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Jeremiah and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts through the Lens of Trauma

The books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are replete with sign-acts. Although the parameters of this prophetic genre remain disputed – whether, for example, symbolic actions observed but not performed by the prophet, as in the case of Jeremiah and the potter (Jer 18), are included – it is clear that there are more sign-acts associated with Jeremiah and Ezekiel, respectively, than there are sign-acts involving all the other ‘writing’ prophets combined.¹

¹ Georg Fohrer's classic form-critical analysis identified two sign-acts in Hosea, three in Isaiah, nine in Jeremiah, eleven in Ezekiel, one in Zechariah, and four in 1–2 Kings (*Die symbolischen Handlungen der Propheten*, 2nd edn. [Zurich: Zwingli, 1968]: 1 Kg 11:29–31; 19:19–21; 22:11; 2 Kgs 13:14–19; Isa 7:3; 8:1–4; 20:1–6; Jer 13:1–11; 16:2–4, 5–7, 8–9; 19:1, 2a, 11–11a; 27:1–3, 12b; 28:10–11; 32:1, 7–15; 43:8–13; 51:59–64; Ezek 3:16a with 4:1–3; 3:22–27 with 24:25–27 and 33:21–22; 4:4–8, 9–17; 5:1–17; 12:1–11, 12, 17–20; 21:11–12, 23–29; 24:1–14, 15–24; 37:15–28; Hos 1:2–9; 3:1–5; Zech 6:9–15). He also notes several that fail his form-critical criteria but might otherwise be considered symbolic actions (pp. 71–73). David Stacey, approaching the phenomenon in terms of ‘prophetic drama’, found three in Hosea, four in Isaiah, one in Micah, two in Zechariah, thirteen in Jeremiah, and sixteen in Ezekiel, plus a further nine in the Deuteronomistic History (*Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* [London: Epworth, 1990]: 1 Sam 15:27–28; 1 Kgs 11:29–31; 18:20–46; 19:19–20, 21; 22:1–12 [2 Chr 18:1–11]; 2 Kgs 2:12–13; 13:14–17, 18–19; Isa 7:3, 10–17; 8:1–4; 20; Jer 13:1–11; 16:1–4, 5–7, 8–9; 18:1–12; 19:1–13; 25:15–29; 27–28; 32:1–15; 35; 36; 43:8–13; 51:59–64; Ezek 2:8–3:3; 3:22–27, cf. 24:25–27 and 33:21–22; 4:1–3, 4–6, 7, 9–17; 5:1–4; 6:11–14; 12:1–16, 17–20; 21:11–12, 17, 13–22, 23–27, 33–37; 24:1–2, 3–14, 15–24; 37:15–28; Hos 1:2–3, 3–9; 3:1–5; Mic 1:8; Zech 6:9–15; 11:4–17). Deeming the unconventional nature of the act crucial, Åke Viberg drew up a narrower list that nevertheless highlights Jeremiah and Ezekiel: one sign-act in the Deuteronomistic History, one in Isaiah, six in Jeremiah, eleven in Ezekiel, one in Hosea, and one in Zechariah (*Prophets in Action: An Analysis of Prophetic Symbolic Acts in the Old Testament*, ConBOT 55 [Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2007]: 1 Kgs 11:29–31; Isa 20; Jer 13:1–11; 19:1–2, 10–11; 27:2–3; 28:10–11; 32:6–15; 43:8–10; 51:59–64; Ezek 4:1–3, 4–8, 9–12; 5:1–4; 12:3–7, 17–20; 21:11–12, 17, 19; 24:15–24; 37:15–22; Hos 1:2–3; 3:1–4; Zech 6:9–15). Counting ‘all the nonverbal behaviours (i.e. bodily movements, gestures and paralanguage) whose primary purpose was

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This concentration of sign-acts is not coincidental but reflects these traditions' origins in the traumatic experiences of the sixth century BCE. These two books are by now widely recognised as major loci of the traumas associated with the demise of the kingdom of Judah and its capital at Jerusalem, including – though not limited to – widespread death, displacement, and deportation.² Contemporary evidence from the social sciences indicates that difficulty with language and the substitution of somatic expression as a means of communication is common among persons who have experienced traumatic events of this kind. Jeremiah and Ezekiel's extensive use of non-verbal, somatic modes of communication is thus in keeping with this wider human proclivity.³

Although a handful of trauma-informed biblical scholars have made passing comments linking (particularly Ezekiel's) sign-acts to trauma – thus Smith-Christopher has suggested that 'many of Ezekiel's "bizarre" actions can be seen as modelling the trauma of the fall of Jerusalem',⁴ Furman suggests that Ezekiel's 'radical deeds ... show the existence of "national-theological post-trauma"',⁵ and Bowen connects Ezekiel's behaviour to trauma re-enactments⁶ – no one has yet connected the exceptional preponderance of sign acts in Jeremiah and Ezekiel to the traumatic experiences of the sixth century, or attempted a sustained interpre-

communicative and interactive', whilst limiting the list to those that were 'actually performed before audiences', Kelvin Friebe identifies eight sign-acts in Jeremiah and thirteen or fourteen in Ezekiel (*Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Rhetorical Nonverbal Communication*, JSOTSup 283, [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999], 14, 15: Jer 13:1–11; 16:1–9; 19:1–13; 27–28; 32:1–44; 35:1–19; 43:8–13; 51:59–64a; Ezek 3:22–27 cf. 24:25–27 and 33:21–22; 4–5; 6:11–12; 12:1–16, 17–20; 21:11–29; 24:15–24; 25:15–24; 37:15–28). Whether the sign-acts described in these books were actually performed in public by prophets bearing the names of Jeremiah and Ezekiel is not of primary interest in the present study. Real or imagined, these sign-acts play an outsized role in these two particular books.

² The secondary literature in this area is growing fast; major works include C. L. Crouch, *Israel and Judah Redefined*, SOTSMS (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012); Ruth Poser, *Das Ezechielbuch Als Trauma-Literatur*, VTSup 154 (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, OBT (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002); Louis Stulman and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2010). For a bibliography of work up to the mid-2010s, see David G. Garber, Jr., "Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies", *CBR* 14/1 (2015): 24–44.

³ Unlike certain older psychological studies of Ezekiel, the following is not an attempt to 'diagnose' Jeremiah or Ezekiel with one or more mental health disorders. Rather, it seeks to observe the ways in which an appropriate sensitivity to the effects of traumatic experience can help make sense of a prominent feature of these traditions.

⁴ Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 95.

⁵ Refael Furman, "Trauma and Post-Trauma in the Book of Ezekiel", *OTE* 33/1 (2020): 32–59, 56.

⁶ Nancy R. Bowen, *Ezekiel*, AOTC (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2010), 28–29.

tation of the sign-act phenomenon in conversation with recent literature from trauma studies. The following seeks to fill that gap.⁷

1 Language

Traumatic experience can prompt a wide variety of atypical behaviours. The type and severity of these vary, depending on the prior mental and physical state of the victim(s), the availability of social and psychological support networks, and local cultural expectations regarding the expression of acute distress. One of the most well-documented difficulties faced by survivors of traumatic experiences concerns language: insofar as trauma stands outside of the normal range of human experience, it is common to find survivors struggling to talk about what has happened to them.⁸ Ordinary language proves inadequate to the task of describing extraordinary experience; as a consequence, 'the fragmented, silence-riddled language of the trauma victim' arises in the gap between words and experience.⁹

A growing body of research indicates that these linguistic issues are not purely problems of the mind, but are linked intimately to the effects of trauma on the body. That is, in some physical way, 'trauma disrupts the brain's ability to

7 The following discussion contains material that some trauma survivors may find triggering.

8 Note that to describe trauma as outside the range of normal human experience is not the same as saying that it is uncommon. Herman explains: 'Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe.' Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 33.

9 Constance J. Dalenberg, *Countertransference and the Treatment of Trauma* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2000), 57–68; cf. e.g., Judy K. Eekhoff, 'No Words to Say It: Trauma and Its Aftermath', *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 81/2 (2021): 186–206; Julia Huemer et al, 'Emotional Expressiveness and Avoidance in Narratives of Unaccompanied Refugee Minors', *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 7 (2016): 1–9; Lena Jelinek et al, 'Verbal and Nonverbal Memory Functioning in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)', *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology* 28 (2016): 940–948. On the resistance of pain of all kinds to language see also Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), esp. 4–5. On the manifestation of these language struggles in literature and art, see e.g., Cathy Caruth, 'Recapturing the Past', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 151–157; Lea Wernick Fridman, *Words and Witness: Narrative and Aesthetic Strategies in the Representation of the Holocaust* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000) and below.

linguistically and logically organize experience', as is necessary for the articulation of experience in words.¹⁰ Whatever the precise mechanisms of the phenomenon, it is now widely recognised that a 'common social response to a traumatic past event is silence and inhibition'.¹¹ This is true across a very wide range of traumatic experiences, including war, natural disasters, and experiences of personal violence such as rape.¹²

1.1 Language in Jeremiah and Ezekiel

Trauma-induced language issues are pervasive in both Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of these linguistic inhibitions is the thrice-repeated report of Ezekiel's mutism (Ezek 3:25–27; 24:25–27; 33:21–22). Whatever the practicalities of the prophet's silence – and much ink has been spilt arguing over whether it was absolute or intermittent, whether one or both of the main reports in Ezek 3 and 33 has been temporally displaced for literary reasons, and so on – this declaration that the prophet will be incapable of speech is a prominent and profound acknowledgment of the chasm between his and his community's lived experience of Judah's downfall and the capacity of prophetic language adequately to describe that experience in words. As Ruth Poser puts it, in such circumstances 'silence ... is the only appropriate reaction to the unbearably traumatic events'.¹³

Another indication of that these books reflect a trauma-induced struggle with language is the way that they talk around the prophets' and their communities' experiences, rather than expressing them directly. Ezekiel's opening vision

¹⁰ Huemer et al, 'Emotional Expressiveness', 3; cf. Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014), esp. 39–47; Ruth Kevers et al, 'Remembering Collective Violence: Broadening the Notion of Traumatic Memory in Post-Conflict Rehabilitation', *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry: An International Journal of Cross-Cultural Health Research* 40, no. 4 (2016): 620–640; all with further references.

¹¹ Kevers et al, 'Remembering Collective Violence', 627, 630

¹² The phenomenon has been especially extensively discussed in relation to the Holocaust; see, e.g., Michael F. Bernard-Donals and Richard R. Glejzer, *Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representation and the Holocaust* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2013); Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975).

¹³ Ruth Poser, 'No Words: The Book of Ezekiel as Trauma Literature and a Response to Exile', in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2017), 27–48, 38.

offers an immediate example. Struggling to find words adequate to describe his experience, Ezekiel resorts to a litany of similes: he sees 'something *like* gleaming amber ... something *like* four living creatures ... something that looked *like* burning coals of fire ... *like* the gleaming of beryl ... something *like* a dome ... the sound of their wings *like* the sound of mighty waters, *like* the thunder of Shaddai ... something *like* a throne, in appearance *like* sapphire ... something that seemed *like* a human form ... something *like* gleaming amber, something that looked *like* fire' (Ezek 1).¹⁴

The book thereafter is saturated with allegory and metaphor – artistic circumlocutions that seek to convey traumatic experience by 'telling it slant'.¹⁵ The so-called Song of the Sword (Ezek 21) is famously incomprehensible; commentators have proposed all manner of emendations and reorganisations in their efforts to render it even so much as translatable. Commenting wryly on YHWH's suggestion that Ezekiel is to use plain speech (Ezek 3:4–7), Jacob Myers remarks that in fact 'Ezekiel presents the most *obscure* and *difficult* display of language in all of Scripture'.¹⁶ Ordinary language simply will not do; hunting for words capable of expressing the trauma of defeat and deportation, Ezekiel resorts to Hebrew's furthest reaches.

That Jeremiah also struggles to put these traumatic experiences into words is even more widely recognised than is the case with Ezekiel.¹⁷ From the very first chapter, Jeremiah reveals the disorientating impact of catastrophe – even the book's depiction of the passage of time has been disrupted.¹⁸ Notoriously

14 Notably: even as the verbal part of the brain shuts down during traumatic events and their recall, the imaging areas are extremely active (van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 43–44). Ezekiel's visual emphasis is widely noted; this may also reflect the aftermath of trauma.

15 The phrase comes into biblical studies from the poetry of Emily Dickinson via O'Connor, *Jeremiah*, 33. From the psychological perspective, Dalenberg, *Countertransference*, 59–68, who makes special reference to the life and work of Elie Wiesel. On the articulation of traumatic experience through artistic modes of communication, see further below.

16 Jacob D. Myers, 'Obscure Preaching: Postmodern Homiletical Insights from Ezekiel the Prophet', *RevExp* 111/4 (2014): 401–410, 401, 410.

17 O'Connor, *Jeremiah*.

18 Yosefa Raz, 'Jeremiah "Before the Womb": On Fathers, Sons, and the Telos of Redaction in Jeremiah 1', in *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Carolyn J. Sharp, LHBOTS 577 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 86–100; cf. Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 158–182, 177. Fridman, *Words and Witness*, 130 explicitly links the 'unrepresentable' nature of trauma with its defiance of temporality: 'Having fallen out of time, it [trauma] has also fallen out of language'; cf. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 61; van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 47, 69–73.

repetitive, the body of the book is a frequently frustrating agglomeration of poetry and prose that leaps from topic to topic, and from form to form, with what often seems like the barest semblance of coherence.¹⁹ In several publications, O'Connor has observed the way that, in its efforts to communicate the horror of Jerusalem's destruction, Jeremiah 'searches relentlessly for language ... wanders down many literary avenues', and 'spills worlds of words into the ruptures of communal life'.²⁰ The book is littered with marginally-coherent exclamations, such as *hôy* and *'ôy*, 'woe' (Jer 4:13, 31; 6:4; 10:19; 13:27; 15:10; 43:3); groans that express a profound loss of hope, purpose, and identity.²¹ It is now widely recognised that Jeremiah's 'inconcinities and disjunctions reflect the *incomprehensibility of trauma* in the human ... and divine realms'.²²

In fact, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel struggle with words to the point of excess. In its Hebrew form Jeremiah is the longest book in all of the Hebrew Bible; Ezekiel is not far behind. Both outstrip their nearest prophetic competition, Isaiah, by several thousand words, despite Isaiah's century-plus head start. Because Hebrew is typically (notoriously) laconic, these books' surfeit of words is especially striking: as they attempt to describe experiences that are fundamentally indescribable, they spew verbiage in all directions. Trauma creates 'a hole in the fabric of language' that these books are desperately trying to patch over.²³ Both are plagued with textual and transmissional difficulties, from the micro-level to the macro. The climactic chapters at the end of Ezekiel 1–39, for example, are organised differently in P967 than they are in the Masoretic tradition; Jeremiah's oracles against the nations appear variously in the middle or at the end of the book. Both have a fairly high rates of *hapax legomena*.²⁴ Frequently minor but nevertheless pervasive differences between the Hebrew *Vorlage* of Jeremiah's Greek rendering and the extant Masoretic text further suggest that efforts to convey the incomprehensible events of the kingdom's destruction in (something resembling) comprehensible language continued to demand scribal attention for some time.

19 O'Connor and Stulman have undertaken extensive analyses of Jeremiah from the perspective of trauma's effects on language; see, e.g., O'Connor, *Jeremiah*; Louis Stulman, 'Jeremiah as a Polyphonic Response to Suffering', in *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, ed. John Kaltner and Louis Stulman (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 302–318.

20 O'Connor, *Jeremiah*, 32–33.

21 Samuel Hildebrandt, "'Woe Is Me! The Book of Jeremiah and the Language of Despair', *JBL* 139/3 (2020): 479–497, 482.

22 Louis Stulman, 'Art and Atrocity, and the Book of Jeremiah', in *Jeremiah Invented: Constructions and Deconstructions of Jeremiah*, ed. Else K. Holt and Carolyn J. Sharp, LHBOTS 595 (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 92–103, 101.

23 Fridman, *Words and Witness*, 79.

24 Job and Psalms, which have been fruitfully examined from a trauma-informed perspective, exhibit similar trends.

These struggles to convey what is happening to the kingdom and its people echo one therapist's description of a traumatised patient's effort to communicate: 'She began to have difficulty completing a sentence. She couldn't speak without stopping, pausing, and starting again, speaking tangentially and then abruptly stopping again ... Her breaks made following her difficult'.²⁵ As readers of these prophetic books attempt to follow Jeremiah and Ezekiel's stops, starts, and digressions, they will do well to recognise that these strange ways of speaking mirror the extraordinary experiences they seek to describe.

2 Somatisation

If words are an inadequate (or inaccessible) communicative instrument for the trauma survivor – what alternatives are there? 'Trauma' itself suggests one possibility: etymologically, the word originates as the Greek term for a physical wound. In the psychological sciences, the term was taken over in the late nineteenth century to describe the invisible injuries inflicted on the mind by certain kinds of psychologically disturbing experiences. Yet, even as trauma research continues to focus primarily on the psychological effects of traumatic experience, the potential for these experiences to affect other parts of the body is increasingly recognised.

Clinically referred to as 'somatisation', these physical symptoms of trauma – symptoms which cannot be linked clearly to physical injury, or other physical cause – manifest in a variety of ways, including gastrointestinal issues, vomiting, paralysis, amnesia, headaches, double vision, dizziness, fatigue, and muscular or joint pain.²⁶ The precise manifestation of symptoms, the way they are communicated, and the way they are treated are influenced by a wide range of physical, social, cultural, and psychological factors.²⁷ Sometimes traumatised persons will even re-enact the traumatic event, usually without being fully aware that what they are doing is a repetition of their earlier experience. One of the most famous of such cases is Pierre Janet's patient Irène, who re-enacted the night her mother

²⁵ Eekhoff, 'No Words to Say It', 192.

²⁶ 'Physical symptoms are common after severe or recurrent traumatic stress and/or if there were physical sensations at the time of the stressor (for example, rape), irrespective of whether there was permanent tissue damage' (Charles V. Ford, 'Somatic Symptoms, Somatization, and Traumatic Stress: An Overview', *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry* 51/1 [1997]: 5–13, 5).

²⁷ See Charles C. Engel, Jr., 'Somatization and Multiple Idiopathic Physical Symptoms: Relationship to Traumatic Events and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder', in *Trauma and Health: Physical Health Consequence of Exposure to Extreme Stress*, ed. Paula P. Schnurr and Bonnie L. Green (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2004), 191–215; van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 186–190.

died for several months before she was able to speak about what had happened and assimilate it into her conscious memory. The phenomenon has been documented many times since then.²⁸

Relevant to the sixth century situation is that ‘multiple traumas may progressively lower the threshold for the development of [somatic] symptoms’.²⁹ The years surrounding the kingdom’s collapse were rife with potentially traumatising events: Jerusalem’s eventual surrender was the culmination of decades of political instability, accompanied by an array of national security threats. These years saw multiple sieges – one of which lasted for more than a year, resulting in widespread starvation and death, and both of which resulted in the forced deportation of significant numbers of people. The homeland saw widespread internal displacement and refugee movements, as families sought to evade first the incoming army and then the consequences of imperial rule. The sacred precincts were invaded and plundered, and much of the city went up in flames. Though the picture is sketched by the biblical texts only in its broad and largely communal outlines, it depicts a generation repeatedly exposed to opportunities for trauma.

Somatic symptoms appear remarkably consistently in the wake of war and violent trauma of this kind. Perhaps especially striking is the marked association between the development of somatic symptoms and experiences of dead body handling.³⁰ Although the exact numbers are unknown, the death toll of Jerusalem’s successive sieges and forced deportations would have been significant (Lam 2:21; 4:5; etc.). Estimates of death rates during Middle Eastern involuntary migrations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries CE range from twenty to fifty per cent.³¹ Interaction with corpses may have been especially traumatic for those with priestly connections, as both Ezekiel and Jeremiah profess to have,

28 See van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 31–33, 181–185 for this and other examples.

29 Ford, ‘Somatic Symptoms’, 9. Jeremiah and Ezekiel undoubtedly underwent long periods of expansion and revision (see above), but the events of the sixth century are their consistent frame of reference.

30 Engel, Jr., ‘Somatization and Multiple Idiopathic Physical Symptoms’, 201–203; Ford, ‘Somatic Symptoms’, 10 for discussion and references. On the sheer volume of bodies in Jeremiah and Ezekiel see below.

31 Dawn Chatty, *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 94, 96, 102. Note that somatic post-traumatic symptoms are attested in other literature of the ancient world (Carol S. North, ‘Somatization in Survivors of Catastrophic Trauma: A Methodological Review’, *Environmental Health Perspectives* 110/4 [2002]: 637–640, 637; David B. Mumford, ‘Somatization: A Transcultural Perspective’, *International Review of Psychiatry* 5 [1993]: 231–242); somatic language is also frequently used in connection with emotional states in the Hebrew Bible, indicating an awareness of the emotional significance of physical symptoms (David B. Mumford, ‘Emotional Distress in the Hebrew Bible: Somatic or Psychological?’, *British Journal of Psychiatry* 160 [1992]: 92–97).

because dead bodies rendered those in contact with them ritually unclean (Jer 1:1; Ezek 1:3 cf. Lev 21:1–4; Num 19:11–18). Somatic manifestations of trauma also appear to be more prevalent among refugees than non-refugees, likely as a result of the traumatic nature of the experiences that drive persons to flee their homeland.³² Both books attest to repeated involuntary migration in the run-up to and aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction.

Why traumatic experience can affect the body in this way is still not very well understood, though recent research in this area has made some helpful suggestions.³³ One explanation connects somatisation to the language problems discussed above, suggesting that memories of traumatic events are laid down in the body, precisely because they cannot be processed in the mind via language. That is, when trauma leaves an individual 'in a state of "speechless terror" in which words fail to describe what has happened ... [their traumatic memories are] stored as sensory perceptions, obsessional ruminations, or as behavioral re-enactments'.³⁴ Indeed, a person's 'memories of trauma may have no verbal (explicit) component whatsoever', at least in the first instance; rather, they are 'remembered' in the form of somatosensory flashbacks, in a variety of modalities (e.g., visual, olfactory, affective, auditory or kinesthetic).³⁵ This is the memory of a rape victim who flinches from a lover's touch; the memory of a combat veteran who dives for cover at the sound of a car backfiring. Not words but rather sensation triggers a re-living of the original traumatic experience.

Another explanation of traumatic somatisation relates to the way that the body responds to the kind of extreme conditions that give rise to trauma, suggesting that somatic symptoms 'may derive from a permanent state of arousal' in the

32 Hans G. Rohlf, Jeroen W. Knipscheer, and Rolf Kleber, 'Somatization in Refugees: A Review', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 49 (2014): 1793–1804.

33 For an accessible discussion of research on trauma's effects on the body, see van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, esp. 49–104.

34 Bessel A. van der Kolk, 'Trauma and Memory', *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 52 (1998): 552–564; cf. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 37–42.

35 van der Kolk, 'Trauma and Memory', n.p. He reports that, 'when asked about the traumatic memory, all of these subjects reported that they initially had no narrative memory of the event; they could not tell a story about what had happened, regardless of whether they always knew that the trauma had happened, or whether they retrieved memories of the trauma at a later date. All these subjects, regardless of the age at which the trauma occurred, claimed that they initially 'remembered' the trauma in the form of somatosensory flashback experiences. These flashbacks occurred in a variety of modalities: visual, olfactory, affective, auditory and kinesthetic, but initially these sensory modalities did not occur together. As the trauma came into consciousness with greater intensity, more sensory modalities were activated, and a capacity to tell themselves and others what had happened emerged over time.'

autonomic nervous system.³⁶ This is the system responsible for the existential ‘fight or flight’ response, which in trauma survivors fails to shut down even after the danger is past. It is responsible for trauma survivors’ characteristic hyper-reactivity to non-threatening situations, and the exhaustion that its constant flood of hormones and chemicals produces in the body has been proposed as a possible source of the body’s subsequent symptoms: the body, incapable of relaxing its hyper-vigilant state, simply exhausts itself.

In its most extreme form, the body’s defensive response to danger is to freeze (tonic immobility): feigning death in hope that the source of the threat might lose interest and go away. This is especially well-documented in animals, but has also been observed among humans, where it is primarily associated with severely traumatised persons, those for whom escape during the traumatising event was either impossible or unsuccessful.³⁷ Perhaps the most well-known example among humans is the rape victim who recalls being unable to move or fight back during the assault. Notably, immobilisation at the time of the original trauma is associated with particularly strong psychological consequences thereafter, including feelings of shame, contempt for self, and self-blaming; a similar, involuntary immobility may also be re-triggered by later reminders of the original traumatic situation.³⁸ Perhaps most striking are cases in which traumatised persons, under threat of additional trauma, withdraw from the world entirely, progressing from reduced speech and loss of appetite to complete or near-complete unresponsiveness.³⁹

³⁶ Rohloff, Knipscheer, and Kleber, ‘Somatization in Refugees’, 1794; cf. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 45–47; Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 35–36.

³⁷ Frank M. Corrigan, ‘Defense Responses: Frozen, Suppressed, Truncated, Obstructed, and Mal-functioning’, in *Neurobiology and Treatment of Traumatic Dissociation: Toward an Embodied Self*, ed. Ulrich F. Lanius, Sandra Paulsen, and Frank M. Corrigan (New York: Springer, 2014), 131–152; Pat Ogden and Janina Fisher, ‘Integrating Body and Mind: Sensorimotor Psychotherapy and Treatment of Dissociation, Defense, and Dysregulation’, in *Neurobiology and Treatment of Traumatic Dissociation*, 399–422; Engel, Jr., ‘Somatization and Multiple Idiopathic Physical Symptoms’; Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 42–47. Note that ‘trauma-related disorders have long been characterized by a vacillation between intrusive reliving of past trauma, accompanied by dysregulated autonomic arousal and animal defences, and numb avoidance of traumatic reminders, accompanied by constriction, loss of energy, and diminished pleasure’ (Ogden and Fisher, ‘Integrating Body and Mind’, 399). That is, trauma originates with and is subsequently characterised by extremes of human experience; both acute sensitivity/hyper-reactivity and complete numbness/inactivity are equally possible outworkings of trauma.

³⁸ Corrigan, ‘Defense Responses’, 131–137, 143–149; Ogden and Fisher, ‘Integrating Body and Mind’, 405, 416.

³⁹ Although best-known today in connection with migrant children in Sweden and Australia, the phenomenon was described by psychiatrists as early as the 1950s (see Anne-Liis von Knorring and Elisabeth Hultcrantz, ‘Asylum-Seeking Children with Resignation Syndrome: Catatonia or Traumat-

2.1 Somatisation in Jeremiah and Ezekiel

The fact that traumatic experiences can manifest themselves somatically, especially in the aftermath of war and involuntary flight, sheds light on a number of aspects of Jeremiah and Ezekiel's efforts to communicate.

At the broadest level, trauma-induced somatisation explains the sheer volume of bodily language in these two books – there is more of it here, with greater intensity, than anywhere else in the prophetic literature.⁴⁰ In addition to the material typically considered sign-acts, the somatisation of the prophets' and the people's traumatic experiences is remarkably pervasive – and remarkably explicit. Ezekiel resorts to intense, physically graphic allegories as it attempts to describe what has happened and what will happen to Jerusalem (Ezek 16; 23). Ezekiel 22 'deal[s] with the physical experiences of violence, suffering and pain by those under siege in Jerusalem and by the exiles in Babylon' and describes the consequences of the bloodshed in explicitly bodily terms (Ezek 22:13).⁴¹ Corpses pile up (Ezek 6:4–13; 9:7; 11:6–7; 37:1–2, 9), past transgressions are failures of the body (Ezek 3:7; 11:21; 16:30, etc.), and the future depends on an organ transplant (Ezek 11:19; 36:26). Likewise in Jeremiah, bodies are everywhere: dead (Jer 7:33; 9:1, 22; 16:4; 18:21; 19:7; 25:33; 26:23; 28:16; 31:40; 33:5; 34:20; 36:30; 51:49), diseased (Jer 16:4), leaking (Jer 9:1, 18; 13:17; 14:17; 31:16), and bloody (Jer 2:34; 19:4; 22:17; 51:35).

These books also focus on the prophetic personae in a way that other prophetic books do not – a fact that has stood out for many of Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's interpreters. Jeremiah scholars, in particular, have focused on the way that Jeremiah's life and physical person are used to communicate suffering.⁴² Some

ic Withdrawal Syndrome?', *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 29 [2020]: 1103–1109; cf. Giuseppe Sarli et al, 'COVID-19 Related Lockdown: A Trigger from the Pre-Melancholic Phase to Catatonia and Depression, a Case Report of a 59 Year Old Man', *BMC Psychiatry* 20 [2020]: n.p.).

⁴⁰ Yvonne Sherwood, 'Prophetic Scatology: Prophecy and the Art of Sensation', in *Biblical Blaspheming: Trials of the Sacred for a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 129–175, 148: 'More than any other prophetic book, Ezekiel exhibits the divine habit of writing on the body or expressing messages on male and female flesh at its most visible and lurid'. Somatic language is also especially prominent in Lamentations – which is likewise a product of acute trauma. Boase highlights its extensive use of bodily metaphors, arguing that they somatise trauma in order to 'embody the trauma in a way that gives voice to the unutterable' (Elizabeth Boase, 'The Traumatized Body: Communal Trauma and Somatization in Lamentations', in *Jeremiah Invented*, 193–209, 194). A similar phenomenon – the inadequacy of speech resulting in an effort to communicate via the body – appears to be at work in Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

⁴¹ Dorothea Erbele-Küster, 'Eat This Scroll (Ezekiel 3): Reading as Eating with Special Reference to "Niddah" (Menstruation)', *Canon and Culture* 2 (2009): 5–26, 18–19.

⁴² See especially O'Connor, *Jeremiah*. On Ezekiel, see Rhiannon Graybill, *Are We Not Men? Unstable Masculinity in the Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 97–120.

of this material is conventionally considered part of the sign-act genre, though not all. Jeremiah remains unmarried and childless, as a sign of the destruction of the kingdom's families (Jer 16:1–4). He buys a field in Anathoth, as a promise that 'houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought' by the people (Jer 32:6–15). He is imprisoned in a pit from which he is unable to escape, just as the people are trapped in the city by the Babylonian siege (Jer 32:1–5, etc.). Later he is taken out of the country by force, just as many of his compatriots had been (Jer 43:5–6).⁴³ As Corrine Carvalho memorably described it: Jeremiah's 'body is the stage on which [Jerusalem's] urban disaster is enacted'.⁴⁴

Ezekiel, for his part, bears the horrors of Jerusalem's siege in his person: day after day after day (Ezek 4:4–8).⁴⁵ His hair goes the way of Jerusalem's inhabitants: scattered and destroyed (Ezek 5:1–4). He crawls through a wall, enacting the frantic flight of Jerusalem's past and future refugees (Ezek 12:1–16). The dismant-

43 On Jeremiah as an involuntary migrant, see David J. Reimer, 'There – But Not Back Again: Forced Migration and the End of Jeremiah', *HeBAI* 7/3 (2018): 359–375; Crouch, *Israel and Judah Redefined*, 115–146.

44 Corrine L. Carvalho, 'Drunkenness, Tattoos, and Dirty Underwear: Jeremiah as a Modern Masculine Metaphor', *CBQ* 80 (2018): 597–618, 597; cf. J. Lindblom's description of the sign-acts as '*verbum visibile*, a visible word' (*Prophecy in Ancient Israel* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973], 172).

45 Furman has highlighted this episode as potentially symptomatic of trauma (Ezek 4:4–8) ('Trauma and Post-Trauma', 56; he also refers to the 'ecstasies of sexual abasement' in Ezek 16: 23 and to Ezekiel's passivity, cf. Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy*, JSOTSup 78 / BLS 21 [Sheffield: Almond, 1989], 52). A common interpretive concern here is the purported impossibility of the sign-act's execution, due to its duration and physical toll on the prophet's body. One of the characteristics of traumatic memory, however, is that it 'takes too long' – far, far longer than it would take to convey the same information in speech. Janet's patient Irène took three to four hours to tell her story in traumatic re-enactments; 'when she was finally able to tell her tale [verbally], it took her only half a minute' (van der Kolk and van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past', 163; for a longer description of this and other traumatic re-enactments see van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 181–182). Trauma survivors may also suffer from extended periods of immobility. Responsiveness in such states varies; it has been observed especially among survivors of violent conflict and among refugees, and appears to be linked to a fear that the traumatic experience will repeat itself (Engel, Jr., 'Somatization and Multiple Idiopathic Physical Symptoms', 201–203; Knorr and Hultcrantz, 'Asylum-Seeking Children'; Sarli et al 'COVID-19 Related Lockdown'). The majority of Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's sign-acts are located narratively between the first and second sieges of Jerusalem – when one massive trauma had been survived, but safety was nowhere in sight. A sense of safety has been widely identified as a critical prerequisite for recovery from trauma; living in a state of continuous threat – either in Jerusalem, where the kingdom was in a constant state of political turmoil (Jeremiah), or in Babylonia, where the deportees were facing the complete unknown (Ezekiel) – is prone to exacerbate traumatic symptoms (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 155–174). Ezekiel, in particular, is clearly convinced that the earlier traumas of Jerusalem were but a foreshadowing of the horrors to come.

ling of Ezekiel's priestly identity in Ezek 4–5 mirrors the dismantling of his fellow deportees' identities; they have survived the disaster, but not (yet) resolved its consequences into a coherent account of the self.⁴⁶ Both men are forbidden from mourning – especially striking, given that a failure to grieve appropriately is one of the things that inhibits the resolution of trauma (Jer 16:5–7; Ezek 24:15–24).⁴⁷

These books' exceptionally intense focus on the body as an instrument of prophetic communication makes sense from the perspective of somatised trauma: struggling to find words capable of communicating the trauma of the kingdom's collapse, the prophets resort to the communicative capacity of their physical bodies.

Both books overtly acknowledge that they resort to embodied forms of communication as a result of words' failure. Jeremiah and Ezekiel are each described as consuming the Word they are given from YHWH, transferring the (unspeakable) divine words concerning the kingdom's doom directly into the prophets' bodies, from which and through which they can subsequently be expressed (Jer 15:16–18; Ezek 2:8–3:3). In the topsy-turvy world of trauma, words enter the body instead of leave it, until finally 'the body of the prophet literally reflects the cultural traumatic experiences the people have undergone'.⁴⁸ Jeremiah's recollection of eating the divine word appears alongside an anguished query, linking his consumption of the communicative content to his unrelenting physical and psychological distress: 'Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable?' (Jer 15:16–18).⁴⁹ These images of prophets ingesting YHWH's words echo what trauma researchers already know: language and the body are deeply interrelated.

The prophetic sign-acts of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are one aspect of this wider somatic symptomology. The bodies of the prophets become the surfaces on which these books' messages are written because, in the face of traumatic experience,

⁴⁶ Ezekiel 4–5 is frequently discussed as a prolonged transformation of Ezekiel's identity, in which elements of his previous identity are erased or dissolved in favour of aspects demanded by his new situation; see Margaret Odell, 'You Are What You Eat: Ezekiel and the Scroll', *JBL* 117/2 (1998): 229–248, 234–236; Guy Darshan, 'The Meaning of בָּרָא (Ez 21,24) and the Prophecy concerning Nebuchadnezzar at the Crossroads (Ez 21,23–29 [18–24])', *ZAW* 128/1 (2016): 83–95, 93; and Christoph Uehlinger, 'Virtual Vision vs. Actual Show: Strategies of Visualization in the Book of Ezekiel', *WO* 45 (2015): 62–84, 72, 82, who describes the Ezek 4–5 sign-acts as 'openly transgressive'. Contra R. Andrew Compton, 'The Sign-Acts of Ezekiel 3:22–5:17: Formative Rituals of Priestly Identity', *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 29 (2018): 47–80, who contends that Ezekiel retains his priestly identity throughout. Lapsley contends that it is less Ezekiel's priestly identity than it is Ezekiel's priestly *body* that is altered (Jacqueline Lapsley, 'Body Piercings: The Priestly Body and the "Body" of the Temple in Ezekiel', *HeBAI* 1 [2012]: 231–245).

⁴⁷ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 69–71, 188–195.

⁴⁸ Erbele-Küster, 'Eat This Scroll', 6, 7; cf. Graybill, *Are We Not Men?*, 102.

⁴⁹ NRSV's translation prioritises physical injury, but the Hebrew phrasing covers both psychological and physical elements; see HALOT II: 455, 579.

ordinary language simply fails: ‘there are no words’ that can convey the horror of what has occurred.⁵⁰ The body is pressed into service as a communicative instrument that requires ‘no words’; it functions as a ‘mediating symbolic device’, which stands in the breach where words cannot go.⁵¹ Through the body, in lieu of words, the prophet is able to ‘press[] against the limits of discourse’;⁵² through the body he is able to ‘convey a message beyond the semiological capacity of words alone’.⁵³ Jeremiah and Ezekiel so characteristically communicate the traumas of the kingdom’s demise through their bodies because language proves – despite their long-winded efforts – an inadequate means of communicating the horror of what has and what will befall Jerusalem and its people. That the body enters where words cannot is a sign and a symptom of these books’ traumatic background.

2.2 Trauma, Somatisation, and the Arts

The nature and purpose of this embodied prophetic communication may be further illuminated by the use of the body in artistic and performance contexts – specifically, those in which individuals and communities seek to communicate and process traumatic experience. For those who find the horror of traumatic experience impossible to put into words, the material and the dramatic arts have proven effective mediating modes of communication.⁵⁴ Noting this, Louis Stulman suggests that the prophetic books work in a similar way to more recent attempts to articulate and process trauma through art.⁵⁵ Like modern trauma literature, art, and theatre, these works are not ‘art for art’s sake’, but rather ‘grow out of

⁵⁰ Eekhoff, ‘No Words to Say It’, 190.

⁵¹ Katherine Low, ‘Implications Surrounding Girding the Loins in Light of Gender, Body, and Power’, *JSOT* 36/1 (2011): 3–30. Recognising the way that these sign-acts ‘disrupt the social normative’ (see below), Hornsby describes them as a ‘withdrawal from the linguistic’ (Teresa Hornsby, ‘Ezekiel Off-Broadway’, *The Bible and Critical Theory* 2/1 (2006): 1–8, 02.7).

⁵² Myers, ‘Obscure Preaching’, 410.

⁵³ Corrine L. Carvalho and Paul Niskanen, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, New Collegeville Bible Commentary: Old Testament 16 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012), 18, as paraphrased by Myers, 410.

⁵⁴ There is extensive literature on the use of various forms of art therapy with trauma victims; for a somatically-orientated discussion of theatre’s use in this way, see van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 332–348; for a case study involving refugees, see C. A. Strine, ‘The Catalytic Image: Migration, Image, and the Exegetical Imagination in the Jacob Narrative (Genesis 25–33)’, in *Image as Theology: The Power of Art in Shaping Christian Thought, Devotion, and Imagination*, ed. C. A. Strine, M. McInroy, and A. Torrance (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 125–142.

⁵⁵ Picasso’s *Guernica* is frequently cited in these discussions, with its broken, disordered attempt to communicate the unspeakable horror of war.

atrocities: they absorb it, interpret it, and survive it'.⁵⁶ Mark McEntire evokes the therapist's office stocked with art supplies when he comments that 'modern readers might envision something like Tinker Toys or Lego when they imagine Ezekiel building little war machines to attack the city' (Ezek 4:1–3).⁵⁷

With an awareness of the way that trauma can be somatically expressed, it is not surprising that a number of scholars have profitably approached the sign-acts with reference to modern performance art – a genre in which the artist's body is a key site of communication.⁵⁸ Jeanette Mathews, for example, has argued that performance art is a useful lens through which to view the sign-acts, because 'the biblical script focuses our attention on the body of the prophet as a vehicle for transmitting the message he is asked to present to his audience'; thus, like performance artists, the prophet 'privileges the body', then uses ordinary objects and actions to provoke the audience.⁵⁹

Although not all of the prophetic sign-acts in Jeremiah and Ezekiel are explicitly said to have occurred in the presence of an audience, many of them are obviously performances or performance-like. Jeremiah's encounter with the rival prophet Hananiah, complete with the bearing and breaking of symbolic yokes, is highly public (Jer 27–28). He invites Rechabites to drink wine in a public test of their resolve (Jer 35). Jeremiah himself traipses around the nations, getting them drunk on a cup of wrath-filled wine (Jer 25:15–29); though the mechanics of such a sign-act are baffling, the drama is effectively staged. The peripatetic wanderings of the scroll in Jer 36 draw attention, in their own distinct way, to the instability

56 Louis Stulman, 'Reading the Bible through the Lens of Trauma and Art', in *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions: Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond*, ed. Eve-Marie Becker, Jan Dochhorn, and Else K. Holt, *Studia Aarhusiana Neotestamentica* 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2014), 177–192, 182; Stulman, 'Art and Atrocity', 92; cf. Jacqueline Lapsley, 'Body Piercings Revisited: Piercings and Profanations of "Bodies" and the Character of God in Ezekiel', in *The Unrelenting God: God's Action in Scripture*, ed. David J. Downs and Matthew L. Skinner (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013), 1–14.

57 Mark McEntire, 'From Bound and Gagged to Swimming in the Water of Life: How God Breaks and Heals Ezekiel', *RevExp* 111/4 (2014): 329–336, 333.

58 Johanna Erzberger, 'Prophetic Sign Acts as Performances', in *Jeremiah Invented*, 104–116; Hornsby, 'Ezekiel Off-Broadway'; Jutta Krispenz, 'Leben als Zeichen: Performancekunst als Deutungsmodell für prophetische Zeichenhandlungen im Alten Testament', *EvT* 64/1 (2004): 51–64; Jeanette Mathews, *Prophets As Performers: Biblical Performance Criticism and Israel's Prophets* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020). Krispenz helpfully observes that, whilst the prophets were not artists in the sense that the term is generally used today, the prophets' social function has shifted in the present to artists ('Leben als Zeichen', 63). In terms of communicative art, then, the analogy is a useful one – though, as with all analogies, there is an eventual limit to the comparison.

59 Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, 170, 159.

and uncertain reliability of words.⁶⁰ Ezekiel is out on the (imaginary) highways and byways as Nebuchadnezzar's approach looms (Ezek 21:23–25); his baffled audience asks what he is doing when he sighs and moans over Jerusalem's imminent demise (Ezek 21:11–12). He is explicitly likened to a public performer – albeit one whose performance is not well received (Ezek 33:32). Like performance artists, the prophets also make frequent use of ordinary objects; Jeremiah has a fondness for pots (Jer 19:1–13) and potters' workshops (Jer 18:1–12), whilst Ezekiel uses a number of common items to attract attention and convey his message – from pots and pans to bricks, swords, and sticks (Ezek 4:1–3; 21:6–22; 24:3–14; 37:15–28).

Trauma is also 'an affliction of the powerless', and it is therefore significant that performance art 'hold[s] a privileged place in the arsenal of those who battle power from below': they use it to 'disrupt or threaten to destabilize the orderliness of societal norms (maintained by language)'.⁶¹ A number of modern protest movements make this connection between public performance and the communication of trauma especially apparent. Massive protests over Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s – many involving veterans suffering with PTSD – ultimately changed public attitudes to and national policy concerning the war. In the 1980s and 1990s, Act Up staged dramatic, public acts of protest in an ultimately successful attempt to pressure the government into taking action against AIDS. More recently, the migrant-justice group RAICES took to the streets of New York with child-sized mannequins in dog kennels, accompanied by audio recordings of real children crying in detention centres. Similar performance art pieces cropped up across the country between 2018 and 2021, drawing public attention to a national moral failure whose victims could not speak for themselves.

The last few years have seen public witness to the traumas endured by Black Americans in the form of mass street protests, marches, and performance art – from choreographed 'die-ins' to the formation of human chains that block free-ways and city streets.⁶² Like the prophets' sign-acts, such events communicate the existence and the meaning of trauma through the bodies of the traumatised.

⁶⁰ Mark Brummitt and Yvonne Sherwood, 'The Fear of Loss Inherent in Writing: Jeremiah 36 as the Story of a Self-Conscious Scroll', in *Jeremiah (Dis)Placed: New Directions in Writing/Reading Jeremiah*, ed. A. R. Pete Diamond and Louis Stulman, LHBOTS 529 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 47–66.

⁶¹ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33; Hornsby, 'Ezekiel Off-Broadway', 02.1, 5. Hornsby is explicitly discussing Ezekiel's 'prophetic performances' here.

⁶² See already Carolina A. Miranda, "'It Hasn't Left Me': How Black Lives Matter Used Performance to Create Unforgettable 2016 Moments", *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 2016. Many of these actions are rooted in the traditions of the civil rights movement, which staged lunch counter sit-ins and marches across the American South to force public attention on the traumas inflicted on Black Americans by segregation and related expressions of white supremacy.

Describing the significance of these bodily forms of communication, Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors has emphasised the importance of conveying the harm experienced by herself and other Black Americans '*without having to say it, but to show it*.'⁶³ In words that might as well be Jeremiah's or Ezekiel's, she responded to a query about how it felt to engage in these acts of public witness by saying that it was 'Painful. Literally, physically painful. Also really transformative, powerful and necessary.' In such acts those whose voices have been silenced witness with bodies instead of words; they place their bodies in the public sphere as a means of communicating other-wise.⁶⁴

Several scholars have recently sought to analyse this intersection between performance, protest, and trauma with particular attention to traumatic somatisation. In a study of Latin American protest groups, Diana Taylor has proposed that protest-performances constitute public, bodily expressions of trauma; moreover, because trauma so often 'expresses itself viscerally through bodily symptoms, reenactments, and repeats', trauma is – by its very nature – 'performatic'.⁶⁵ Taylor also suggests that these trauma-driven performances seek to 'channel [performers'] own terrible loss into productive social action', attempting to change public behaviour in a way that limits the recurrence of similar traumas in future.⁶⁶ Here

⁶³ Quoted in Reed Dunlea, 'Black Lives Matter Co-Founder on Building a Movement through Art', *Rolling Stone*, June 23, 2020 (italics added). With Ezekiel's displaced community in mind, her comment that 'For black people living in this country, this place has not felt like home for really, forever' is especially striking.

⁶⁴ On the communicative capacity of the body as distinct from that of the voice, see Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁶⁵ Diana Taylor, 'Trauma and Performance: Lessons from Latin America', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 121/5 (2006): 1674–1677, 1675.

⁶⁶ Taylor, 'Trauma and Performance', 1676. See also Nelson Arteaga Botello, '"It Was the State": The Trauma of Enforced Disappearance of Students in Mexico', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 32/3 (2019): 337–355, who discusses protests in the wake of the disappearance of 43 students in Mexico as 'symbolic representations and discourses signifying ... events that cause suffering and pain' (p. 341); and Thomas Riccio, 'Shadows in the Sun: Context, Process, and Performance in Ethiopia', *New Theatre Quarterly* 28/3 (2012): 272–295, who describes the way that 'performance provides a forum for revealing social, political, and cultural trauma' with reference to a theatre project in Ethiopia (p. 272). Martínez Ruiz likewise suggests that public political activism can function therapeutically for survivors of trauma (Rosaura Martínez Ruiz, 'Overcoming Psychic Trauma and Hate Speech: On Performativity and Its Healing Power', *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 41/3 (2021): 174–186); recent research further suggests that, in a mirrored image of the way that trauma manifests itself in the body, therapies that support re-engagement with the body can be effective in helping trauma survivors to process their traumatic experiences, and sometimes to be able to articulate those experiences in language (van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 215–219, 265–278, 298–310, 332–348).

Ezekiel's anxious obsession with the avoidance of future trauma is especially resonant; the prophet repeatedly berates his audience for their misdeeds, seeking to correct their behaviour so that it does not provoke further punishment.⁶⁷

In a similar vein, Jan-Dirk Döhling has argued that the prophetic sign-acts are confrontational by nature; they use the prophet's body in ways that defy ancient expectations of bodily conformity, and thereby draw the audience's attention to the ways in which present reality fails to conform to the expectations of the old.⁶⁸ This echoes Helena Buffery's analysis of theatre representations of the Spanish Civil War, in which she observes 'the ways in which living bodies continue to be marked by and transmit the impact' of past traumas, and the way that the inescapably bodily nature of performance 'draws attention to and transmits the immediate effects of violent acts on the body, and confronts us with a body as embodied witness'.⁶⁹

3 Conclusion

The bodies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as depicted in the books that bear their names, are embodied witnesses to the lasting consequences of traumatic violence. The sign-acts with which they are associated represent remarkable efforts to communicate in a world beyond the capacity of ordinary vocabulary to describe. In the face of words' failure, the communicative potential of the *soma* comes to the fore; the traumas that cannot be expressed in words are expressed instead through the body.

Although a few scholars have suggested a connection between the prophetic sign-acts and trauma, none have suggested that the particular prevalence of sign-acts in Jeremiah and Ezekiel should be linked to the traumatic aftermath of the kingdom's demise. This essay has sought to make explicit and to clarify the connec-

⁶⁷ Crouch, *Israel and Judah Redefined*, 49–90, esp. 56–70.

⁶⁸ Jan-Dirk Döhling, 'Prophetic Körper: Ein exegetisch-soziologisches Plädoyer zu einer vernachlässigten Dimension der sog. "prophetischen Zeichenhandlungen"', *BZ* 57/2 (2013): 244–271, 259, 266; cf. Kathleen Blee and Amy McDowell, 'Social Movement Audiences', *Sociological Forum* 27, no. 1 (2012): 1–20. Compare Hornsby, who juxtaposes the bodily communication of performance art with the linguistic communication favoured by the status quo ('Ezekiel Off-Broadway'); also Joseph Blenkinsopp's observation that the author of Ezekiel is trying to address the simultaneous and interrelated breakdown of communication and community (*Ezekiel*, Interpretation [Louisville: John Knox, 1990], 25).

⁶⁹ Helena Buffery, 'Bodies of Evidence, Resistance and Protest: Embodying the Spanish Civil War on the Contemporary Spanish Stage', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 94/8 (2017): 863–882, 863, 878.

tion among traumatic experience, linguistic inhibition, and overtly bodily forms of communication, arguing that the unusual prominence of sign-acts and other somatic phenomena in these two books may be traced to the language difficulties characteristic of trauma survivors and the development of somatic phenomena as an alternative means of communication.

