



Birth-giving women as implied readers of Juliana Claassens' monograph
*Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old
Testament*

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To “mommo”, who became a widow and a single mother, battled cancer twice, and served as a Nurse until her mid-70s. To my great grandmother, who taught herself the art of midwifery to assist women in childbirth. To my mother and mother-in-law.

Abstract

This thesis analyzes and discusses Juliana Claassens' monograph *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament*. My aim in this thesis is to challenge the presumption of to whom this monograph speaks, and to illustrate its relevance to women in the context of childbirth. My thesis question asks, "To what degree can birth-giving women be understood as implied readers of Juliana Claassens' monograph *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*?" *Chapter 1* provides an introduction, as well as the method for this thesis. *Chapter 2* provides an overview of relevant theologians, defines relevant terms such as 'reader', 'intended reader', 'implied reader' and 'implied author', and shortly explains feminist criticism, rhetorical critic, reader-response-criticism, and trauma theory. *Chapter 3*, which is the main portion of this thesis, analyzes and discusses Claassens' three chapters: God as Mourner, God as Mother, and God as Midwife. I suggest that Claassens' discussion of tears of the wailing women joined with God's tears speaks birth-giving women about a deliverer God who cries with them in childbirth. In addition, I argue how the words of the prophet Jeremiah, and Claassens' analysis of it, to some degree can put into words the trauma of childbirth. I further analyze Claassens' discussion of the two images of a maternal God: God as Woman in Labor, and God as Nurturing Mother, where I suggest that God not only joins in the pain of childbirth, but bus is the Mother who never abandons her children. I also discuss Claassens' reflections on the texts Ps. 22:9-10 and 71:6 that portray God as Midwife and reflect a person's struggle to cope with severe pain. I propose that Claassens' discussion on God portrayed as Midwife speaks about a relationship between a birth-giving woman and God as Midwife in the context of childbirth. Lastly, I reflect one the patriarchal nature of the texts that I argue have relevance for birth-giving women, considering that childbirth is a woman's experience. *Chapter 4* concludes that Claassens' monograph *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* with its focus on trauma and maternal images of God speaks, clearly speaks to implied readers that are birth-giving women.

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1.0 Introduction

The images of nurturing and new life introduced by the female imagery, though muted, tend to linger. The ambiguities of the text continue to confront us, and they await the future reader. As Robert Gibbs writes, ‘to knit diverse things together is the responsibility of holding open the meaning for a reader yet to come.’¹

1.1 Background for thesis

During my undergraduate studies at Augustana University, I was introduced to Elizabeth A. Johnson’s *She Who Is* by Professor Ann Pederson, who taught a course called “God, Suffering and Evil.” Pederson’s course urged me to question and problematize the male metaphors of God that dominates in the Christian Faith. At that time, I was a second-year student, and therefore undermined not only my capabilities, but my position to raise questions such as: Is God a *He*? What about female characteristics of God? Is there a *She* who delivers also? One could say I settled for a rather elusive, yet mysterious image of a female God who possibly *could be*. I took comfort in learning about a possible *She*, a female image of God who provides love, comfort, and delivery from everything that is of the world. In 2022, during my second year as a graduate student at VID Specialized University, I gave birth to son. The aftermath of this birth led to a more traumatic recovery than I ever could have imagined. I was in a state of despair, where I needed to reclaim the presence of a God that seemed absent during my hardest seasons: childbirth, grief, and the beginning of motherhood. My advisor Professor Knut Holter introduced me to *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, a monograph by Juliana Claassens that portrays a delivering God in the Old Testament through these exact metaphors: mourner, mother, and midwife. Claassens explains how instead of settling for the violent metaphors of a liberating God, her monograph offers readers alternative metaphors to speak of God’s delivering nature and presence in trauma. As I read, I started to wonder about these readers (as well as my own position as a reader, and a mother). To whom does *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* speak? I remarked Claassens’ argument that “the metaphors of God as mourner, mother and midwife, which all relate to people’s attempt dealing with trauma and its lingering effects, may offer the potential to speak to people who are dealing with deep-seated pain today.”² I then begun to think about mothers whom have dealt with

¹ Juliana M. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament*, First ed. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, 62.

² L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament*. First ed. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, 8.

trauma in childbirth, and thus must have questioned the presence of God in the midst of it. I came to the decision to write this thesis on *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* with a quest to discuss the existential and theological question that Claassens herself asks: “Where is God in the midst of the trauma?”³ I was convinced that Claassens’ monograph implicitly also deals with the question of God’s delivering presence in the trauma of childbirth.

1.2 Thesis Question

I notice how Claassens uses the word “contemporary”⁴ when she refers to the ‘readers’ that she aims her book at. Her further explanation of what she hopes her book can offer gives the sense of a reader who could be someone outside the practice and teaching of liturgy, preaching and pastoral care. Why? Because everyone must deal with the complex and violent world, embrace pain and face brokenness in life.⁵ At some point in our lives, we are either the ones who suffer ourselves or we engage with others who suffer, regardless of a position as a pastor, theologian, or neighbor. Several times, Claassens also refers to ‘us’ and ‘we’, something that illustrates how she speaks inclusively and aims at any reader, including herself. An example of this is when she says:

Given the complex geopolitical situation in which *we* find ourselves, this innate power of God-language to guide and to shape people’s beliefs and actions challenges *us* to consider some alternative, more responsible ways of speaking of the Deliverer God.⁶ (My italics)

Another example of how Claassens speaks to anyone is when she argues how this relational, “care-giving God becomes manifest when we turn our attention to the other who is more vulnerable and in greater need than ourselves. The care and compassion contained in these divine metaphors encourage *us* to do the same.”⁷ It is my impression that Claassens is not entirely clear in her book on who ‘the reader’ is, or what exactly the term ‘reader’ covers. It must be said, however, she is clear on concrete contexts that she argues will benefit from her analysis of God as Mourner, Mother and Midwife. In chapter 5, she argues not only how the female metaphors of God as Mourner, Mother and Midwife can transform the education and practice in preaching and liturgy, she argues how these metaphors can be “effectively

³ Juliana M. Claassens, David G. Garber Land, "First Words ... Faith Facing Trauma," *Review and Expositor* (Berne) 105, no. 2 (2008): 188.

⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 13, 16, 17.

⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 15-16.

⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 4.

⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother and Midwife*, 92.

communicated in a charge to the congregation to take up their vocation as wailing women, mother, and midwives to face those suffering from poverty, homelessness, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, illiteracy, disease, hunger.”⁸ Here she expands her targeted audience even more. Between the lines and throughout the book one discovers that Claassens speaks to a wider audience than first assumed. An audience of readers who are not protected by titles such as ‘theologian’, ‘professor’, or ‘pastor’. I say “protected” because I believe that these titles give readers a greater confidence and security when they use and discuss analyses of biblical texts done by biblical scholars. When Claassens refers to ‘the reader’ in her book, I argue that she speaks to all readers who accidentally, or on purpose come across her book.

It is of course only expected to assume and argue for *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*’s position within the walls of teaching and education. Although I agree, and even encourage this book for that exact use, I believe this book also has potential outside such defined platforms. According to Claassens, “the intricate link between trauma and metaphor is one aspect of trauma hermeneutics that is particularly suited to prophetic literature’s tendency to employ symbol and metaphor in order to put past traumatic events into words.”⁹ When I began reading *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, Claassens presented me with the following: “The birthing of a book is often, as in the case of real life, long, complicated, and exceedingly painful. But as my mother used to say: when you hold the baby in your arms, the suffering rapidly recedes into the background.”¹⁰ In other words, Claassens starts off *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* by comparing the making of the book with an actual childbirth. Immediately I wondered whether the subject of childbirth was going to be the underlying focus of this book. And if not, could this book after all still speak to readers that are birth-giving women?

I have chosen to identify implied readers as birth-giving women. These implied readers that I argue are birth-giving women are obviously women of faith who, as Claassens says, “... inevitably find themselves living in the already as well as the not-yet of God’s deliverance.”¹¹ My thesis therefore discusses on the following question:

⁸ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother and Midwife*, 96.

⁹ L. Juliana M. Claassens, "From Traumatic to Narrative Memories: The Rhetorical Function of Birth Metaphors in Micah 4-5," *Acta Theologica* 2018, no. Sup26 (2018): 222.

¹⁰ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, acknowledgments.

¹¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 17.

*To what degree can birth-giving women be understood as being the implied readers of
Juliana Claassens' monograph Mourner, Mother, Midwife?*

The intention of my thesis is not to disprove *Mourner, Mother, Midwife's* position in either liturgy, preaching, or pastoral care. The same way Claassens wants readers to expand their image of a delivering God in the Old Testament, I want to challenge the presumption of whom the readers of *Mourner, Mother and Midwife* could be. I do not wish to lose myself in an ambiguous reconstruction or rejection of the many historical, social, political, gender or class-oriented issues that come with discussing the portraying of God in the Old Testament. My intention is also not to encourage readers to neglect the traditional or perhaps preferred image of the Old Testament God. I will instead consider how readers other than those that are theologians, or work in pastoral care and ministry, can benefit from *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* and enrich their own reading of the Bible in face of trauma in childbirth. Something Claassens says in the last chapter of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* sticks with me: "This book is an attempt to imagine alternative possibilities that may help traumatized people imagine life differently, to journey from injury and trauma to new life."¹² I argue that the metaphors Claassens discusses can speak to birth-giving women, namely to the context of a traumatic childbirth. A mourner, mother, and midwife all play a role in childbirth, and I believe that Claassens has started a conversation that can provide alternative ways to think of how a delivering God acts in and through the roles of a mourner, mother, and midwife. Claassens' analysis and discussion of the biblical texts from the Old Testament offers an opportunity for birth-giving women to express their traumatic experience through the biblical words such through those of a prophet, the lament psalms as well as through Claassens' own reflections. I argue how Claassens' monograph equips implied readers that are birth-giving women, to see themselves as theological agents who can seek, find and thus reimagine God's delivering presence in the face of trauma in childbirth.

1.3 Delimitation

I believe it is appropriate to provide a delimitation before I further discuss how I aim to answer my thesis question. As mentioned, I discuss to what degree birth-giving women can be understood as implied reader of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. It is, however, important for me to say that I do not limit this monograph to readers in defined terminologies such

¹² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 91.

‘intended’ and ‘implied’ readers. However, from the position of being a woman and a mother myself, I have chosen to merely focus on women as the implied readers in this thesis. It must also be stated that I discuss the reading of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* as a merely self-serving activity where I argue that birth-giving women can benefit from Claassens’ alternative approaches to interpret the Deliverer God in the Old Testament and connect them to the context of childbirth. Also, I cannot provide a full overview of trauma theory in relation to biblical studies, as “the use of trauma theory in the field of biblical studies is still in its infancy.”¹³ But I will argue that this monograph engages with biblical texts through the lens of trauma, as Claassens has a particular focus on trauma theory in other works, but mainly after *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*.¹⁴ To preserve the focus of this thesis I cannot go into depth on the history and development of feminist theology or literary criticism, although I acknowledge the importance of time bounding literary criticism as a method in feminist biblical hermeneutics. It is also impossible to cover the entire development of feminist biblical hermeneutics’ during the past forty years, since cultural, racial, social, and religious approaches all accounts for its richness, fullness, and complexity. As a female graduate theology student, I will comment on Claassens’ discussion that is based on her use of exegesis and general interpretation of the specific biblical texts, and further argue for its relevance for the implied readers that are birth-giving women.

1.4 Method

From a position of being a female theology student, and undergraduate English student (with a focus on literature and creative writing), I will use a feminist hermeneutic approach and through the lens of trauma theory attempt to answer to what degree birth-giving women can be understood as implied readers. I will structure my thesis in the following way. Firstly, I will give a short presentation of Juliana Claassens, and present relevant theologians that Claassens uses in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, and that I use in the analysis. I will also define and discuss important terms such as ‘reader’, ‘intended reader’, ‘implied reader’ and ‘implied author’, before I provide some theory on feminist criticism, rhetorical critic, reader-response-criticism, and trauma theory. Secondly, but most importantly, I will analyze Claassens’ three

¹³ Dickie, "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories," 887.

¹⁴ Examples of Claassens’ work on trauma theory are many, but see “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*, *Old Testament Essays*, 2020, and Trauma and Recovery: A New Hermeneutical Framework for the Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13)?,” Pages 177-192 in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*. (Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, eds.; Semeia Studies 86. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2016).

chapters on God as mourner, mother, midwife, and discuss to what degree birth-giving women can be understood as being the implied readers. Finally, I will briefly reflect on the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts that I argue target birth-giving women, before I conclude my thesis with an answer to my question.

2.0 Theory

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will present relevant theory for the thesis. First, I will briefly introduce some of the scholars that Claassens refers to in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. Due to word limit, it is of course impossible to give an overview of them all. I must therefore introduce the theologians that I believe Claassens relies on the most. In addition, I will mention some of the important scholars that I refer to for this thesis. Further, I will present theory on feminist criticism, rhetorical critic, reader-response-criticism, and trauma theory, which I argue is relevant to my thesis question on birth-giving women as implied readers of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*.

2.2 Juliana M. Claassens

Juliana M. Claassens is currently a professor of the Old Testament at the Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch with a focus on human dignity. She currently serves as the Head of the Gender Unit at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University.¹⁵ Claassens graduated with her PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton NJ, USA in 2001. Most recently, Claassens finished teaching a J-term course at Princeton Theological Seminary on Gender, Postcolonial, and Queer Approaches to the Hebrew Bible.¹⁶ Below I will provide a brief overview of some of the publications of Claassens. Although I would want to mention all of Claassens' work, her publications are many so I can only mention a few.

2.2.1 Publications

Dissertation

¹⁵ Academia, "Juliana Claassens," last accessed May 12th, <https://sun.academia.edu/JulianaClaassens>.

¹⁶ Email correspondence with Juliana Claassens

- “The God Who Feeds: A Feminist Theological Analysis of Key Pentateuchal and Intertestamental Texts” Dissertation committee: Prof. Dennis T. Olson, Katharine D. Sakenfeld, Donald Juel

Books

- *Claiming Her Dignity: Female Resistance in the Old Testament*, Liturgical Press, 2016
- *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God’s Liberating Presence*, Westminster John Knox, 2012
- *The God who Provides: Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, October 2004.

Articles

- “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*, *Old Testament Essays*, 2020
- “From Traumatic to Narrative Memories: The Rhetorical Function of Birth Metaphors in Micah 4-5,” *Acta Theologica Supp* 26 (2018): 221-236 (Fanie Snyman Festschrift)
- “Praying from the Depths of the Deep: Remembering the Image of God as Midwife in Psalm 71,” *Review and Expositor* 104/4 (Fall 2007): 761-776.

Essays

- Trauma and Recovery: A New Hermeneutical Framework for the Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13)?,” Pages 177-192 in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*. (Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, eds.; Semeia Studies 86. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2016).
- “Like a Woman in Labor: Gender, Queer, Postcolonial and Trauma Perspectives on Jeremiah,” Pages 117-132 in *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (ed. Christl Maier and Carolyn Sharp; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013).

2.3 Relevant theologians in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* and in analysis

In *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, as well as in other works, Claassens several times refers to Flora A. Keshgegian, who is an Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, and an Episcopal priest. Keshgegian’s work reflects her genuine interest in what it means to live a virtuous life despite having experienced great suffering and trauma.¹⁷ Claassens refers to several of Keshgegian’s work, but mostly refers to her book *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation*, a book that focuses on how witnessing and memorizing trauma contributes to healing. Phyllis Trible, an internationally recognized biblical scholar and rhetorical critic¹⁸, is also a theologian that Claassens mentions a few times in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. I also refer to Trible in my analysis, as her work reflects her interest in “text-based exploration of women and gender in scripture.”¹⁹ Both Claassens, and I refer to one of Trible’s most groundbreaking work *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, a book that explores feminist imagery of God in the Old

¹⁷ Flora A. Keshgegian, “Biography,” last accessed April 28th, <https://www.florak.org/index.htm>.

¹⁸ National Women's History Museum, “Dr. Phyllis Trible,” last accessed April 29th, <https://www.womenshistory.org/dr-phyllis-trible>.

¹⁹ National Women's History Museum, “Dr. Phyllis Trible,” last accessed April 29th, <https://www.womenshistory.org/dr-phyllis-trible>.

Testament.

A scholar that Claassens refers to several times, and whom I also refer to is Elizabeth A. Johnson, a distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University.²⁰ Among Johnson's fields of interest is her focus on the mystery of the living God, the problem of suffering, and not but least how the human dignity of women is articulated in feminist theology.²¹ In the book *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, Claassens refers to two of Johnson's work: *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, which discusses how readers can rediscover the feminine God in Christian tradition, and *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*, a book that through the lens of memory and hope explores the communion of Saints in a new way.

Claassens introduces both Catherine Keller and Schüssler Fiorenza who she argues both "have turned their attention to the way empire thinking has seeped into theological language and practice, and vice versa."²² When Claassens speaks of how readers turn to their attention to life and love, she refers to the theologian Catherine Keller, who speaks about "a love that cannot be disembodied; a love that is a 'collective effort' that arises 'across and between boundaries—of nations, faiths, groups, gender'; a love that understands that 'all bodies matter.'²³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is known for her pioneering work in biblical interpretation and feminist theology.²⁴ Among Schüssler Fiorenza's research focus are the biblical hermeneutics, rhetoric, and the politics of interpretation. Schüssler Fiorenza's most groundbreaking work include *In Memory of Her* and, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, just to mention a few.²⁵ Due to its relevance to my thesis question on birth-giving women as implied reader, I refer to Schüssler Fiorenza because of her focus on hermeneutics and rhetoric in the book *Rhetoric and Ethic*, and her mention of the 'implied reader'. Claassens also refers to the work of the theologian Kathleen M. O'Connor, who is included in the Advance Praise for *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. Although Claassens mentions

²⁰ Fordham University, "Elizabeth A. Johnson," last accessed April 28th, https://www.fordham.edu/info/23704/theology_faculty/6347/elizabeth_a_johnson.

²¹ Fordham University, "Elizabeth A. Johnson," last accessed April 28th, https://www.fordham.edu/info/23704/theology_faculty/6347/elizabeth_a_johnson.

²² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 3.

²³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 62.

²⁴ Harvard Divinity School, "Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza," last accessed April 29th, <https://hds.harvard.edu/people/elisabeth-sch%C3%BCssler-fiorenza>.

²⁵ Harvard Divinity School, "Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza," last accessed April 29th, <https://hds.harvard.edu/people/elisabeth-sch%C3%BCssler-fiorenza>.

several of O'Connor's works for further reading, she mainly refers to the book chapter "The Tears of God and Divine Character in Jeremiah 2-9," from *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*.²⁶ Claassens also relies on the work of the Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann due to his discussion on metaphors of God and Prophets in the Old Testament.²⁷

In my chapter that covers relevant theory, I refer to Hanne Løland, an Associate Professor in the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Religions and Cultures, who specializes in gender studies, metaphor theory, death studies, and biblical narratives.²⁸ Løland's book *Silent or Salient Gender?: The Interpretation of Gendered God-Language in the Hebrew Bible, Exemplified in Isaiah 42, 46, and 49* is particularly relevant for my thesis, as it discusses both the role of reader and female imagery of God. I must mention Claudia D. Bergmann, who published her dissertation *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and IQH XI, 1-18*, which concentrates on the metaphor of childbirth and its comparison to people's crisis. Lastly, I refer to the work of David G. Garber Jr, an associate professor of the Old Testament and Hebrew.²⁹ Garber's work focuses on trauma theory as an interpretive lens for biblical study. Claassens mentions Garber in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, and she also co-wrote the article "First Words ... Faith Facing Trauma" with Garber.

2.4 Feminist Criticism, Rhetorical Criticism, and Reader-Response Criticism

Feminist Criticism, Rhetorical Criticism, and Reader-Response Criticism are approaches that somehow explain the perspective I am analyzing Claassens' book *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* from. It is especially reader-response-criticism that is relevant, considering my discussion on birth-giving women as implied readers of Claassens' book. In *The New Literary Critic and the Hebrew Bible*, David J.A. Clines and J. Cheryl Exum explain how feminist criticism uses different approaches and "encourages multiple readings, rejecting the notion that there is a 'proper way' to read a text as but another expression of male control of texts and male control

²⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 102.

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, "Walter Brueggemann Biography," last accessed May 1st, <https://www.walterbrueggemann.com/about/>.

²⁸ Academia, "Hanne Loeland Levinson," last accessed April 29th, <https://umn.academia.edu/HanneL%C3%B8landLevinson>.

²⁹ Mercer University, "Rev. Dr. David G. Garber Jr.," last accessed May 1st, <https://theology.mercer.edu/faculty-and-staff/garber/>.

of reading.”³⁰ Rhetorical criticism focuses on how language of the given texts is used to express meaning.³¹ The reason I explain the function of rhetorical criticism is because it concerns itself with writing and metaphors (as well as parallelism) in narrative, poetic structures, and in stylistics figures.³² In addition, rhetorical criticism “focuses on the texts and their own internal articulation,”³³ instead of the historical dimension. I must also in short explain what ‘reader-response criticism’ is, as it is reader-response criticism that “distinguishes between the actual writer/reader and the implied writer/reader.”³⁴ In reader-response criticism, meaning comes into being, “at the meeting point of text-and reader — or, in a more extreme form, as being created by readers in the act of reading.”³⁵ Exum and Clines further articulates how “the idea of ‘the’ meaning of a text disappears and meaning becomes defined relative to the various readers who develop their own meanings.”³⁶ Most importantly, they argue that a text means whatsoever it means to the various readers regardless of how “... strange or unacceptable some meanings may seem to other readers.”³⁷

Edgar V. McKnight makes some essential points in regard to the role and function of reader-response criticism in arguing that “the Bible as literature is seen as an instrument for humankind’s discovering, creating, and/or making sense of world, self and whatever world-and-self-transcended meanings and values humankind is capable of imaging.”³⁸ In other words, the method of reader-response criticism “allows readers to interact with the text in light of their own context.”³⁹ A last point McKnight makes is how “... the same word, expression, or entire text can signify two or more distinct references and express and elicit different attitudes and feelings.”⁴⁰ This statement is important in terms of I am convinced that *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* targets any type of reader, not only birth-giving-women that I call ‘implied readers’.

³⁰ J. Cheryl Exum and David J.A. Clines, *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, Vol. 143. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993, 17.

³¹ Exum and Clines, *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 16.

³² Exum and Clines, *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 16.

³³ Exum and Clines, *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 16.

³⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic : The Politics of Biblical Studies*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, 109.

³⁵ Exum and Clines, *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 19.

³⁶ Exum and Clines, *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 19.

³⁷ Exum and Clines, *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 19.

³⁸ Edgar V. McKnight, “Reader-Response Criticism,” in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications*, ed. Steven L McKenzie, and Stephen R. Haynes. Rev. and Expanded. ed. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999, 239.

³⁹ McKnight, “Reader-Response-Criticism,” 239.

⁴⁰ McKnight, “Reader-Response-Criticism,” 239.

2.5 Female images of God

Since *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* focuses on female images of God through the metaphors of a mourner, mother, and a midwife, it is necessary to provide a short overview of the general discussion on female images of God in the Old Testament. Hanne Løland refers to Phyllis Trible, and explains how “feminine imagery of God is more prevalent in the Old Testament than we usually acknowledge,”⁴¹ and that “until the 1970s there had been hardly any acknowledgement by the Hebrew Bible scholars of the feminine imagery or language used for YHWH in the Hebrew biblical literature.”⁴² Further, Løland states that “the search for the feminine God” has made its way into the Hebrew Bible research starting from the 1970s and ‘80s onward.⁴³ In addition, Løland says that although feminist readings, discussions, and the overall interest in God’s gender in the Old Testament has existed prior to modern feminist biblical exegesis, it mostly happened outside of academic discourse.⁴⁴ This particular statement is interesting in terms of how I discuss *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* and its relevance to readers that are birth-giving women, and who are not necessarily in academia. Another point Løland makes, which I understand as a critical point in terms of Claassens’ book is the following:

In many studies [the feminine metaphors (God-language)] are grouped and studied thematically: ‘God is mother,’ ‘God is midwife,’ ‘God is giving birth,’ and so on. To a lesser extent are the metaphors studied in their textual context. The reason for this can again be partly explained by the nature of these studies; they are short articles or surveys that attempt to cover as much material as possible This is somewhat problematic.⁴⁵

If I understand Løland correctly, the function of these female metaphors has not been discussed apart from the extual context they appear in. One will have to question why exactly these metaphors are used, although the metaphors themselves in the biblical texts are not explored in great depth. In relation to female metaphors of God in the Old Testament, Claassens argues how dealing with a metaphor, at first, involves dissonance and tension.

⁴¹ Hanne Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender? : The Interpretation of Gendered God-language in the Hebrew Bible, Exemplified in Isaiah 42, 46, and 49*, 2008, 6.

⁴² Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 7.

⁴³ Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 7.

⁴⁴ Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 7.

⁴⁵ Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 12

Then, hopefully, the metaphor brings the reader to a state of recognition before the ready eventually is transformed to see and understand God in a new way.⁴⁶

2.6 Readers

One might ask why I have chosen to focus on a type of *reader* in the analysis of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. Since my thesis question discusses to what degree birth-giving women can be understood as implied readers, I want to first mention what Løland says about the significance of any reader:

Texts [...] also have readers, and readers are essential for the understanding of a text. Readers are especially important in the understanding of metaphorical language The understanding of the metaphor, its ability to work, is dependent on the reader. The metaphorical utterance gives ‘two ideas for one’ but it is the reader’s responsibility to hold these ideas together and apart What is salient, also depends on the reader to establish. It depends on the reader’s competence and perhaps also on what the reader is interested in, or in search for.⁴⁷

Although Løland here refers to readers that are readers of biblical texts, I find them to be true for the readers of Claassens’ *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* as well. It is especially true that what becomes significant in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* “depends on what the reader is interested in, or in search for.”⁴⁸ Claassens’ book is after all a discussion of these alternative metaphors of a Deliverer God. And terms of my own position as a reader of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, I search for evidence that birth-giving women to some degree can be understood as being implied readers based on the theory that readers are so crucial in understanding and making meaning out of metaphorical language.

In addition, it cannot be ignored that Claassens in addition to being the author, is also a reader. Løland makes an important point concerning this fact, and which I believe applies for Claassens too: “the perspectives I apply, my choice of text material, my questions, and so forth will also to some extent be colored by me being who I am and by my context.”⁴⁹ I mention this because I will not try to enter the mind of Claassens, and thus make arguments based on assumptions I have concerning Claassens’ own context and position as a reader

⁴⁶ L. Juliana Claassens, *The God Who Provides : Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004, xviii.

⁴⁷ Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 55.

⁴⁸ Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 55

⁴⁹ Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*, 56.

herself. I can and will only discuss Claassens' chapters in the light of theory that she refers to theory I believe to be relevant, and what Claassens says herself beside the theory.

I will now attempt to clarify terms that are important to my thesis: 'reader', 'intended reader', 'implied reader', and 'implied author'. To keep things in order in this thesis, it is necessary to define readers in certain groups. In analyzing, and discussing my thesis question I focus on the term 'implied reader', but I do, however differentiate between the terms "intended reader", and "implied reader". I say attempt because it is important for me to stress that these terms tend to be not only discussed and understood differently by theorists, but also criticized. Definitions are not always definite, but I will have to stick to definitions that benefits and suits my thesis. After all, the terms themselves are not as important in this thesis as it is to identify and argue who the implied readers are. However, in order to talk about specific readers, I must place different readers in theoretical definitions that separate them. I will especially give attention to term 'implied reader' since I investigate and discuss birth-giving women as implied readers.

2.6.1 Intended Reader vs Implied Reader

The intended reader is the reader who the author expects to read the text. According to Marina Hurley, implied readers "are the group of readers that you want to read your document, or you expect will read your document. These are the people you are designing your document for. The target audience should understand everything the author writes."⁵⁰ What is an 'implied reader' then, and who do I argue are the "implied readers" in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*? I say "also", because I do not deny other "categories" of readers of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. Emma Baldwin provides a clear definition of 'implied reader' explaining that it is "is the person the author directs their writing toward. It is usually the person, or type of person, they believe would most enjoy or benefit from their literature."⁵¹ Baldwin's definition, I believe, provides a description that reads too similar to the definition of an "intended reader", thus is why I mentioned how terms tend to be defined differently. In the chapter on "Implied Reader" in *Handbook of Narratology* Wolf Schmid suggests the following explanation of the term 'implied reader':

⁵⁰ Dr Marina Hurley, "How to identify your target audience," *Writing Clear Science*, last accessed April 12th, <https://www.writingclearscience.com.au/targetaudience/>.

⁵¹ Emma Baldwin, "Implied Reader," *Poem Analysis*, last revision 30 May 2022, <https://poemanalysis.com/definition/implied-reader/>.

The term 'implied reader,' coined by Booth ([1961] 1983) as a counterpart of the implied author (Schmid → Implied Author), designates the image of the recipient that the author had while writing or, more accurately, the author's image of the recipient that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs.⁵²

Here, Schmid explains that the author imagined a specific recipient when writing." In modesty, I will never claim that Claassens consciously imagined mothers in the context of birth being the recipients when she wrote *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. I do, however, argue that implied readers, being birth-giving women, can be understood to be the recipients who are "fixed and objectified" in the *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* by "specific indexical signs". In other words, that there are statements of Claassens' analysis and discussion that resemble an idea of an audience that are women in birth. In the book *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* the German Literary scholar Wolfgang Iser says the following about the 'implied reader':

The concept of the implied reader as an expression of the role offered by the text is in no way an abstraction derived from a real reader but is rather the conditioning force behind a particular kind of tension produced by the real reader when [she/he] accepts the role.⁵³

I find this description fitting as I believe a reader that encounter Claassens' *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* can already assume what Claassens is writing about, as it is already somewhat obvious in the book's title. The discussion of God as mourner, mother, and midwife are not discovered during the process of reading, they are already revealed to readers in the title. In knowing beforehand that these metaphors are going to be discussed in the book, the reader thus accepts the role of being a reader that knows what she is diving into and perhaps what she was looking for. The discussion of mourner, mother and midwife are explained, defended, and explored together with the reader, who perhaps searched for these alternative metaphors of a deliverer God before encountering Claassens' book. Claassens might not have had these readers in mind, yet these readers are out there in the world. In the book *Silent or Salient Gender?* Hanne Løland quotes Mary E. Shield who inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin,

⁵² Wolf Schmid, "Implied Reader" In *Handbook of Narratology* edited by Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier and Wolf Schmid, 301-309. Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110316469.301>

⁵³ Iser Wolfgang, *The Act of Reading : A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 36.

makes a relevant point in regards to my focus on the implied reader:

For the readers of the biblical text, this mean that (at least) two readers are at play in the production of meaning: the implied reader, or anticipated audience from the author's own historical/political context, and the contemporary reader/interpreter... Thus, there is no one possible interpretation of any text, but rather, each reader's historical/political/social situation will determine how one approaches and enters in dialogue with a particular text.⁵⁴

2.6.2 Implied Author

It only makes sense to mention the idea of an 'implied author' since I in my research question discusses the 'implied reader'. According to Chatman Seymour, "there is always an implied author..."⁵⁵ In other words, one cannot talk about an implied reader without the assumption that there is an implied author as well. In *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (3 ed.), the academic Chris Baldick explains that the implied author is "to be distinguished from the narrator, since the implied author stands at a remove from the narrative voice, as the personage assumed to be responsible for deciding what kind of narrator will be presented to the reader..."⁵⁶ By referring to Wayne Booth, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza provides a shorter definition and explains how the implied author "is not the real author, but rather the image or picture the reader will construct in the process of reading the work."⁵⁷ In other words, the 'implied author' is not the *the* author, in this context Claassens. It is not an 'author role' that Claassens deliberately has taken upon her when writing *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. The existence of an "implied author" is rather someone that comes to being when the text is already a finished work, and when read by a presumably "implied reader" who believes that the text somewhat aims at her specifically. What I am trying to say is that although it may seem that I steer Claassens' statements to deliberately speak to implied readers that are birth-giving women, it is not necessarily what Claassens has meant to do with her book. However, the way the book is written, and the way the Claassens' own reflections and mention of biblical texts, certainly sparks the idea that the 'implied reader' and the 'implied author' came

⁵⁴ Hanne Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender*, 55.

⁵⁵ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980, 149.

⁵⁶ Baldick, Chris. "implied author." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. : Oxford University Press, 2008. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199208272.001.0001/acref-9780199208272-e-585>.

⁵⁷ Elisabeth Fiorenza Schüssler, *Rhetoric and Ethic : The Politics of Biblical Studies*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, 110.

to existence during or after the process of writing *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*.

2.7 Trauma theory

In the article “First Words ... Faith Facing Trauma” from 2008, Claassens and Garber states that “those who frame their understanding of life through religious language cannot escape articulating their experiences through this language,” and that yet “trauma challenges faith even while faith attempts to understand trauma.”⁵⁸ Trauma obviously exists “... on a continuum in human experience, ranging from individual suffering and differing in severity.”⁵⁹ There are two reasons to why I will provide some overview of trauma theory. One, I believe that Claassens to a great extent engages with the biblical texts through the lenses of trauma theory. Second, I too analyze and discuss Claassens’ chapters in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, through the lenses of trauma theory, and more specifically in the context of trauma in childbirth. In the book *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette argue that “... to grasp the ways in which language can represent trauma opens up new avenues for understanding violent imagery, especially violent depictions of God”⁶⁰ In terms of the function of trauma theory and language, Boase and Frechette further state how “hermeneutics of trauma is attuned to the fact that language can encode and respond to traumatic experience in ways that correspond to the effects of trauma as well as to mechanisms of survival, recovery, and resilience.”⁶¹ Boase and Frechette also argue that “... by attentiveness to insights into human experience that reveal meaning not captured by the plain sense of a text, a hermeneutics of trauma can complement a range of interpretive approaches.”⁶² Lastly, they argue that although the literary approach to trauma hermeneutics may focus on how a biblical text reflects trauma experienced by those who authored the texts, biblical interpreters “... have found it particularly productive to consider the appropriation of the biblical text by traumatized populations in both ancient and present contexts.”⁶³

⁵⁸ Juliana M. Claassens, David G. Garber Land, "First Words ... Faith Facing Trauma," *Review and Expositor* (Berne) 105, no. 2 (2008): 188.

⁵⁹ Claassens and Garber, "First Words ... Faith Facing Trauma," 187.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, Saint-Laurent: SBL Press, 2016, 16.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, Saint-Laurent: SBL Press, 2016, 13.

⁶² Boase and G. Frechette, *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, 13.

⁶³ Boase and G. Frechette, *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, 13.

In the article “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies”, David G. Garber explains how several scholars “since the early 2000s have explored the use of trauma theory as an interpretive lens to understand some of the most difficult and painful texts in the Bible.”⁶⁴ Garber argues that “the use of trauma theory does not constitute a method of interpretation but a frame of reference that, when coupled with other methodologies (e.g., psychology, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, refugee studies, etc.), can yield innovative results.”⁶⁵ According to Garber, the use of trauma theory as an interpretive lens when reading the Bible, “began with the application of insights from psychology to research of the Bible.”⁶⁶ He explains further that:

One way of defining trauma literature derives from the language of trauma itself. A direct transliteration of the Greek word, ‘trauma’, means a ‘wound’ or a ‘hurt’. In trauma theory, the initial trauma is the historical experience of the wound One way the survivor can testify to the experience is through literature — attempting to bear witness to the event through various literary forms. If trauma is the initial wounding experience, trauma literature could be considered the scar — the visible trace offered by the survivor that points in the direction of the initial experience.⁶⁷

Further, Garber explains that while “trauma theory developed as a discipline in comparative literature through the 1990s, its influence began to be felt in biblical interpretation through trends in the study of the exilic literature, particularly a trend that approached Lamentations as a book of survivor literature.”⁶⁸ It is important to mention that trauma theory continues to develop and progress. Garber mentions the work of Erikson, which he argues “widens the perspective on trauma by shifting the emphasis from the individual to the communal.”⁶⁹ At some level, this statements at least challenge the fact I don’t focus on the intended readers (pastoral care, ministry, worship, academia), that are a part of a community or a group dealing with trauma of other’s, but implied readers that experience trauma on an individual level. However, it is true that “although it is helpful to distinguish between the individual and collective dimensions of trauma, the biblical text often blurs the distinction.”⁷⁰

Garber refers to Linafelt “who proposes that many Christian readers ‘survive’ the book of Lamentations by overemphasizing the brief words of hope (Lam. 3.21-22).”⁷¹ Contrariwise,

⁶⁴ David G. Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 1 (2015): 24.

⁶⁵ Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” 24.

⁶⁶ Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” 25.

⁶⁷ Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” 25.

⁶⁸ Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” 24.

⁶⁹ Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” 28.

⁷⁰ Boase and G. Frechette, *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, 18.

⁷¹ Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” 30.

Garber also refers to O' Conner who believe that Lamentations is not a book that only creates pain but is a book that reveals pain and "comfort to those who already sit in suffering."⁷² In the article "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories", June F Dickie explains how many scholars "focus on the message of biblical prophets (...) and explain how written prophecy helped people cope in the aftermath of trauma, giving meaning to 'shocking occurrences.'"⁷³ Dickie also remarks how "following war and community dislocation, the prophetic writings assisted in the re-ordering of values and the creating of new symbolic and social worlds."⁷⁴ Dickie emphasizes the importance of "applying biblical text to help contemporary sufferers."⁷⁵ Dickie argues that although studies on biblical texts and trauma theory still center on how "ancient victims testified to their traumatic experiences", several scholars now recognize "the need to mine ancient biblical texts to serve people today, as they process their own traumatic experiences."⁷⁶ In addition, Dickie refers to Wayne Rollins who "includes the need to study 'levels of meaning a text can evoke in readers'."⁷⁷ In terms of how birth-giving women as implied readers can benefit from Claassens' monograph *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, Dickie says the following about readers and metaphors:

The sufferer can also find a new vibrant metaphor which speaks into [her/his] situation and will be more strongly associated with the trigger than the former troublesome memory. The choice of the new image may appear ambiguous [...] but it can still significantly change perception.⁷⁸

For my analysis of Claassens' *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, it is essential to connect trauma theory not only to the book of Prophets, but also to the book of Psalms. In terms of psalms in relation to healing of trauma, Dickie explains how a reader must "try to enter into the poet's universe, 'invading and occupying [the text].'"⁷⁹ In addition, Dickie refers to Jonathan Culler who "emphasizes the need for the reader 'to linger in the various patterns or metaphors in the poem', thus making its reading 'an event'."⁸⁰ While Psalms such as 71 and 22 according to Claassens "express feelings of torment and pain so compellingly that they have continued to

⁷² Garber, "Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies," 30.

⁷³ June Frances Dickie, "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories," *Old Testament Essays* 32, no. 3 (2019): 885-907.

⁷⁴ Dickie, "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories," 886.

⁷⁵ Dickie, "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories," 887.

⁷⁶ Dickie, "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories," 887.

⁷⁷ Dickie, "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories," 887.

⁷⁸ Dickie, "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories," 887.

⁷⁹ Dickie, "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories," 894.

⁸⁰ Dickie, "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories," 894.

capture the experiences of people traumatized by personal and corporeal tragedies”, Hays explores how Psalm 78 creates a safe space of recovery and healing, and an environment where traumatized people can “reorient themselves to the reality of their covenant with God.”⁸¹ The important remarks of Hays’, I believe is the fact that “reading the audience of Psalm 78 as a traumatized people does not necessarily mean that the audience personally experienced the traumatic events the psalmist describes”, and that “the psalm’s focus is broader than the traumatic experiences of any one generation.”⁸² Another important point of Hayes, is that the Psalm is also very much relevant “distanced from the events the psalm describes.”⁸³ In other words, biblical texts can be relevant in the context of contemporary traumatic events that are different from the traumas expressed in the psalms.

3.0 Analysis

3.1 Introduction

In this part of my thesis, I analyze and discuss Claassens’ following chapters in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*: “God as Mourner”, “God as Mother”, and “God as Midwife”. First, however, I will attempt to make a distinction between the readers that I believe Claassens herself argues that her book is meant for, and the readers that I believe her book also targets. Then I will briefly explain what I mean when I contextualize childbirth as being an event of trauma and personal crisis. Finally, for the main part of my analysis, I will present and discuss observations in each of the three mentioned chapter, as a way to answer my question to what degree *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* speaks to implied readers that are birth-giving women.

3.2 Who do I argue are the intended and implied readers of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*?

As briefly mentioned, Claassens clearly states how her book *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* can be an important tool within pastoral care, ministry, worship, congregation, and even for theology students. I chose to call these readers “intended readers”, and that demands a clarification of the term “intended reader”. The ‘intended reader’ is a term that aims at readers who engage in pastoral care, education, worship, and ministry. These readers, with

⁸¹ Hays, “Trauma, Remembrance, and Healing”, 183.

⁸² Hays, “Trauma, Remembrance, and Healing”, 193.

⁸³ Hays, “Trauma, Remembrance, and Healing”, 193-194.

their theology background are expected to have some sort of knowledge and understanding of theology when diving into Claassens' *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. Somehow, I do believe these readers are expected to be familiar with the biblical texts, the general discussion about the texts, and thus understand mostly what Claassens write. I do not, however, believe that the intended readers are expected to accept, or agree on everything Claassens says. How I understand it, the book *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* aims at these intended readers that Claassens mention, and is meant to equip these readers (in their role as a pastor, teacher) to comfort, help and empathize with other people's pain. These intended readers are all agents on behalf of God, and they have the possibility and responsibility to bring forth Claassens' discussion of an alternative understanding of a Deliverer God in the Old Testament, portrayed through the metaphors of mourner, mother and midwife. In addition, it is obvious that Claassens targets her book to students, as she emphasizes the importance of helping "students imagine these liberating possibilities that offer an alternative to a world of pain, oppression, and injustice."⁸⁴

Claassens' hope is that her book may "contribute to the formation of an alternative way of understanding God,"⁸⁵ and that with such an understanding "people can deal constructively with their pain and, eventually, begin to see new possibilities."⁸⁶ She argues further that her conversation of a delivering God portrayed as mourner, mother, and midwife can provide resources "not only to survive but also to take up the task of living."⁸⁷ It is in these statements I argue that Claassens also speaks to readers outside education, pastoral care, ministry, and worship. She does not specify what she means by "people" here, and that gives a possibility to understand "people" to include women who are or have undergone trauma in their life, such as childbirth. Again, it must be stated that I aim to show how Claassens' book targets other readers than those readers that she herself argues that her book is meant for.

In the analysis where I discuss Claassens' chapter 2 "God as Mourner", I will exemplify how I see that both the intended readers and the implied readers are targeted. Further in the analysis, I will not spend much time discussing nor identifying the intended readers of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. The reason for this is because Claassens herself in chapter 5 "God's Delivering Presence" states what contexts her monograph speaks to, where she hopes

⁸⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 91.

⁸⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 82

⁸⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 82.

⁸⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 82.

her discussions on maternal images of God can change a theology of presence, education as transformation, and transforming worship.

3.3 Contextualizing childbirth as trauma and personal crisis

Since I argue that implied readers are birth-giving women, I must explain how I understand childbirth to be the context and the “trauma event”. Perhaps the statement I found to be most important and motivating to my quest to discuss birth-giving women as implied readers, is when Claassens says the following: “It is significant that two of these images are associated with childbirth, which presents us with the opportunity to use connotations of ‘delivery’ in the context of childbirth for portraying God as the Deliverer God.”⁸⁸ Claassens’ statement here is the cornerstone of why I contextualize “childbirth” as being an event of trauma and personal crisis. In the book *Birth as Metaphor for Crisis*, Claudia D. Bergmann argues how the Old Testament uses the Birth Metaphor for the purpose of “describing instances of local, universal, or personal crisis...[that] cause fear and anxiety in individuals or groups facing personal oppression, the onslaught of a historical event such as a battle...”⁸⁹ In addition, Bergmann states how “the simile ‘like a woman giving birth’ parallels the characteristics of males undergoing crisis with the characteristics of women experiencing birth, and in particular, difficult labor.”⁹⁰ I, however, want to illustrate how the narratives of childbirths in the Old Testament to a degree has the potential to describe the actual event of a traumatic childbirth. One could say it this way: since Claassens bases her book on the images of God as a mourner, mother, and midwife, I aim to bring her discussion of these maternal images of God back to the context of motherhood and back to the trauma of childbirth. In contextualizing childbirth as a trauma experience, I illustrate how Claassens’ *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* speaks to implied readers who are birth-giving women.

3.3 Mourner, Mother, Midwife

3.3.1 Introduction of book

Claassens turns to three metaphors for God that are used in conjunction with God’s acts of deliverance in Biblical traditions: God as Mourner or Wailing Woman (Jer. 8:22-91:1), God

⁸⁸ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 7.

⁸⁹ Claudia D. Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis : Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI, 1-18* Bd. 382 (2008): X, 67-68.

⁹⁰ Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 71.

as Mother (Isa. 42:14;49:12-15), and God as Midwife (Ps. 22:9-10, 71:6). Claassens' main argument in this book:

The central argument of this book is that, amid the rhetoric of violence that often marks the biblical discourse, there are also other metaphors that speak of God's deliverance — metaphors that can be used to expand the meaning of the all-important metaphor of God as Liberator. In this regard, I shall use the metaphor of God as Deliverer to denote God's deliverance as opposed to the violent portrayal of the traditional Liberator-Warrior metaphor for God.⁹¹

3.3.2 Reception of Claassens' Mourner, Mother, Midwife

In a review on *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, Lisa L. Thompson writes how, "Claassens leads the reader through possibilities for attending to this question, while retaining a biblical and theological account of God's presence in everyday suffering."⁹² According to Thompson, Claassens' book "adeptly offers practical theological insight on the biblical text, it targets Biblicists as well as practitioners and teachers of pastoral care and worship."⁹³ While Athalya Brenner says *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* is "a book of and for our times,"⁹⁴ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld describes the book as "academically significant and accessibly written for seminary and church study audiences."⁹⁵ According to Dennis Olson, this book "offers good news for those marginalized and traumatized by oppressive empires today."⁹⁶

3.4 God as Mourner

3.4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented an overview of Claassens' theory in the book, as well as theory I believe is essential for my thesis. I also provided a brief definition of terms such as 'reader', 'intended reader', and 'implied reader'. It now only seems appropriate to follow the chronological order of the book when I am about to discuss the metaphor of God as 'mourner', 'mother', and 'midwife'. Therefore, in this part of the paper, I will start with Claassens' chapter 2 "God as Mourner". I will first present a brief overview over the chapter as a whole. Secondly, I will analyze how the biblical texts that Claassens mention, with their

⁹¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 7.

⁹² Lisa L. Thompson, "L. Juliana M. Claassens, Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament," *Homiletic* 38, no. 1 (2013): Homiletic, 2013, Vol.38 (1), 48.

⁹³ Thompson, "L. Juliana M. Claassens, Mourner, Mother, Midwife," 48.

⁹⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, "Advance Praise".

⁹⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, "Advance Praise".

⁹⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, "Advance Praise".

“raw descriptions of suffering and pain”⁹⁷ as well as Claassens’ own reflections can speak to implied readers and put into words the trauma of birth. Claassens’ argument how we also discover “the first flickering of hope in the midst of despair” as we engage with the wailing women’s tears that join the tears of God” moves me to my third point, which is to argue how the implied reader can understand the image of God as a Wailing Woman to represent the people that assist and surround her in birth. Finally, as a way of placing this discussion in a hermeneutical framework, I will attempt to draw lines between the implied reader and trauma theory. In short, I suggest that Claassens chapter on God as Mourner offers a new image of a Deliverer God in the context of birth.

3.4.2 Overview of chapter 2: God as Mourner

In chapter 2 “God as Mourner”, Claassens introduces the metaphor of God as Mourner or Wailing Woman. Together with Claassens, readers encounter several texts from the book of Jeremiah, with a specific attention to the suffering of the Babylonian exile. One of Claassens’ main point in this chapter is that these biblical texts from the book of Jeremiah are “filled with tears”⁹⁸ Claassens demonstrates how God portrayed as Mourner or Wailing Woman suggests a “particularly fitting description of the mood of the period of [the Babylonian exile]. A second main point in this chapter is Claassens’ argument that tears is the only “appropriate response to the scenes of death and destruction.”⁹⁹ Claassens explains how she “considers the rhetorical effect of God weeping in reaction to the suffering of the Babylonian Empire.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, Claassens argues how the image of the mourning and wailing women in Jeremiah 9:17-20 is essential considering how Judah’s response to trauma is understood among interpreters. Perhaps the most important point of Claassens’ is the theory that these specific biblical texts from the book of Jeremiah provides an alternative way to portray the Deliverer God. The tears of a Mourner or Wailing Woman that “join the tears of God”¹⁰¹ symbolize hope in a situation that otherwise seems hopeless. Lastly, Claassens reflects on how the metaphor of the Divine Mourner holds us accountable to “serve as God’s partners in a deeply wounded world”¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 16.

⁹⁸ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 16.

⁹⁹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 20.

¹⁰¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 20.

¹⁰² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 20,81.

3.4.3 Birth-giving women and God as Mourner

As mentioned, my research question asks, “to what degree can birth-giving women be understood as implied readers?” First, a reminder that an implied reader is “the conditioning force behind a particular kind of tension produced by the real reader when [she/he] accepts the role.”¹⁰³ Since I argue that the implied reader can be birth-giving women, this means that a reader (a woman with the experience of childbirth) accepts the role of being an implied reader, which to *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* speaks. I will now begin my analysis and discussion of the implied reader in Claassens’ chapter 2: God as Mourner.

Claassens introduces the chapter with Jer. 9:17-20 and the idea of women’s cry as a metaphor for God. She explains how the “compelling image in Jeremiah 9 brought to mind a number of images of wailing women that captured, for [her], something of the power of tears cried by women as an evocative metaphor of God.”¹⁰⁴ My first observation in this chapter is that Claassens almost immediately refers to the contemporary movie called *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk.¹⁰⁵ What I find crucial is that instead of merely emphasizing the Civil Right Struggle in the United States during the 1960’, Claassens focuses on specific individuals in the movie: the young girl Lily, her travel companion Rosaleen, and the sisters August, May and June. Claassens brings up the “wailing wall” that the character May built. The wall not only symbolizes the sadness of the world, but is the only thing that solaces May’s suffering, according to Claassens. The “wailing wall” is similar to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, a place for people to gather, mourn and wedge prayers “written on small scraps of paper, into the cracks in the wall.”¹⁰⁶ In this way, Claassens invites implied readers into a world where she draws lines between the biblical texts of the Old Testament and everyday women who during a nonviolent social and political movement struggle with their own personal trauma and pain.

A second observation is when Claassens mentions how “Rachel cries inconsolably for her children that are no more (Jer. 4:28).¹⁰⁷ This remark, although “Rachel dies in the act of giving life”¹⁰⁸ is especially relevant to my argument about the implied reader being women

¹⁰³ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 36.

¹⁰⁴ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 36.

¹⁰⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 19.

¹⁰⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 19.

¹⁰⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 26.

¹⁰⁸ Elena Bosetti, *Yahweh : Shepherd of the People*. Middelgreen: St Pauls, 1993, 38.

who experience a traumatic birth. When Claassens brings up the profoundly sad image of Rachel who weeps for her children, implied readers can relate to this image to the experience of losing a child in birth. This biblical text is initially a “reference to the tragedy of a nation that is deported to Babylon”¹⁰⁹, but it is also the lamenting of “a mother who had died in vain because the children she bore have been brutally snatched from her.”¹¹⁰ This text does after all directly speak of a relation between a mother and her child(ren). Again, my observation here is merely that Claassens mentions a biblical text that gives a “raw description of suffering and pain”, and hence to some degree can put into words the experience of losing a child in birth. Elena Bosetti even remarks how the mother Rachel “who has died to give life, seems to die a second time in the death of her son, and this time without any possible comfort.”¹¹¹ And just to expand Claassens’ mention of Rachel’s mourning, Bosetti argues how Rachel’s tomb “is the sign not only of the mother who dies giving life but also of the mother who weeps for every child that dies; even to our own times.”¹¹² Claassens’ mention of Rachel certainly speaks to implied readers that are birth-giving women, considering that women nowadays still come to Rachel’s tomb to pray not only for fertility, but for an easy labor.¹¹³ Another biblical text that Claassens brings up is “... the wailing women voice the terrible memory of death entering their dwellings, cutting down children where they ought to be playing ...”¹¹⁴ For implied readers, this statement can also describe a context where mothers and everyone involved in the childbirth, mourn for the children that did not survive , but rather were deprived of a life in a home where they should have played.

Further, Claassens talks about the invasion of the Babylonian Empire, and argues that the book of Jeremiah offers “the first raw, poetic expressions of a people struggling to come to terms with the ‘terror all around’.”¹¹⁵ My observation is therefore when Claassens specifically brings up Jeremiah 4:23-26 and explains how “... we watch as the prophet’s world spirals into primordial chaos, the ‘waste and void’”¹¹⁶ My observation here is that Claassens’ remarks the repeated phrase “I looked” and argues that is repeated “so that the reader witnesses through the prophet’s eyes a world that is steadily falling into complete

¹⁰⁹ Bosetti, *Yahweh : Shepherd of the People*, 39.

¹¹⁰ Bosetti, *Yahweh : Shepherd of the People*, 39.

¹¹¹ Bosetti, *Yahweh : Shepherd of the People*, 39.

¹¹² Bosetti, *Yahweh : Shepherd of the People*, 39.

¹¹³ Irmtraud Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled with God : Biblical Stories of Israel's Beginnings*, Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2005, 89-90.

¹¹⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 28.

¹¹⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 20.

¹¹⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 20.

disarray...”¹¹⁷ How I understand it, Claassens paints a picture of a traumatic event where Claassens emphasizes the importance of a witness being present with the traumatized person. Brent A. Strawn argues how both confronting and recovering from trauma involves “*the presence of another*: a listener who can offer things such as ‘advice, attention, sympathy (...) as they grieve.”¹¹⁸ One could therefore argue that Claassens’ remark on the repeated phrase “I looked around” does equip intended readers, such as pastors and the congregation, to empathize better on behalf of other’s traumatic experiences, that one through the eyes of the prophet learn to witness and deal with the traumatic experience of others. Strawn actually suggests that those who happen to overhear trauma verbalized, (in his example specifically in a psalm), “might have been mobilized to provide the comfort, assistance, renewed connection, and psychological faculties...”¹¹⁹

It makes sense that Claassens suggests how the intended readers are meant to be inspired, not only by psalms, but by the way the Prophet (Jeremiah) speaks, and that the Prophets’ words is a “model ... and become the precise way contemporary readers or prayers disclose ... experiences and feelings about trauma, whether that trauma be their own, the trauma of others, or the trauma of others-as-their-own.”¹²⁰ In other words, I definitely see how Claassens’ discussion targets the intended readers of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. I do, however, suggest that implied readers can see that interpreters of these biblical texts don’t merely operate as “witnesses” of another’s trauma, but that one as an implied reader is a witness of one’s own trauma. Although I am not sure whether Claassens does so intentionally, I believe that her understanding of the repeated phrase “I looked” also offers an opportunity for her implied readers to feel themselves standing in the prophet’s shoes. I do not argue that Claassens exclusively want to encourage her readers to see themselves as “witnesses”. I also do not believe readers simply operate as “witnesses” here through the prophet’s eyes experiencing the prophet’s trauma. Instead, I suggest that her remark of the repeated phrase provides an implied reader an opportunity to see and experience her own world falling apart in the context of birth. When a birth progresses into a rather complicated situation for both the mother and the baby, it may feel just as Claassens says, like “a world

¹¹⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 20.

¹¹⁸ Brent A. Strawn, "Trauma, Psalmic Disclosure, and Authentic Happiness," In *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, edited by Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016, 153.

¹¹⁹ Strawn. "Trauma, Psalmic Disclosure, and Authentic Happiness," 154.

¹²⁰ Strawn. "Trauma, Psalmic Disclosure, and Authentic Happiness," 155.

that is steadily falling into complete disarray.”¹²¹ By engaging with such biblical texts implied readers such as birth-giving women, as she herself puts it, “find words to name those life-denying forces, ascribing meaning by using similarly inventive symbolic language to express the inexpressible”¹²²

According to Claassens, Flora Keshgegian “... describes the impact of trauma as ‘world shaking and world shattering’”¹²³ Although Claassens does not connect Jeremiah’s response directly to the context of birth, I argue that an implied reader can understand “the world shaking and shattering” to be the accurate words to describe a traumatic birth. These words can after all describe any type of trauma, and thus allow an implied reader, a birth-giving woman to connect them to her context of childbirth. A fourth observation in regards to descriptions of childbirth is therefore Claassens’ remark on how “[Jeremiah’s] raw emotion in the face of impending doom expresses a first response to a disaster that will extend far beyond the initial event.”¹²⁴ How I understand it, her analysis of Jeremiah’s response to trauma can function as a reminder to intended readers that for a traumatized person, the trauma is not over just because the initial event of trauma is. When a person experiences loss of someone dear, the effects of that trauma may linger a long time, and thus the person is in need for support by a pastor and the congregation. In terms of the implied reader, I suggest a different approach to understand Claassens’ reflection here. I argue that her remark on Jeremiah’s response to a traumatic event, when considering the “initial event” to be a context of birth, to some degree can put into words that the trauma of birth does not stop with the birth itself. Instead, the trauma extends into the aftermath of the birth as well.

Regarding the lingering trauma post childbirth, it is fitting when Claassens says that “no one can put all the pieces [of a woman’s body] together again, at least not without visible signs of rupture.”¹²⁵ Although this statement is likely meant to be understood metaphorically, an implied reader can read it literally and connect it to her context of childbirth. After a vaginal birth, a woman is often stitched to repair the rupture(s) caused by the baby passing through the birth canal. And especially after a caesarean section, a woman must undergo sewing of the deep layered wound in order to heal properly. Referring to her remark about how

¹²¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 20.

¹²² Claassens, L. Juliana. "Finding Words in the Belly of Sheol: Reading Jonah’s Lament in Contexts of Individual and Collective Trauma." *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 13, no. 2 (2022): 91, 11.

¹²³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 21.

¹²⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 21.

¹²⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 21.

although “stitched together”, it is true how a woman is always mentally, physically, or both, marked with “visible signs of rupture”, and in my analysis, due to the trauma of childbirth. Hence, Claassens discussion puts into words the very event of an implied reader’s trauma. I connect this thought to an article published one year prior to *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* where she explains how “despite the yearning to go on and to live, we also see how trauma survivors recognize what Keshgegian calls ‘the persistence of an unhealed wound,’ and how life therefore is often ‘layered on top of the wounds.’”¹²⁶ This supports Johnson’s statement that “even here women’s courage to mourn and resist may lead to healing and new life, however scarred.”¹²⁷

Claassens use of metaphorical language, I argue, clearly suggests a picture of a human body that although forever injured by a trauma event, which I argue *can* be understood as a childbirth, still attempts to move on. Thus, the Prophet’s words and Claassens’ own reflections put into words the narrative of traumatic childbirth. Her reflection on this biblical text gives an implied reader an opportunity to engage with a biblical text from the Old Testament that puts into words how it can feel as if the world falls apart in the context of childbirth. Biblical texts can, as Strawn puts it regarding psalms, “offer traumatized persons specific words to adopt as their own, even if the script is at some remove, a ‘trying out’ of another person’s event of trauma.”¹²⁸ In her article “Finding Words in the Belly of Sheol: Reading Jonah’s Lament in Contexts of Individual and Collective Trauma”, Claassens is clear on that “this process of finding words to name the unnamable pertains to the essential role of symbol and metaphor to ascribe meaning to events that have been responsible for wounding the body and soul.”¹²⁹

In her chapter on God as Mourner, I also believe that Claassens’ rejection of God as an Abusive Spouse and as a Mighty Warrior “who does not hesitate to destroy people’s lives...”¹³⁰ is important as these metaphors not only “reinforce negative gender stereotypes but also contribute to an assumption that the Bible condones violence against women.”¹³¹ I believe that for birth-giving women, it can sometimes be difficult to make sense of Genesis

¹²⁶ L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Praying from the Depths of the Deep: Remembering the Image of God as Midwife in Psalm 71," *Review and Expositor (Berne)* 104, no. 4 (2007): 769.

¹²⁷ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 269.

¹²⁸ Strawn, "Trauma, Psalmsic Disclosure, and Authentic Happiness," 155.

¹²⁹ Claassens, L. Juliana. "Finding Words in the Belly of Sheol: Reading Jonah’s Lament in Contexts of Individual and Collective Trauma." *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 13, no. 2 (2022): 4.

¹³⁰ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 22.

¹³¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 22.

3:16 that says, “To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children [...]’” I mention this at this biblical text directly speaks of childbirth. From the perspective of understanding the implied reader as being women in childbirth, Claassens rejection here about the Bible disregarding violence against women is important, so that the implied can imagine a deliverer God who does not punish through a spouse, nor that God in any way punishes in childbirth or with childbirth. Because if not, Claassens asking how “the survivors of extreme trauma simply will turn away from this seemingly uncaring or impotent God and seek other ways to recover from their past?”¹³² becomes a reasonable question. Claassens argues that when God is portrayed as a Wailing Woman, it “complicates the traditional understanding of God as Warrior and Aggrieved Husband.”¹³³

I have now argued and exemplified how in chapter 2, Claassens’ own reflections, Jeremiah’s, and Rachel’s response to a trauma to some degree can speak to an implied reader who are birth-giving women and put into words the narrative of childbirth. I will now focus on my argument that Claassens’ discussion on how the image of the wailing women portrays a fresh image of a God who mourns with those to suffer and experience trauma, also represents a “hope in midst of despair” to birth-giving women. Or as Elizabeth Johnson states: “If God grieves with them in the middle of disaster, then there may yet be a way forward.”¹³⁴ In terms of this shift of focus, Claassens says the following:

... for people in our traumatized world, who on micro- and macrolevel may experience the world as falling apart — the proverbial mountains shaking, the heavens turning dark, and their joy disappearing like birds flying away — the image of the wailing women calling upon the community to join in wailing and weeping may offer resources to deal with the trauma that had so violently broken into their lives.¹³⁵

Although Claassens in Chapter 2 specifically refers to and exemplifies the importance of God’s tears for communal trauma and tragedy, her points are also relevant for the implied readers when she says the “the image of the God who weeps (...) speaks to people in a way that few others images are able to.”¹³⁶ In my opinion, these “people” that Claassens refers to

¹³² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*,

¹³³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 33.

¹³⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is : The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Twenty-fifth Anniversary ed. Place of Publication Not Identified: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2017, 274.

¹³⁵ Claassens, “Calling the Keeners”, 64-65.

¹³⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 24.

here can be understood as any reader, thus also the implied reader that are birth-giving women. Since I mention the role of community in terms of childbirth, it must be said that only in a perfect world, a woman in labor is surrounded by people such as family, and health care professionals. I say ‘in a perfect world’ because I am fully aware that the setting of childbirth differs from context to context. Claassens reminds readers that in too many places around the world women are not birthing in a safe place. She in this regard emphasizes the fact that “a large percentage of women around the world have no access to medical care.”¹³⁷

Claassens says the following about what it means when we as readers are presented with an image of God who weeps:

Beyond its ability to serve as a source of comfort and inspiration, this image of the God who weeps challenges our perceptions about the age-old question of theodicy. In the midst of violence, bloodshed, terror, and anguish, this imagery of the weeping God steers the conversations in a whole new direction: it offers the ‘and yet’.¹³⁸

How I understand Claassens is that in during a trauma of “violence, bloodshed, terror and anguish” the biblical texts also present for an image of a God who weeps with us. For in the intended reader, one can understand this as a description of trauma that people in the contemporary society experience today: trauma on a communal level such as war, terror, natural catastrophes. In addition, these descriptive words can also put into words a personal or individual trauma such as loss of a dear one, terminal illness etc. Claassens’ statement provides the intended reader the idea of God who joins the traumatized people in their weeping. Thus, the intended reader can communicate this idea to people that desperately need to hear about a God who is present in the midst of trauma, and not just as a witness, but as a fellow mourner. Trauma is real, yet there is a God who joins us in tears for the trauma that surrounds us. Boase and G. Frechette state how tears, or “... lament gives suffering the dignity of language [...]”¹³⁹

Considering that I argue how implied readers are being birth-giving women, I must mention how Claassens herself does not focus much on healthcare system or healthcare professionals.

¹³⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 65.

¹³⁸ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 24.

¹³⁹ Boase and G. Frechette, *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, 15.

It is not until chapter 4 that she not only introduces her chapter with a mention of the healthcare system, but directly speaks about hospitals, doctors, gynecologists, pediatricians, nurses, and anesthetists.¹⁴⁰ In chapter 2 “God as Mourner” Claassens refers to Shoshana Felman who uses “the figure (from Camus’ novel *The Plague*) of the physician who becomes a witness for those who dies during the plague”¹⁴¹, and where the physician’s testimony becomes a part of “an act of survival”¹⁴² and later, the healing process. Here she emphasizes the importance of having someone who can both witness and testify to the event of trauma, as an “essential part of helping [people] to deal with their pain.”¹⁴³ Also June Frances Dickie emphasizes how “the safe and supportive presence of others as witnesses and dialogue partners is crucial for advancing the process of reinterpreting the traumatic experience.”¹⁴⁴ In the article “Calling the Keeners: The Image of the Wailing Woman As Symbol of Survival in a Traumatized World”, Claassens states how “the wailing woman can be understood in terms of the categories of *witness* or *testimony*, which are fundamental concepts in trauma theory.”¹⁴⁵ In other words, these “someone” are according to Claassens the Wailing Women that “play a significant role in helping the people of Judah to come together in their grief, and so to participate in the “survival of their story.”¹⁴⁶ Put differently, “[the] wailing women are the ones who voice the pain and whose laments serve as memory of what and who were lost.”¹⁴⁷ Considering how biblical texts can provide birth-giving women words to remember the trauma of childbirth, Claassens says how “remembering becomes a means for those who are trapped in traumatic situations to transcend their suffering in order to start seeing possibilities of new life her and now.”¹⁴⁸

Claassens refers to Kathleen O’Connor “who argues that ‘the tears of God are part of the imaginative literary enterprise that ruptures theological language.’”¹⁴⁹ This means, that God’s tears challenge our theology on God’s presence during trauma and suffering in the Old Testament. In addition, Claassens argues how the metaphor of God as Wailing Woman

¹⁴⁰ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 65.

¹⁴¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 29.

¹⁴² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 29.

¹⁴³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 29.

¹⁴⁴ Dickie, "The Intersection of Biblical Lament and Psychotherapy in the Healing of Trauma Memories," 891.

¹⁴⁵ L. Juliana Claassens, "Calling the Keeners: The Image of the Wailing Woman As Symbol of Survival in a Traumatized World," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1 (2010): 70.

¹⁴⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 29.

¹⁴⁷ Claassens, "Calling the Keeners," 72.

¹⁴⁸ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 91.

¹⁴⁹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 25.

“grounds God’s tears in the community’s reality...”¹⁵⁰ Claassens explains further that God as a Wailing Woman “depicts a God who is part of the community; who weeps together with the community; who is wounded with the same wounds that afflict the people.”¹⁵¹ When Claassens does not specify what "community" she is talking about, her statements here can speak to implied readers who can imagine the “community” being the healthcare professionals involved in birth. Healthcare professional become not only witness to the trauma of birth but take they also part in the emotional chaos that parallelly follows it. Just as the Wailing Women who were weeping on behalf of the community’s trauma, Healthcare professionals too share the emotions of frustration and grief of a mother who experiences childbirth as traumatic, and in the worst case, loses a child. A birth-giving woman might have asked herself: where was God? I suggest that Claassens’ chapter here implies a God who is the Wailing Woman “in the midst of the believers’ painful reality.”¹⁵² If the Wailing Women can be thought of as being the health care professionals who “find themselves deeply enmeshed in the calamity, thoroughly engaged in the [the birth]”¹⁵³, this can speak to implied readers who are birth-giving women.

The Healthcare professionals are experienced with the trauma of childbirth as they have watched how a new life begins, and how it so abruptly can end. To birth-giving women, the Wailing Women can also represent elder family members (particularly women) who assist in a context of birth. In this regard, it is fitting that Claassens refers to an interviewee who said that “the wailer begins to wail when she gets along in years, when she begins to understand life, to understand sadness. She gave birth to a child, she knows what sadness is, what torture of the soul is”¹⁵⁴ Claassens is right in her statement that “the image of God as liberator may become truly liberating in those instances when we recognize God’s liberative action in the gestures of comfort and compassion from the people around us.”¹⁵⁵ I believe that Claassens’ reflections on the image of the Wailing Women speak to implied readers an image that a deliverer God who “enters into solidarity with [the birth-giving women] reeling from

¹⁵⁰ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 32

¹⁵¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 33.

¹⁵² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 32.

¹⁵³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 32.

¹⁵⁴ Claassens, "Calling the Keeners», 66-67.

¹⁵⁵ L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Praying from the Depths of the Deep: Remembering the Image of God as Midwife in Psalm 71, " *Review and Expositor (Berne)* 104, no. 4 (2007): 772.

the trauma,”¹⁵⁶ and in the weeping is incarnated in the community that surrounds a woman in childbirth.

To implied readers, the raw descriptions of suffering and pain in the texts from Jeremiah, as well Claassens’ own reflections on these texts can describe and put into words the experience and trauma of childbirth. The exploration of God’s role as a Wailing Women can give birth-giving women the idea of a God who is present in their midst, and who acts through the people that surround them in birth, such as Healthcare workers or family members. Finally, Claassens’ discussion on tears can give birth-giving women the idea of how tears of compassion “can bring about healing” and how “God’s tears are a protest against violence.”¹⁵⁷ The readers of Claassens’ chapter “God as Mourner” are not only intended readers who are advocated to assist and comfort other people’s trauma, but implied readers whom themselves are traumatized and in need for a different image of God’s presence. The words of the prophet Jeremiah, and Claassens’ analysis of it, to some degree can put into words a fitting description for birth-giving women of how it may feel in a traumatic birth. Additionally, can Claassens’ discussion of tears of the wailing women joined with God’s tears provide birth-giving women the opportunity to reimagine a deliverer God who cried with them in birth.

3.5 God as Mother

3.5.1 Introduction

In the previous subchapter I started off my analysis with a discussion on Claassens’ chapter 2 on God as Mourner. Claassens discussed Jeremiah response and lamenting to trauma, and I argued how intended readers can learn how to sympathize with other’s trauma by looking through the eyes of the prophet. I also, however, suggested that Claassens’ discussion of Jeremiah also presents an opportunity to put into words how implied readers might feel in the context of birth. I also reflected on Claassens’ argument that by joining the fountain of tears cried by Jeremiah and the wailing woman, God is portrayed as mourner, the tears of God represent a communal grief, and thus that take part in people’s heartache and suffering. Claassens’ understanding of God as mourner become a way for implied readers to liberate pain through tears and lamenting, which move them toward healing and recovery. Thus, can

¹⁵⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 32.

¹⁵⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 36.

Claassens' analysis of God as mourner speak to implied readers about a deliverer God that is present in the context of birth by joining in the mourning.

Claassens argues how “these maternal metaphors — with their emphasis on new life, nurture, and care — offer rich resources for people recovering from trauma.”¹⁵⁸ In this chapter I analyze and discuss Claassens' reflection on maternal metaphors of God used in Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah. Claassens discusses how the metaphor of God as a mother, which was an honest way to address the obscurities and trials faced by Israel after the exile, also can provide comfort and care that offers readers a new way to think of the Deliverer God. While as mentioned, Claassens' intended readers are people in pastoral care, ministry, congregation, worship, academia, I discuss how Claassens' discussion also aims at implied that are birth-giving women. Claassens focuses on maternal metaphors, and although she focuses on the challenges faced by Israel during and after the exile and not on maternal images in relation to motherhood, I argue that Claassens' discussion still is relevant to implied readers. In other words, I want to return to the subject of motherhood, although “in religious studies, motherhood remains a marginal topic,” and in gender studies, it is only now coming to the fore, having been the “unfinished business of feminism.”¹⁵⁹

According to Claassens, “contemporary images of women protecting their children” suggests an alternative, yet powerful image of a Deliverer God in Deutero-Isaiah.¹⁶⁰ The imagery offers a description of a “people's valiant attempts to survive the deeply traumatic events of war and state-sponsored acts of terror.”¹⁶¹ In this chapter, I see clearly see how Claassens discusses the images of motherhood in relation to Holocaust and World War II and their application to Deutero-Isaiah. I, however, believe that Claassens' analysis and discussion of Deutero-Isaiah texts also speak to birth-giving mothers who experience childbirth as traumatic. I will attempt to illustrate how I believe Claassens' chapter on God as Mother provides birth-giving women a way to put into words the trauma of childbirth and an alternative way to understand who God is as a Mother in the context of childbirth. In this chapter of the analysis, I will analyze on Claassens' discussion two images of God as mother:

¹⁵⁸ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 46-47.

¹⁵⁹ Bergmann, "Mothers of a Nation: How Motherhood and Religion Intermingle in the Hebrew Bible," 141.

¹⁶⁰ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 42.

¹⁶¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 42.

God as Woman in Labor (Isa 41:13-14); 45:9-19), and God as Nurturing Mother (Isa.49:14-15) and argue how these discussions speak to birth-giving women.

3.5.2 Overview of chapter 3: God as Mother

In this chapter, Claassens refers to Deutero-Isaiah as “survival literature” and discusses the evidence of trauma survivors that look toward the future, and who aim to move on toward a time following the exile.¹⁶² Claassens argues that the Deutero-Isaiah texts not only show a sovereign God with superpowers, but that they also offer “a window onto the pain and suffering that still lurked beneath the surface of the exilic survivors’ lives.¹⁶³ In regards to the metaphor of God as mother, Claassens discusses the maternal metaphors that are used in Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah “in conjunction with God’s creative and liberative work.”¹⁶⁴ Claassens’ main argument in this chapter is that the metaphor of God as mother offers a fresh perspective in regards to discover “the possibilities of new life that Israel imagined at that stage of its journey of recovery.”¹⁶⁵ Claassens illustrates how “female metaphors such as God as Mother in Labor (Isa 41:13-14); 45:9-19) and God as Nurturing Mother (Isa.49:14-15; 66:10-13) draw on values of comfort and care” that can give readers another alternative imagery of the Deliverer God.¹⁶⁶ Finally, Claassens states that “these maternal metaphors — with their emphasis on new life, and care — offer rich resources for people recovering from trauma.”¹⁶⁷

3.5.3 Birth-giving women and God as Mother

It is not only noteworthy, but highly relevant for my thesis question that Claassens starts of her chapter on God as Mother with the title “Mothers” and with the following:

As I was working on the remarkable cluster of maternal metaphors in Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah, metaphors that offer some intriguing perspectives on God as Deliverer, many personal images of mothers came to mind. My wonderful mother, grandmother, mother-in-law, and Doktormutter all have shaped and enriched my life.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 16.

¹⁶³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 16.

¹⁶⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 16.

¹⁶⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 16.

¹⁶⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 16.

¹⁶⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 46-47.

¹⁶⁸ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 41.

These sentences are personal, concrete, and clearly speaks about motherhood. The fact that Claassens here mentions the different images of mothers, is also essential to my argument that *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* also targets implied readers that are birth-giving mothers. Although said briefly, I argue that Claassens' statements here read almost as a tribute to all mothers "out there" in the world. Concerning mothers, a second observation I make is how Claassens refers to Melissa Raphael who "uses these nurturing and protective actions of mothers rooted in a 'capacity to bend over and cover, stroke, warm, feed, clean, lift and hold the other'...."¹⁶⁹ Although this sentence does not speak of childbirth it brings readers to the subject of motherhood.

Trible states how "historical chaos has become divine labor pains."¹⁷⁰ Claassens explains how God as a Mother in Labor "conveys a profound mixture of suffering and pain, hope and joy [...] and points to the fact that God does experience the people's pain but also moves beyond the pain in order to make new life possible for the exilic returnees."¹⁷¹ My observation in here when Claassens further directly speaks to the context of childbirth by explaining how the cry and panting of a woman in labor in Isaiah 42 "quite vividly remind the reader that a key aspect of giving birth is excruciating pain."¹⁷² This statement is important in terms of how I argue that Claassens' reflection of the biblical texts can put into words the trauma of childbirth, although not all women experience childbirth as traumatic or excruciating painful. However, birth-giving women can experience it as essential that a biblical text can stress that childbirth is painful. It is the fact that Claassens allows for such an understanding of Isaiah 42 that I believe is important here. How I see it, Claassens here provides birth-giving women a way to see how a biblical text to some degree can describe mental and physical pain in childbirth. A third observation that is essential in terms of God's presence in childbirth, is Claassens' suggestion that the metaphor of God as a woman in labor implies that God identifies and enters the person's pain¹⁷³. Since the metaphor speaks of the context of childbirth, it means that God here enters a woman's pain in childbirth. The idea of God joining in the pain of labor is closely related to the idea that God as Mourner portrays a God who joins in the weeping during and in the aftermaths of trauma.

¹⁶⁹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 41.

¹⁷⁰ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 64.

¹⁷¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 51.

¹⁷² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 51.

¹⁷³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 50-51.

Claassens suggests that “The female metaphors in Deutero-Isaiah are particularly well-suited to encourage us to think differently about God’s power, because they serve as a reminder of alternative values of a mother’s power to first give life then then to nurture that life.”¹⁷⁴ She also argues how a woman’s cry and panting in labor “is not a sign of weakness but of strength; a sign of her determination to ensure that her child enters the world alive and healthy.”¹⁷⁵ This statement also clearly speaks to readers that are birth-giving women, as readers that are women “may well see their ability to bring life into the world as potentially harmful an caught in the wake of sin.”¹⁷⁶ Because traditionally, “the image of a woman in labor is used to illustrate the terror of the sudden, inescapable suffering of retribution for sinful behavior.”¹⁷⁷ Fischer argues, however, that “the image of women giving birth in the speeches of God is always seen from the female perspective and sense of inner self and therefore positions the woman in labor in positive light.”¹⁷⁸ Further, Fischer stresses how “YHWH compares his own acts of salvation with a woman giving birth” that illustrates ‘not an image of distress but a liberating act of strength that looks towards bringing new life into the world’¹⁷⁹ Fischer suggests “Isaiah 66:7-8 reads like a cancellation of the verse against women in Genesis 3:16 that announces difficulty during pregnancy and pain in childbirth...”¹⁸⁰

For implied readers that are birth-giving women, it is especially meaningful to read how Claassens describes a God “who is as vulnerable and at the same time as powerful as a woman giving birth.”¹⁸¹ In regard to birth-giving women, I find it especially important that Claassens in this regard uses the word “vulnerable” when she compares God to women who give birth. After all, a birth-giving woman might feel that she is left in the state of vulnerability, when the nature of her body fails to bring forth the life of her child. It is therefore fitting how Claassens adds that “even though both the mother and warrior are in danger and hence quite vulnerable, both are exceedingly strong.”¹⁸² She also speaks directly to birth-giving women when she says that the power to bring forth life “is a creative power,

¹⁷⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 55.

¹⁷⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 56.

¹⁷⁶ Luise Schottroff, Marie-Theres Wacker, and Lisa E. Dahill, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation : A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2012, 306.

¹⁷⁷ Schottroff, Wacker, and E. Dahill, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 306.

¹⁷⁸ Schottroff, Wacker, and E. Dahill, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 307.

¹⁷⁹ Schottroff, Wacker, and Dahill, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 306.

¹⁸⁰ Schottroff, Wacker, and Dahill, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 306.

¹⁸¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 56.

¹⁸² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 56.

shared by every other woman who had ever given birth or who would ever give birth.”¹⁸³ Although it is the power of God that is evoked through the Mother-in-labor metaphor, Claassens here also speaks about the power of birth-giving women.

Lastly, Claassens explains how the metaphor of God as Mother in Labor expresses not only suffering and pain but hope and joy. In terms of God as liberator in the context of childbirth, Claassens says that God not only experiences the people’s pain, but that God moves the people beyond their pain “in order to make new life.”¹⁸⁴ Readers that are birth-giving women can understand this as a Deliverer God that feels their pain in childbirth, but also move them beyond the pain that childbirth causes women. In addition, birth-giving women can recognize this as God who attempts to liberate them from physical, and mental pain. To many women, childbirth often causes suffering and pain. However, amid this suffering and pain, there is also that linger of hope and joy of the expected child, a new life. For God to “make new life”, God moves the birth-giving women beyond that temporary pain and suffering. Conversely, this understanding only makes sense given that the child survives birth.

I must mention that initially, “the birth metaphor (...) and the image of a woman in labor pain [in the Bible] represent the suffering of Israelites.”¹⁸⁵ It is therefore important for me to state that I do not neglect how the metaphor of a woman in labor “captures something of the fragile nature of Israel’s experience — the life-and-death situation in which they found themselves”¹⁸⁶ Claassens also clearly states how we shall not disregard the fact that childbearing was dangerous in the ancient times, and that women died just as warriors died in battle, thus is the metaphor of childbirth fitting as a comparison to the trauma of war and battle.

For the discussion on implied readers, it is especially significant that Claassens brings up Isaiah 49:13-15 where God is argued to be imaged as a nurturing mother who comforts her child. According to Claassens, “the female metaphor of a mother’s nurturing love that is used for God spoke to the crushed and tormented exiles as they were recovering from trauma they had experienced in a way few other metaphors could.”¹⁸⁷ Ashley M. Wilcox describes the

¹⁸³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 56.

¹⁸⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 51.

¹⁸⁵ Schottroff, Wacker, and Dahill, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 331.

¹⁸⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 56.

¹⁸⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 51.

images of God as nurturing mother and a mother carrying a child in her womb as “striking” and calls it a “turning point” in the text of Isaiah when God “responds to Zion, the grieving mother and widow.”¹⁸⁸ Claassens refers to Isaiah 49:13-15.¹⁸⁹

Claassens’ mention and reflection of Isaiah 49:13-15 can target implied readers who are birth-giving women who might feel that God is absent in a traumatic birth. Birth-giving women that might feel that God has forsaken them and forgotten them as they struggle to find God in the chaos of their suffering and pain. Although referring to how the exilic community feels that God has abandoned them in their suffering, it is also fitting for birth-giving women how Claassens says that “God becomes the ultimate Mother who shows compassion. Even though earthly mothers, when under extreme duress might forget their children...God as Mother will always be faithful.”¹⁹⁰ This leads me to Claassens’ next important discussion on Isaiah 49:15 where according to Claassens, God “seeks to convince the people that God’s love surpasses even the strongest bond between mothers and their children.”¹⁹¹ I believe that Claassens’ focus on a “God as the ideal mother who will never forget or abandoned her children” is especially relevant to implied readers that are birth-giving women.

In the context of childbirth, a loss takes many such as a mother’s notion of losing herself, losing control during childbirth, or in worst case, losing a child. Elizabeth Johnson profoundly states how “... should tragedy strike, and a mother’s love fail, a dialectical metaphor arises as God is depicted as more reliable still.”¹⁹² Claassens states how “the metaphor of a nurturing mother conveys the notion that it is not enough that God gives new life; it also suggests that, in order for new life to continue, it needs to be nurtured and preserved.”¹⁹³ Instead of feeling abandoned during a traumatic childbirth, a birth-giving woman can find comfort in the image of a God that preserves her life, as well as the life of her child. In a situation where a mother, for the time being is separated from her child because she underwent c-section, because her child is ill, or in worst case scenario because she lost her child in birth; God will not forget her children or never abandon a mother in her pain, or the child in death. It is therefore fitting how Claassens states how “God is the Mother

¹⁸⁸ Ashley M. Wilcox, *The Women's Lectionary : Preaching the Women of the Bible throughout the Year*, First ed. Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Publishing, 2021, 26.

¹⁸⁹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 45.

¹⁹⁰ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 45.

¹⁹¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 51.

¹⁹² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is : The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Twenty-fifth Anniversary ed. Place of Publication Not Identified: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2017, 105.

¹⁹³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 52.

whose love knows no bounds, [which] serves the function of naming the pain and rebuilding the bond between God and God's traumatized children who have suffered..."¹⁹⁴ If I understand Claassens correctly, her argument here is that God becomes the faithful Mother for the mothers when they in their inadequacy experiences the impossibility, the shame, and the pain associated with childbirth and motherhood. The fact that Claassens discusses how God becomes Mother to the mothers, supports my argument that *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* aims at implied readers that are birth-giving women.

Another observation regarding God as Nurturing Mother is how Claassens argues that in Isaiah 49, "the reference to God as the ideal mother who will never forget or abandon her children evokes the pain of mother who actually have forgotten or abandoned their children"¹⁹⁵ It is true that portraying God as the ideal mother can make earthly women feel that they lack "what it takes", or that they do not live up to society's or their own expectations as a mother. We live in a reality where earthly mothers can experience feeling emotionless and dissociated towards their newborns, something which I believe is still a sensitive subject to speak of. In such circumstances, Claassens' idea of God as the Nurturing Mother is essential. As mentioned before, God acts in the role of those who surround women in childbirth, and if the mother becomes unable to take care of her child, there are healthcare professionals who step in and nurture the child on behalf of the mother. God nurtures the child through the people who provides comfort and care for the mother. Temporarily, God takes over the role of mother, and becomes the Mother for both the mother, and her child. In terms of how Claassens argues that God becomes what she calls an "Adoptive Mother", she emphasizes that "one should not forget that the adoption metaphor also implies traumatic memories of the mothers whose hands are empty — mothers who are unable to care for their children"¹⁹⁶ While in this case, Claassens speaks about the case of adoption, and thus how a biological mother might feel toward the adoptive mother, this statement can also describe how mothers feel toward healthcare professionals who nurture their child because they themselves are "unable".

Claassens states how the metaphor of God as Mother "... is even more powerful if we consider that, in antiquity, childbirth quite often entailed the death of the mother or the baby or both, and that a successful birth was celebrated as an act of deliverance in praise songs that

¹⁹⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 53.

¹⁹⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 53.

¹⁹⁶ L. Juliana Claassens, "Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child:" Considering the Metaphor of Divine Adoption in the Context of Trauma." *Religions* 14, no. 1 (2023): 6.

depicted the mother in labor as a war hero who had won the battle for liberation.”¹⁹⁷ I am critical to the idea that a woman in labor equals a war hero that has won in battle, with the criteria that the childbirth must have been “successful”. Although childbirth often ended in death in the ancient times, it is still true for today that not all childbirths end well. Is there an absence of deliverance when the baby dies in childbirth or when the birth becomes complicated? The creating imagery interpreted through the image of a woman in labor gasping and panting is essential, but I believe it is significant regardless of “successful birth” or not. Some mothers birth stillborn babies. However, the notion of deliverance and creation in the metaphor of a laboring mother is still important. My suggestion is that any woman is still “a war hero who have won the battle of liberation”, because she has still delivered a child, birthed, and thus have become a mother. Even though her child is no longer alive on earth. In addition, a woman might feel like she “lost the battle” when a birth does not proceed as it should, leading to intervening from doctors who must perform c-section in order to “preserve life” of the mother and child. What now then? How can birth-giving women discover God’s delivering presence in the context of a childbirth that does not proceed, and where nature fails? In my next chapter I discuss Claassens’ chapter 4 where God through the role of a Midwife intervenes, and takes action in childbirth in order to preserve life.

3.6 God as Midwife

3.6.1 Introduction

Claassens states how “[her] project on finding different ways of speaking about God’s deliverance”¹⁹⁸ begun with the less dominant female metaphor of God as Midwife. In terms of connecting the image of God as Midwife directly to the context of birth, Thompson explains how Claassens “describes Pss 22 and 71 (with reference to Isa 66) as instances of transition from lament, suffering, and despair to trust, hope, and rebirth”¹⁹⁹, and thus how “the image [of God as Midwife] hinges on the intimacy and trust that exists between a birthing mother and midwife at the intersections of life and death in childbirth.”²⁰⁰

In the previous chapters of my thesis, I discussed Claassens’ chapter on God as Mourner, God as Mother and how in both chapters, Claassens’ discussions target implied readers that are birth-giving mothers. In this chapter I will first present a brief overview over the chapter

¹⁹⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 50.

¹⁹⁸ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 64.

¹⁹⁹ Thompson, "L. Juliana M. Claassens, Mourner, Mother, Midwife," 48.

²⁰⁰ Thompson, "L. Juliana M. Claassens, Mourner, Mother, Midwife," 48.

as a whole. Then I will discuss Claassens' reflections on the texts Ps. 22:9-10 and 71:6 that portray God as Midwife and reflect a person's struggle to cope with severe pain. I will attempt to argue that Claassens' argument that "both God and the believer have agency in the struggle of deliverance"²⁰¹ speaks about a relationship between birth-giving women and God as Midwife.

3.6.2 Overview of chapter 4: God as Midwife

In this chapter, Claassens focuses on how specific psalms of lament "reflect the individual's struggle to come to grips with severe pain"²⁰². Claassens argues that in addition to being understood as an individual's struggle with trauma, these psalms of lament could also be understood collectively "in the post-exilic period to reflect the suffering of Israel as a whole."²⁰³ Reading the psalms where God is portrayed as Midwife in combination with the Deliverer God provide a noteworthy case of how tragedy can be dealt with.²⁰⁴ Claassens illustrates how the psalmist mirrors an individual who alters between the state of despair and hope for the future. With the metaphor of God as Midwife, Claassens challenges not only the image of the Deliverer God, but how we understand the word "delivery" in a biblical context considering how the word "delivery" is highly relevant to the context of childbirth and to the role of a midwife.

3.6.3 Birth-giving women and God as Midwife

Claassens is right when she says that there are very few instances in the Bible where God is portrayed as Midwife²⁰⁵, yet Claassens connects these instances (Pss. 22, 71 and Isa- 66:7-9) back to the actual context of childbirth. I say "back" as these psalms is used to describe God's acts of deliverance of a people. In this chapter, my first observation is that Claassens exemplifies how the metaphor of God as Midwife is presented in two psalms: "Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast. From birth I was cast on you; from my mother's womb you have been my God" (Ps. 22:9-19), and "Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb." (Ps. 71:6). In this regard I find it important to have in mind Hay's argument that a traumatized readers do not necessarily have to relate to the exact traumatic event of the

²⁰¹ Thompson, "L. Juliana M. Claassens, Mourner, Mother, Midwife," 48.

²⁰² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 17.

²⁰³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 17.

²⁰⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 17.

²⁰⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 65.

psalmist.²⁰⁶ In the next two paragraphs, my observation is that Claassens speaks about the circumstances of childbirth in terms of birth-giving women's access to medical professionals. Claassens here reminds readers that "not everyone around the world has trained medical professionals on hand to deliver their babies", which means that too many women die in childbirth. Because a large percentage of women have no access to medical care, Claassens argues how "we may be unaware of the significant role played by midwives in bringing new life into the world."²⁰⁷

A next observation is that Claassens reminds readers that "with strong hearts and gentle hands, midwives throughout the ages have helped women give birth."²⁰⁸ Claassens here clearly connects the subject of God as Midwife to the context of real-life childbirth. After all, Claassens further explains how the image of God as Midwife "denotes an intimate connection between God and God's people similar to that which exists between a mother in labor and the midwife."²⁰⁹ These statements are crucial to my question on to what degree birth-giving women can be understood as implied readers. Although Claassens does not spend much time discussing the role of God as Midwife in the context of trauma in an actual childbirth, my understanding is that she does not leave the subject of childbirth completely either. What's important is that Claassens emphasizes the importance of the midwife's role in a context of trauma. Because further Claassens argues how the metaphor of God as Midwife "is an image of power, denoting specifically to the power to give life or to rescue from death (...) where the midwife works ceaselessly to bring life into the world..."²¹⁰ Here Claassens clarifies what a midwife's role entails in the context of childbirth. Regarding a midwife's role, she refers to Elaine Wainwright who in the book *Women Healing/Healing Women* explains that "at the center of this female space occupied by midwife and pregnant woman are the bodies of women. Bodies touch as the hands of the midwife enable the birth process in and from the body of the other woman."²¹¹ In addition, Claassens remarks how Wainwright "considers the imaginative possibilities embedded in this 'female space of childbirth'..."²¹²

²⁰⁶ Hays, "Trauma, Remembrance, and Healing," 193.

²⁰⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 65.

²⁰⁸ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 65.

²⁰⁹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 65.

²¹⁰ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 76.

²¹¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 65.

²¹² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 65.

With the idea that this image represents an intimate relationship between God and God's people, birth-giving women can understand it as a God who as a Midwife, and with hands touches and assists in childbirth.

In her discussion of Psalm 22, Claassens notes how verses 9-10 is "marked by personal, intimate language and describes the psalmist's experience of God being present from the moment she drew her first breath."²¹³ In addition, she remarks how the psalmist addressed God by saying "you", meaning that "God was the one who assisted at her birth, who drew her out of her mother's womb and who kept her safe on her mother's breasts."²¹⁴ Bergmann states how in Ps 22, "descriptions of crisis are interchanged with expressions of trust that [God] will end or turn around the crisis."²¹⁵ Here, I suggest that birth-giving women understand the crisis as being an actual childbirth. Claassens directly speaks of birth when she remarks how "the mother and child would die"²¹⁶ if the child remains in the mother's womb. It is also fitting how she further argues that a midwife "fulfills an important function in those moments when death and life intersect."²¹⁷ These birth-giving women who experience that the birth does not naturally proceed as it should, now depend on others to help them bring forth the life of their child. According to Claassens, Psalm 71 "... offers the reader an opportunity to reflect on how one may go about creating a viable self in the midst of those situations of an extreme vulnerability when the believer has to come to terms with the limitations of one's situation."²¹⁸ In this regard, the image of God as Midwife then, as Claassens puts it, "... presents us with the opportunity to reenvision or reimagine the conventional understanding of God as the One who delivers,"²¹⁹ where I argue can be in the actual context of childbirth.

In terms of the image of a God as the Midwife who Delivers both the mother and the child in childbirth, I notice how Claassens discusses the verbs used to describe God's act of deliverance in the role of a Midwife in Psalm 22:10 and 71:6. The word *gwh* in Psalm 71:6, is according to Claassens a reference to the action of "pulling a baby from its mother's

²¹³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 72.

²¹⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 72.

²¹⁵ Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 155.

²¹⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 73.

²¹⁷ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 73.

²¹⁸ Claassens, "Praying from the Depths of the Deep", 763.

²¹⁹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 71.

womb.”²²⁰ More crucially is her statement that the verb in Psalm 71:6 used to describe God freeing the baby from the mother’s womb is “an uncertain term that may be derive from the root *gzh* (to “cut off/sever”), which suggests that God *cut* the baby from its mother’s womb. She suggests that “the language of ‘severing’ or ‘cutting loose’ may explain the duties of a midwife who, in a situation where both mother and baby would otherwise die for certain, cuts open the mother’s womb to free the baby.”²²¹ Claassens makes it clear that this is not a reading that everyone approves of, and that the language “... describing God’s involvement at birth is ambiguous”, yet “all of the main translations follow the interpretation of God taking or freeing the newborn baby from the womb.”²²² In her article on God as Midwife, she says, “... the fact that God is depicted as the savior who can powerfully step in and deliver the baby does not take away the agency of the mother.”²²³ She further adds, referring to an actual childbirth that “the mother still has to do the work to bring the baby into the world, moving the baby from darkness into light, from death into life.”²²⁴

It must be stated that Claassens’ understanding of the midwife’s action of severing the womb, implies the death of the mother.²²⁵ However, I dare to suggest that her discussion here still opens the possibility for implied readers who are birth-giving women to engage with a biblical text that narrates not just a childbirth, but a cesarean birth where God still acts, but through the role of a midwife. Bergmann argues that “it has not yet been proven conclusively that cesarean sections were performed in the ancient Israel”²²⁶ In addition, Bergmann argues that “where God ‘cuts’ the child out of the mother [...] most likely refers to the severing of the umbilical cord.”²²⁷ However, Bergmann also says that it really is not clear in Ps. 22 how God precisely pulls the child from the womb. I believe that regardless of whether we can know for sure if cesarean sections were performed in the ancient Israel or not, this interpretation of the Ps. 22 at least allows the assumption, and thus for birth-giving women provides a description of such births. Most importantly, Claassens argument that God is

²²⁰ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 75.

²²¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 75.

²²² L. Juliana Claassens, "Praying from the Depths of the Deep: Remembering the Image of God as Midwife in Psalm 71." *Review and Expositor* (Berne) 104, no. 4 (2007): 768.

²²³ Claassens, "Praying from the Depths of the Deep," 770.

²²⁴ Claassens, "Praying from the Depths of the Deep," 770.

²²⁵ Claassens, "Praying from the Depths of the Deep," 771.

²²⁶ Claudia D. Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis : Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI, 1-18* Bd. 382 (2008): X, 267.

²²⁷ Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 154.

portrayed as the Midwife suggests that God takes part in this type of childbirth as well, which is crucial considering that 1 in 3 women end up with a cesarian birth.

My next observation is Claassens' argument that "[Ps. 71 and Ps. 22] express feelings of torment and pain so compellingly that they have continued to capture the experiences of people traumatized by personal and corporeal tragedies."²²⁸ Although she explains how these psalms convey prayers "not only of individuals but also for the community as a whole", she also states how this "communal application of the psalms does not nullify the validity of the prayer for the individual speaker who identifies his/her own well-being..."²²⁹ The words "torment and pain" can for a birth-giving woman easily be understood to describe a traumatic childbirth. It must be said, however, that not all women experience childbirth as either traumatic, difficult, or painful, but then again, I argue that the implied readers of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* are birth-giving women who have experienced trauma related to childbirth.

In terms of how Claassens mentions and also discusses Psalm 22, it is interesting how Bergmann says that v.15-16 "describes the feelings and the physical reactions of the person in crisis through images of weakness and exhaustion."²³⁰ Although I do not want to use the word "weakness" to describe childbirth, labor often leads women to a state of mental and physical exhaustion. In addition, not being able to birth vaginally might feel like a sign of weakness. To birth-giving women then, Psalm 22 can to some degree can put this into words the mental of physical state in a childbirth. To put it differently, Claassens' discussion of Psalm 22, and how it can be read through the lens of trauma, provides birth-giving women a way to read it as a description of a traumatic childbirth.

According to Claassens, the female image of a midwife "... intriguing interpretive possibilities for God's deliverance in contemporary situations of severe trauma."²³¹ She argues that "the midwives' unflinching dedication to labor with mother to bring children into the world and the intimate connection between mother and midwife offer us a lens through which to view the larger story of deliverance in the book of Exodus."²³² I argue, however, that Claassens' focus midwifery can provide birth-giving women an alternative way to

²²⁸ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 66.

²²⁹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 66.

²³⁰ Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 156.

²³¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 68.

²³² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 69.

imagine God's act of deliverance in the context of childbirth, and to "view the Deliverer God who saves [the birth-giving women and child] from debilitating circumstances"²³³ Still in our contemporary time, midwives play an essential role in childbirth, and they do everything in their power to preserve the life of both the mother and the child, and thus it is fitting how Claassens refers to Exod. Rabbah 1:15: "We will keep them alive in any way we can."²³⁴ Claassens' mention of women who are both mothers and surrogate mothers, "united by the overall objective of preserving life,"²³⁵ can remind birth-giving mothers about the dedication, and the presence of a God, who through these images of midwives are committed to preserve life.

Although it is true that sometimes a childbirth progresses into a life-threatening situation where either the mother, the child or both dies. Today, this usually is not the normal outcome, but it too often is the reality in a context where the mothers do not have the access to necessary medical care. How can birth-giving women then understand and accept an image of a Deliverer God in the role of a midwife? Claassens clearly states that "this divine portrayal does not offer a magic cure"²³⁶, and in the book *God and Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Tribble says the following about a midwife's role:

Similarly, God is present as deliverer when the believer is in despair. Just as the midwife does not offer a magic cure nor does God, and the believer converts despair and pleas into internal persuasion to struggle through delivery with the assistance of God.²³⁷

How I understand Tribble here is that an image of God as the Midwife does not necessarily mean that God automatically assures that a childbirth is successful. Rather, God as a Midwife is this intimate image of "God and [the birth-giving woman who] both have agency in the struggle of deliverance."²³⁸ In terms of understanding God as assisting the birth-giving woman, Claassens says how the image of God as a Midwife assisting a woman in labor also "reverses death and denotes an unflinching commitment to life' on the part of God and believers."²³⁹ Fischer, however, states how midwives in the context of childbirth "obtain the

²³³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 68.

²³⁴ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 70.

²³⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 70.

²³⁶ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 73.

²³⁷ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Overtures to Biblical Theology. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978, 68.

²³⁸ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 68.

²³⁹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 68.

support of the God who is on the side of all these subversive women.”²⁴⁰ There are obviously different angles to the understanding of God and the role of a midwife. To Tribble and Claassens, God *is* the Midwife, but to Fischer, God support the midwives. However, what is important to birth-giving women is the image of a delivering God who is present in childbirth, through the roles of midwives.

In 2007, five years before publishing *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, Claassens published the article “Praying from the Depths of the Deep: Remembering the Image of God as Midwife in Psalm 71” where she argues that “the key image in the psalm that transform it into a redemptive hope is the image of God as midwife in verse 6,” and that just as a midwife “God acts to bring forth life even in the midst of pain — even when the mother may suffer death.”²⁴¹ A last observation to remark is thus when Claassens refers to Karen Baker-Fletcher who says that “‘truth and reconciliation’ or deliverance and healing is a process.”²⁴² Claassens argues how these psalms provides readers with “a remarkable glimpse of a long and winding journey through pain on the way to healing.”²⁴³ If I understand her correctly, she does not only discuss how these psalms express or put into words feelings of suffering and pain, but also how these psalms reflect deliverance, and hope for the future. It is therefore fitting how she says how “praying to God as midwife evokes this emphasis on life, and particularly life after one has looked death into the eye as suggested by the experience of finding oneself in the depths of the deep.”²⁴⁴

3.7 Birth-giving women and the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts

3.7.1 Introduction

In her dissertation *The God Who Provides: Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment*, Claassens explains how we are challenged with the patriarchal nature of the text, and that several feminist theologians question whether “biblical traditions can be reclaimed and reinterpreted for women.”²⁴⁵ One of the “revisionary and compensatory”²⁴⁶ approaches are to reclaim

²⁴⁰ Irmtraud Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled with God : Biblical Stories of Israel's Beginnings*, Colledgeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2005, 122.

²⁴¹ L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Praying from the Depths of the Deep: Remembering the Image of God as Midwife in Psalm 71," *Review and Expositor (Berne)* 104, no. 4 (2007): 761.

²⁴² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 66.

²⁴³ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 68.

²⁴⁴ Claassens, "Praying from the Depths of the Deep", 768.

²⁴⁵ L. Juliana M. Claassens, *The God Who Provides : Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004, xviii.

²⁴⁶ Claassens, *The God Who Provides*, xviii.

female imagery of God, which Claassens does both in her dissertation and of course in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*. In terms of how I argue that biblical texts to some degree can put into words the experience of a traumatic birth as well as portray God as Midwife, I too cannot ignore the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts that we engage with in Claassens' *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*.

3.7.2 Childbirth – a woman's experience

I have argued how both Claassens' own reflections as well as biblical texts from the Old Testament to some degree can put into words the trauma of birth, a trauma which is a woman's experience. However, not everyone would agree with me on this, as there are many ways to rather criticize how the Bible lacks adequate descriptions of the trauma of childbirth. For example, Alice Bach makes an important point that "literary feminists studying the ancient world have struggled with the difficulties of reading male-authored texts" as they obviously do not "provide access to women's inner thoughts"²⁴⁷

In her article "The Rhetorical Function of the Woman in Labor Metaphor in Jeremiah 30-31: Trauma, Gender and Postcolonial Perspectives", Claassens states how female experience of the pain in childbirth "is employed to describe people's dear and anguish in the face of the Babylonian invasion."²⁴⁸ In other words, one must question how a birth-giving woman can find comfort in biblical texts that although they speak of childbirth, most likely are written by male authors who simply cannot fathom the nature of being pregnant and birthing a child. In addition, Claassens says that "one could argue that this is a largely male construction of the birth process — the female experience of giving birth co-opted to describe the effects of war."²⁴⁹ She also remarks how women throughout the ages have experienced childbirth as a something powerful, something which seems "lost in the prophet's application of this metaphor."²⁵⁰ However, in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, Claassens illustrates how the metaphor of a woman in labor symbolizes new life, rather than death and destruction. In this regard, I also want to mention the article "Mothers of a Nation: How Motherhood and Religion Intermingle in the Hebrew Bible" where Bergmann is rather critical to how human experiences of conception, pregnancy, childbirth "regularly [are] utilized in metaphorical or

²⁴⁷ Bach, "GOOD TO THE LAST DROP," 29.

²⁴⁸ L. Juliana Claassens, "The Rhetorical Function of the Woman in Labor Metaphor in Jeremiah 30-31: Trauma, Gender and Postcolonial Perspectives," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 150 (2014): 67.

²⁴⁹ Claassens, "The Rhetorical Function of the Woman in Labor Metaphor in Jeremiah 30-31," 71.

²⁵⁰ Claassens, "The Rhetorical Function of the Woman in Labor Metaphor in Jeremiah 30-31," 71.

symbolic language”²⁵¹ Bergmann emphasizes that human experiences of conception, pregnancy, childbirth are “truly ‘human experiences’ and ‘events’ [that] influence and change the lives of individual mothers”²⁵² But according to Bergmann, “details about the mother’s physical health and emotional state are rare, as the goal of the texts is not to describe actual pregnancies or occasions of childbirth but the early development of a people”²⁵³ Although Bergmann might be right that the goal is not to describe an actual childbirth, but I suggest that biblical texts, despite their lack of details, to some degree can describe a traumatic childbirth. Further, Bergmann argues that since the biblical texts are “developed by the authors of this authoritative text,” they are not a description of the actual feelings and experiences that mothers (as well as fathers, children and siblings).²⁵⁴

According to Bergmann, the Old Testament clearly lacks descriptions of emotions such as those “after a failed attempt to become pregnant, or of the pleasures and discomforts experienced during pregnancy, or the pain of childbirth, or the hopes of the women bearing children for their own futures...”²⁵⁵ To Bergmann, the actual perspectives of mothers in the Hebrew Bible are absent, and “all that is left is the voice of the authors, who might have a certain and often distant knowledge about actual childbirth and motherhood, but who use these human experiences for their own literary purposes.”²⁵⁶ Bach, however, argues how “*reading as a woman* allows, the subversion of male doubling and allows the figured woman in the text to communicate with a feminist reader.”²⁵⁷ In terms of the “figured woman” in the biblical texts that Claassens engage with, I argue that these women (namely God as Mourner, Mother, Midwife) can, although not necessarily characters explicitly *mentioned*, be *imagined* in the biblical texts. This way, the biblical texts can, as Claassens says in *The God Who Provides*, “create a meaning that allows for women’s experience”²⁵⁸ after all.

²⁵¹ Claudia D. Bergmann, "Mothers of a Nation: How Motherhood and Religion Intermingle in the Hebrew Bible," *Open Theology* 6, no. 1 (2020): 132.

²⁵² Bergmann, "Mothers of a Nation," 132.

²⁵³ Bergmann, "Mothers of a Nation," 135.

²⁵⁴ Bergmann, "Mothers of a Nation," 132.

²⁵⁵ Bergmann, "Mothers of a Nation," 132-133.

²⁵⁶ Bergmann, "Mothers of a Nation," 132-133.

²⁵⁷ Alice Bach, “GOOD TO THE LAST DROP: VIEWING THE SOTAH (NUMBERS 5.11-31) AS THE GLASS HALF EMPTY AND WONDERING HOW TO VIEW IT HALFS FULL,” in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, Red. Exum, J. Cheryl and David J.A. Clines, 30.

²⁵⁸ Claassens, *The God Who Provides*, xviii.

4.0 Conclusion

4.1 Summary of analysis

In this thesis, I have discussed the question, “To what degree can birth-giving women be understood as implied readers of Juliana Claassens’ monograph *Mourner, Mother, Midwife?*” I have argued how Claassens’ in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* with her own reflections as well as mentioned biblical texts from the Old Testament speak to a woman’s context of trauma in childbirth. Mourning, mothering, and midwifery are all themes that relate to childbirth, and I have aimed to demonstrate how the portrayal of God in these roles can provide birth-giving women a way to reclaim God’s delivering presence in the trauma of childbirth.

In the first part of my analysis, I discussed Claassens’ chapter on God as Mourner. Claassens discusses how biblical texts from the book of Jeremiah provides an alternative way to portray the Deliverer God, and that the tears of a Mourner or Wailing Woman that “join the tears of God”²⁵⁹ symbolize hope in a situation that otherwise seems hopeless.²⁶⁰ Here, I argued how the raw descriptions of suffering and pain in the texts from Jeremiah, as well Claassens’ own reflections on these texts to some degree can put into words the experience of trauma in childbirth. I also discussed how the exploration of God’s role as a Wailing Women can give birth-giving women the idea that God as Deliverer is present in childbirth, and acts through the actions of people that surround birth-giving women in childbirth. Finally, I argued that Claassens’ discussion on tears can give birth-giving women the idea of how tears of God’s compassion can lead towards healing.²⁶¹

In the second part of my analysis I discussed Claassens’ chapter on God as Mother, where she illustrates how maternal metaphors such as God as Mother in Labor and God as Nurturing Mother draw on values of comfort and care that can provide readers a new imagery of the Deliverer God.²⁶² Based on Claassens’ reflections on these two maternal images, I argued how her discussion on God compared to a woman in labor can provide birth-giving women a narrative of how powerful, yet vulnerable childbirth is. In addition, when Claassens

²⁵⁹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 20.

²⁶⁰ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 20, 81.

²⁶¹ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 36.

²⁶² Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 16.

says that God portrayed as a woman in childbirth can be understood as God stepping into a person's pain, I argued that this image precisely can be understood as God entering the pain of a woman who gives birth. Lastly in this part of my analysis, I argued that Claassens' focus on a "God as the ideal mother who will never forget or abandoned her children" speaks to birth-giving women who experience some sort of loss. Should a mother's love fail, God is reliable still.²⁶³ Instead of feeling abandoned during a traumatic childbirth, I argue how Claassens' analysis can offer birth-giving women comfort in the image of God as Nurturing Mother, who never abandons her or the child.

In the third part of my analysis, I analyzed Claassens' reflections on Ps. 22:9-10 and 71:6 that portray God as Midwife. I first argued how and reflect a person's struggle to cope with severe pain. I also discussed how Claassens' argument that "both God and the believer have agency in the struggle of deliverance"²⁶⁴ speaks about a relationship between a birth-giving woman and God as Midwife in the face of trauma in childbirth. In addition, I argued how during a life-death situation. God as Midwife has the role of the preserving the life of the mother and the child, by freeing the baby from the womb. Lastly, I considered the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts, which I argue have the potential to put into words the trauma of childbirth.

4.2 Birth-giving women as implied readers of *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*

As mentioned earlier, Claassens explains how she hopes her monograph can be a resource within pastoral care, education, the congregation and in worship. From what I understand here, Claassens' monograph *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* clearly has a targeted audience of readers in mind, thus why I have used the term 'intended reader' for this group of readers. By engaging with biblical texts through the lenses of trauma theory, it is no doubt that Claassens' monograph encourages readers to expand their understanding of a Deliverer God in suffering, trauma and in healing. As mentioned before, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* speaks to different type of readers, not only those I have discussed in this thesis.

Claassens and Garber claim that "when the inexpressibility of trauma joins itself to the inexpressibility of the character and nature of God, the crisis for a survivor of faith becomes

²⁶³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is : The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Twenty-fifth Anniversary ed. Place of Publication Not Identified: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2017, 105.

²⁶⁴ Thompson, "L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament*," 48.

even more acute.”²⁶⁵ Trauma and suffering happen to all human beings, and thus are we all in need for recovery and healing from it. As mentioned earlier, it is true that people who “... frame their understanding of life through religious language cannot escape articulating their experiences through this language”²⁶⁶ In face of trauma, people of faith will naturally search for biblical texts than in a way that not only can put into words the event of trauma but speak of a God that is present in the midst of it. In my thesis, the context of trauma has been contextualized as childbirth. I could not ignore the fact that Claassens specifically named her book “mourner, mother, midwife”, which I believe all play a role in childbirth. Since Claassens’ subtitle of the book reads “Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament”, I also believe that birth-giving women can long for the presence of a Deliverer God in the trauma of childbirth. After all, it cannot ignore that 1 in 3 women experience childbirth as a traumatic event.²⁶⁷ In terms of how we then engage with the metaphors of God as Mourner, Mother, and Midwife through the lens of trauma, we must reconsider the perspective of birth-giving women of faith who experience birth as traumatic. It is true that by understanding a how a Deliverer God is present in these metaphors, biblical texts from the Old Testament certainly can put into words not only the experience of trauma, but provide words to begin the journey of recovery and healing. My belief is that Claassens’ monograph *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* awakens new ideas in the direction of how birth-giving women can rediscover God’s presence in the trauma of childbirth.

Claassens refers to Keshgegian, who suggests that “women’s experiences of embodiment, of being pregnant, giving birth, nursing, and raising children can be fruitfully appropriated to portray an awareness of God’s presence and personal involvement in people’s lives.”²⁶⁸ Although Claassens clearly speaks to readers that are birth-giving women, she never states that *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* targets readers that are birth-giving women. I, however, have discussed how birth-giving women still can be understood to be the implied readers of Claassens’ book. I have attempted reclaim the use of maternal metaphors of birth and connect it back to the context of childbirth. Bergmann might be right in saying that “biblical texts do not contain many descriptions of birth and are not interested in portraying detailed birth

²⁶⁵ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*,

²⁶⁶ Claassens & Garber Land, "First Words ... Faith Facing Trauma," 188.

²⁶⁷ Rachel Reed, Rachael Sharman, and Christian Inglis, "Women's Descriptions of Childbirth Trauma Relating to Care Provider Actions and Interactions," *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 17, no. 1 (2017): 21.

²⁶⁸ Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 83.

narratives.”²⁶⁹ But on the other side, authors of the Old Testament clearly “were familiar with the motifs and images associated with giving birth and used them almost exclusively as a metaphor describing crisis.”²⁷⁰ With that being said, crisis is also trauma, and childbirth can also be an event of trauma. For birth-giving women, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* is a good place to start when searching for a Deliverer God in the midst of trauma in childbirth, and when in search for biblical texts that has the potential to into words that event of trauma. Hopefully, in reading *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, birth-giving women can rediscover the presence of a Deliverer God. After all, “God is responsible for conception, pregnancy, and birth; he opens and closes the womb (cf. 1 Sam 1:5; Gen 16:2; 29:31; 30:22; Isa 66:9).”²⁷¹ And also as Tribble says it, “... God conceives, is pregnant, writhes in labor pains, brings forth a child, and nurses it. With reticence characteristic of the poetic mode, such language expands, broadens, and deepens our understanding of the biblical God.”²⁷²

²⁶⁹ Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 220.

²⁷⁰ Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 220.

²⁷¹ Luise Schottroff, Marie-Theres Wacker and Lisa E. Dahill, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation : A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2012, 250.

²⁷² Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 69.

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