The Suffering of God: Love in Willing Vulnerability

I. Introduction

Nothing illustrates or honors suffering like a story. And, when we are trying to understand our pain and our trials, we look for a story that will be revealing. Learning, communicating, and remembering actually reflect a mode of living, a worldview. Whether some define life, God, and suffering through empirical information, an “act of God,” or others relate through cultural stories and myths, we need to understand how Scripture presents its redemptive drama.

In truth, whenever we allow the Scripture to become fragmented, it is in danger of being diluted and absorbed into our individual narratives. To be sure, suffering always “writes” a powerful personal story—which we need to hear in far more testimonies!—but our stories are not what redeem people’s lives. They show how lives are redeemed. This really concerns our hermeneutic. Understanding the Bible’s story of the suffering of God is all about how God presents himself in Scripture, and this is a theo-drama far more riveting than most know! To get here, though, we need to do some digging.

II. Exploring Story and Defining Terms

Two Illustrative Accounts

In the Greek play, The Frogs, Aristophanes writes about Dionysus and Xanthias. They embark on a trip into the underworld to resurrect a skilled poet. As they are passing through Hades, they both claim to be gods. So they construct a decisive test: both of them will be flogged, and they conclude, “Whichever of us squeals first or even bats an eyelid isn’t a god at all.” In other words, true deity is defined by freedom from pain and suffering. Emerging from this stoic philosophy, The Unmoved Mover may reflect Aristotle’s metaphysics, but these same commitments also shaped the core trajectory of the theology of God in the early church. But is God really this unresponsive and sealed off from pain? Is the life of God really detached from the pain of his own creation? Is this really the God of the Christian Scriptures? Assuredly not!

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As one of the leaders in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, Allan Aubrey Boesak discusses another kind of illustrative story. In his book, Dare We Speak of Hope? he writes about the Khoi people of the Eastern Cape. He notes three distinctives of their faith: (1) a supreme being, named Tusi-Goab, is the Giver, Protector, and Sustainer of all creation; (2) the people’s dependence on and resonance with nature; (3) and awareness that their “human-being-ness depended on the life-giving interrelationships with other human beings.” Tusi-Goab fights on behalf of his creation and helpless people, not just for himself. In Tusi-Goab’s fight against evil, Boesak explains:

[...]ough God was victorious, they say in that ancient and ongoing battle God was wounded in the knee. That is why the supreme being is called Tusi-Goab, which literally means ‘wounded knee’…Tusi-Goab was in the first place not a God of power and might, but of woundedness and empathetic solidarity, a God who fought on behalf of God’s creation and children, and who was willing to be wounded for their sake…Because Tusi-Goab is wounded, the ancients go on to say, God understands the woundedness and woundability of God’s creation, of God’s children…It may well be that this is the answer to the oft-debated question why the Khoi in South Africa so easily opened their hearts to the Christian gospel…The lure of the Christian faith could only have been in the fact that they discovered in the crucified Jesus, with the wounds in his hands, feet, and side, so much of the image of Tusi-Goab, the God whose name is ‘Wounded Knee.’

Boesak poignantly argues that we can speak of hope “only if we speak of woundedness.” Because of the profound evil, systemic suffering and social injustice that Boesak lived through under Apartheid, he concludes, “hope is fragile, for it is the hope of the vulnerable, of those at the bottom of the well.”

_Seriously...A Suffering God?

_Though hardly the theological scandal it was once, the theology of a suffering God still runs up against several “roadblocks.” On the one hand, these two illustrative accounts need not be multiplied in order to show how intellectually post-modern and un-omnipotent a suffering God can seem to some. On the other hand, it is stunning that some ancient non-Western religious traditions can be so richly oriented around a “wounded deity.”_ Simon Chan explores a context-specific theology, noting how European reflection moved sharply toward a theology of a suffering God after WWII, as a counter-measure to the unprecedented mechanized evil of the 20th Century. By contrast, key strands of Asian theology moved decidedly in the opposite direction, cordoning God off from human pain and brutal regimes, in order to oppose the fear of ancestral spirits and demonic oppression more common in Asian cultures. The transcendence and immanence of God find different emphases, depending on the cultural codes of a group and the

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6 Allan Aubrey Boesak, _Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics_ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 34.
7 Ibid., 37-38.
8 Ibid., “Dare We Speak of Hope? Only If We Speak of Woundedness,” 24-42.
9 Ibid., 42; quoting the phrase by Derrick Bell, _Faces at the Bottom of the Well: the Permanence of Racism_ (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
meaning they attach to their suffering. Western theology has prioritized objective certainty, and this has led to a dogmatism ill equipped for the dialogic categories of a relational theology.

Much of the problem has been the tendency of Western Christian theology to view God in categories of rational abstraction and political triumphalism; categories that cannot accept the affectability of God or the Khoi and their God with a “wounded knee.”\(^\text{11}\) Regarding this, L.A. Markos makes a keen observation:

*We post-Reformation, post-Enlightenment Christians are too often uncomfortable with such nature talk. On the one hand, we fear that our doctrines will become so diluted with pagan elements that Christianity will fade into the realm of myth. On the other hand, we are suspicious of any language that resembles pantheism—not so much because we are Christians as because we are children of a modernist world that has defined nature as a thing to be studied rather than loved, and the unseen world as a non-thing to be explained away or, better, ignored.* Our fears are not totally baseless, but fears they are, and they often prevent us from understanding the deep hunger that draws so many into the precincts of the New Age.\(^\text{12}\)

But the God of biblical orthodoxy functions at neither end of this spectrum: New Age vagueness or classic austereness.\(^\text{13}\) The way simple laity long to relate to their approachable God, seems ultimately dashed to the ground beneath a menacing “bar-of-justice” theology. Where is the tender “shepherd of the sheep” (Heb. 13:20) who “gathers the lambs and gently holds them close to his heart” (Isa. 40:11, NIV)? This same paradigm is charged to Church leaders, “being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3). This is the same God of both testaments, and he still comes to the aid of frail sheep.

*It is our contention that God relates to his creation in willing vulnerability and the inevitable emotional pain that is experienced in the life of God that results from his committed relationship with his rebellious creatures. Further, we claim that a theology of the suffering of God is evident throughout the testimony of Scripture, not just the passion of the crucified Lord.*\(^\text{14}\) Our study will explore numerous biblical passages, rather than pursue abstract philosophical or metaphysical arguments for divine perfection, simplicity, ultimate power, or perfect freedom—arguments that take on a logic of their own, usually detached from the real drama of biblical

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Observing the suffering of God in Scripture is not a simple enterprise. Considering the relational life of God—within the inner-Trinitarian relationship and among God’s standard human agents—requires a hermeneutic of *discernment*, not *deduction*; a relational theology, not objectivist epistemology. Lutheran theologian, Robert W. Jenson, is surely correct when he argues that the suffering of God is best defined by the biblical drama itself, not metaphysical properties.

Metaphors have raised another problem. The claim that metaphors are simply accommodating language to speak of God is linguistically and hermeneutically naïve. As G.B. Caird points out, “We have no other language besides metaphor with which to speak about God.” Terence E. Fretheim helpfully explains, “Metaphors do reveal an essential continuity with the reality which is God.” The real danger, however, “is either interpreting metaphors literally in every respect or (more commonly today) denying any essential relationship between the metaphor and God.” The interpreter must determine where the point of comparison lies. “But to conclude that such language reveals nothing of God’s essential personhood makes all such language pointless.” When God is given human characteristics, it reveals a God who is living and personal—One who is committed to interaction with people. As Terence E. Fretheim states:

> Christians should have no difficulty using such language for God, *for in Jesus Christ God has acted in a remarkably anthropomorphic way*. A direct line connects this kind of language for God and God’s becoming flesh in Jesus Christ, “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). In this human being God reveals to us most supremely who God is, how God relates to us and the world, and the depths to which God will go for our salvation.

Unfortunately, classic epistemology is embarrassed by the anthropomorphic aspects of God—in both testaments. In fact, such language has been transposed or explained away in generic notions of God. But this dismissal of emotional aspects in the language for God runs into the fallacy of circular logic, as Kevin J. Vanhoozer explains. This hermeneutic assumes that the interpreter already knows either what God is like, or what the author of the biblical text knew God to be like, and can thus differentiate between the language which is intended to correspond

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18 G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1980) 174. “Thus anthropomorphism is something more than the imposing of man’s preconceived and limited images on the divine. There is something that answers back in perpetual dialogue” (182).
22 Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God 2*. 
to God’s true nature and actions, and that which is not. So any biblical text that speaks of divine impassibility is simply dismissed. But no biblical text or passage argues divine impassibility. Broadly speaking, classical theism is itself, a hermeneutic “on guard.” Again, Vanhoozer explains:

In the classic theological paradigm, the Bible and classical philosophy are seen to agree: a perfect being who has life in himself cannot suffer. Where the Bible appears to ascribe emotion or suffering to God, the tradition quickly concluded that such language must be figurative. Classical theism thus functions as a theological hermeneutic for construing what Scripture says about the love of God.

“God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God” (1 John 4:16b). However, what this love requires of God, toward his wayward creatures, we shall have to explore.

Sadly, some “frozen categories” of biblical orthodoxy have stressed the legal work and transcendent life of God to the exclusion of his immanent presence and relational pain over the rebellious humankind that he came to save, through Jesus Christ. But the profile of God, popularized within every generation of theologians and pastors, is often a God who is stubbornly “other,” above the fray of human ills, ablaze in glory and power—completely apart and unaffected. In effect, God has been marooned on an island of unapproachable sovereignty by his own image bearers, stripped of his emotions, addressed by abstract titles, hailed in monikers of “victory,” and defined by terms that are offensively negative to seeker and saint, alike: immutable, impassible, impeccable, ineffable, and so on. So much definition—via negativa—shuns the vulnerable love and emotional spectrum of God’s own person. This is not the portrait of God in Scripture.

We must pause and ask some vital questions?

- **Question 1**: How does God relate to human pain, injury, violence, and involuntary suffering?
- **Question 2**: Can a God who does not or cannot experience suffering in some sense really be said to “know” the tides of pain that sweep through his own world?
- **Question 3**: How are humans to enter a genuinely personal relationship with a secluded God?
- **Question 4**: Can a God who is unable to sympathize—at cost to himself—really be said to love?

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24 That said, some appeal to theological syllogism, regarding divine ontology to defend impassibility. Paul Helm, for example, argues: (1) God is timelessly eternal, (2) whatever is timelessly eternal is unchangeable, (3) and whatever is unchangeable is impassible. (4) Therefore, God is impassible. See “The Impossibility of Divine Passibility,” in *The Power and Weakness of God: Impassibility and Orthodoxy*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh, UK: Rutherford House Books, 1990) 119. In counterpoint to Helm, see the excellent essay by Richard Bauckham, “In Defense of the Crucified God,” 93-118.

25 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002) 74; emphasis added.

26 See the insightful cultural critique of Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God* 1-17.
Question 5: Because humans are made in the image of God, can our unique connection with God be limited to emotion or reason, or does God relate more holistically with us?

Response: Scripture reveals great breadth and depth in the life of God. From Creator to Savior, God has always chosen to be vulnerable. In the freedom of his love toward all creation, especially humankind, this results in a spectrum of his own suffering.

These questions capture the weight of what is at stake with a God who is relationally intimate with his creation.

Some Terms and Tenants

While most of these topics of our study could be expanded further, our purposes require us to at least consider some of the primary terms and tenants in this relational theology of God. First, several important terms must be defined.

- Impassible – used in classical theology to claim that God cannot suffer, since he cannot be affected by anything external to himself.
- Passibility – refers to God being affected by and responsive to the external world.
- Pathos – both suffering (= pain) and passion (= emotion), capable of “disturbing” pure reason.
- Apatheia – divine impassibility; divine constancy, expressed as immutability (= static).
- Patripassianism – the idea that the Father suffered with Christ.\(^{27}\)
- Panentheism – God eternally exists in a mutually interdependent relationship with creation.\(^{28}\)

Most significant is the term impassibility, meaning God does not experience emotion or suffering. As William C. Placher explains it:

> Divine impassibility served two functions. It ruled out vulgar passions: no more rapes, no more private vengeance. At the same time, it preserved divine power. Part of what power seemed to mean, after all, is that one can affect others for good or ill but yet remain unthreatened by them, invulnerable. It is the most powerful ruler who is safe and secure from external threat…For God, then, impassibility guarantees omnipotence.\(^{29}\)

In other words, God feels neither pain nor pleasure from the actions of another being. But the testimony of Scripture, as we shall see, actually shows otherwise. In the end, terms such impassible are not helpful, as the profile of God is far more complex, interactive, and dialogical than such negative terms allow. God’s love makes him willingly involved in the lives of people—God is not stoic and unaffected. Again, however, there was a rich cultural backdrop that fueled this stoic worldview. Richard Bauckham explains the Greek philosophical thought that shaped classic theology’s aversion to a suffering God:

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\(^{27}\) “Patripassianism” was labeled a heresy in the modalism controversy, not because Trinitarian suffering has no biblical basis, but because of Greek philosophical notions of impassibility; see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009) 360.


\(^{29}\) Placher, *Vulnerable God* 5.
For the Greeks, God cannot be passive, he cannot be affected by something else, he cannot (in the broad sense) ‘suffer’ (paschein), because he is absolutely self-sufficient, self-determining and independent… The connecting thought is passivity. Suffering is what comes upon one, against one’s will. It is something of which one is a passive victim. Thus suffering is a mark of weakness and God is necessarily above suffering… To be moved by desire or fear or anger is to be affected by something outside the self, instead of being self-determining… God cannot be subject to anything.30

More accurate to the biblical testimony is the claim of Thomas J. Oord, when he writes, “God acts intentionally and sympathetically” toward his creation.31 Yet The Council of Chalcedon dismissed a God that is passable as “vain babblings,” condemning those who held it.32 But even some of the greatest creeds of contemporary faith obscure this biblical truth.

The Westminster Confession of Faith states that God is “infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense.”33 This is a proud statement of apatheia. The intent of such platonic declarations is to “preserve” God, keep him entirely “other,” and in no way subject him to suffering. But how does a “pure spirit,” devoid of “passions” actually rescue his impure and frightened image bearers? What does this mean about God’s relationship to the brokenness of his world and the suffering among his creatures? Even Millard J. Erickson shows an unfortunate retreat into more stoic conceptions of divine personality when he speaks of God engaging in “reciprocal relationship,” only to conclude: “It seems best to think of God having empathy, rather than sympathy, for humans and their feelings. In other words, he knows what we are feeling, but does not necessarily experience that same emotion himself personally.”34 Is that it? Are we left with divine cognition? Hardly.

Rather, Christians of all theological stripes are rethinking the impassibility of God, for several reasons, and now argue that God is the “deeply moved ‘First Mover.’”35 Roger Olson states:

Some evangelical theologians believe that the God of classical theism is not much better than the God of panentheism; if the latter is too dependent and weak, the former is too impersonal and despotic. How can the God of classical theism be the compassionate God of the biblical narrative, they ask?36

John S. Feinberg expresses similar dissatisfaction. For him, the claims of both classic theism and process theism are inadequate. On the one hand, the self-sufficient, immutable sovereign God of

34 Erickson, Christian Theology, 295 n.14; emphasis added. Actually, the fault lines run more along Reformed versus Armenian views of divine relationality.
classical theism, he claims, is “too domineering, too austere, and too remote to be at all religiously adequate.” On the other hand, the adapting, power-sharing God of process theology, Feinberg claims, is not strong enough to sustain and revitalize hope that all things will be well. He proposes a third model: the *King who cares*. D.A. Carson also registers his methodological disagreement with impassibility:

> The methodological problem with the argument for divine impassibility is that it selects certain texts of Scripture, namely those that insist on God’s sovereignty and changelessness, constructs a theological grid on the basis of those selected texts, and then uses this grid to filter our all other texts, in particular those that speak of God’s emotions…impassibility is seeping over into impassiveness.

The roots of contemporary impassiveness reach back into philosophical commitments of impassibility in an earlier era. Nicholas Wolterstorff describes the stance of the early Christian church: “God dwells eternally in blissful non-suffering *apatheia,*” which, in the end, makes Augustine’s God “remarkably like the Stoic sage: devoid of passions, unfamiliar with longings, foreign to suffering.” So actually, *passibility*—i.e., “passionate love”—straddles the two doctrinal extremes of *apatheia* and *pathos.* This discussion illustrates how these terms have been used, most often, to isolate God from any “outside” suffering.

While we have briefly touched on some “strands” comprising a theology of the suffering of God, we can also list some core tenants of a suffering God; One who is actively engaged in vulnerable relationship with people. A theology of the suffering of God draws on some core realities of God’s emotional life and activity, as portrayed in Scripture.

- God maintains his *compassionate-love* toward people (Exod. 34:6b-7; James 5:11)
- God is in constant *relatedness* with his creation. God’s life with his creation is always incarnational. From the highly relational metaphors (Isa. 42:14; 66:13) to his theophany in human form (Genesis 18-19), God is constantly interacting, drawing himself into potential pain (Hos. 11:8).
- God is *willingly vulnerable* toward people (Gen. 6:5-6). Jesus Christ is the fullest expression of God, and he suffered greatly (John 14:9; Phil. 2:7-8). Far from divine child abuse, Jesus Christ gave up his own life (1 John 3:16).
- God is *affectable,* evident in his emotional life. God freely loves, and in that love is willing to risk great anguish and suffering (Ps. 78:40-41; Jer. 18:7-10).
- God is personally *consistent,* amid great pain (Pss. 90:2; 95:9-10; Heb. 13:8)

God’s availability to his creation results in a rich vulnerability matched by new initiatives of discipline and restoration. God’s dialogic commitment causes him to be impinged upon—

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brought to areas of agony, grief, and joy.\textsuperscript{40} However, the emotional life of God does not diminish the unchanging character of his promissory purposes.\textsuperscript{41}

### III. Key Biblical Passages Involving God’s Suffering

#### A. Genesis 6:5-6

“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.”

From creation on, God is affected by the events in his world. The LORD’s “seeing” counters the “sons of God” who “saw” (v. 2). God is no robot or some static principle. Rather, God engages intimately with his creation, to further his transcendent purposes.\textsuperscript{42} “Sorry” describes the emotional anguish of God (cf. Exod. 13:17; Jer. 31:19), which is further explained by the final clause: “and it grieved him to his heart” (v. 6b). God’s “pained-heart” (’asseb, v. 6) responds to humankind’s “wicked-heart” (’asseb, v. 5), and recalls the first judgment involving the woman’s “pain” (’eseb, 3:16) next to the man’s “pain” (’issabon, 3:17).

The relational ecosystem includes the pain of the broken-hearted Creator toward humans who were intended to act differently. “God’s judgment is not a detached decision…the judgment is a very personal decision, with all the mixed sorrow and anger that go into the making of decisions that affect people who one lives. Grief is always what the Godward side of judgment looks like.”\textsuperscript{43} While pre-flood humanity has a scheming heart, God responds with a wounded heart, filled with pain.\textsuperscript{44} As Walter Brueggemann observed, God has altered his course:

It has effected an irreversible change in God…It is now clear that such a commitment on God’s part is costly. The God-world relation is not simply that of strong God and needy world. Now it is a tortured relation between a grieved God and a resistant world. And of the two, the real changes are in God.\textsuperscript{45}

#### B. Exodus 3:7-10

“…I have surely seen the affliction of my people…and have heard their cry…I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them…the cry of the people of Israel has come to me…Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people…”

God addresses Moses as his chosen agent, the means of Israel’s deliverance. But Moses will force God into a compromise in his divine plan (4:14). Alongside this portrait of resistance

\textsuperscript{40} Brueggemann, An Unsettling God 5.
\textsuperscript{42} Mathews, Genesis 344.
\textsuperscript{43} Fretheim, The Suffering of God 112.
\textsuperscript{44} Mathews, Genesis 341.
\textsuperscript{45} Walter Brueggemann, Genesis. Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1982) 73, 81.
from Moses, there emerges a profound revelation of God’s intimate attention. In verse 7, three key verbs highlight God’s full engagement on their behalf: “seen…heard…know.” What the narrator notes about God in 2:24-25 is now stated from God’s own mouth. This is God’s first speech since he gave Jacob permission to descend to Egypt (Gen. 46:1-4). They are not merely “sons of Israel,” instead, their “affliction…cry…and sufferings” have arisen to God as “my people”—noted twice! (3:7, 10; cf. Gen. 18:21).

There is a new level of knowing for God (cf. 3:7; cf. 33:12-17) that changes his relationship with his people and incites a dynamic act of redemption: “Come, I will send you” (v. 10). With this spectrum of God’s senses activated (v. 7) he is now physically mobilized into the very midst of their trouble. The severity of Israel’s oppression provokes a radical intervention from God.

This is a God who “comes down to deliver” (v. 8), incarnated in the mouth of Moses (4:11) and, even with “the staff of God in his hand” (4:20)!

C. Numbers 14:1-45

“And all the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, ‘If only we had died in Egypt!...We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.’… Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown…‘Only do not rebel against the LORD.’ But the whole congregation talked about stoning them…The LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me?...I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them...’ Moses said to the LORD, ‘In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have forgiven them from the time they left Egypt until now.’ The LORD replied, ‘I have forgiven them, as you asked.’

The grief and fear that Moses and Aaron show, by falling facedown (v. 5), sets the stage for the sudden manifestation of God’s glory in his wrath (v. 10; cf. Exod. 16:7). God’s glory is his royal grandeur, and in the context of his anger, can appear in a storm-like theophany (1 Sam. 7:10; Ps. 29:3, 7). While God desires fellowship from his people, he does not force their obedience. So, for good reason, Joshua and Caleb passionately try to avert God’s anger (v. 6). God’s anger appears over 500x in Scripture, precisely because people use their freedom to act in rebellion and defiance against God’s tender love and instruction (cf. Exod. 34:6-7; Ps. 95:8-11).

What God does next is stunning—he laments! Horst D. Preuss is correct, “When even YHWH himself laments, then this demonstrates something about the God who suffers with his people.” “How long…contempt”; “How long…refuse” (v. 11); “How long…grumble against me?” (v. 27). “Lament is always an integral part of the wrath of God.” God uses the very language of his servants who cry out to him (Pss. 6:3; 13:1-2). This is not a quest for information, but combines divine (1) complaint with (2) anguish (cf. Exod. 16:3, 7-9). In fact,
God’s memory of past actions only intensifies the painfulness of the present. God is not a dispassionate accountant. On several occasions he genuinely struggles over what shape the people’s future will take: “Why should I forgive you? Your children have forsaken me…Should I not punish them for this?” (Jer. 5:7-9, NIV; cf. 2 Sam. 24:11-13; Joel 2:12, 13).

How the people respond to God’s efforts to repair the relationship determines the shape of the future that God and his people will have together.53 To see God’s anguish and change of decision, it is helpful to observe the switch between parties in Numbers 14.

A The Congregation Rebels and God’s Glory Appears (vv. 1-10)
B Moses Intervenes and Asks God to Forgive (selach, vv. 11-19)
B’ God Forgives in Response to Moses’ Request (selach, vv. 20-25)54
A’ The Congregation Receives a Mitigated Punishment (vv. 26-38)

It is entirely God’s prerogative to activate their punishment through the standard cause-consequence sequence; that is, moving from announcement of judgment to execution of judgment. But Moses intervenes at this key juncture with a three-part plea:

1) God’s reputation as a powerful deliver is at stake (vv. 13-14),
2) Mass destruction lets the wicked determine the fate of the righteous (vv. 15-16),
3) God’s revealed nature requires that God be motivated by grace as much as the need for justice (vv. 17-19).55

This three-part argument forms the foundation for Moses’ dire request that God “forgive the sin of these people” (v. 19).56 Observe that Moses’ request is not based on any repentance from the people, just the magnanimous character of their covenant-keeping God (cf. Exod. 34:6-9; Neh. 9:17-19).57 God’s response to Moses is immediate and positive: “I have forgiven them as you asked” (v. 20). Unlike humans, God’s pain and emotion do not incapacitate him. Nevertheless, forgiveness does not preclude punishment.58 But death will only come to those who maintained disbelief in the face of God’s mighty acts of deliverance (cf. Ps. 95:9). God will not wipe them out “all at one time” (v. 15). Moses succeeded in changing God’s course of action, and no priest or ritual sacrifice was involved. Though still angered by their collective rebellion, this text illustrates how God “invites participation in the accomplishing of divine will.”59

God’s judgment is viewed in terms of a breakdown in personal relationship, and all the accompanying effects of anger and pain. At stake is a relationship, not a contract. “To bear the

53 Ibid., 123.
54 In the Old Testament, selach is only used with God as the subject (46x). In other words, it is the only word used exclusively for God’s forgiveness.
56 If pre-flood humanity had had a mediator like Moses, like Israel experienced in the wilderness period, maybe the suffering would have been modified. Regardless, after the flood we see God in self-limitation (Gen. 8:21). A flood is no longer an option for God.
57 Ibid., 134.
59 Ibid., 143.
suffering, while making continuing efforts to heal the relationship, means at least that God chooses to suffer for the sake of the future of that relationship.”

\[D. \text{ Psalm 78:40-41} \]

“How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert!

They tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel.”

Psalm 78 extols God’s faithfulness in Israel’s history—at great cost to God. This is the unique contribution of the historical psalms (e.g., Psalms 78, 105, 106), which recount the story of God’s relationship with his people. As the 2nd longest poem, Psalm 78 recounts how deeply God’s relationship with Israel finds him vulnerable, not mechanical. Facts are not the intent, but showing that the responses God was drawn into, guiding a wayward nation, had ongoing impact in the life of God and Israel’s theological tradition.

Psalm 78 moves through two broad panels. Following the introduction (vv. 1-11), the first historical recital recounts key events in the wilderness (vv. 12-32), and the second recital recounts their march from Egypt to Canaan (vv. 40-64). Each recital briefly notes an occasion of national rebellion (vv. 17-20; 56-58) which is then followed by an extensive account of the spurning of God, his anger, and Israel’s subsequent discipline (vv. 21-31; 59-64). Each panel closes with God’s readiness to forgive and begin anew (vv. 32-39; 65-72). Sadly, “Their heart was not steadfast toward him” (v. 37a), so God acknowledges “that they were but flesh” (v. 39a).

The nation’s constant rebellion is matched by God’s ongoing grief. Just as Israel’s rebellion continually recurred, so God’s personal grieving was not a one-time experience (cf. Num. 14:22). The word for “grief” (’atsab) here refers to pain and hurt (e.g., Gen. 6:6; Pss. 16:4; 127:2; 147:3). God’s grief is as current as people’s disobedience. In fact, the entire period of wilderness wandering was “loathsome” or “disgusting” (HCSB) to God (Ps. 95:10). But God remains committed to a relationship that wounds him. The “Holy One”—the unique and transcendent God—is still moved to act “When they are diminished and brought low through oppression, evil, and sorrow” (Ps. 107:39; cf. 106:44-45).

Divine anger is highlighted in Psalm 78, for good reason. This psalm mentions God’s anger 7x, more than any other psalm. It is important to understand that God’s anger is relational, is not a reckless emotion (cf. 78:38). Anger is not innate to God’s nature, but appears because of his vulnerable relationship to sinners. God is provoked because of his relational commitment. Further, God’s anger is not the opposite of his faithfulness. God’s anger flares up because of his relational commitment. Though they grieved God’s heart, “he was merciful and forgave their sins and didn’t destroy them all. Many a time he held back his anger” (v. 38, NLT). By his own admission, God is “slow to anger” (Exod. 34:6), not devoid of it. As William P. Brown states,

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60 Fretheim, Suffering of God 124, 125.
63 Fretheim, Suffering of God 111.
64 Ibid., 111.
65 Jacobson, “The Faithfulness” 123.
“Divine indignation is no blind rage. God, rather, has the moral resolve and emotive wherewithal required to execute justice continually and without compromise.”

E. Hosea 11:8-9

“How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.”

There is no greater display of God’s pathos in a parent’s love than Hosea 11. Not surprisingly, this is a suffering love. God’s love has been obstinately shunned—past and present (vv. 1-2a). So Israel’s judgment is now inevitable. Of all ironies, Israel will “return” (shub) to Egypt, because they refuse to “return” (shub) to God! (v. 5; cf. 2:6-7). Their rebellion has forced God to activate their means of destruction through Assyria (vv. 5-6). God’s pain is acute: “My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them” (v. 7).

In verse 8, God begins intense self-questioning. These words are soaked with wrenching emotion. Four rhetorical questions occur in one verse, highlighting a rich paradox—he is the sovereign-broken, God! This is turmoil, not timidity. God reconsiders the extent of destruction. Whereas Admah and Zeboiim were destroyed with the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:21, 25; Deut. 29:23), God’s parenting-love will curb the degree of Israel’s judgment. The reference to these ancient cities highlights both precedence and manner. While the wickedness of these cities caused them to be “overthrown” (hapak, Gen. 19:21, 25), now it is God’s caring heart that is “overthrown” (hapak, Hosea 11:8b)! The daring use of this verb (hapak) describes the sudden agitation and “shake-up” of God’s heart.

While God begins by “pouring out his heartfelt agony” (v. 8a), he concludes by describing the sharp emotional effect Israel’s pending judgment has on him—the heart of God “recoils” or “is torn” (NLT). The sharp justice of the Judge is overwhelmed by the tender compassion of the Parent (cf. 1 Kgs. 3:26). God maintains his mysterious freedom that willingly stoops to the messiness of his wayward child. The rebellious son will not be stoned (cf. Deut. 21:18-21). The declaration that “I loved him” (11:1a) is also mingled with persistent sorrow and, together, will prevent the final ruin of his loved ones. God does not suffer as mortals do. He does not lash out to destroy the deserter, venting frustration. God’s anger is restorative, not revengeful. So the boundaries represented in his “I will not” statements (3x) distinguish the balanced emotional life of the “Holy One” from humankind.

69 Fretheim, The Suffering of God 120.
Again, God’s pained memory shows through (11:1-8), and causes profound suffering for God (v. 8-9).\(^{71}\) In God’s love, the destruction is drawn down, though they have not even repented!

\[F. \] Jeremiah 9:1[Heb. 8:23]; 9:10[Heb. 9:9]; 13:17; 14:17, 18

“O that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears,
that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” (9:1)

Weeping is a social behavior, utilizing tears that are meant to be seen.\(^ {72}\) Tears are standard fare in laments (cf. Pss. 6:9; 39:13; 102:10), and this pain is evident in the book’s beginning (3:21; 4:19; 6:26; 7:29). In the “weeping poems” of Jeremiah, the parent-child relationship illuminates God’s behavior and deep emotion.\(^ {73}\) In his ministry, Jeremiah finds God to be patient, compassionate, merciful, and longsuffering (3:12; 13:14; 15:15). Yet because God is the agent of destruction as well as lover of the nation, love and anger mingle in God’s tears (cf. Jer. 31:20; Isa. 63:15).

While it can be difficult to determine who the speaker is in these biblical texts, if God speaks in any of them, then God weeps.\(^ {74}\) J.J.M. Roberts argues persuasively that God’s weeping is couched in the form of “city laments” common to Mesopotamia. These laments depict deities weeping over their precious cities.\(^ {75}\) The parallel to Jesus weeping outside Jerusalem should not be missed (Matt. 23:37-38). In the case of Jeremiah, \textit{I believe the prophet is expressing God’s suffering}. Terence E. Fretheim’s comment is a helpful guide:

The suffering prophet and God are so interconnected that it is difficult to sort out who is speaking in many texts. Nor should one try to make too sharp a distinction. As if with one voice, prophet and God express their anguish over the suffering of the people…These texts should be interpreted in terms of the prophet’s embodiment of God’s mourning…At least, Jeremiah’s mourning is an embodiment of the anguish of God, showing the people the genuine pain God feels over the hurt that his people are experiencing.\(^ {76}\)

The movement of 8:18–9:1 has one speaker, arguably YHWH. There are not multiple voices here (\textit{contra} 12:1-6; 15:10-21), though the \textit{persona} of both prophet and God may be present. Emotive phrases like “O that” (\textit{mi-natan}) connect the close of Chap 8 with the opening of Chap 9. “Day and night” underscores the depth and duration of grief. The speaker wishes to continue weeping, uninterrupted (cf. Ps. 42:4; Lam. 2:18).\(^ {77}\)

The God who “exalts” and “sings” over restored Israel (Zeph. 3:17) also weeps over Israel’s pending destruction. The tears are a plea for the people to turn around.

“I will take up weeping and wailing for the mountains,
and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness.” (9:10)

\(^{71}\) Fretheim, \textit{The Suffering of God} 143.


\(^{73}\) Ibid.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 27.


\(^{76}\) Fretheim, \textit{The Suffering of God} 160-161.

\(^{77}\) Bosworth, “The Tears of God” 33.
Again, there is no change of speaker surrounding verse 10. The people’s fear of abandonment (8:19; 9:2) is actually what God is about to do (12:7-8)! But rather than leaving Jerusalem and fleeing to the wilderness (9:2), God makes a wilderness out of Jerusalem (cf. Luke 19:41-44). The people “are so deeply enmeshed in evil that they lack the will to repent.” God is weeping and lamenting over the loss of a treasured relationship.

“But if you [pl.] will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the LORD’s flock has been taken captive.” (13:17)

Here the weeping, though “in secret,” is noted for the entire community. Reference to “life/soul” (nephesh) adds to the sincerity of “secret” tears that affect the innermost parts. “They arise from an interior emotion rather than an insincere display.” Again, the goal is to prompt the people toward restoration of the relationship. Even as Jeremiah’s tears embody God’s, the Old Testament prophet is often an extension of the divine theophany.

“You shall say to them this word:
‘Let my eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease…If I go out into the field…and if I enter the city…” (14:17, 18a)

In 14:17-18 God commands Jeremiah to quote a message to his people: “say to them this word” (17a). This means that the following 1st person pronouns (“my, I”, vv. 17-18) refer to God and his lament. God’s tour of his royal city and its adjacent territories prompts God’s weeping mourning in a communal lament. Like Jer. 9:10, the text of 14:17-18 single out the weeping of God. But as J.J.M. Roberts observes, “the anthropomorphisms involved in such a portrait of God are simply too striking for most commentators to entertain seriously.” God’s sorrow is intensified because of the false optimism of prophets’ message. The response of the people is too little, too late. This is the portrait of a God in deep sorrow for the “blows” of punishment that he must bring, and the devastation that follows. As David A. Bosworth notes:

Tears signify deep distress, especially when an important relationship is threatened or terminated…Weeping is a powerful non-verbal expression of distress and need, and the weeping of YHWH is revealed to the people…They should respond with empathy for a suffering God and seek to soothe YHWH’s pain by their own repentance…The revelation that YHWH’s experience of the punishment is sorrow rather than satisfaction serves an important function.

G. Revelation 5:6

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79 Ibid.
80 Bosworth, “The Tears of God” 38.
82 Bosworth, “The Tears of God” 40.
83 Ibid., 44, 45.
“And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain…”

While it is common for Christians to comfort each other with the words: “He’s still on the throne,” that is only where John begins (4:2). A passive appeal to God’s sovereignty may sound good (e.g., “Turn it over to God”), but these words offer no care to the rape victim, no reprieve for the depressed, no solace to those betrayed by their spouse, and bring no timely intervention for the martyr’s family. A “bigger” picture is needed for our profound stories of suffering.

Afraid that the scroll might be permanently sealed, with no mediator able to open it, John starts “weeping loudly” (v. 5) in the heavenly throne room (cf. Isa. 6:8). Then he is informed that the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” and the “Root of David” is qualified to open the scroll (cf. Gen. 49:9; Isa. 11:1-5). Both titles identified the Messiah as the conqueror of the nations, one ready to destroy the enemies of God’s people. These were standard texts and titles for Jewish messianic hope in the first century (cf. 1QSb 5:24, 29). At one level, this is imagery of a new David who secures a military victory over Israel’s enemies. But John never sees this lion. This scene is actually not about the slaying of the wicket (cf. Isa. 11:4).

John hears about the conquering Lion, but when he turns to look, he sees a slaughtered “Lamb” (v. 6; cf. Isa. 53:7)! For John, the auditory is often redefined by the visual (cf. 1:10-12; 7:4; 9:16-17). John makes this identification by the ritual marks of slaughter. Neither the Lion nor the title will appear again in the book. The Lamb, however, will appear over 28x to designate the exalted Christ. Resurrected, the lamb now stands. This highlights his sacrificial role. The scene climaxes with the Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7) ready to lead a new Exodus (Rev. 5:9-10; cf. 17:14). Taken together, the mix of titles for the Lion and Lamb forms a new symbol—conquest by sacrificial death! This composite now explains how the ancient Scriptures are fulfilled. Jewish expectations have been changed. Evil has been defeated by a sacrificial death, not military conflict. And those delivered are from all nations (5:9-10).

This is a stunning picture of power redefined in weakness! “The Lamb is the embodiment of the Lion, not its replacement.” This is Revelation’s most lingering image. On the historical horizon, this is a scene of impressive might, especially for those who have “little power” (3:8)—like the Philadelphian believers (3:7-13). To the eyes of faith, the cross is not

86 “Looking as if/though it had been slain” (ESV, NIV, CEB) is not clear enough to be helpful. “As advertised” means actually advertised, not just in words. See Gregg K. Beale, The Book of Revelation (Grand Rapids: Eerdman, 1999) 352. The Greek esphapmenon (perf. ptcp., “having been slain”) expresses an ongoing condition resulting from a past act. The struggle among translations to reflect this dynamic is obvious: “seemed to have been slain” (JB), “a lamb that appeared to have been killed” (NET), “looked as if it had been slaughtered” (NLT), are interpretively unclear, with “like a slain lamb” (HCSB) or “a lamb with the marks of slaughter upon him” (NEB), being preferable.
87 Stevenson, A Slaughtered Lamb 133.
89 Ibid.
91 Stevenson, A Slaughtered Lamb 133.
victimization or “divine child abuse,” but the willing choice of the “Lamb of God” (John 1:29), who reigned from the cross (John 19:19). Christ joined humanity, in his suffering. This has always been the divine relational commitment. “God saves the world by taking its suffering into the very heart of the divine life, bearing it there, and then wearing it in the form of a cross.”

Suffering, not force, was the key to his victory.

The death of the Passover Lamb was so significant, that this sacrificial image was permanently taken up into heaven. The flesh of the Word “is taken into the inner triune life of the Godhead as a permanent, now eternal feature, scars, history, glory and all, as a permanent sacrament.”

This is what Peter Hicks calls “the eternal scarring of God.” I agree with Hicks when he states: “Somehow, evil in all its form—sin and suffering and death—has been taken eternally into the Godhead; the marks of slaughter on the Lamb are eternal; there is blood on the throne of heaven.” John’s vision of the wounded Lamb goes well beyond the notion of Christ’s death as an event in history; he transforms the crucifixion into a principle of cosmic proportion which, in turn, serves as a starting point for understanding what it means to live faithfully in a world characterized by profound suffering (cf. 6:9-11).

IV. Conclusion

At present, I believe biblical studies are making the freshest contributions in the study of the suffering of God. That said, several points, theological and practical, should be made.

First, so much interpretation has been afraid of the verbal and emotional particularity of God in Scripture, and so interpreters resorted to a philosophical theism. I agree with Timothy Wiarda when he observes, “Apologetic and theoretically oriented interests drive much of the modern discussion of divine passibility.” These approaches tacitly deny that their interpretation is hermeneutically socialized at all. Yet there are clearly certain rationalistic abstractions and triumphalist commitments that prioritize power and autonomous sovereignty, particularly in the Western tradition. Jürgen Moltmann observes that the Church Fathers mistakenly saw only two alternatives: (1) essential incapacity for suffering, and (2) fateful subjection to suffering. Fortunately, fresh nuances are now defining this conversation. I propose that God’s willing vulnerability—expressed in passionate love—more accurately reflects the redemptive drama.

The biblical meta-narrative needs to reassert itself amid a flood of conceptual studies. In this case

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95 Peter Hicks, The Message of Evil & Suffering. The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006) 75, 76.
96 Ibid., 81-82.
the story of suffering in the life of God is actually the meaning of doctrine, and following his suffering will press us closer to God’s theo-drama.\textsuperscript{101}

Second, for the contemporary reader, the suffering of God also dips deeply into a distasteful paradox: “the weakness of God is stronger than men…though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor” (1 Cor. 1:25b; 2 Cor. 8:9). Defining salvation as liberation and power as perfection, we have sidestepped the majesty of God who “stoops” into humankind in frail flesh, living in scandalous weakness. Or, as Michael S. Horton puts it, “Christ’s will to weakness is stronger than modern humanity’s will to power, and that which the supermen of our age regard as opium for the masses.”\textsuperscript{102} God’s love precedes power, rightly argues William C. Placher. “A God defined in terms of power is precisely not a reliable rescuer, because power provides no guarantee of concern…it is his silent suffering that paradoxically confirms his identity as the true Messiah.”\textsuperscript{103} This is a harsh truth for a religious culture more interested in validation than restoration.

Third, we noted at the outset that we would have to dig, and that includes staring into the darkness of our own hearts. We are petrified of weakness! Manipulation and violence are actually false alternatives to real power, where we turn when we are too weak to risk vulnerability.\textsuperscript{104}

Human beings seek power because they are afraid of weakness, afraid of what might happen should they be vulnerable, and so the drive for power that looks like the purest expression of freedom proves in significant degree inspired by an enslaving fear that dares not risk vulnerability…\textit{Probe violence and the quest for domination far enough, and one always finds the fear of weakness.}\textsuperscript{105}

We have projected an “isolating” power onto God that he never claims for himself. Instead, he routinely prefers the company of orphans, widows, and the poor (Ps. 113:5-9)—the weaklings of the world. Only a God who is weak in power but strong in love is really strong enough to take on the pain of the world.\textsuperscript{106}

Fourth, understanding the suffering of God helps mend the shattered lives of believers who have known painful and alienating suffering. For broken, betrayed, and persecuted believers, a suffering Savior makes following our Lord credible, not just possible (cf. Heb. 2:17-18; 4:15-16). In a world steeped in terrorism, this reality also matters. Being a disciple of the “First Wounded” creates a new reality through a fresh view that many suffering believers need. The wounded redeemed can follow this kind of Shepherd. Being a disciple of one who does not hide his sorrow or wounds is beyond comforting, it calms the deep-down places that have no words, only groans (cf. Rom. 8:26-27; Heb. 7:25). This relationship of the scarred Lamb to his suffering sheep helps us say “No” to surrogate attachments that promise relief, but only enslave. This “man of sorrows” (Isa. 53:3) does not ask us to go where he has never been—this is a precious discipleship, indeed. He not only died for us, he is also willing to suffer with us.


\textsuperscript{102} Michael S. Horton, \textit{A Place for Weakness: Preparing Yourself for Suffering} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 89.

\textsuperscript{103} Placher, A Vulnerable God, 14, 18.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 20.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 18, 21; emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 21.
Fifth, embracing a suffering and scarred God draws human affliction into the context of profound relationship not membership. This provides a nurturing point of departure for the hurting—beyond “divine knowledge.” This relationship draws from a shared place of suffering that is capable of calling the believer out of their commodified lifestyle and their addiction to technology. But connectivity is not intimacy. So, it is not surprising that mechanical solutions to suffering have seduced the contemporary church away from the rawness of pain, away from the gift of communal grief-sharing and our basic need for human community. The suffering of God can stimulate a practice of bearing others’ pain that we might rather deny as unspiritual or unproductive. But this is no pill or “like” button. It is all about following the wounds of our risen Lord in a time when affliction is increasingly something of an embarrassment to “refined faith.”

Nicholas Wolterstorff writes, “It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live.” “I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend said perhaps it means that no one could see his sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is his splendor.”

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