

Ariell Watson

November 5, 2015

Lumen et Vita Symposium

### Witnessing Lot's Wife: Traumatic Memory and Vicarious Trauma

In Judeo-Christian popular imagination, the cities of “Sodom and Gomorrah” epitomize sinful hedonism and divine annihilation. In the midst of the apocalyptic scene of sulfur, fire, and destruction in the book of Genesis, we find a peculiar verse: “But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.”<sup>1</sup> This paper will interpret the biblical text as a tale of traumatic memory, examine the risk of vicarious trauma to caregivers, and affirm best practices in trauma care.

In order to understand the role of traumatic memory and trauma care in this story, one must first identify the disruptive experiences that may have haunted Lot’s wife. The text offers very little insight to her past; we know neither her name nor her opinion of the events that led up to the family’s hasty departure from their home. One can infer, however, that Lot’s wife had witnessed several traumatic scenes in the previous hours: a mob at the door of her house; neighbors threatening to assault her husband and break in to their home; Lot offering up their unwed daughters to the sexual appetites of the crowd; and the hasty extraction of her family. On the way to safety, Lot’s wife made her fateful mistake: she “looked back,” against the angel’s instruction.

Scholarly opinions diverge regarding whether the danger of “looking back” arose from the pain of grief, or from disobedience of divine injunction. The angels’ parting words had been

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 19:26, NRSVCE.

“Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed.”<sup>2</sup> Was this a command or a warning?

Some scholars read the angel’s words as an injunction, which in turn frames Lot’s wife’s action as one of disobedience. God’s punishment is swift and lethal. According to this reading, Lot’s wife harbored lingering attachments to Sodom, which detracted from her obedience to God’s call. Janice Haaken offers a feminist critique of this narrative, which presents a masculine-aligned God who winks at patriarchal bad behavior and makes repeated compromises with both Abraham and Lot throughout the story. In contrast to this permissive attitude, the divine punishment of Lot’s wife seems like a severe double standard. This interpretation begs the question of whether is God less tolerant of female deviance.

Steven Luger offers an alternative reading. He reinterprets the story of Lot’s wife by applying the clinical psychiatric framework of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In the aftermath of profound violation, harm, or the threat thereof, some people struggle to regain a sense of personal safety. PTSD is a diagnostic category based on symptoms that limit a person’s normal functioning after a traumatic event. Luger identifies in the Genesis account both a traumatic event and psychiatrically significant symptoms in Lot’s wife. He concludes:

“Lot’s wife disobeys and...sees the world as she knows it destroyed. What is her reaction to this terrible loss of her entire world? She becomes a pillar of salt (19:26) - a catatonic reaction to stress. She becomes as immobile and rigid as a pillar of salt. This catatonic reaction, too, has been described in the psychiatric literature as a result of severe psychological trauma.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., verse 17.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Luger, "Flood, Salt, and Sacrifice: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Genesis," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 38, (2010): 124-126, *Old Testament Abstracts*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 12, 2015), 125.

This identification of Lot's wife with PTSD is significant for two reasons. First, it reimagines the fate of Lot's wife as a sad result of failing to heed a warning, rather than as the punishment of a vindictive God. Second, it draws an instructive parallel between Lot's wife and modern trauma survivors. Haaken particularly associates the pillar of salt with salty tears shed by women in "grief over the losses of history."<sup>4</sup> This offers some insight to the particularity of the fate of Lot's wife: a pillar of salt dramatically illustrates being overcome and immobilized by tears.

While previous scholarly work has focused on Lot's wife and her trauma, this paper will now pivot to examine the other characters in the biblical story, using their experience as a frame for understanding the vicarious trauma of caregivers. Like PTSD, vicarious trauma is a psychological term which describes how a past event can interfere with a person's sense of safety and daily function moving forward. Unlike PTSD, the sufferer of vicarious trauma did not personally witness or experience the traumatic event. Instead, vicarious trauma occurs when an empathetic caregiver accompanies a trauma survivor through the healing process. The psychological toll of this empathic identification with a second-hand experience is known as "vicarious trauma"—a common occupational hazard for the pastoral caregiver.

If Lot's wife is analogous to the trauma survivor, paralyzed by memory, then Lot resembles the caregiver who accompanies her. The Genesis text explicitly states that Lot's wife was *behind* her husband when she "looked back." This nuance reveals a powerful dimension of the story: Lot could not turn to look at his wife without also glimpsing the scene of destruction behind her. For fear of sharing her fate, Lot continues his journey without ever turning to bear

---

<sup>4</sup> Janice Haaken, *Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, and the Perils of Looking Back*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 6.

witness to the loss of his partner. In this way, he avoids becoming a second-hand witness to the annihilation, at the price of accompanying his wife.

Refusing to behold his wife's trauma was an effective—perhaps even necessary—survival mechanism for Lot; but by the nature of their work, pastoral caregivers choose to turn toward suffering individuals. Pastoral relationships are present to various forms of recollection, ranging from painful modes of memory (i.e. flashbacks) to constructive modes such as the therapeutic process and ritual. Inasmuch as pastoral caregivers work to bear witness in these formats<sup>5</sup>, they risk vicariously glimpsing horrific scenes in the process of attending to petrified people.

A third character in this story provides yet another model for encounter with traumatic memory. Abraham witnesses the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah from a distance. The biblical narrative continues, “Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD; and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the Plain and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace.”<sup>6</sup> Abraham actually sees the destroyed cities, albeit from a distance. Presumably this distance obscured any graphic horrors from sight, and thus saved Abraham from sharing the fate of Lot's wife.

Distinguishing between the traumatic experiences of Lot, his wife, and Abraham provides an instructive metaphor that supports several principles of trauma care:

---

<sup>5</sup> Philip Browning Helsel, "Witnessing the Body's Response to Trauma: Resistance, Ritual, and Nervous System Activation," *Pastoral Psychology* (October 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 19:26, NRSVCE.

First, Lot's wife embodies the risk of asking trauma survivors to recollect their experiences prematurely. First-responders help survivors to establish physical and emotional safety after the traumatic event, keeping them moving forward and grounded in their present circumstances. In the initial aftermath of a disaster, the risks of dissociation and flashbacks are high. Like Lot's wife, survivors may struggle to catch up to their shifting reality, and become immobilized in the process.

Second, Lot's position towards his wife illustrates the internal dilemma of many caregivers. Lot's wife glances toward her burning home, while Lot stands further removed. Caregivers find themselves in a similar tableau; like Lot, they stand one step removed from the horrors remembered and mediated through the survivor. The tremendous vulnerability of this position captures the real risk of vicarious trauma to those who accompany survivors.

Third, Abraham reveals the possibility of bearing witness to traumatic memory from an appropriate distance. In pastoral care, this could mean listening to and affirming a survivor's experience during a later stage of the healing process. Once the crisis has abated and an individual feels reoriented to his or her post-traumatic world, talking about the past can become healthy. The caregiver must be conscious, however, of keeping the survivor grounded, safe, and aware that they are no longer in the throes of the trauma. Distance from the traumatic event—and indeed awareness of that distance—protects both survivor and caregiver.

The story of Lot's wife memorializes the danger of traumatic memory and illustrates the risk of vicarious trauma. In these regards, it is a cautionary tale for first-responders. Meanwhile, Abraham's role offers insight to the possibility of healthy traumatic witness within the appropriate context. As a whole, this biblical tale presents rich religious imagery for

understanding modern experiences of PTSD and vicarious trauma. Caregivers accompanying trauma survivors would do well, in the words of the Gospel of Luke, to “Remember Lot’s wife.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Luke 17:32, NRSVCE.

## Bibliography

Browning Helsel, Philip. "Witnessing the Body's Response to Trauma: Resistance, Ritual, and Nervous System Activation." *Pastoral Psychology* (October 2014).

Haaken, Janice. *Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, and the Perils of Looking Back*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Harries, Martin. *Forgetting Lot's Wife*. New York: Fordham, 2007.

Lanyado, Monica. *The Presence of the Therapist: Treating Childhood Trauma*. New York: Bunner-Routledge, 2004.

Luger, Steven. "Flood, Salt, and Sacrifice: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Genesis." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 38, (2010): 124-126. *Old Testament Abstracts*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 12, 2015).

Pearlman, Laurie Ann and Karen W. Saakvitne. *Trauma and the therapist: Countertransference and vicarious traumatization in psychotherapy with incest survivors*. New York: WW Norton & Co, 1995.