suggested above, Obadiah and Nahum invite participation in gloating – but I do not have to accept this invitation. By activating empathy, the harm of the gloating described and of the text itself, emerges clearly. Given the ongoing ideological use and power of biblical texts, training such awareness of what the text legitimates remains, I think, crucial.[48]

Thirdly, by staying emotionally as well as critically engaged, including to the clear affinities between text and violent present, I can, to use Amy Cottrill's term of 'relational reading,' learn to acquire a 'sensing, perceiving, and understanding [of] the world around' (2021: 148). This can also facilitate better self-care and care for others. Reading, researching and reflecting on violence and trauma – be this historical trauma, contemporary trauma, or the intersections between them – is, after all, liable to take a toll, as is finally becoming more recognized and addressed.[49]

Fourthly, critical empathy, drawing as it does on self-reflection and conscious and explicit involvement of emotion and criticism, is up-front in owning subjectivity and rootedness in an ever-changing present. As such, it can offer interpretations that explicitly and self-consciously capture something of the present – only to be overhauled by other readings in other times.[50] This throws into relief the impossibility of an objective or immovable truth or of a single authoritative interpretation and can liberate a range of interpretations responsive and relevant to changing times. While this might feel disconcerting, as though the ground is ever-shifting (which it is!) it can also, potentially, create something profound – in terms both of interpretation and of evolving self-knowledge and knowledge of others. I agree with Eve Parker that empathy can bring about learning in the classroom and

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[47] Both Givens (2021a; 2021b) and Ruttenberg (2022) draw sharp attention to the need for self-examination and self-acknowledgement of complicity in harm. Both also – from very different perspectives – provide critically empathetic and practical strategies towards action and change. Boone's autoethnographic method is also grounded in self-awareness and reflexivity, alongside recourse to theoretical work on decolonisation and critical whiteness (2025).

[48] Boone's trauma-informed pedagogy extends this beyond ideologies of texts or other media to mindfulness of power dynamics in the classroom (2025).

[49] As co-editor of a book series focused on the topic of rape culture, I can testify from experience that most series authors at some stage during their research and writing expressed to me feeling emotionally burdened or drained. Theresa Redmond (2026) points out that whereas as a practitioner working with sexually exploited girls, she had a support system to draw on, which included clinical supervisions, as a university researcher she had no such support. The impact and toll of conducting sensitive and emotionally challenging research, including in the context of biblical studies, is only gradually becoming more spoken about. Fry goes further and includes in her book on Esther and trauma some helpful tools for emotional regulation (2026: 165–68).

[50] Such is inevitable. I read my own recent chapter on trauma, embodiment and the Bible, written in 2022 and published in 2025, as naïve in my current present (Stiebert 2025). Where in 2022 I saw some cause for hope, borne of MeToo and Black Lives Matter momentum, events since – the re-election of Donald Trump, the decimations of Diversity-Equity-Inclusion projects and foreign aid funding, the wars in multiple places, the release of the redacted Epstein Files – have cast a pall over such hope.

the academy,[51] for instance, that is interpersonally connected, so that, at its best, it initiates transformative pedagogy (2022: 181).[52]

Fifthly, because critical empathy is explicitly aimed at actively understanding others, in particular when consciously resisting empathy bias, those whose experiences and perspectives are distinct from one's own, it can precipitate and deepen much-needed unlearning of and, subsequent to this, changes in academic conventions. Bias, importantly, is not only an individual but also a disciplinary matter. Biblical studies attracts, favours and largely perpetuates particular theological directions, as well as orientations that focus on and examine some themes, perspectives or ideologies more than others.[53] Practices for resisting this include more co-production, more conscious inclusion of diverse voices, more panels or roundtables or workshops rather than keynotes by individuals, more dialogue and collaboration and the flipping of classrooms.[54]

To conclude, the Bible, with its many stories, capturing a range of emotional and other experiences, and drawn as it continually is into ideological instrumentalization, is especially suited to and stimulating for critically empathetic investigation. Critical empathy, moreover, in deliberately expanding the process of interpretation of biblical texts through foregrounding the world in front of the text, alongside emotion *and* critical thinking, works against, in Chimamanda Adichie's poignant words, the danger of a single story. And this matters, because, to quote Glancy, the answer to ignorance is 'not less memory but more memory' and in particular (and resisting empathy bias) 'the honouring of memories of those outside the circle of the we' (2017: 400).

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[51] I am unsurprised that there are two book-length cases for compassion and empathy in the academy – both by biblical scholars (Lawrence 2021; Southwood 2025).
[52] This transformative pedagogy strikes me as compatible with Givens' aims of radical empathy (2021a).
[53] In biblical studies, focus on Israel – e.g. what the term denotes or connotes, for instance – exceeds focus on Gaza. The latter is more peripheral in the biblical text, which justifies disproportionate emphasis up to a point. It is also the case that this focus has both ideological reasons and ideological consequences – including up to the present. The podcast *Empire*, episodes 291 to 301, offers a rare deep dive into the history of Gaza and made clearer to me some of my own scholarly biases.
[54] For suggestions for the biblical studies classroom, see the contributions in my edited volume (Stiebert 2024).

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