

Hugenate Kollege Conference: South African Spiritualities

Dr Liza Esterhuizen // Prof Alphonso Groenewald

Title:

A study of the tension between experiences of nothingness and hope in Isaiah 7 and 8 from a perspective of trauma hermeneutics

Abstract:

'A rose is a rose is a rose', is the most widely cited line of the American writer Gertrude Stein, where she suggests that all roses are the same. However, when the focus is shifted from roses to people, and particularly, the prophetic roles of individuals, all people cannot naturally be grouped together by saying that 'a prophet is a prophet is a prophet'. The thorn in this analogy can surely be named the Book of Isaiah, where the prophet Isaiah is not just a prophet, but also a beacon of hope, even where feelings of nothingness result from circumstances of despair. The interpretation of a prophetic text (e.g. Isaiah) is challenging. As theological scholars, we do research to investigate old truths but also to discover new insights. That is being done by formulating new questions in the quest to understand the relevant literature, and most of all to interpret this literature within the world we are living in today (a world experiencing the impacts of the pandemic and the subsequent socio-economic consequences).

In our quest to understand the above, Isaiah chapters 7 and 8 presented us with a research opportunity relevant to the topic of this conference. A common thread that was noticed within chapters 7 and 8 was the tension throughout between experiences of nothingness (even despair) and hope. In the Isaiah prophecy, the equilibrium swayed constantly between prophecies of judgment and salvation. What also became very clear was that aspects of trauma were visible within the verses of these chapters. Imagery, symbols and specific metaphors underline the trauma that was experienced by Isaiah, the King Ahaz and the people of Judah. Trauma is part of life, today and since the beginning of time. The aim of this paper is to address the issue of nothingness and hope in Isaiah 7 and 8 and, particularly, the role that trauma played in this regard.

Isaiah 7 and 8 are set against the Syro-Ephraimite war and the looming threat of an Assyrian invasion. The historical and social circumstances are laced with tension of the experiences of nothingness and hope in the pending crisis. These two chapters are also the starting point of Isaiah prophetic utterances directed at King Ahaz and the people of Judah. From the outset of chapter 7, notions of tension between Isaiah and King Ahaz can be detected. In chapter 8, these notions of tension become further more evident in the oracles of Isaiah. The messages of the children's oracles are to trust Yahweh and not to despair in their faith – in other words to drown in nothingness. This

paper will investigate the tension between the experiences of nothingness and hope in Isaiah 7 and 8 from a perspective of trauma hermeneutics.