



Anthology

Mission over  
– the journey home  
– From PTSD to moral injury

Published by The Swedish Soldiers Homes Association in 2024  
First published in Swedish 2022  
Translation: Anita Shenoj  
For further information: [www.soldathem.org](http://www.soldathem.org)  
Email: [info@soldathem.org](mailto:info@soldathem.org)

    @soldathem and @veterankort

Publisher: Andreas Philipsson  
Editor: Louise Weibull  
Design: Rebecka Hellqvist  
Cover image: Getty Images  
Printer: Trydells AB, Laholm 2024

# Foreword

“THEY CHANGE THEIR SKY, NOT THEIR SOUL, WHO RUSH ACROSS THE SEA”

*Caelum, non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt*

Horace (65–8 BC), The Epistles, Book I, Epistle XI:27

The above quote from Horace aptly emphasises that, no matter *where we are, we are who we are*, taking with us the experiences we’ve had as individuals over the course of our lives. We do, however, always come home as someone ‘different’ to who we would have been, had we stayed at home.

This collection of articles, entitled *Mission over – the journey home*, is part of an anthology on post-traumatic stress and moral injury, published by The Swedish Soldiers Homes Association (Svenska Soldathemsförbundet) in 2022. However, since then, the foundation on which we could envisage probable scenarios in our time, has been re-cast. Russia’s aggressive war on the

Ukraine is now in its third year. The Hamas attack on Israel, and Israel’s subsequent reprisal, have created a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. In short, the issue of moral injury has become topical in a way that most of us could not have imagined in our worst nightmares. What we do know is that it will probably take generations for this injury to heal. Hopefully, for those affected, a small step on the way to recovery is the insight that they are far from alone in experiencing difficulties such as these.

*Stockholm 24 August, 2024*



Photo: Marcoianna3/Pixabay

# The burden of the Ringbearer – Frodo Baggins and readaptation

BY: LISA MOBRAND

**Since its cinematisation in the early 2000s, The Lord of The Rings and the story of Frodo Baggins have become public property in popular culture. Most of us know the main gist of the story about the little hobbit, Frodo, who lives in an idyllic part of Middle Earth. Gandalf the wizard gives him the impossible task of taking the omnipotent ring into enemy territory in order to destroy it in the volcanic fires of Mount Doom, all to prevent Sauron, who once forged the ring to enslave people, from repossessing it.**

**F**rodo is an orphan. He inherited the ring from his uncle, Bilbo, who many years ago had won it (or actually stole it) from a creature called Gollum. Gollum was once an ordinary hobbit. But the ring has its own evil will that corrupts anyone wearing it for too long and Gollum has now shrunk and turned into a terrible creature. Even Bilbo starts to be affected by the destructive qualities of the ring.

In the background, Sauron is getting ready for a great war, and battles are being fought one after the other in pursuit of the ring while Frodo and Sam secretly journey to Mount Doom in the heart of enemy territory, with Gollum as their unexpected companion. Against all odds, they reach their goal. So Frodo stands there at the precipice, ready to throw the ring down into the chasm. But he is so broken down and changed by his experiences that he finds himself unable to part with it. The entire journey appears to have been in vain. Then, Gollum makes one last attempt to snatch the ring and in the struggle that follows, he falls down into the fire, ring and all. So the ring is destroyed but seemingly by coincidence. After this destruction, Sauron's empire falls and the war ends but the world has changed. The elves – those immortal and wise creatures – do not want to stay here in this new era. And when Frodo and his friends return to their home, the Shire, which they hoped would be spared the troubles of this world, they find war has arrived here too. They have to force out the intruders before peace can be restored.

For Sam, things finally turn out the way he wanted – he gets the wife of his dreams and lives a long life. For Frodo the story is different. He can live in the Shire no longer, as the things he’s experienced have changed him so much, he cannot find peace. Frodo is offered the opportunity to accompany the elves on their last voyage from the grey havens to their paradise of Valinor. The trilogy ends with Frodo the Ringbearer boarding a vessel which will take him away from everything he has once known and fought for but which no longer brings him happiness.<sup>1</sup>

With the centenary of WWI in 2019, there was much scholarly examination of JRR Tolkien’s personal experiences of war and how they influenced his work. Tolkien was a veteran of ‘The Great War’, which had been industrialised on a much greater scale than any war before it – something that can be seen in the way Tolkien describes the advance of the evil orcs.

Due to injury, Tolkien was repatriated early and spent a long time in hospital. But neither Tolkien himself nor later researchers have given any clear answers as to how much of his injury was physical, or the effects of PTSD. This was partly because the very concept of PTSD was merely in its infancy at the time of World War I.

Although the actual phenomenon had already been described in classical literature, it had been understood differently throughout world history depending on the prevailing view of humanity, soldier ideals and knowledge of the human psyche. Even at the beginning of World War I, the symptoms were still viewed as moral

weakness, or quite simply cowardice, and there were cases of soldiers being executed or disciplined as a consequence of symptoms that we now would classify as trauma.

By the end of World War I, there was much greater understanding of trauma and its effects on the psyche, but in the public consciousness, the tendency to judge it as ‘weakness’ sometimes persisted. On a few occasions, Tolkien himself had to defend Frodo’s failure at Mount Doom to readers who felt that Frodo should have been executed for cowardice. This was no doubt extremely painful for someone who had struggled with this issue himself.

Through the lens of more recent knowledge, it is easier to see and understand the description of Frodo’s homecoming in *The Lord of The Rings* as a story about someone who has brought the war back with him in his soul, and for this reason cannot find peace in the idyll he first ventured out to save. The concept of PTSD has already been eruditely illustrated in relation to the Ring trilogy and Frodo’s plight.<sup>2</sup> Without making light of this – rather, with a desire to add existential and spiritual dimensions to the veteran experience – it is also clear that much of what is said of Frodo and his homecoming can be understood as a story of an individual’s moral injury<sup>3</sup> and failure to readapt as a consequence.

In addition to seeing Tolkien as a war veteran, we must also have an understanding of his outlook on life. He was a deeply religious and conservative Catholic, who, for example, rejected churches that held services

in the language of the people instead of Latin. To our secular modern minds, this may appear to be a peculiar biographical anecdote, but it is also revealing of someone with a categorical view of the world and morals. Such a view could be supportive in securing a foothold when life was uncertain but also shake one's perception of self to the very foundations in situations of war and conflict, when hard decision-making and personal shortcomings inevitably come to the fore.

For Tolkien personally, there was trauma in the fact that his unit suffered extensive losses after he had left the war to be cared for in hospital – something that is usually referred to as 'survivors guilt'. Feelings of guilt and shame can be difficult to express and cannot be treated easily without an understanding of the existential perspective.

A strong and categorical sense of morals cannot simply be developed through a religious or political upbringing – it is also part and parcel of classic military training, as the military are expected to have to make clear decisions in difficult situations. In many ways, this strictness can be supportive, but it can also generate a feeling that the world is much simpler and clear cut than it really is.

If there is always a clear answer as to what one should do, mistakes can also be considered the consequence of personal failings. Many veterans have described experiencing a heavy sense of failure in situations they actually had no control over, a phenomenon that is sometimes referred to as 'moral luck'.

In a chaotic existence, feeling in control may be

the thing that keeps you together, but it can also be the final straw for someone who feels they're losing it. Gandalf the wizard regards Frodo as most suitable for the task of ringbearer because he is a simple and honest creature. As the ring corrupts its bearer, the task must be carried out by someone who is not interested in power and glory. In many ways, this is a healthy portrayal of good leadership – to appoint a leader driven by ideals and principles rather than ambition. But there is also a risk that these ideals have arisen in a context where they have rarely been tested and will therefore be difficult to uphold in the moral grey zone associated with conflict.

Frodo lives in an idyll, where difficult choices rarely have to be made, and in this idyll it is easy to have strong principles. He actually has no experience or training for war or hard times, so when he is tested and sees the darker aspects of himself, he is frightened and ashamed of them. He finds it difficult to forgive himself.

The underlying feel to the Lord of the Rings is one of an era coming to its end. The elves, with their refined culture and sophistication, are about to leave Middle Earth to make way for humans – a more warlike and self-interested race. It is reasonable to interpret the undercurrents in this trilogy as an expression of Tolkien's political and religious conservatism but in terms of re-adaptation difficulties, one might also wonder how much is a deeply personal reflection on becoming disenchanted with the world due to his experiences. This is something described by some veterans abroad. They find it difficult to find joy in things the way they used to

because, even if they see beauty, it feels fragile and threatened. Due to all they've lived through or done, they sometimes no longer feel worthy of inclusion in society – that their very existence will sully what is pure. Through their sacrifice they have undoubtedly saved the world, but they are no longer welcome in it.

This feeling is difficult to grasp in purely clinical terms, as it encompasses ritual and theological concepts such as dignity and purity. In many philosophies of life there is the concept of atonement, whereby an erring individual is restored to their community – as it is in Catholicism – but for Frodo in our story this idea does not appear to exist. Instead there is a sense of being forsaken, something he has in common with many veterans. Only by leaving the world can he heal it, which is in many ways a scary thought from the veteran perspective.

Why did Frodo finally end up in the grey havens, outside of society? And how did Sam, who made the same journey to Mordor and back, manage it? Why are some able to bounce back while others fall apart? This question is of great interest in psychological research and also important in observing the phenomenon of readaptation and moral injury.

One key to understanding may be to see the ring as representing leadership under difficult circumstances. The ring imbues the wearer with power, but no tools with which to manage it. The ring stirs up ambitions, but gives no guidance as to how to sensibly keep them in check. When Frodo accepts responsibility for the ring, it is with limited knowledge of the bigger picture

– he simply has a sense of being the chosen one.

First, he is given a task that is difficult in itself, that of taking the ring to the elves. From the moment he arrives, he suffers his first injury that will torture him for the rest of the journey. And when he thinks his journey is over, he realises it has only just begun. The group that has been assembled to assist him are split up in dramatic circumstances and one of its members tries to take the ring with force. Frodo loses faith in a person he has respected; his friends are taken prisoner and he doesn't know what has happened to them. With all previous plans dashed, Sam and Frodo must continue the journey by themselves on foot. The burden of responsibility continues to grow without Frodo really having any opportunity to adapt.

Why is Frodo's friend Sam able to readapt? Research has increasingly turned to the concept of resilience to examine what enables people to manage difficult situations, to identify health factors and to prevent problems further down the line. How has Sam built resilience? We can pinpoint a number of things that all have to do with context and meaningfulness.

Sam has something to return to and something to long for. He has his father, who he thinks about all the time, and he has his dream for the future, of being worthy of his love, Rosie. He has a before and an after which is his guiding light in times of difficulty. During the journey, he tries to re-create a sense of comfort by cooking food that reminds him of home, even though the elves have given them ample provisions. Sam also





*Photo: Sqback /Istock*

has a level-headed attitude to his assignment, which is not to save the world but to help Frodo and make sure he is able to complete his mission.

In contrast, Frodo has an empty home to come back to. He may have inherited Bilbo's riches, but he lacks a social safety net because Bilbo has moved to the Elven realms to recover from the influences of the ring. Right from the beginning of the story, it is clear that Frodo is not really at home in the Shire. He has always had a great ambition to set out on an adventure, like Bilbo. His friendship with Sam is hierarchical – Sam is his gardener, while Frodo is the lone hero with the big mission. There really is no before and after for Frodo, no everyday life to be a part of, even if he loves the people of the Shire and is prepared to die for them.

American research has highlighted that veterans who do not have PTSD but still have difficulty in readjusting are often lacking something to come home to. At the time when the Swedish Armed Forces were directly recruiting soldiers for international missions, there was no proper follow-up of what awaited them when they got back. In the worst cases, it could mean the veterans did not even have a permanent address or a job. If, on top of that, they had some kind of traumatic experience, it would be even harder to regain a foothold in a society with no obvious place for them. This is why support from relatives and the home context are important in veteran support, not only to help those staying at home but also to give those dispatched on mission some security to return to.

Part of the moral injury that many veterans speak

about concerns not only the bad deeds they have seen others commit but also the psychological break down that comes from feeling complicit. In particular, those who have been involved with mentoring and liaison say how demoralising it can be to have to work with people you have little confidence in or view as corrupt, and how sometimes, for pragmatic reasons, you stand powerless as a witness to things you would never keep quiet about at home (e.g. child and animal abuse). Leaders who have tried to teach and convey values or a particular view but not seen any progress eventually become disillusioned and have to lower their ambitions to prevent themselves from mental break down or even casting off their own morals.

After some time journeying towards Mount Doom, the hobbits notice they are being followed. It's Gollum, the previous owner of the ring who cannot bear to be without it. They capture Gollum and Frodo hopes to be able to rehabilitate him, perhaps because he sees his own future self in Gollum and refuses to accept the idea. So, on top of the impossible task of returning the ring, Frodo is now also taking on the task of turning Gollum into a hobbit again. Sam is reluctant but concedes, perhaps because he too understands Frodo's fear of becoming like Gollum himself.

What Frodo does is amazing, and he also comes quite far in retrieving Gollum's hobbit soul. But because Frodo is personally invested in this mission, so too his failure becomes a personal one. It would appear Gollum cannot be saved. How then can Frodo himself be freed from the power of the ring?

After this failure, which almost costs Frodo his life, Sam is forced to muster courage and take on more responsibility. He becomes ring bearer for a while, fights in battles and becomes a leader. But for Sam, this is simply a way of supporting Frodo, and he is not influenced by the power of the ring because he has no ambition to keep this power. As they make their way up the last bit to the Cracks of Doom, Sam has to carry Frodo to ensure he has the strength to execute his mission. But in the end, it is Frodo standing there with the ultimate responsibility to lead and decide – a lonely position that many military leaders describe as heavy and disheartening.

“If I make the wrong decision now, many will die.” How does it feel to fail at the crucial moment, and how do you live with that? Soldiers and officers who perceive themselves as having made the wrong decision or being unable to act in a difficult situation describe feeling ashamed for not ‘measuring up’. Sometimes, they may actually have done something wrong, but this sense of wrongdoing can also arise even in situations where there was no right way to act or a course of events that could not be foreseen or influenced.

In the context of training exercises, learning builds on the idea that the right behaviour can be learned. But simply doing the right thing does not always mean things will go well. Combat has parameters that no-one can be prepared for – coincidence, bad luck, unknown factors. And the risk of believing that if you are prepared, you will always survive equals not wanting to ac-

cept we cannot control everything. Sometimes you can do everything right but fail nonetheless.

Another aspect of moral injury is precisely this loss of our own moral compass and ability or courage to make good decisions. At the edge of the abyss, Frodo is so affected by the ring, he is unwilling to complete his task and wants to keep the ring for himself. When the ring is finally thrown into the Cracks of Doom, it is because Gollum has bitten it off Frodo’s finger and Gollum himself falls backwards with it into the abyss. Even if Tolkien personally saw it as fortuitous and not a freak accident, for Frodo, it must have still felt like that. His hand would bear a reminder for the rest of his life that when he hadn’t wanted to let the ring go, it had been violently taken from his finger – a physical scar of his great failure.

Once back in the Shire, Frodo’s restlessness is palpable. For him, home no longer exists. Yes, this is PTSD but also a feeling of having failed at his mission, even though the ring was destroyed at last. His big adventure had been one full of disappointment, grief and loss. Making simple decisions had been difficult. So when Frodo is asked if he wants to accompany the elves, the choice is an easy one. Just like them, he no longer feels at home in the world – the war wages on inside him. In some way, there is a happy ending in that he actually does find peace and rest, albeit in a different place.

Alas, in our reality, there are no Grey havens to escape to. For those who have had their view of the world

and morals shattered to the extent that they no longer have a place to call home healing must occur on several levels. Their trauma must be worked on, clinically and therapeutically, with different types of support. An inner process of reconciliation must also occur between the person they thought they were and the person they became in an impossible situation. Such reconciliation can occur in different ways, one of which may be in the language of drama or ritual.

A big thank you to Daniel Möller of the Swedish Tolkien podcast, *Tolkienpodden*, for his expert analysis of Tolkien's life and works.

## Notes

- 1 For more on Tolkien's work I recommend [www.theonering.net](http://www.theonering.net) or the Swedish podcast: <https://tolkienpodden.podbean.com/>
- 2 Some links about Tolkien, the war veteran and understanding Frodo as a war veteran with PTSD: <https://ajcarlisle.wordpress.com/tag/frodo-baggins-war-veteran/> , <https://angrystaffofficer.com/2016/03/25/tolkien-and-combatstress-writing-as-a-release/> or [http://greenbooks.theonering.net/guest/files/040102\\_02.html](http://greenbooks.theonering.net/guest/files/040102_02.html)
- 3 For a more in-depth description, see Louise Weibull's article, *Moral injury and PTSD*.

# The Odyssey – a veteran’s long journey home

BY: LOUISE WEIBULL

**What does the perilous adventure of Odysseus have to do with the war veterans of today? In his book, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (2003), the American researcher, psychiatrist, military advisor and expert on antiquity, Jonathan Shay, is convincing in his argument that Homer’s *Odyssey* is probably one of the earliest accounts of a war veteran’s attempt to come home, as well as being the most famous.**

In other words, Odysseus’ experiences on his epic voyage are far more reaching than his legendary encounters with cyclops, sirens and six-headed monsters. According to Shay, these should instead be interpreted as metaphors, dressed in literary garb to illustrate the issues associated with homecoming. Shay further comments that people who are not personally affected by these issues find the occasionally ironic allegories of the *Odyssey* entertaining.


Shay’s book, along with *The Odyssey*, are widely read and discussed in American veteran book clubs, and as such, are much appreciated sources of community in which to create meaning and promote self understanding. Below I refer to select portions of Shay’s overarching analysis, followed by his more or less literal account of the events in *The Odyssey*.

Shay starts by highlighting one important difference between then and now, namely that in antiquity, many relationships were not black or white. For example, a hero was not always someone of purely good character. The name Odysseus can be variously translated as ‘he who hates’ or ‘he who causes pain’. Even what we would now describe as overtly narcissistic character traits were neither unusual nor for that matter particularly problematic for an individual from a social perspective. The portrayal of both humans and gods was generally more complex in nature.

Shay consequently argues that Homer (or the group



*Photo: Viateur Beaulieu /Pixabay*



of authors writing under this name) was very well acquainted with the problems experienced by veterans, as he illustrates in the first part of his book, *Unhealed wounds*. This is also the largest of the three parts, focusing of course on Odysseus, the hero from the Trojan war, and ending with his famous trick, in which the Greeks bring a wooden horse full of soldiers inside the city walls of Troy. Then, as we know, Odysseus' journey home takes a very long time. According to Shay, this ties in with the psychological injuries he has incurred during the war.

In Shay's view, the fact that veterans often continue living in a state of combat readiness, mobilised to attack (or defend) even after the war has ended, is itself at the core of the problems they create for themselves and the people around them. However, they cannot simply switch this combat readiness off or replace it with a more civilian approach, even if purely intellectually they understand that this is exactly what they must do.

Another continually recurring theme is the distrust Odysseus feels for the people around him, from his commander Agamemnon (from whom he finally breaks free) to his nearest and dearest, with whom, after many ordeals, he is finally reunited. During the twenty years his wife Penelope has waited, their son Telemachus has grown up to be a young man. Odysseus is distant with both of them, and even treats Penelope with suspicion. In his relationship with his own father, his behaviour borders on cruel, writes Shay, who points out that it is

not unusual for veterans to be perceived as emotionally cold or reserved by loved ones.


Of course, there may be many reasons of this approach. Shay discusses this perceived insensitivity and bluntness as partly having to do with a more strategic emotional restraint and partly to do with an adaptation to the grief, pain and fear many veterans harbour. Both of these approaches are included in Shay's interpretation of Odysseus' actions.

Odysseus' psychological injuries are also an explanation for his poor judgement as a leader, exemplified many times in the course of *The Odyssey* and which we will elucidate. The great length of his journey home is partly due to his own shortcomings but also partly to events beyond his control, as he is simply a pawn in the game of the gods. Below is a short summary of the events in *The Odyssey*, illustrating the events Shay discusses in his book.

#### **Part 1–4**

#### **A home without husband or father**

For ten years now, Odysseus' wife Penelope and their son Telemachus have lived in the knowledge that the Trojan war is over and that Odysseus has managed to escape Troy with his life intact. But where is he? Penelope is still beautiful (and rich, if both her husband and son die) and she is now literally surrounded by throngs of ambitious and aggressive young men from the local



area, all who have settled into her and Odysseus' home on the island of Ithaca and are now competing for her hand in marriage. They not only woo her but also eat and drink from her table and amuse themselves with her chamber maids.

Penelope's suitors pressure her to choose one of them soon to replace her lost husband. Her son Telemachus has also grown up hearing many stories of his father's greatness, but these suitors are the only men on the scene these days. Desperate to find out whether he really has lost a parent, he leaves his mother to visit his father's friends on the mainland, who have already returned from Troy.

Later, Penelope's suitors secretly plan to get him killed on his way home, which would give them control over Odysseus' land and riches, once Penelope has made her choice amongst them.

### **Part 5–8**

#### **Odysseus starts his journey home**

Rather unflatteringly for Odysseus, we find him alive and compelled to the bed of the beautiful sea nymph Calypso on her distant island home of Ogygia, where Odysseus was shipwrecked. But the gods of Olympus tell her to let him go. Even if she is lovely and has been very kind to him, Odysseus has wearied of her after seven years and yearns for home. The problem is that he has lost all his men and his ship. Reluctantly, Calypso

helps him build a raft and he sets sail, only to be shipwrecked again and washed up on the island of Phaeacia.

The exhausted Odysseus eventually wakes up to the sound of Princess Nausicaa and her hand maids washing clothes on the seashore. Naked and in desperate need of help, Odysseus emerges from the undergrowth and begs Nausicaa for help. She gives him clothes to wear and then invites him to her parents' palace, where he soon enjoys their great hospitality.

At first, Odysseus does not reveal who he is. He enjoys the feasting at court, but when Demodocus the poet sings about the events of the Trojan war, Odysseus breaks down in tears. Although the courtiers are enjoying these narrative songs as entertainment, the king notices Odysseus' reaction and forces him to reveal his true identity.


Shay comments that Homer is not really portraying the king and his courtiers as insensitive – simply as limited in their perspective and incapable of offering Odysseus what his soul needs. Nevertheless, the king is sympathetic and does offer Odysseus support in material form, such as clothes and a ship, in order for him to continue his journey.

### **Part 9–12**

#### **Odysseus' account of his fantastic adventures**

Odysseus now reveals his identity to the Phaeacians but says nothing about Troy, despite his host enquiring if he





is grieving for his friends. Bizarrely, Odysseus explains that he is famed for his cunning and trickery, without actually saying anything more about what really happened – possibly to avoid the risk of his having a break down. He could have chosen to describe himself in meritorious terms because he is now a man of repute – the brains behind the Trojan horse – but he does not. However, Shay states that in other contexts Odysseus is boastful about his role in this very thing.

Odysseus' account starts with him and his men leaving Troy and plundering the island of Ismarus, from which they escape with great losses after the island's inhabitants counterattack. Why does Odysseus allow this to happen, wonders Shay. This action is one of numerous examples he gives of Odysseus' faulty leadership. Here he has lost control of his men, who have gotten drunk and are pillaging the city. Not only are his troops now at great risk, but their behaviour can hardly be called honourable. In Shay's view, Odysseus' weak leadership and his men's behaviour can be explained by the fact that they are still in a state of combat readiness.


The surviving men set sail but are blown off course to the land of the Lotus-eaters. The natives offer the men their delicious lotus, a narcotic, and soon the men fall into a state of bliss with no thought of returning home. In Shay's view, this episode highlights how close veterans can come to numbing their senses. Homer's main message here is that if you abuse drugs, you risk never coming home.

After dragging his men back on board, Odysseus sails off and lands on the island of Polyphemus the cyclops, where six of his men get eaten. Once again, Odysseus' leadership leaves much to be desired. Why even go and explore there, when the signs are clear that immediate escape is the better option? But this is part of the problem. Odysseus allows his own curiosity and attraction to danger to lead his men into Polyphemus' cave, with fatal results. Here the message concerns veterans' lingering attraction to danger – having to roll the dice occasionally, as many find civilian life hugely boring.

Odysseus has become someone who is reckless with his own life and the lives of others, while simultaneously having grand delusions about his own invincibility. Once in the cave, Odysseus could have escaped because the cyclops was not at home, but instead he waits for his return out of sheer curiosity. When Odysseus and his men finally do manage to escape – after Odysseus employs some of his famous cunning – he has also blinded Polyphemus. Since the cyclops just so happens to be the son of Poseidon, this action incurs the wrath of the sea god, making Odysseus' journey home even more difficult.

With his greatly depleted troops, Odysseus now drifts ashore an island ruled by King Aeolus, who has control of the sea winds. He gifts Odysseus with the bag of winds to assist him all the way home to Ithaca but once again a mishap prevents Odysseus from getting there, despite being so close.





After being blown off course again, he and his small group of surviving men arrive at what appears to be a peaceful island, but its inhabitants, the giant Laestrygonians, greet the fleet by pelting them with boulders, sinking all but Odysseus' own ship, which is a little further out to sea. Shay wonders why that is, highlighting this as another example of incompetence and catastrophic leadership. If Odysseus suspected danger (which was likely because he kept his own ship at a distance) why did he allow his men to proceed at all?

The terrified survivors flee the massacre and end up on an island inhabited by a beautiful sorceress, Circe. There she turns all the men into swine, apart from Odysseus, who has been given an antidote by the god Hermes. The portrayal of Odysseus' leadership gets more complex here, as we cannot really tell if his men are partially to blame for their plight. Eventually, Odysseus is able to overpower Circe and force her to reverse the spell on his men. She also gives him instructions on how to pass through the underworld, where he meets a number of dead souls, including his mother, Anticlea, who tells him she had died from grief awaiting his return, and his battle comrades, Achilles, Agamemnon and Ajax. The spirit of Tiresias tells Odysseus that no sooner has he returned home, he will have to set off again on one last challenge to appease Poseidon.

Odysseus returns to Circe for more instructions befo-


re managing to escape the sirens, the six-headed monster Scylla and the whirlpool, Charybdis. Finally, he and his small band of men reach the island of Thrinakia, where the sun god Helios grazes his cattle. Tiresias has warned Odysseus not to touch any of them, or his crew will be doomed. Strangely, Odysseus does not clearly convey this instruction to his men or tell them why it is so important. This failure results in Odysseus' men ignoring his recommendations and incurring the wrath of Helios, which, according to Shay, yet again emphasises Odysseus' guilt (at least partly) in the matter.

After Zeus wrecks Odysseus' ship in punishment, the last of his crew are dead and Odysseus is the sole survivor. He finds he has drifted back to the island of Ogygia, where he had spent time with Calypso several years before. According to Shay, this dragged out course of events illustrates the hopelessness that many veterans experience – that they forfeit their golden opportunity to make things 'right' and move on in their own strength. Instead, they continually find themselves back where they started.

### **Part 13–16**

#### **Father and son are reunited and return to Ithaca**

Back in the Phaeacian court, the king and queen are very impressed by Odysseus' truthful and honourable



account and bestow upon him a number of valuable gifts, as well as safe passage home to Ithaca.

Once there, Odysseus wakes up on the shore alone and disorientated. He finds himself unable to recognise the place. Just in time, Athena his protectress appears, disguised as a shepherd, and tells him where he is. Odysseus makes up a story about how he got to Ithaca, but Athena tells him she knows he is lying and reveals her true identity. She explains the dangerous situation that has arisen in his absence and warns him not to tell anyone about his return. For safety, Athena disguises Odysseus as an old beggar, and they make a plan to be rid of the suitors. Odysseus must seek refuge with his old swineherd, Eumaeus, rather than go home directly and Athena will tell Telemachus (Odysseus' son) to hurry back to Ithaca and to Eumaeus' hut, to avoid the ambush the suitors have planned for him.

Odysseus has not seen Eumaeus in over twenty years. Impressed by the swineherd's loyalty, Odysseus tells him his old master will soon return, but continues to lie about his identity. Eumaeus is keen to know more about his visitor, and Odysseus spins a yarn about the adventurous life of his beggar character, including that he has fought with Odysseus himself at Troy.

Once Telemachus arrives, father and son can finally be reunited. At first, Odysseus tests him and does not reveal who he is. But Athena intervenes again and transforms Odysseus into a more youthful version of himself, so he can now approach his son and tell him

the truth. Soon they start discussing plans to thwart the suitors who have taken over their house. According to Shay, the fact that Odysseus lies to Eumaeus and is reticent towards his son is an expression of lack of trust.


### **Part 17-20**

#### **A stranger in his own home**

Telemachus and Odysseus set off back to the manor separately. Still dressed as a beggar, Odysseus enters his former home, where his son is party to his pretence and invites him in hospitably. The suitors, on the other hand, behave like vile hooligans, and see Odysseus as a wretched beggar who they can humiliate in various ways, despite his now being embraced by the hospitality of the house, as is the custom. Over a hundred suitors are gathered, and Odysseus must carefully consider how he behaves to avoid being killed in his interactions with them.

Only his son knows his true identity. Given the large number of men who have previously turned up claiming to be Odysseus, it is very unlikely he will be believed.

Once the suitors have retired for the night, Odysseus stays up and finally gets an audience with Penelope under the pretext he has news of Odysseus. Both she and Telemachus have had their hopes raised and shattered multiple times. Since Athena is still protecting Odysseus with his disguise, Penelope does not recognise him.



However, someone who does is his old nurse Eurykleia, who notices an old scar on his leg as she is bathing his feet. Odysseus pulls her close and makes her swear not to reveal his identity.

In a way, Penelope also perhaps senses Odysseus has come home, as she has organised an archery contest for the next day: whoever wins will also win her hand. However, this is no ordinary archery contest. The bow is Odysseus' great hunting bow, requiring special skill and strength to handle, and the test is to shoot one arrow through twelve axe heads, which was Odysseus' favourite trick before going to war.

After prayers, omens and various preparations before dawn, Odysseus and his son are ready. Along with two loyal servants, Eumaeus and Philoitios, they have made a plan for the upcoming contest and how to kill the suitors.

### **Part 21-24** **The veteran triumphs**

A number of men try to string the bow without success, but Penelope insists the beggar also be given a chance. Telemachus instructs her to retire to her room and orders Eumaeus to bring Odysseus the bow, while Philoitios ensures the door and gates are locked. The other contestants jeer at the disguised Odysseus, but to their astonishment, he strings the bow effortlessly and shoots the arrow cleanly through the row of axes.

With Odysseus' identity now apparent to all, a battle ensues. With a little help from Athena, Odysseus and his few loyal men prevail over the mass of suitors, who cannot escape the locked manor house. The servant women who shared their beds with the suitors are also punished with death.

Penelope waits in her room, not believing the news that Odysseus is back. When they finally come face to face, both are reserved and distanced with each other. Penelope is still suspicious and needs to test Odysseus further, while Odysseus is also anticipating vengeance from the suitors' relatives, so wants to keep the men's deaths a secret. He fakes a wedding feast in the locked house to buy time.

Penelope finally tests Odysseus with questions about their marriage bed that only he can know, and they are reunited as man and wife at last. Their happiness is short-lived, however, as Odysseus must leave at dawn.

Odysseus, Telemachus and their faithful servants go to see Odysseus' father Laertes, who has withdrawn and lives pitifully on a small farm. After cruelly testing his father by spinning yet another tale, Odysseus reveals who he really is and they prepare to face the mob of avengers. Both Laertes and Telemachus prove their worth in the fight. However, Athena intervenes and orders the two sides to declare a truce – Odysseus has been restored to his rightful position and thus peace to Ithaca. Although he must leave home for one last mission, Odysseus has been assured that he and Penelope will



*Photo: Janeb13 /Pixabay*

end their days in peace and harmony.

Two further aspects highlighted by Shay in his book are the portrayal of women in *The Odyssey* and what characterises 'complex' post traumatic stress disorder.

### **Women are dangerous**

According to Shay, 'women are dangerous and unreliable' is the summary analysis of how women are portrayed in *The Odyssey*. Shay further comments that Homer appears to understand men's ability to blame women for everything, and unfortunately, also appears to think this blame is perfectly justified.

Commenting chiefly on the experiences of American veterans, Shay goes on to say that many he has come into contact with feel inferior to women, and in child custody battles, it is not uncommon for them to lose their visitation rights. So the conclusion is that women are actually dangerous. Shay also ponders whether this line of reasoning does in fact stem from disappointment when veterans idealise the event of being reunited – that the love of a woman can heal them from the wounds of war. Instead, there is often a large emotional rift between the veterans and their families, which many never manage to bridge.

### **'Simple' and 'Complex' PTSD**

It is well known that perceived danger mobilises body and mind in various ways, and that this state of being often negatively affects the individual. However, what

psychologists call PTSD is, according to Shay, 'Simple' PTSD and today, there are a number of successful therapeutic methods for treating this category. Of course, 'simple' PTSD can nevertheless be very limiting for the individual, but Shay comments that the other category, 'complex' PTSD, is even more so.

In complex PTSD the psychological damage has destroyed the person's ability to trust, which requires a different kind of rehabilitation. Shay repeatedly refers to Odysseus as a man who no longer trusts anyone. This lack of trust is rarely replaced by a vacuum. Instead it is replaced by a high state of wariness, whereby the veteran assumes people are out to deceive and tends to strike out first.

In the last part of his book, Shay expands on the idea that all lasting healing starts with self care. Without secure living conditions and freedom from alcohol and drug abuse, it is virtually impossible for the person to address the actual trauma. In cases of complex PTSD miracle cures are not the answer, rather, rehabilitation is generally a long and continuous process, comparable to a marathon.





# Thoughts on war veterans in the Bible

BY: JAN GRIMELL

**Very little is written about the war veterans of the Bible, even though the Old Testament is full of conflict, battles and, indeed, military veterans. I have always found this somewhat strange. Many times I've also considered that in the bible, in the language of the writers themselves, we should be able to discern and understand how military operations affected the war veterans of these narratives – in other words, there should be some sort of wisdom there to decipher.**

It was in the summer of 2018 that these observations and thoughts prompted me to take a closer look at how to interpret, understand and consider the war veterans of the bible, as viewed through the lenses of PTSD and Moral Injury. The result was two articles that were published later in 2018 in the American journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling (links at the end of the article). These are summarised below.

The basic idea of my psychological interpretation project was to identify a number of biblical characters who had a robust military history, which also included repeated missions and war operations. At the same time, I wanted to be able to follow these characters

over time so that important psychological events could be interpreted and understood from a longer narrative perspective.

I found what I was looking for in the narratives of the first and second books of Samuel. These were relatively detailed and nuanced accounts of conflicts and war, allowing me to follow a number of experienced war veterans throughout their military/civilian lives.

The four characters I felt were most suitable for a psychological analysis of this kind were: King Saul, General Joab, King David, and the warrior, Uria – all scarred war veterans whose lives turned out in various ways. By studying the biblical narrative about these war veterans through the theoretical lenses of PTSD and

Moral Injury, I could find a new way of interpreting and seeing each of these characters.

For example, in my view, Saul's gradually declining mental health (involving aggression, uncontrolled rage, depression/melancholy, destructive behaviour, paranoid suspicion and more) was not necessarily due to being tortured by an evil spirit, as the Bible says. Instead, it was through his life and experiences that he developed a complex form of PTSD.

Saul never recovered from this serious condition and his life ended with his being wounded on the battlefield and taking his own life – an event I came to interpret both literally and metaphorically. By metaphorically, I mean the 'battlefield' is a description of a life with complex PTSD and that in such a life, there is an overarching risk of losing one's 'inner battle' and committing suicide. It is difficult to be alone in such a condition – support and help are necessary.

I also considered the skilful general Joab, who I argue was exposed to moral injury when his leader King David fell short of the ideals of moral justice that Joab had been taught and that also permeated the military culture of which they were a part.

During a battle, Joab's brother was killed by an enemy commander, but Joab carried on fighting tenaciously, finally finding himself in a situation where he could defeat the enemy commander. However, this came at the risk of losing many of his own soldiers, so in order to save their lives, Joab called off this last offensive. When King David later negotiated with the enemy commander and even sought to enter into an

alliance with him, Joab was furious.

Here, my theory is that Joab felt betrayed by his superior in a high risk, life and death situation, a situation hardly made easier by the fact that David and Joab were related (and thereby also related to the dead brother). The likely result was a moral injury that never healed, with loyalty and trust between the general and his king seriously damaged.

Shortly afterwards, Joab sought revenge for this perceived betrayal by brutally slaying the enemy commander (and others during the course of the narrative). In the autumn of his days, Joab's own long life in military service also came to a violent end at the hands of another man.

In turn, David himself was a seasoned war veteran. His unique characteristic was that, despite suffering with depression for shorter periods of time in the wake of war, he had the special ability to bounce back – he was resilient. He always summoned the strength to recover psychologically and for his soul to heal. In my view, David's ability to partake of and express himself through dance, music and literature, as well as find help in listening to others, was of the essence in his recovery and healing. In other words, he had access to expressing himself culturally, beyond the military, and associated with other identities that paved the way for growth, recovery and new energy.

The last character I looked into was the skilful and experienced soldier, Uria. He personified military culture and loyalty in light of the ideals that shaped him. Unfortunately, Uria became a mere pawn in a political



Photo: Wikilmages /Pixabay

and relational game, betrayed on the battlefield (on the King's instruction) and finally killed.

In light of the findings from my psychological interpretation of the bible, I then came up with four character types of biblical war veterans: the Saul type (who can develop complex PTSD), the Joab type (who can develop Moral Injury), the David type (who demonstrates a repeated ability to recover and heal) and the Uria type (who personifies the warrior ideal). Today, no living individuals fully match these archetypes but the idea is to be able to relate to and recognise oneself in them to a greater or lesser degree. I also see these archetypes as a way of considering how the bible depicts the effects of war on humans. No-one leaves the battlefield

unchanged but how much they change varies.

**Download and read the articles in their entirety here:**

Grimell, J. (2018). *To Understand and Support Contemporary Veterans Utilizing Biblical Combat Veteran Types*, *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 72(4), 232-240. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1542305018815691>

Grimell, J. (2018). *Contemporary Insights from Biblical Combat Veterans through the Lenses of Moral Injury and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 72(4), 241-250. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1542305018790218>



*Photo: BDphoto /Istock*

# Moral injury and PTSD

BY: LOUISE WEIBULL

**Today, many clinicians and researchers agree that Post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, is far too limited a description of the psychological repercussions that may come from serving in areas of crisis, war and disaster. Primarily in the USA, the concept of moral injury has gained traction as a complementary model of explanation for poor mental health among veterans with a history from Vietnam, Afghanistan or Iraq, for example. However, PTSD continues to dominate in the literature as an umbrella term for psychological problems following international service.**

**P**TSDD<sup>1</sup> arises after traumatic experiences and is often associated with danger and life-threatening events. The symptoms can manifest in various ways, but commonly as reoccurring and intrusive memories – flashbacks – along with great anxiety and stress, resulting in avoidance behaviour. For most soldiers, the symptoms become milder over time, but for others they can become chronic, if not promptly treated.

The US Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that between 11-20 % of the 2.5 million soldiers who served in Iraq or Afghanistan are affected by PTSD and that it will develop into a chronic condition for one third of these.

Delayed reactions can also occur. For example, a

Danish study has shown that the number of soldiers with PTSD was highest between 3-5 years after serving (Lyk-Jensen et al, 2012). Left untreated, these ‘natural’ reactions to extremely stressful situations risk becoming more intense over time, often resulting in a greatly reduced quality of life for the individual concerned.

Even if expressions of PTSD and moral Injury sometimes co-exist and partially overlap, moral injury often has a different background. Commonly, a person will have witnessed, overheard or been part of something that fundamentally oversteps their deeply rooted moral convictions and values.

One definition of moral injury used by the US Department of Veterans Affairs is “The prolonged negative ‘emotional, psychological, behavioral, spiritual and



*Photo: 652234/Pixabay*

social' ramifications of perceived acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (Litz et al., 2009, p. 695). Thus, the psychological problems a person suffers from afterwards are not primarily associated with anxiety, but with guilt or shame. This also means that it is more difficult to talk about, and after some time, also more difficult to treat.

Researchers also maintain that even trivial transgres-

sions that did not lead to any real harm can result in strong feelings of guilt. While much of the research on moral injury is based on the experiences of American service personnel, it is important to emphasise that neither PTSD nor moral injury is unique to the military sphere. Everyone finding themselves in an area of crisis, war or disaster runs the risk of developing psychological damage and, of course, that applies to pro-

fessions working under mission-like circumstances, for example, the police, emergency services and emergency care.

The fact that there has been an increase in moral challenges is likely due to the changed nature of armed conflict. But this issue is not a new one – the subject of war veterans' moral injury has been described as far back as in Homer's *Odyssey*. However, in more recent time, the fact that war is no longer simply an inter-state matter fought chiefly by male soldiers is highlighted as accentuating the problem.

In *New and Old Wars: organized violence in a global era* (1999), the political scientist Mary Kaldor says that although our new wars are not fundamentally different from historic ones, in our globalised, post-modern world we are seeing a great increase in conflicts where the enemy could be 'anyone' and where it is difficult to identify the combatants. In these new wars, we also see the development of what is known as hybrid warfare, involving both state and non-state actors. All in all, this means situational ambiguity increases, with the threat also including elements such as suicide bombers and remote-controlled landmines.

A related issue that has attracted increasing attention in recent years is how these new types of conflict affect men and women differently. Gender-based violence, rape, trafficking and other forms of assault have become increasingly systematised, meaning women and children are often particularly vulnerable groups (see, for example, Chinkin & Kaldor, 2013).

It is also important to note that witnessing suffering

due to natural disasters also leaves people with lasting feelings of remorse, guilt or failure. Like military operations, these contexts involve difficult choices, whereby none of the alternatives is good and resources are limited. The decisions made have a deep impact on other people's lives. Johan Von Schreeb, a Swedish physician who has worked for Médecins sans Frontières for many years, has written about this in his book, *Katastrofdoktorn* (the disaster doctor) (2013).

In regard to Swedish soldiers, it is of course difficult to estimate how many have lingering and difficult memories of their actions, and likely, a large number have fallen under the radar. The most common diagnosis among Swedish veterans is PTSD, which is usually estimated to be around 5 %. On the basis of calls made to The Swedish Soldiers Homes Association, around 15 % are deemed to have problems rooted in existential and moral issues. This primarily affects veterans from missions to Afghanistan and Mali, but also Bosnia, Lebanon, Kosovo and others, despite these operations having finished long ago. Swedish veterans' support needs also relate to various forms of guilt associated with accidents occurring in Sweden itself.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> The *D* (disorder) is now often omitted to emphasise that this is a natural reaction to an unnatural situation.



The Swedish Soldiers Homes Association in 2024

[info@soldathem.org](mailto:info@soldathem.org)  
[www.soldathem.org](http://www.soldathem.org)

[f](#) [@](#) [x](#) [in](#) @soldathem and @veterankort

