God's suffering?
A challenge for biblicists

Gordon Matties

From his prison cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in 1944, "Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world…. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help." Bonhoeffer suggests that by doing away with "a false conception of God," we become open to "seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness."[1]

The Old Testament witnesses to a God whose suffering love transcends the very strictures of language, especially language that demands consistency and noncontradiction.

Similarly Abraham Heschel, in his influential work on the prophets, argues that God is "moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath…. Quite obviously in the biblical view, man's deeds may move Him, affect Him, grieve Him or … gladden and please him…. God can be intimately affected," because "God does not stand outside the range of human suffering and sorrow."[2]

Theological debate

For Bonhoeffer and Heschel, two world wars and the Holocaust had awakened the question of whether God suffers. Although the question had been taken up by others since then, in 1975 Dorothee Sölle suggested that "the theological question of whether God could suffer has not been settled to this day."[3] Nine years later, Terence Fretheim affirmed "a divine vulnerability" in which "God takes on all the risks that authentic relatedness entails. Because of what happens to that relationship with those whom God loves, God suffers."[4]

By 1986, Ronald Goetz remarked that the notion of a suffering God had become a "new orthodoxy."[5] Even so, as Marcel Sarot suggests, "The debate between those who affirm and those who deny that God suffers is not a debate between people who believe in different sorts of gods. It is, rather, a debate between people who take for granted different philosophical axioms and employ different philosophical tools in their articulation of belief in one and the same God."[6] Or, as Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon put it, the real issue of our time isn't whether God exists, but what kind of God exists.[7] Does God suffer in the fullness of the Trinity, or does God suffer only in the human Jesus Christ?[8]

Among some evangelical theologians the subject has become a flash point. The so-called "openness of God" theology, challenging traditional theology's "pagan borrowing" and overemphasis on God's "magnificent otherness,"[9] takes up the affirmation that God suffers. As Clark Pinnock suggests, "Impassibility is undoubtedly the Achilles heel of conventional thinking. It was as self-evident to our ancestors as it is out of the question to us, but as soon as one tinkers with it the edifice trembles. To our ancestors … God was perfect or changeable; to us he is both perfect and changeable."[10]

Biblical witness

Such conclusions resonate with the increasing attention being paid to the actual biblical language for, by, and about God.[11] We do well, of course, to heed Sarot's observation that the concern about whether God suffers "is hardly ever addressed in the Bible." Sarot cautiously summarizes, "The biblical testimony cannot be used to exclude the possibility of God's suffering."[12] Although the Old Testament does not directly address the question, it presents a character who lives in and through a story with all of creation, yet who is not overcome by the freedom God grants to the creation.

The Bible presents that character via texts whose God-talk cannot be neatly systematized or reduced to a handful of propositions. Rather, the Old Testament bears witness to a lively conversation in which one perspective sheds light on another, a conversation that represents a striving toward the mind of God.[13] God's suffering love transcends the very strictures of language,

especially language that demands consistency and noncontradiction. Three examples illustrate the point.

Isaiah affirms that God dwells "in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit" (Isa. 57:15),[14] and that "in all their distress he too was distressed" (Isa. 63:9, NIV).[15] It should not bother us that Isaiah 46:5 refuses the option of reducing God to human dimensions. After all, God "does not faint or grow weary…. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless" (40:28–29). In God's incomparability God imagines a way that runs counter to conventional theopolitics. Such imagination is rooted in God's own ability to "have compassion on his suffering ones" (Isa. 49:13). God has birthed Israel and knows the pain and compassion of mothering (Isa. 42:14; 49:15). God's otherness does not preclude God's intimate and empowering compassion. According to Fretheim, "there is no suffering of the servant without the suffering of God."[16] By protecting God's freedom from domestication, Isaiah presents a God whose presence and imagination transcend the limits of power and politics, both human and divine. Isaiah's theopolitical agenda strives toward the New Testament's appropriation of the servant who takes up suffering in order to transform it.

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The book of Jeremiah offers us a prophet who embodies the pain of God's embracing compassion for and rejection by Israel. We read what sounds like the suffering of Jeremiah: "My eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears" (Jer. 13:17; cf. 9:10; 15:18; 23:9). Yet we find what seems like a rending of the very heart of God: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick…. For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me" (Jer. 8:18, 21). And at times the words of Jeremiah and the words of God merge seamlessly, as though both prophet and God grieve in anguish and writhe in pain at the reality and consequences of evil (Jer. 4:19–22; 23:9–11). Even the earth mourns (Jer. 4:28; 12:4; 23:10). Jeremiah is a book of the pain of the divine Word.

This pain reveals that God's constancy is not compromised by the rupture of the relationship with Israel. The irony of the book is that the God who withdraws God's "steadfast love and mercy" (Jer. 16:5) is the God who is faithful to the relationship founded on "steadfast love, justice, and righteousness" (Jer. 9:24; 31:3). God has given birth to Ephraim and continues to participate in the pain inherent in parental compassion (Jer. 31:20; cf. 31:9, 15, 20). And because Israel's "hurt is incurable" and their "wound is grievous," God is committed to restoring health and healing (Jer. 30:12, 17). God's having chosen to be bound to Israel gives birth to the experience of divine suffering (Jer. 30:22; 31:33; 32:38; cf. 31:35–37).

The challenge for those who seek a biblical response to a theological question is to allow the language of scripture to stand on its own terms and not to take offence at its earthiness.

This unequivocal binding makes it possible for the prophet to utter the unimaginable: "See, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me?" (Jer. 32:26). Here we witness the travail and paradox of the divine Word that both judges and redeems, because God cannot be implicated in the constraints of a piety that demands God's presence in conventional terms (Jer. 7:4–7). God may well be both near and far (Jer. 23:23). It is precisely because God is able to "fill heaven and earth" (Jer. 23:24) that God is able both to pluck up and to plant, to destroy and to build, to wound and to heal (Jer. 1:10; 18:5–9; 24:6; 31:28; 42:10). Yet in no way does Jeremiah ascribe capriciousness to God. God suffers because of Israel's actions but will not allow those actions to thwart God's intentions for the relationship (Jer. 24:7–8; cf. 33:19–22). Jeremiah presents a God whose power and might (Jer. 16:21) cannot be compared to the "no gods" (Jer. 16:20). Israel's God will not be domesticated by abstract notions of consistency. Israel's God suffers and heals.

Hosea, too, presents us with a compassionate God who will save God's people, but not in ways traditionally associated with power (Hos. 1:7; NASB). Hosea presents a God who experiences suffering love as a jilted lover (Hos. 3:1) and a rejected parent (Hos. 11:1–9). The betrayed husband acts to restore the marriage in the transformation of all creation (Hos. 2:18–20). The grieving parent lets the wayward child go yet purposes to exercise compas-

sion in ways that seem inconsistent with the demands of retributive justice. After all, "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst" (Hos. 11:8–9). The one who is profoundly affected by injustice and disloyalty also stands outside the limitations of human language, in that God's affections both participate in the wounding and precipitate a healing transformation that extends beyond Israel to a mending of all creation (Hos. 2:18). This is Hosea's paradox. The divine Other participates fully in relationship and willingly suffers the consequences of God's own commitments.

Seeking a biblical response to a theological question

The challenge for those who seek a biblical response to a theological question is to allow the language of scripture to stand on its own terms and not to take offence at its earthiness. Fretheim's argument in *The Suffering of God* is a good example of this posture. God suffers *because* of evil in the world and among God's people in particular. God suffers *with* Israel in the consequences of that evil, and absorbs yet is not overwhelmed by it. And God suffers *for* Israel in that God takes on suffering in order that God's will might be done on earth.[17] In all this, God embodies a condescension, a *kenosis*, a self-emptying, yet without contradicting the otherness of God that cannot be comprehended within the limits of human reason (cf. Isa. 40:28; Jer. 23:23; Hos. 11:9). As Pinnock puts it, Christ humbled himself (Phil. 2:6–11), "but this self-emptying was what he had seen his kenotic Father do."[18]

Scripture presents a God who, though identifying with the bruised servant, the injured parent, and the jilted spouse, always at the same time lives out of a faithfulness that will not abandon the people, the child, the spouse.

Because humankind, made in the image of God, lives in a relationship with the Creator that is inhabited by love, and because the essence of love is a freedom inherent in the gift of loving, all of creation, including humankind, shares suffering with a God who is affected by the creation. By experiencing the suffering of relationship gone awry, God bears the suffering yet is not overcome by it. God takes it up into a larger redemptive purpose, enduring the suffering and shaping it toward the goodness God desires for all things.

Scripture presents a suffering and transforming God who, though identifying with the bruised servant, the injured parent, and the jilted spouse, always at the same time lives out of a faithfulness that will not abandon the people, the child, the spouse. God's love is deep enough to absorb the suffering and strong enough to stay in it to the end, when all is redeemed. God, surprisingly, works through the transforming power of weakness, "identifies with our suffering and works faithfully, everlastingly, and infallibly to transform our suffering into the highest possible good or into life lived within the realm of God's resurrection."[19]

Notes

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 361.

[2] Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 4.

[3] Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 43. For a mapping of the terrain since then, see, e.g., Richard Bauckham, "'Only the Suffering God Can Help': Divine Passibility in Modern Theology," *Themelios* 9, no. 3 (1984): 6–12; Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[4] Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 14 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 78.

[5] Ronald Goetz, "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," *Christian Century* 103, no. 13 (16 April 1986), 385–89.

[6] Marcel Sarot, "Does God Suffer? A Critical Discussion of Thomas G. Weinandy's *Does God Suffer?*" *Ars Disputandi* [http://www.ArsDisputandi.org] 1(2001), section 1. Weinandy argues for the impassibility of God in *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) and in his summary article, "Does God Suffer?" *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 35–41 [http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=2262].

[7] Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 95.

[8] This question has been at the heart of debate since the early church fathers. See Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, for a thorough exploration.

[9] Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 7, 75.

[10] Ibid., 76. For a more nuanced perspective on the early church fathers, see Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*.

[11] The challenge for Old Testament theology is to account for the rough and the emotive language for God (see, for example, John Goldingay, *Israel's Faith: Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006], sections 2.6, "Yahweh's Love," and 2.7, "Yahweh's Hostility"). For New Testament theology, the challenge is to bring the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ into conversation

with scriptural tradition (see, for example, Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); and Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

[12] Sarot, "Does God Suffer?" sect. 3.

[13] Pinnock suggests that the "struggle for truth" within the Bible itself recommends openness to the Bible's "overall drift." We do well to "listen to the Bible as we would listen to a conversation" (Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 21). See Ellen F. Davis, "Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner Biblical Hermeneutic," *Anglican Theological Review* 82 (2000): 733–51.

[14] Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

[15] This is the sense in the KJV, NIV, NASB, NLT, and NJPS. The context suggests a divine "carrying" of Israel (Isa. 63:9), yet a tragic rebelling, with the result that Israel "grieved his holy spirit" (v. 10). Of course, the prophet affirms the otherness of God in God's speech: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" (55:8–9). These "ways," however, include the way of the servant, which represents the heart of divine condescension, including suffering, as that is interpreted by New Testament writers. See Bauckham, *God Crucified*, on the New Testament appropriation of the Servant Songs.

[16] Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 148.

[17] Fretheim makes the threefold argument in chapters 7, 8, and 9.

[18] Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 58: "If change and suffering can be ascribed to God, the mystery of the incarnation is much more comprehensible. Divine perfection is perfection in change. This is a God who changes and suffers while remaining perfect."

[19] Tyron Inbody, *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 188.

About the author

Gordon Matties is associate professor of biblical studies and theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. He is a member of the River East Mennonite Brethren Church in Winnipeg. His own awareness of human suffering derives mostly from observing his mother's graceful struggle with multiple sclerosis.