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L. Juliana M. Claassens at the Theological Gate

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the unique features of Juliana Claassens' theological work within the historical, socio-cultural, economic and religious context that motivated her approaches. It follows the trajectory of Claassens' theological thinking and how she has been able to navigate various issues of discrimination and prejudice that stem from patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, racism, tribalism, sexuality and disability, among other social factors, using diverse sources that include novels, films and music, besides Scriptures. In addition, the essay investigates how Claassens' work has dialogued with other theologies, specifically African male theologies, Global South theologies, and Western feminist theologians. The conclusion highlights Claassens' main contributions to the world of knowledge and liberation as well as its potential applications to the future world and work.

Keywords: Theology, discrimination, African male theologies, Global South theologies, Western feminist theologians, liberation and Juliana Claassens

Introduction

In 1993, after more than 130 years of offering theological and ministry training, the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University (SU) graduated a set of theological students which featured a lone female among twenty-eight males. Young L. Juliana Claassens was the sixth female to graduate from SU's Faculty of Theology, which graduated its first female

students in 1991.[1] Claassens graduated on the eve of the demise of apartheid and the birth of democracy in South Africa, but what is remarkable is that her class also was exclusively white and the product of what was prior to that time an all-white institution. Despite being nurtured theologically in such a circumscribed and discriminatory environment, Claassens went on to evolve as a theologian whose scholarship and relationships transcend race and gender. In 1999, she obtained a PhD in Old Testament from Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, USA under the supervision of the renowned Professor Katharine D. Sakenfeld. She then taught at several seminaries and colleges in the USA before her appointment as Associate Professor of Old Testament in Stellenbosch in 2010.[2]

This essay examines Claassens scholarship and engagement with the Circle of Concerned African Women's Theologians (the Circle). The central question asked here is: How has Claassens contributed to the theologies of liberation in the region, continent, and the world, in view of the long-standing tradition of feminist intersectional liberation theology in Southern Africa? In what ways does Claassens' theology compliment, reinforce or intersect with the theological ideas produced by significant theological matriarchs of the Circle in South Africa such as Christina Landman, Denise Ackerman, Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), etc. As an Old Testament scholar, Claassens operates in the broad context not only of Old Testament studies in South Africa but also of White hermeneutics (vs Black Hermeneutics) and Feminist (vs Male Hermeneutics). Her social position as a white feminist Old Testament scholar place her in tandem with womanist Old Testament scholars Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Sarojini Nadar but also distinguishes her in the company

1 Claassens received four degrees from SU, all with distinction, before proceeding to PTS for her PhD. These are BA Honours in Theological Studies (1993), BA in Ancient Near Eastern Studies (1994), MA in Ancient Near Eastern Studies (1996), and BD (1997).

2 Juliana Claassens was promoted to full professorship in July 2014, becoming Stellenbosch University's first full female professor of Old Testament. She has served as Head of Department of Old and New Testament, and is currently the Head of the Gender Unit at SU's Faculty of Theology. In addition, she serves as a member of the Society of Biblical Literature's Committee of Status of Women in the Profession, the Chair of the Old Testament Society of South Africa and a member of the board of the Semeia Studies Series of the SBL as well as on the board of Perspectives in Religious Studies, among other roles that testify to her recognition in the guild.

of Denise Ackerman and Christina Landman, white feminist practical theologians. In other words, her social location as a South African feminist thrusts her into the company of these other South African female theologians and helps her to be conscious of her context, as she does not shy away from reflecting on the social ills that predominate in the society, particularly issues of gender-based violence and patriarchy driven oppression of women and other vulnerable groups.

However, there is no doubt that Claassens operates also within the broader milieu of Euro-American feminist frameworks given her American theological training and teaching experience. An ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and of the Presbyterian Church, USA, Claassens reads not only against the grain of Scriptures but also against the grain of orthodoxy and male dominated traditional historical critical methods. But this perspective does not position her as an adversary to male theologians, several of whom she has collaborated with on various projects. These include Gerald West, Alphonso Groenewald and Steed V Davidson.

Crux of Claassens' Hermeneutics and Theology

Claassens employs a diversity of approaches ranging from Feminist to Trauma and Disability studies which attest to the richness and polyphonic character of her work. The focus of her teaching, workshops, conferences and seminars also speaks to her theological thinking, Circle commitment, other activities and publications. Perhaps Juliana Claassens' most notable contribution to scholarship is her research on the intersection of trauma and gender. But her work has not always been centered on these two issues. Before her 10 March 2015 inaugural lecture titled, 'An Abigail Optic: Reading the Old Testament at the intersections,' which became a catalyst to her recent research on the intersection of trauma and gender in the Hebrew Bible, her writings had used feminist lens to read the Old Testament text particularly from the perspective of human dignity.[3] It should be noted that prior to that inaugural lecture,

[3] See LJM Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization: Ruth, Tamar and the Quest for Human Dignity," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74/4 (2012), 659-674; "Praying from the Depths of the Deep: Remembering the Image of God as Midwife in Psalm 71," *Review and Expositor* 104/4 (2007), 761-776; "Laughter and Tears: Carnivalistic Overtones in the Stories of Sarah and Hagar," *Perspectives*

Claassens had served as the Coordinator of the Human Dignity Project (the former Hope Project) at SU's Faculty of Theology. In that position, she organized four major international conferences on human dignity between 2011 and 2015. Her writings in that period project a clear voice of resistance – resistance to dehumanization in different forms, especially the dehumanization of women and people with disability.

Claassens' vehement resistance of injustice and dehumanization is well articulated and developed in her award-winning book *Claiming Her Dignity: Female Resistance in the Old Testament* (Liturgical Press, 2016). The book demonstrates how Old Testament women such as Sarah, Abigail, Rizpah, Tamar, Hagar, Ruth and Naomi, among others, resisted acts of brutalities of war, rape, systemic injustice, patriarchy and poverty in nonviolent but effective ways. Her argument is that the stories of these women can be seen as expressions of different ways in which women of old (and of today) resist dehumanization and the violation of their dignity. Contemporizing the stories of these ancient characters, Claassens states pointedly in the introduction of the book that, "To be human means to resist dehumanization," (p. xiii). Moreover, she affirms in the conclusion that, "the brave, creative, and nonviolent acts of resistance of the women in this volume that draw our attention to women all around us who are standing up for justice should indeed inspire us to work for a kinder, more just world in which women, men, and children may truly flourish" (p. 156). For Claassens, therefore, reading biblical texts through the prism of female resistance exposes unjust power structures that undermine women and diminish their worth as full humans, while also helping women to recover their agency. In a sense, this theme of resistance

in Religious Studies 32/3 (2005), 295-308. Reprinted with permission in *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12/2 (2006), 89-110; "Resisting Dehumanization: Acts of Relational Care in Exodus 1-2 as Image of God's Liberating Presence," *Scriptura* 104 (2010:2), 572-580; "Human Dignity in the Prophetic Traditions. Upholding Human Worth in a Context of Dehumanization," *NGTT* 52/1-2 (2011), 34-44; "Countering Stereotypes: Job, Disability and Human Dignity," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 17/2 (2013), 169-183; "Female Resistance in Spite of Injustice: Human Dignity and the Daughter of Jephthah," *OTE* 26/3 (2013), 607-622; "Just Emotions: Reading the Sarah and Hagar Narrative (Genesis 16, 21) through the Lens of Human Dignity," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34/2 (2013), Art. #787; "Give us a Portion among Our Father's Brothers: The Daughters of Zelophehad, Land, and the Quest for Human Dignity," *JSOT* 37/3 (2013), 319-337.

is expanded in her recent co-edited anthology on *Transgression and Transformation* in which different authors demonstrate how the ancient people (women in particular) transgressed the status quo to carve out a niche for themselves and uphold their dignity.[4]

The theme of resistance in Claassens' work also surfaces in the output of her foray into disability studies, which culminated in a co-edited volume.[5] Overall, she tries to show the impact of religion on people living with disability. But focusing on the narrative of Job, she helps the reader to not only encounter but also counter the stereotypes embedded in the story of Job, while moving towards a new kind of speech that accords full dignity to those who are differently abled. Her work therefore underscores the importance of values such as compassion, human dignity, justice, and equality in a society that strives for change such as South Africa. In addition, her theological reflections cover other hermeneutical intersections such as postcolonial and queer theories.[6]

As early as 2010, however, traces of trauma analysis had begun to surface in Claassens' essays,[7] but by 2013, it seems there was an evident shift in her conceptual lens, as trauma (and healing) began to take center stage in her writings and scholarship.[8] Drawing largely from the prophetic corpus and some women's narratives, she uses birth imageries of woman in

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4 Transgression and Transformation: Feminist, Postcolonial and Queer Biblical Interpretation as Creative Interventions (LBHOT series; co-edited with Christl Maier, and Funlola O. Olojede. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2021).

5 *Searching for Dignity: Conversations on Theology, Disability and Human Dignity* (co-edited with Leslie Swartz and Len Hansen. Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2013).

6 Cf. "Like a Woman in Labor: Gender, Queer, Postcolonial and Trauma Perspectives on Jeremiah," in *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (ed. Christl Maier and Carolyn Sharp. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 117-132.

7 "Calling the Keeners: The Image of the Wailing Woman as Symbol of Survival in a Traumatized World," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26/1 (2010), 63-78.

8 "Like a Woman in Labor"; "The Rhetorical Function of the Woman in Labor Metaphor in Jeremiah 30-31: Trauma, Gender and Postcolonial Perspectives," *JTSA* 150 (2014), 67-84; "Rethinking Humour in the Book of Jonah: Tragic Laughter as Resistance in the Context of Trauma," *OTE* 28/3 (2015), 655-673; "Trauma and Recovery: A New Hermeneutical Framework for the Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13)?" in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma* (ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette. Semeia Studies 86, Atlanta/GA:

labor, which had featured strongly in her earlier volume, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Liberating Presence* (Westminster John Knox, 2012), to read different portions of the books of Jeremiah, Jonah, and Micah through the lens of trauma. Trauma is also identified in the stories of Tamar's rape (2 Sam 13) and of Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah (Gen 29-30).

Specifically, Claassens explores the intersection of trauma and gender and this is most clearly exemplified in her recent monograph, *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation,* the first book to appear in a new series on The Bible and Trauma (Sheffield Phoenix Press). This monograph builds on themes she had started exploring in her earlier essays on trauma and is significant in several respects. Claassens' *Writing to Survive* highlights the importance of trauma narratives both in the production of texts and in their reception. She explains that traumatized individuals and groups created or reproduced what can be described as "meaning-making art" as they wrote their way through the traumatic experiences that had befallen them. In other words, writing was a means of survival for these trauma-

SBL Press, 2016), 177-192; "Beyond Revenge? Responsible Bible Reading Practices in a Traumatized Land," *HTS* 73/4 (2017), 1-8; "From Traumatic to Narrative Memories: The Rhetorical Function of Birth Metaphors in Micah 4-5," *Acta Theologica Supp* 26 (2018), 221-236; "The Case of the Trafficked Princesses (Jer 41-44): Trauma Hermeneutics as Pedagogical Tool for Teaching on Gender-Based Violence," in *Teaching for Change: Essays on Pedagogy, Gender, Health and Theology in Africa* (co-edited with Charlene van der Walt, Funlola O. Olojede. Stellenbosch: SunMedia, 2019); "Reading Trauma Narratives: Insidious Trauma in the Story of Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah (Genesis 29-30) and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale," *OTE* 33/1 (2020), 10-31; *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2020); "Between Excruciating Pain and the Promise of New Life: Birth Imagery in the Prophets and Trauma Hermeneutics," in *Prophecy and Gender in the Hebrew Bible: The Bible and Women* Vol 1.2, (ed. Irmtraud Fischer and L. Juliana Claassens. Atlanta/GA: SBL, 2021), 315-332; "Jeremiah: The Traumatized Prophet," in *Oxford Handbook to Jeremiah* (ed. Louis Stulman and Ed Silver. Oxford: OUP, 2021), 358-373; "Surfing with Jonah: Reading Jonah as Postcolonial Trauma Narrative," *JSOT* 45/4 (2021), 1-12; "Finding Words in the Belly of Sheol: Reading Jonah's Lament in Contexts of Individual and Collective Trauma," *Religions* 13/ 91 (2023). https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020091.

tized producers of the text. In the same vein, from the angle of the reception of the text, contemporary and biblical readers, who are experiencing personal or communal trauma, read trauma narratives as a way to make sense of trauma, that is, they are "reading to survive." Claassens goes further to argue that at the intersection of gender and trauma in both the ancient and the contemporary contexts, biblical trauma narratives exhibit, to some extent, an interplay between individual and collective trauma with collective trauma being a synthesis of individual stories of pain and trauma while individual traumas, in this case, of biblical female characters, also embody or point to collective trauma. Lastly, employing a transdisciplinary approach, Claassens skillfully brings her selected biblical trauma narratives into conversation with some contemporary trauma narratives of women's experiences, drawn from literary fiction and popular culture. She brings in these narratives to fill in the gaps in what she identifies as the typically male-authored trauma narratives which constitute the biblical tradition. Similarly, she has read the books of Jeremiah, Nahum and Jonah through multiple interpretative lenses by which trauma intersects with gender and postcolonial biblical interpretation.

Besides employing the lens of trauma to look back at the Bible and to probe the world we live in today, Claassens interprets biblical stories from the viewpoint of popular culture. In several of her articles, she has brought biblical stories (and other texts) into conversation with some films and contemporary fictional novels, as she has done in her monograph, *Writing to Survive*. Highlighting gender issues from the biblical text, Claassens has engaged with J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Steven Spielberg's film production of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and *The Light between Oceans*, among others.[9] Through these

[9] "A True Disgrace? The Representation of Violence against Women in the Book of Lamentations as well as in JM Coetzee's Novel *Disgrace*," in *Fragile Dignity: Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family and Violence* (co-edited with Klaas Spronk, Semeia, 2013), 73-90; "Breaking the Silence about Gender Violence? In Conversation with *The* Girl *with the Dragon Tattoo*" in *Sacred Selves: Essays on Gender, Popular Culture and Religion* (ed. L. Juliana Claassens and Stella Viljoen, Griffel, 2012), 1-18; "Reading Trauma Narratives". "Transforming God-Language: The Metaphor of God as Abusive Spouse (Ezekiel 16) in Conversation with the Portrayal of God, in *The Color Purple*," *Scriptura* 113 (2014), 1-11; "Voicing Reproductive Loss: Rachel's Cry

dialogues with contemporary films and novels, Claassens enables the biblical text to come alive in today's context.

Gender is the unifying element of Claassens' scholarship and it is evident in her writings as well as in her teaching and other academic and public engagements. She is passionate about gender issues, and one of the two quotes she always starts her classes on feminist biblical interpretation with is, "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people." The quote speaks to the heart of her theologizing – the necessity of recognizing and treating women as equal with and not inferior to men. To advance her cause, Claassens took responsibility for the development and oversight of the Gender, Health, Theology (MTh) Program at SU, which was sponsored by the Church of Sweden between 2012 and 2018. This course served as precursor to the founding of the Faculty of Theology's Gender Unit in 2016. The Unit, Claassens' brainchild, seeks to find new avenues for effecting change with regard to perceptions about gender, race, poverty, sexual orientation by means of education and research. She has been involved also in designing and teaching courses on gender in SU such as Gender, Culture and Scripture; Gender in the Bible (Old Testament); Feminist Biblical Interpretation; and Gender and Postcolonial Criticism, among others. The themes of the dozens of Masters and PhD theses she has (co)supervised also confirm the centrality of gender to Claassens' academic endeavor.

Claassens and the Old Testament Corpuses

Although her interest in other corpuses of the Old Testament is unmistakable,[10] Claassens' love of narratives and, more pointedly, of prophetic literature shines through her publications. Her 2016 monograph, *Claiming Her Dignity*, probes several narratives of female characters such as Rizpah in 2 Sam 21, Abigail in 1 Sam 25, and the two Tamar's in 2 Sam

in Conversation with *The Light between Oceans*," in *Sexual Reformation: Theological and Ethical Reflections on Human Sexuality* (ed. Nina Muller-Van Velden, Manitza Kotze, and Nadia Marais. Eugene/OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022), 89-105.

[10] Cf. Her writings on Job, Psalms, Old Testament narratives including of Ruth, Tamar, see Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization", "Praying from the Depths of the Deep", "Laughter and Tears", "Give us a Portion among Our Father's Brothers", "Trauma and Recovery", etc.

13 and Gen 38 from the perspective of female resistance. Similarly, her 2020 monograph unpacks stories of the barren matriarchs (Rachel and Leah) in their struggle to conceive (pp. 47-97), the daughters of Lot who would become the mothers of the Ammonites and Moabites (pp. 25-46), and Dinah who is raped by Shechem (pp. 98-126), all in the context of women and trauma. For Claassens, the stories of these biblical women resonate powerfully with the stories of many contemporary women who in like manner are marginalized, disempowered, or oppressed.

In the Prophets, the books of Isaiah,[11] Jeremiah,[12] and Jonah[13] stand at the center of Claassens' hermeneutical undertakings. But it is important

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[11] Cf. "Expanding our Vocabulary for God: Female Metaphors for God in Deutero-Isaiah," *NGTT* 49/3-4 (2008); "Interrupting God-language: Rethinking the Image of God as Liberator in Isaiah 42," in *Exile and Suffering: A Selection of Papers Read at the 50th Anniversary Meeting of the OTWSA, Pretoria August 2007* (OTS 50, eds. Bob Becking and Dirk Human, Leiden: Brill, 2008), 53-70; "To the Captives Come out and to Those in Darkness Be Free…:" Using the Book of Isaiah in (American) Politics?" *Old Testament Essays* 21/3 (2008), 618-634; "Isaiah", in *Theological Commentary of the Bible* (ed. David Peterson and Gail O'Day. Louisville/KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 209-222.

[12] "Calling the Keeners", "Like a Woman in Labor", "The Rhetorical Function of the Woman in Labor Metaphor", "God and Violence in the Prophets" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets* (ed. Carolyn Sharp. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr, 2016), 334-349; "Jeremiah," in *The Paulist Bible Commentary* (ed. J. Aguilar, R. Clifford, and D. Harrington† et al., New York: Paulist, 2018); "The Hidden Wounds of Structural Violence: Exploring an Intersectional Understanding of Violence in Jeremiah 4-6", Willie Wessels Festschrift, *OTE* 31/3 (2018), 613-629; "Going Home? Exiles, Inciles, and Refugees in the Book of Jeremiah," *HTS* 75/3 (2019)/ Eben Schleffer Festschrift a5149. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i3.5149; "The Case of the Trafficked Princesses; "Jeremiah: The Traumatized Prophet"; "Prophetic Leadership as Resistance: The Case of Ebed-Melech and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38-39)," in *Transforming Authority: Concepts of Leadership in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Katharina Pyschny and Sarah Schulz; Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (BZAW) series'. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 33-46. "Preaching the Pentateuch: Cultural Trauma and the Rhetorical Function of Jeremiah's Sermons," *Scriptura* 116/2 (2017), 27-37.

[13] "Rethinking Humour in the Book of Jonah", "Surfing with Jonah", "Entertaining Contradictions: Continuing the Conversation on Irony in the Book of Jonah," in *Between Subversion and* Innovation*: Irony in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament* (ed. Tobias Häner, Virginia Miller and Carolyn Sharp. Brill, 2023), 246-261; "Finding Words in the Belly of Sheol."

to add that her study of the Prophets is not limited to these three books, as she has written (though less frequently) also on Ezekiel, Nahum,[14] Joel, and Obadiah.[15] Remarkably, most of Claassens' study of prophetic literature is done in relation to trauma hermeneutics. Her analysis of prophetic texts probes ways in which trauma shapes collective identity through narratives of their shared sufferings and how the experiences of contemporary traumatized readers of these texts also produce new interpretations. This line of thinking and way of approaching the text are particularly germane in a context like South Africa with its brutal history of trauma produced by its apartheid past. Thus, Claassens is totally spot on with her relentless excavation of issues of trauma from the biblical text that resonate with contemporary experiences of trauma. Prophetic literature, as "meaning making" texts, then, become for Claassens, tools of making sense of a world-turned-upside-down in which we live today.

Ancient biblical prophets are renowned for their speaking truth to power. It appears in a sense that Claassens attempts to do just that in her exploration of prophetic literature. The themes of resistance, transgression, transformation, female metaphors for God, etcetera, that permeate her scholarship subtly yet pointedly prove her own goal of subverting both the ancient text and the modern context where patriarchy, injustice and oppression hold sway. Her dogged analysis of prophetic texts then serves as a way of expressing her own prophetic voice just as the prophets of old did; but even much more because it goes beyond the prophets to fill the gap of what the ancient prophetesses could not do — express themselves in writing.

[14] Cf. Note that Claassens' commentaries on Nahum and on Jonah are forthcoming, respectively in Oxford Bible Commentary series (2025) and in Old Testament Library series (2024).

[15] "Joel and Obadiah," in *Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley. Louisville/KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 309-311 and 319-320; "Transforming God-Language". "Innocent Metaphors? The Ideologies of Patriarchy and Violence in Ezekiel 16 and 23 in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence in South Africa," Co-authored with Marius Gertzen, *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 20/2 (2014), 99-114; "The Ethical Obligation to Disrupt: Facing the Bloody City in Nahum 3:1-7," *OTE* 34/3 (2021), 835-848.

As a prophetic voice in not only the (South) African but also the international context,[16] Claassens aims "to imagine the world to be otherwise,"[17] through her commitment to shine the light in darkness, to uncover wounds and to bind up wounds. Such rationale therefore places her theologizing also in the domain of public theology. Her prophetic voice becomes a public witness in a context of imbalance of power and of multilayered oppression. It is no surprise therefore that the Gender Unit which she coordinates, operates under the aegis of SU's Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology. Her growing international presence and recognition are evident also in her research collaborations with various Old Testament scholars of repute such as Irmtraud Fischer, Carolyn Sharp, Musa Dube, Christl Maier, Jacqueline Lapsley, and Steed V. Davidson, among others, confirming her ability to network and cross boundaries especially of gender and race.

Circle Involvement and Commitment

Shortly after her appointment by SU, Claassens established a chapter of the Circle in Stellenbosch in 2012, and began to network resolutely with other chapters of the Circle in the Western Cape and in South Africa, at large. Bringing the Circle, a society that was founded by a black West African woman, to SU was a bold and radical move on the part of Claassens, given Stellenbosch's history of racial prejudice and the faculty's patriarchal and exclusionary precedent. But Claassens was undaunted as she soon rallied women (white, black and any shade in-between) from and outside the theology faculty to constitute the Circle. Prior that time, the Faculty of Theology had shut its gate not only against women but against people of color for almost 150 years. And suddenly, like Woman of Wisdom of Proverbs 1-9 (8:3), Claassens stood at the theological gate to usher women into the Circle. As the Coordinator of the Stellenbosch Chapter of the Circle, she hosted yearly conferences in collaboration with

[16] "Between Excruciating Pain and the Promise of New Life", *Prophecy and Gender in the* Hebrew *Bible: The Bible and Women, Vol 1.2,* (ed. Irmtraud Fischer and L. Juliana Claasssens. Atlanta/GA: SBL), 2021.

[17] "Towards a Feminist Public Theology: On Wounds, Scars and Healing in the Book of Jeremiah and Beyond," *International Journal of Public Theology* 13 (2019), 185–202 (188).

the UWC Chapter. The 2014 Conference on Gender and Human Flourishing, which was followed by the Pan-African celebration of the life and work of Mercy Amba Oduyoye who founded the Circle in 1989, was particularly laudable. As part of SU's centennial celebrations in 2018, Claassens nominated Prof Musa Dube for a Doctor of Theology honoris causa, a move that put the Circle in a positive spotlight.

Claassens is no doubt a prolific writer with a free flowing and reader friendly style and she has brought the full weight of her scholarship into the corridors of the Circle. The first output of the Stellenbosch Circle engagements is *Sacred Selves: Essays on Gender, Popular Culture and Religion* (which she co-edited with Stella Viljoen, Griffel, 2012). Her sheer determination and persistence birthed that volume. After crossing the hurdle of the call for papers, she hosted the authors in her home for several weeks of peer review of the essays over coffee and cake before the draft was submitted for further review and for publication. Each essay was thoroughly reviewed until other co-authors were satisfied with the quality of the content. It was a mentoring strategy as few of the authors were upcoming theologians or first-time authors, and the exercise enabled the group to fulfil one of the goals of the Circle, namely mentoring.

In 2021, Claassens drew from her personal research funds and with the support of the Faculty of Theology sponsored the creation of a website for the Circle. The launch of the Circle website was the climax of a four-day writing retreat organized by the Gender Unit which is headed by Claassens. The aim of the writing retreat was to help some of the younger generation of Circle members from Southern Africa hone their writing skills, and the program, which pulled participants from South Africa, Malawi and Zambia, again, helped to fulfil the Circle's mentoring goal.

CONCLUSION

Without a doubt, the thread of gender that runs through all her work places Juliana Claassens' scholarship solidly at the center of the Circle's concern. In recognition of her commitment to the Circle and her tireless efforts to uphold its cause, Claassens was given an award by the Circle at its 2019 regional convention in Botswana. Her skillful use of non-traditional and multidimensional approaches easily draws readers to her writings, and her ability to connect with other Circle scholars through her conferences, workshops and seminars as well as her writings no doubt places her at the Circle's theological gate. But it is Claassens ability to cross boundaries, build bridges and speak out against injustice that stands her out among her peers. This woman's works do certainly praise her at the gates!