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Crying Out Together: Forming a Hermeneutic of Powerful Suffering

Harley Burgess
hburgess@gardner-webb.edu

This thesis has been examined and approved.

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Thesis Advisor, Dr. Kent Blevins, Professor of Religious Studies

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Reader, Dr. Robert W. Canoy, Dean and Professor of Christian Theology

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Reader, Dr. Steven Harmon, Professor of Historical Theology

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Date

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CRYING OUT TOGETHER:
FORMING A HERMENEUTIC OF POWERFUL SUFFERING

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DR. KENT BLEVINS, DR. ROBERT W. CANOY, AND DR. STEVEN HARMON

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Abstract

Process theology, along with its connection to questions of suffering and theodicy, presents a perspective that is largely absent within biblical scholarship. Similarly, a lack of clear cohesion with the biblical text is an evident critique of process theology. A hermeneutic that is directly informed by process-oriented passibilism meets a need that is present in both biblical scholarship and process theology, allowing for a deeper understanding of biblical depictions of suffering. This thesis aims to incorporate the theological conclusions of passibilist process theology into a new hermeneutical strategy that will allow for a more comprehensive examination of suffering in the Bible.

The thesis first synthesizes several scholarly works that explore the problem of suffering as it relates to both God and humanity. This synthesis produces a theology of powerful suffering that reorients the concept of divine power as ultimate suffering in relationship. This conclusion is further grounded within the biblical text, revealing an overarching biblical narrative of suffering that spans the canon.

This theological outlook is then translated into guidelines that form a hermeneutic of powerful suffering. The proposed hermeneutic is most centrally concerned with a text's role in the canon, granting privilege of perspective to the sufferer and applying the process-oriented passibilist understanding of suffering and power to the text.

Finally, the hermeneutic is applied to Song of Songs (specifically 3:1-4 and 5:2-7). The hermeneutic of powerful suffering is found to be successful in revealing an interpretation of scripture that allows for greater ease of application and greater understanding of the text within the canon.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Ari Aster's 2019 film *Midsommar* follows the journey of Dani, a student who is processing the tragic death of her family and the growing apathy of her boyfriend, Christian.[1] The two travel, along with friends, to a remote village in Sweden, hoping that the bright midsummer festival of the village will help them clear their minds. What begins as an adventurous dive into a foreign culture swiftly becomes a horrific descent into brainwashing and madness, as each of Dani's friends goes missing in turn. Under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs and feeling increasingly distanced from her partner, Dani finds solace in the arms of the village's emotional cult. At the climax of the film, Dani watches as Christian is paired with a girl in the village for the final ritual, betraying her and officially marking the end of their relationship. As Dani wails, grieving for her many losses, the members of the cult surround her and begin screaming in unison. They match her breathing and wail with her. Slowly, Dani becomes quiet again. The film ends gruesomely, with Dani becoming the cult's heroic figure and Christian being burned alive. Dani is finally accepted, and rejects the apathy of her former partner.

Although *Midsommar* features many classic horror frights, especially at its shocking ending, Ari Aster has described the film as a "break-up movie."[2] When questioned about the cult's mimicking of Dani's cries, Aster notes that the villagers "speak a language of empathy."[3] Perhaps this is why watching *Midsommar* is such a

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[1] Ari Aster, dir., *Midsommar* (2019; Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2019), DVD.

[2] Mekado Murphy, "Ari Aster on the Bright and Dark Sides of 'Midsommar,'" *The New York Times,* July 3, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/03/movies/midsommar-ari-aster.html.

[3] Ibid.

bizarre experience. Despite the horrors of the world that surround Dani, there is something profound to be uncovered in her connection with the village itself and her emergence from grief. It is clear from the onset that Christian is disengaged from Dani's suffering and only interested in his own endeavors. When Dani's emotions are finally validated, the audience breathes in relief. Dani moves on from a relationship with someone who cannot empathize with her, being accepted into a community that speaks a language of empathy. It is clear that Dani's isolation from Christian stems from his unwillingness to see and understand her suffering. He does not understand and he cannot understand. Christian is not a bad person, but he fails to suffer *with* Dani. He treats her suffering like an ailment that needs to be fixed.

My own experience of the 2020 zeitgeist affirms that Christian's failure to empathize with his suffering partner is not new or rare. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in the spring, recommendations for safety precautions began to trickle down from medical and governmental authorities. In addition to shutting down businesses and public gatherings, good practices like wearing facial coverings in public, maintaining distance from others, and frequent hand washing have been recommended by the CDC.[4] However, there has been incredible resistance to such safety measures from some Americans. The sentiment behind this resistance was echoed by President Donald Trump, as he explained that he would not be wearing a mask because, "Wearing a face

[4] "How to Protect Yourself and Others," last modified September 11, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html.

mask as I greet presidents, prime ministers, dictators, kings, queens - I just don't see it."[5] It is clear what Trump was implying: wearing a facial covering makes one appear weak.

Whether due to an increasing culture of bravado and individualism or the simple tendency of Americans to push back against being told what to do, it appears as if this aversion to appearing weak will continue to influence political endeavors within the United States moving forward. Is this preference for strength over humility what we would like to accept? Most importantly for this work in particular, how ought Christians respond to this divide in popular thought? Are Christians justified in shedding their masks, strengthened by their own confidence and aversion to appearing weak? Alternatively, should Christians push against this cultural perception of strength as virtue in favor of taking up one's cross, acting in love for one's neighbor?

Questions of power and suffering are naturally intertwined, especially when one attempts to discern how suffering ought to be faced. If the goal is to eliminate suffering, what is the best way to achieve that goal? If one attains the political and economic power necessary to combat the suffering of a nation of people, but feels no compassion for those who suffer, suffering will continue. Far too often, those who wish to eliminate suffering most fervently do not seem to be in a position to do so easily. If the acquisition of coercive power, the power to command and control, is not the best method for eliminating suffering, what is? Because coercive power alone cannot alleviate needless suffering, it surely cannot be considered the highest order of power. What, then, is ultimate power, and how does it work to lessen the burden of suffering?

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[5] "Coronavirus: Donald Trump wears face mask for the first time," *BBC*, July 12, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53378439.

The primary focus of this thesis will be to explore how the biblical text engages with and responds to the problem of suffering and the power to alleviate it, as well as the implications of such engagement for interpreting the portions of the Bible that either do not appear to engage with the problem of suffering directly or challenge other texts regarding suffering. The central assertion of this work may be stated as follows: *A hermeneutic that is formed on the principles of process-oriented passibilism reveals the overarching biblical narrative beginning with the imago dei and ending with hope in the eschaton, allowing for consistent interpretation of other conflicting texts.*

Before the thesis itself is examined, I should note the hierarchy of authority sources that I am working from. The processes of biblical interpretation and theological reflection are inter-mingled and necessarily circular. The best interpretive endeavors are informed by theological claims, and vice versa. This thesis begins with a basic conclusion from experience: I suffer. As Jürgen Moltmann notes, "It is in suffering that the whole human question of God arises."[6] From the human experience of suffering, theological questions arise. Moving from experience to observation of creation, claims from natural theology will be prioritized next. These claims will then be tested against the biblical text. If they are found to be affirmed within the biblical text, they can then be utilized within a hermeneutic that interprets the Bible more generally. Again, this process is necessarily circular. When a claim emerges intact from this cycle of testing, it is worthy of informing further biblical interpretation. I will employ this process of theological reflection and biblical interpretation throughout this thesis.

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[6] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 47.

The thesis will begin by establishing a "process-oriented passibilist" theology, drawing from relevant scholarship. This approach will then be checked against the biblical text. This thesis claims that the biblical text features a meta-narrative of suffering that is revealed by and subsequently shapes a process-oriented passibilist theology. When the establishment of this meta-narrative and its link to process-oriented passibilist theology is completed, the thesis will then turn to crafting a hermeneutical strategy that employs the claims of this approach. Finally, the established hermeneutic will be tested via an analysis of the Song of Songs 3:1-5 and 5:2-8.

Chapter 2: Theology of Powerful Suffering

Defining Suffering

Defining suffering and exploring the implications of the resulting parameters is vital for any discussion of theological issues surrounding the phenomena of suffering. Before one begins to entertain the possibility of God's suffering or attempt to explain the suffering of human beings, one must precisely define "suffering." Because the glorification of intentional, self-inflicted, or endured pain is common throughout Christian history, it is important that this work establish specific parameters for the type of suffering discussed. The importance of avoiding these associations will be made clear throughout the following discussion of suffering. The hermeneutic of suffering I will develop will rely upon a synthesis of the theological conclusions drawn from a selection of theologians. Those theologians will provide us with a framework for defining "suffering."

Both Daniel Day Williams and Paul Fiddes offer a broad definition of "suffering." Williams connects love and suffering intrinsically to one another, explicitly defining "suffering" as "the capacity to be acted upon, to be changed, moved, transformed by the action of or in relation to another."[7] Paul Fiddes utilizes this definition in his own treatment of suffering. Fiddes agrees that suffering means "change and being changed."[8] Further, Williams and Fiddes agree that being in loving relationship with another involves a fundamental altering of one's experience, an agreement to receive another's contributions and be altered by them.[9] Within Fiddes's framework, this agreement poses an existential threat to the being in relationship. Through the process of change, or suffering, one's being is fundamentally altered by the existence of another.[10] This association between suffering, relationship, and existential threat is important within Fiddes's definition, as he goes on to further refine suffering and its implications via this association.

Though the concept of suffering as "the capacity to be acted upon" is sufficient as a broad definition, we must also define what is *not* meant by "suffering." Williams and Fiddes wrestle with the complex and dangerous implications of equating suffering to righteous masochism. In any context within which one attempts to justify or make positive the experience of suffering, one must recognize potential dangerous implications.

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[7] Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 117.

[8] Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 50.

[9] Fiddes, 50; Williams, 117.

[10] Fiddes, 51.

Anna Mercedes attempts the task of approaching suffering mindfully, through which she arrives at a picture of intertwined kenosis and power that both affirms the goodness of kenotic sacrifice and warns against the dangers of enduring suffering senselessly.[11] Mercedes rightly draws attention to failed attempts at condemning the virtue of self-sacrifice altogether in the name of reclaiming feminine power. The pervasive tendency of Christian theology to affirm and glorify the act of suffering is not without consequence. For those who identify with traditionally feminine gender roles, the notion of self-sacrifice, or suffering for the benefit of others, can severely limit one's self-actualization.

The synthesis of previous views that Mercedes provides offers a picture of feminine self-sacrifice that is anything but self-fulfilling. Women forced into submissive roles by the theological affirmation of self-sacrifice and giving are directly harmed by such affirmations.[12] Because Christian theology and pastoral care have been historically aimed toward the mitigation of a traditionally "masculine" sin, that of self-aggrandizement, what feminist theologians would identify as "feminine" sin has been either ignored or elevated to a virtuous status.[13] It is important to be mindful that one's elevation of suffering to a form of power or glorification does not further victimize the women that have such suffering thrust upon them. Because of this danger, this thesis seeks to differentiate between suffering that is embraced with consent and suffering that

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[11] Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self Giving* (London: T & T Clark, 2011).

[12] Mercedes, 10-11.

[13] Ibid.

is thrust upon someone. There is a key difference between suffering that is being accepted as a part of mutual relationship and suffering that is being endured as a result of cruelty or wrongdoing. The suffering of an abused wife is not the same as the suffering of a loving partner, parent, or friend.

The differentiation between suffering and pain is evident within the works of Williams and Fiddes. Williams contrasts suffering as being acted upon and suffering as "undergoing pain."[14] Though suffering may naturally include pain, the utilization of suffering that Williams employs does not necessarily account for physical pain alone, such as breaking a bone or recovering from a burn.[15] Fiddes similarly differentiates between the inner feeling of suffering and the impact of suffering from outside ourselves; suffering is "both felt and received… an emotion and an impression."[16] If suffering is merely defined as an "inner state of mind," one risks excluding the real and pressing suffering experienced due to worldly conditions that are beyond one's control.[17] The pressing implication of Fiddes's argument is that because there is a key difference between suffering that is merely felt and suffering that is both felt and received, there is a differentiation to be made between the stoic endurance of pain and the taking up of pain as an intrinsic part of giving relationships. Merely enduring pain for the sake of martyrdom, keeping peace, or fostering the self-actualization of others is not the virtue I wish to extoll. The endurance of suffering is not a virtue that is attributed to Fiddes's

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[14] Williams, 117.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Fiddes, 47.

[17] Ibid., 49.

passible God, as the mere endurance of pain is not characteristic of an ultimate being. Though suffering is to be affirmed as an actuality and even affirmed as an intrinsic element of loving relationships, it must be taken up in order to be virtuous.[18] As the following section will discuss, it is by taking up suffering that God ultimately claims and transforms suffering. It is this process of taking up suffering that is to be imitated by followers of Christ. The ways in which this contextualization protects the marginalized is to be discussed as part of a larger, later argument.

Dorothee Soelle also explores the dangers of extolling a particular kind of suffering within her works. Affliction, a particular category of suffering that Soelle draws from Simone Weil, involves three dimensions: physical, psychological, and social.[19] As Soelle categorizes it, pain that does not involve all three categories is both "easier to overcome" and "easier to forget."[20] Though affliction may not be inherently physical, it manifests in physical ailments like exhaustion and mental strain.[21] Affliction is also necessarily social, including an element of isolation from social groups due to the pain experienced.[22] Soelle's definition of suffering contributes to her interpretation of the

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[18] Dorothee Soelle utilizes the phrase "take" or "take up" in lieu of "bear" or "put up with" in reference to accepting suffering. Soelle criticizes the latter expression as a description of suffering "tolerated, although intolerable." This sentiment expresses an idea that Soelle would rather reject. Soelle prefers "take" in combination with "on, up, over" due to its implication that the "person doing the accepting is himself changed." "Taking" is different from "bearing" in its implication of consent to and ownership of pain, according to Soelle. This is language that Fiddes appropriates. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering,* trans. by Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 103.

[19] Soelle, 13.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid, 14.

[22] Ibid.

crucifixion—God must have experienced all dimensions of affliction in order to have been permanently altered by it.[23] We will return to Soelle's exploration of the passion in later sections.

Soelle draws attention to the difference between affliction that is taken up and suffering that is endured in the name of "theological sadism."[24] Soelle utilizes the term "theological sadism" to describe a theological perception of God, one that she primarily associates with Calvin, that revels in the humiliation and suffering of creation.[25] To avoid limiting our description of suffering to mere self-abasement, we must utilize Soelle's full definition as well as Mercedes's attention to the differing traditional roles of men and women. Because Soelle theorizes that this "theological sadism" arises from guilt regarding sinfulness, Mercedes's conclusions about feminine and masculine sin are pertinent.[26] The tendency of "theological sadism" to involve self-hatred within its claims about suffering is likely influenced by the social station of theologians like Calvin—the masculine values held aloft by a patriarchal society threaten the will and power of God. Naturally, scholars would reject the patriarchal values that are venerated by the society that surrounds them, valuing virtues like submission and humility instead. However, for women that would be exposed to "theological sadism," the state of self-abasement extolled by this theology closely mirrors the oppressive state that they already experience in their daily lives. The same could be said of people of color, immigrants, or those who

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[23] Ibid, 16.

[24] Ibid, 22.

[25] Ibid, 22-23.

[26] Ibid, 24.

are gender non-conforming. The "theology of sadism" that Soelle defines depicts suffering in a way that cannot speak to the affliction felt by the marginalized. Self-abasement only offers hope to those who possess privileged power in the first place. This implication is one of the many reasons why defining suffering is so important. A theologically useful understanding of suffering must be suffering that is not sadistic or masochistic and with which all readers can identify.

What, then, does suffering look like practically? Suffering, as it is to be utilized within this thesis, implies a choice on the part of the sufferer. With Soelle, Fiddes agrees that meaningful suffering requires that the process of suffering be actively chosen.[27] As Fiddes writes, "Though suffering has befallen us, we choose it as our own; or for the sake of love we choose a path where it is likely that suffering will be imposed upon us, and we make that our own."[28] I will refer to this active process of taking up suffering as one's own as "powerful suffering." Powerful suffering is different from suffering passively endured, ignored, or romanticized. As Fiddes elaborates, powerful suffering naturally involves anticipation and expectation.[29] This may take the form of anticipating future suffering (in the case of participating in relationships with the knowledge that suffering is possible and likely imminent) or expectation for the end of suffering.[30]

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[27] Fiddes, 61.

[28] Ibid, 61-62.

[29] Ibid, 77.

[30] Ibid.

Fiddes, therefore, argues that powerful suffering leads the sufferer toward social justice and the future elimination of the state of senseless suffering.[31]

Though there is surely much more to be said about suffering and its various states, the most pressing concerns have been addressed. This thesis differentiates between senseless suffering and powerful suffering. The following sections will focus on the latter and its implications. First, a theological argument will be formed regarding God's suffering. Afterward, the consequences of such a theology for humanity will be explored.

Establishing a Process-Oriented Passibilist Approach to Theology

Impassibilist Approaches

The disparity between the classical picture of God's impassible being and the gospel witness of God's incarnational suffering has been a broadly debated issue within theology for centuries. Divine impassibility has been classically tied to declarations of God's magnanimity.[32] For many theologians, the impassibility of God is a non-negotiable aspect of God's nature, without which God would cease to be God. What is the origin of this claim? For those who defend it so passionately, what is its purpose? To provide context for later counterclaims, I will offer a brief overview of divine impassibility and its relevant implications.

Just as suffering is difficult to define precisely, so also is divine impassibility a difficult concept to succinctly describe. The wealth of discussion involving any aspect of God's nature stems from the difficulty in arriving at universal definitions. Richard E.

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[31] Ibid.

[32] James Keating and Thomas Joseph White, *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2009), 1.

Creel, for example, provides eight definitions for impassibility: (1) "lacking all emotions" (excluding bliss); (2) "in a state of mind that is imperturbable;" (3) "insusceptible to distraction from resolve;" (4) "having a will determined entirely by oneself;" (5) "cannot be affected by an outside force;" (6) "cannot be prevented from achieving one's purpose;" (7) "has no susceptibility to negative emotions;" (8) "cannot be affected by an outside force or changed by oneself."[33]

It is in Creel's fifth definition that Fiddes, Williams, and Soelle would likely find common ground. Some of Creel's definitions of divine impassibility only address portions of divine impassibility's many implications, allowing for compromise with little consequence on the part of the impassibilist. For instance, any claim that God lacks in all emotions except bliss (Creel's first definition) or is not susceptible to negative emotions (Creel's seventh definition) is easily dismissed as lacking in biblical support. Because these depictions of impassibility are easy to accept without sacrificing other attributes, it is important to distinguish them from those definitions (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8) that actively pose a challenge for notions of omnipotence, immutability, omniscience, or transcendence. If one is to favor a nuanced view of divine impassibility, as Creel attempts to do, one cannot merely concede that God experiences emotions.[34]

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[33] Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 9.

[34] Creel's final summation of a nuanced theory of divine impassibility rejects the claim that God experiences emotions, but does accept that God experiences the changing of time. Creel does not argue that God is "in time," but rather that God acknowledges the passing of one moment into another. This is the extent of Creel's acceptance of any form of passibility of God, separate from the incarnation (204-207).

What, then, is the purpose of arguing in favor of an impassible God? For the theologians who do so, the transcendence and independence of God is at stake.[35] Unfortunately, modern defenders of divine impassibility only superficially address what drives them to revive support for impassibility as a theological doctrine.[36] The methodology utilized by impassibilist writers, however, may provide insight into their motivations. For example, James Keating and Thomas Joseph White introduce their collection of essays regarding divine impassibility with a central question: how can we hope to be saved from suffering by a God who is not free from suffering?[37] How could we possibly hope to worship a God who is weak? This notion is shared by Creel when he presents the "universal" point of agreement between theologians on the issue of impassibility: God must be impassible in nature, because "no being whose very nature is vulnerable to change could be worthy of unconditional worship."[38]

For impassibilists, the logical starting point appears to be creation. God cannot create out of desire for creation, because that would necessitate that God be changed or moved by creation.[39] God creates "that there might also be others to enjoy the great good of existence under his sovereignty."[40] For Creel, suffering is a great evil, but is

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[35] Keating and White, 1-4.

[36] Creel and Gavrilyuk do not seem driven by any pressing theological need to defend these ideas, but rather feel as if the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility has been mistreated or mishandled in modernity. Creel. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought. Oxford Early Christian Studies,* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2006.

[37] Keating and White, 12.

[38] Creel, 13.

[39] Ibid, 207.

[40] Ibid.

overwhelmed by the good of existence, so much so that anyone who suffers would willingly choose to suffer again in order to experience God's presence.[41] As we will see, the view of suffering presented by impassibilist theologians contrasts starkly with the understanding of theologians like Fiddes.

Finally, for some, the notion of divine impassibility is central to the unique quality of the Christian faith. Paul Gavrilyuk, for example, defends the classical doctrine of divine impassibility as a special paradox that Christian tradition upholds.[42] Gavrilyuk argues that the dichotomy between impassibilist Hellenistic philosophy and the suffering God of the biblical text is merely a scholarly construction.[43] This scholarly portrayal of both Hellenistic philosophy and the biblical text considers neither the complexity of Hellenistic thought nor the hesitancy with which the biblical text ascribes emotion to God.[44] Gavrilyuk rejects the critique that early Christian theologians were somehow limited by Hellenistic notions of an apathetic God, choosing instead to explore the complexity of the patristic conversation surrounding divine impassibility.[45] The incarnate suffering of an impassible God, according to Gavrilyuk, is a central feature of the Christian faith that ought to be admired and retained into modernity.[46]

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Gavrilyuk, 175.

[43] Ibid, 21-47.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

Gavrilyuk ultimately arrives at a defense of Cyril of Alexandria, favoring a view of divine impassibility that is inherently paradoxical.[47] J. Warren Smith further elaborates upon Cyril of Alexandria's defense of a God that "suffers impassibly."[48] Cyril's defense of divine impassibility attempts to retain both Christ's suffering and God's immutability. In doing so, Cyril claims that God suffers in the incarnation without experiencing change.[49] Cyril makes a distinction between the suffering that God experiences on the cross and the degenerative suffering that human beings may experience as a result of illness, emotional trauma, or impending death.[50] If God were to experience degenerative suffering, God would become lesser.[51] Suffering of this nature would not allow God to continue to be God by definition, as it would make God lesser. Further, by voluntarily entering into a state of suffering and subsequently remaining unchanged by it, God retains impassibility.[52] The state of suffering must be one that is entered into by God, rather than an inherent part of God's nature, because a God that suffers inherently has no need for an incarnation that can suffer, even impassibly.[53]

The retention of this traditional paradox—the impassible suffering of God— is central for impassibilists like Gavrilyuk. This centrality is directly related to God's value

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[47] Ibid, 135-172.

[48] J. Warren Smith, *"Suffering Impassibly: Christ's Passion in Cyril of Alexandria's Soteriology," Pro Ecclesia* 11, no. 4 (2002).

[49] Ibid., 470.

[50] Ibid, 469.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid, 472-473.

[53] Ibid.

as an object of worship. For God to remain God by definition, God must remain unchanging in nature. An unstable God of constant change is not worthy of worship and cannot provide safety or stability for humanity. A God of this kind provides no hope. As we will continue to explore, passibilist theologians have met the challenge of defending a passible God that is worthy of worship by reorienting the classical understanding of suffering and power.

Passibility and Wrath

There are many nuances among arguments in favor of divine passibility. Though this thesis will favor Paul Fiddes's argument for divine passibility as given in *The Creative Suffering of God*, the problems associated with other views will be addressed now. We will begin by comparing the views of Paul Fiddes and Kazō Kitamori.

According to Kitamori's account of suffering, the reality that we experience is necessarily and fundamentally flawed.[54] Because humanity has sinned and sin must be punished, God feels wrath.[55] However, God also possesses the will to love creation, even as it is broken.[56] As Kitamori summarizes, "The 'pain' of God reflects his will to love the object of his wrath…. God who must sentence sinners to death fought with God who wishes to love them. The fact that this fighting God is not two different gods but the same God causes his pain."[57] Kitamori follows Luther in affirming this tension. In the

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[54] Kazō Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), 21.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

crucifixion, God experienced God's own wrath and was wounded by it, initiating atonement.[58]

In contrast to Creel's claim that there is a universal agreement among scholars regarding the impassibility of God's nature, Kitamori argues that it is in God's nature to be in pain.[59] Kitamori describes the crucifixion as the "astonishing fact of the gospel," a shocking revelation for which the church has lost its fascination.[60] According to Kitamori, God undergoes literal death through Christ. God is thus viewed as capable of experiencing a fundamental alteration of self. The death of Christ is brought about by the incredible tension between God's need to punish sinners (wrath) and God's love for creation. When Christ dies, God changes fundamentally. Because the death of Christ is central to all of Kitamori's theological claims, the potential implication of God's nature changing is not an issue that Kitamori addresses. The immutability of God's nature is not as important as the centrality of Christ's death.

Fiddes offers an alternative account of God's pain. We cannot understand God's suffering as a conflict between wrath and love because this suffering would be beyond human understanding and entirely apart from human experience.[61] Because of this, Kitamori's explanation for God's suffering does not adequately address the way in which humanity practically experiences suffering. The arguments of Kitamori and Fiddes also differ in their assumptions regarding the omnipotence and immanence of God. Because

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[58] Ibid, 22.

[59] Ibid. 45.

[60] Ibid. 44.

[61] Fiddes, 22.

Fiddes intertwines concepts from process thought into his discussion of divine passibility, he avoids the tension that Kitamori finds within a God who both actively punishes sin and unconditionally loves. Despite these differences, Fiddes agrees with Kitamori that there are a vast array of texts within the Old Testament that depict God as experiencing pain or turmoil in response to sin or its results.[62] The two theologians differ in their treatment of these texts and their resulting depictions of God, a dialogue that will become important as we turn to the biblical text later in this thesis.

Divine Passibility in Process Theology

The aim of this thesis is not to present a new view of divine passibility. Rather, I intend to contextualize existing theories as they relate to the biblical text and to utilize them to inform a new strategy for interpreting the text. The following overview of process-oriented passibilist theories will attempt to provide the first foundational claim for the hermeneutic to be developed: God powerfully suffers. The following overview will also address both the problems associated with impassibilist theories and how a process-oriented approach can solve problems associated with non-process passibilist theories.

The argument that Fiddes presents in favor of divine passibility begins in the same place as process thought: human experience.[63] The classical understanding of divine glorification in the form of coercive power and punishment also arises from human experience, but, as Fiddes argues, misunderstands the relationship between humanity's

[62] Ibid, 24-25.

[63] Fiddes, 228.

realization of power and the ultimate expression of divine power—the cross.[64] Langdon Gilkey argues that human awareness of temporality leads to the conception of what is good as exclusively that which provides invulnerability to evil.[65] What is "good" then takes the form of changelessness, eventually leading to the exaltation of power, wealth, and "passionless indifference."[66] In contrast with Gavrilyuk, Gilkey connects this human tendency to equate goodness with invulnerability to Hellenistic conceptions of perfection that were later echoed by the early church.[67] It is important to note that the connection between invulnerable power and goodness arises from a human need for security, echoing the concern of many scholars who defend divine impassibility.

The key difference between Fiddes's assessment of the attributes of God and many classic perspectives is that Fiddes recognizes that the ability to inflict suffering upon others, expressed in its extreme form as coercive omnipotence, is a contradiction to the revelation of God's character. Similarly, God has not escaped or avoided suffering, but has knowingly and willfully embraced it as a part of God's nature.[68] In agreement with Soelle, Fiddes asserts that the empowerment we feel as we take up suffering and make it our own must also belong to God, lest we possess power that God does not or

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[64] Ibid, 89

[65] Though Langdon Gilkey is not influenced by process philosophy, his insight into the theological conception of power and passibility are helpful. His frequent emphasis upon the vulnerability and powerlessness of humanity, however, contrasts with that of Fiddes and other process theologians. Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: A Study of the Christian Doctrine of Creation* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1959), 213.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid, 214.

[68] Fiddes.

cannot possess.[69] Fiddes's argument addresses the claim made by Creel that affirming a passible God would result in a "religion of pity" in which God is made to be vulnerable and weak.[70] In contrast, Fiddes's passible God possesses an incredible power that is only accessible through the most divine form of love, relationship, and suffering.

Fiddes asks a very different set of fundamental questions in comparison to impassibilist thinkers. If we can experience non-being, can God experience non-being or is non-being alien to God?[71] What does it mean for God to experience something new or to possess a future?[72] These sticky questions drive Fiddes's argument. Though the necessity of suffering in relationship is present within Fiddes's work, his appeal to the experience of anticipating non-being by God is most intriguing. Essentially, Fiddes attempts to answer a question central to Christian belief: How can God die? While God does not experience death—as no living or non-living being can experience death itself—God experiences the anticipation of death, or relatedness to non-being.[73] From creation, God struggles between being and non-being, forming order out of disorder.[74] It is in this real experience that the weight of the cross takes on meaning. Through the incarnation, the Trinity experiences a multiplicity of suffering that includes physical death and

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[69] Ibid, 61.

[70] Creel, 125.

[71] Fiddes explores this question in chapters 7, 8, and 9, utilizing language from Tillich, Barth, Jüngel, and Moltmann. Here, Fiddes is participating in a much wider theological discussion, but his conclusions ultimately break from these scholars in favor of his own synthesis.

[72] Fiddes explores this question in chapter 4.

[73] Fiddes, 198.

[74] Ibid.

alienation, but is not ultimately consumed by it.[75] God dies, but remains God, and becomes more glorified as a result.[76] There is an important implication to be drawn from Fiddes's argument: God changes as a result of suffering death and becomes more powerful in the process of suffering. This not only establishes the notion of a powerful God that can change fundamentally, but also establishes the role of suffering as a form of glorifying power.

The risk that suffering poses for immutability is not a concern for Fiddes, but is actually the vehicle of God's glorification. Fiddes equates the "glory of God" to both the divine nature and hope for the future, the latter of which implies that God increases in glory over time as creation approaches the eschaton.[77] Moltmann also characterizes glorification in this way, relating it to a movement from nothingness to hope of liberation.[78] The claim that God moves toward greater glorification, along with creation, allows for a God that changes over time but gains greater stability as a result. God is not static, but moves toward a goal of future hope.

Fiddes's reorientation of divine attributes is characteristic of most process theologies.[79] Bruce Epperly, for example, distinguishes between two theological approaches: apophatic and kataphatic.[80] While the apophatic approach (what God is not)

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[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid., 78.

[78] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 218.

[79] Bruce G. Epperly, *"Process Theology and Lived Omnipresence: An Essay in Practical Theology, Encounter* 68, no. 3 (2007), 25.

[80] Ibid.

assumes God to be mysterious, generally beyond understanding, and fundamentally transcendent, the kataphatic approach (what God is) assumes God to be revealed in creation.[81] According to Epperly, a process-oriented approach to theology will typically radicalize the classic trinity of "omni" words associated with God (omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience).[82] God's omniscience is understood to be knowledge of all things actual and possible, but constrained by temporality, meaning that perfect knowledge evolves over time as new possibilities are generated.[83] Though omniscience is peripheral to the process-oriented passibilist approaches examined here, the attributes of omnipotence and omnipresence are central. Where Fiddes's approach differs from Williams is in this emphasis. As Epperly explains, a process-oriented theology will generally emphasize divine omnipresence, establishing God as present "everywhere in all things."[84] Williams focuses upon divine omnipresence in his defense of divine suffering. Williams' argument more closely reflects those that Creel directly refutes—God is revealed through direct contact with creation, moving through human history and sharing directly in our suffering.[85]

Rather than focusing upon omnipresence, though arguments like those of Williams are also represented, Fiddes's argument emphasizes a reorientation of divine omnipotence, as explained above. The traditional understanding of valuable power, what

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[81] Ibid, 26.

[82] Ibid, 22.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid, 23.

[85] Williams, 5.

Robert Mesle calls "unilateral power," has been attributed to God apophatically under the assumption that coercive, unilateral power is preferable over the "weakness" of suffering.[86] In other words, the ability to control or direct others without being affected in return is traditionally viewed as more desirable than being affected through change. The king who possesses the power to subjugate citizens is more magnificent than the citizens who suffer under his rule. Therefore, God must be like the king. This conclusion is not drawn kataphatically, but apophatically. This means that reorienting our understanding of what kind of power is desirable allows us to address passibility via a much easier route.

Rather than attempting to disprove a kataphatic claim (God does not suffer), we are instead open to reaffirm a classic apophatic claim (God is omnipotent) in a new way. God is affirmed as the most powerful being, but what does this power entail? This is the reorientation that Fiddes provides. Mesle, though largely writing from a secular position, makes a similar claim:

> Nor can God remain unaffected by the world: God is the only one who has the strength, the ability, to be open to every single experience in the world. God is the only one who can take everything in, integrate it with God's own infinitely ancient wisdom, and create God's self out of that relationship in each moment. God is the only one who can then feed back to every creature in the world a lure and call toward those possibilities that are best for it.[87]

In process, or becoming, creation grows, transforms, and becomes new. How could God remain God without participating in this process? Rather than supposing that God cannot change, a process-oriented passibilist approach insists that God *must* change,

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[86] C. Robert Mesle, *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead* (Pennsylvania: Templeton Pr., 2009), 65-71.

[87] Ibid, 87. Mesle's ideas are built upon those of A.N. Whitehead.

because change is the ultimate form of glorification. Further, Fiddes argues that God *desires* this participation, for it allows God to form meaningful relationships with creation, be altered by it, and be moved to end its suffering through glorification.[88]

God's intent is demonstrated in the cross, as is stated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

> God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us…. only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness.[89]

To recognize God's omnipotence as weakness is to reorient our understanding of desirable power to more accurately reflect our lived experience in creation. Moltmann addresses the critique of omnipotence by protest atheism, noting the movement's sentiment that "a God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him…. Finally, a God who is only omnipotent is in himself an incomplete being, for he cannot experience helplessness and powerlessness."[90]

Moltmann answers this critique by offering a God that suffers and is therefore powerful in doing so. When suffering is understood to be powerful, capable of making one better, more compassionate, more loving, and more complete in relationship to others, God can be understood as powerful in suffering. *This* is the great paradox of

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[88] Fiddes, 78-79.

[89] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* ed. by Eberhard Bethge, [1st American] enl. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 360-361.

[90] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 223.

Christian hope, not that the unsuffering God suffers in Christ, but that the suffering God is most powerful in weakness.

Praxis in Powerful Suffering

What, then, are we to do with the conclusion that God suffers? How is humanity to respond to this revelation, and how ought our practical, pastoral concerns shift? As Moltmann claims, "It is in suffering that the whole human question about God arises."[91] The reality of suffering is inarguable, especially after the horrors of war and inhuman atrocities we have witnessed in the twentieth century. That we suffer is granted, but begs the question of God's suffering. Once the question of God's suffering is resolved, how ought the Christian approach to human suffering change in response?

It is at this point that the warnings of Soelle and Mercedes must be discussed again. How can a theology of suffering avoid condoning abuse and perpetuating cycles of violence? How does a theology of suffering advocate for the abused partner or disenfranchised person of color? Soelle openly dismisses Christian approaches to suffering that do not adequately address these concerns. Both "Christian masochism" and "Christian apathy" are condemned by Soelle as misguided, or even malicious attempts at gaining meaning from suffering.[92]

The pastor who advises a woman suffering within an abusive marriage to forgive her persecutor, return to her domestic duties, or otherwise endure her suffering misleads

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[91] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God,* 47.

[92] Soelle discusses both Christian masochism and apathy at length in chapters 1 and 2.

the woman into believing that her suffering is, in itself, redemptive.[93] The pastor misleads the woman into believing that the endurance of her suffering alone is Christ-like. However, within the framework that has been established by process-oriented passibilism, i.e., a theology of powerful suffering, the abused woman may have access to better guidance. An understanding of suffering as exclusively evil or a product of God's wrath leads to the conclusions against which Soelle warns. Suffering is viewed as either a sign of misdeeds on the part of the sufferer or a necessary catalyst for personal salvation and growth. Neither perspective, either Soelle's Christian masochism or apathy, assist the sufferer practically.

Powerful suffering, however, offers the potential to move Christians to social justice. As Moltmann argues, those who love cannot stand the suffering of another and are moved to put an end to it.[94] Powerfully suffering in love for the other results in more than mere acknowledgement of another's pain or a search for the other's guilty sins.[95] The sufferer in love experiences and is changed by the cries of the other and cannot avoid being impacted by them.[96] This is why choosing to be in relation with others is such a difficult and coveted choice. By choosing to be in relation with others, we actively take up the risk of suffering with them. Choosing to love others meaningfully, as Christ

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[93] The same could be said for men or the gender non-conforming suffering the abuses of spouses, parents, or any others. Soelle and Mercedes focus specifically on the experiences of women, but this treatment of suffering is not exclusive to this perspective. However, it ought to be noted that the way in which women are instructed to deal with their suffering is often different from instructions given to men, as Soelle explains.

[94] Moltmann, 51-52.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

willfully chose death, is to choose to open oneself up to suffering. Because it has already been established that God is the being who suffers supremely, to choose the possibility of suffering with the other is to choose a path that is Christ-like. This is the path of the *imago dei.*[97]

Despite the appeal of this claim, it does not yet fully avoid Soelle's warning against the Christian tendency toward self-abasement. After all, if the abused wife is told that she ought to suffer for others, would this not be counter-productive? Would she simply continue to suffer as a martyr? This concern is addressed at length by both Soelle and Mercedes. Mercedes utilizes psychological insights to pose an argument against characterizing the sufferer as a martyr. Women who suffer abuse at the hands of spouses, parents, or other authority figures are often evaluated under the same misguided framework that informs the notion that unilateral, coercive power is supremely desirable.[98] Women have typically only been seen as "resistant" to their abusers if their resistance is physical, a characterization that stems from the patriarchal understanding of control as physical dominance.[99]

However, Mercedes recognizes other strategies that have been employed by women and other marginalized groups in abusive circumstances that are actively resistant, but often misunderstood as passive. These methods can take the form of listlessness, silence, or "learned hopelessness," but, notably, may also take the form of

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[97] The concept of *imago dei* is discussed at greater length in the following section.

[98] Mercedes, 105.

[99] Ibid.

kenotic self-giving.[100] Mercedes recounts a number of stories from women who have survived and overcome their abuse by loving others passionately. These accounts of resistance as self-giving may take the form of children refusing to take up their abusive parent's racist language or a mother prioritizing the lives of her children over the escape of suicide.[101] While Mercedes is careful to qualify that these forms ought not be prioritized over alleviating the suffering of these women in whatever way possible, her point is that not all self-giving can be classified as passive acceptance.[102] For many, reclaiming suffering for themselves and acting in compassion for the suffering of others allows them to resist those who would inflict pain upon them.

Soelle develops this concept further. The goal of powerful suffering is not to free oneself from suffering, but to liberate others.[103] As Soelle writes, "God has no other hands than ours."[104] By taking up suffering and reclaiming it, we regain the ability to seek out and liberate those who suffer innocently and are helpless to stop it.[105] Soelle argues that the Christian is in a unique position to end the suffering of others. A Christian soul is one that has already experienced the void of alienation from God—the dark night of the soul—and has been faithful through it.[106] The Christian has loved God even within the void, and believes in hope for the future. When rightly understood, the suffering of

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[100] Ibid, 106-108.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Soelle, 148-149.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Ibid, 164.

[106] Ibid, 157.

God with creation and the subsequent taking up of suffering by the Christian can lead to greater efforts in eliminating suffering for humanity at large. As Soelle poetically illustrates, "He who does not weep needs no utopia; to him who only weeps God remains mute."[107] It is the unique Christian quality of finding hope on the cross that enables its adherents to fight harder for the end, a future of eschatological glorification.[108]

Soelle offers her contemporaries, the leaders of the civil rights movement, as exemplary of hope that emboldens one to act. Though they suffer in their movement, beaten and demonized, they do not stray from their hope. They "seek and produce confrontation as they make suffering visible."[109] As Christ, they do not run from suffering in hopes of escaping it, but pursue it so that it may be theirs to claim.

Contemporary experience offers parallels to Soelle's example. In early 2020, the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others rekindled the flames of the nation-wide Black Lives Matter movement. Every day, as I witnessed countless protestors being gassed, shot, and beaten in the streets, I could not help comparing them to Christ. With their signs and their words, they took up the cross and confronted suffering so that it might be visible. They did not shy from the video footage of Floyd's murder or the reality of systemic racism. They boldly proclaimed it, never backing down from their persecution. I witnessed powerful suffering—the suffering of God—in motion, and I sincerely believe that their efforts will be remembered as a momentous historical

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[107] Ibid, 166.

[108] Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology,* (London: T & T Clark. 2003), 116.

[109] Soelle, 164.

occasion. It is this suffering that we all ought to emulate—suffering that we own and that allows us to work toward a future in which no one is forced to suffer helplessly.

The Biblical Meta-Narrative of Powerful Suffering

Though biblical interpretation is an inherently cyclical endeavor, petitioning and challenging the conclusions of reason, experience, and tradition in its continuous examination of scripture, theology is too often the victim of isolation. This is especially the case for process theology, which can be accurately critiqued for its emphasis on secular philosophy and lack of emphasis on biblical analysis. The most comprehensive theological position is that which tests itself against the biblical text. Of course, some theologians may choose to accept the contradictions present between their theological conclusions and what the biblical text may be interpreted as asserting. However, it is the position of this thesis that a theological position is most complete when it is reaffirmed via evidence within the biblical text. Similarly, the practice of biblical interpretation is most valid when it is informed by a theological position. It is thus vital for the process-oriented passibilist position examined in the preceding section to be grounded in the biblical text. The following section will attempt to test the theological claims outlined above against the biblical canon. The thesis that I will attempt to demonstrate is this: The biblical canon[110] presents an overarching narrative of suffering that begins with creation, is refined through various conflicts, and is completed in eschatological hope.

[110] This thesis specifically references the Protestant canon, excluding the apocrypha, though the arguments presented retain their validity irrespective of one's choice of Christian canon.

Creation

The creation texts within Genesis perform the role of introducing the canon's primary protagonists—the two figures most important to those who seek understanding within the biblical text—God and humanity. Through a narrative of creation, the text establishes who God is, what God's purposes are, and the role of humanity in those purposes. Though the creation narratives are not the first texts to be written or established within the biblical canon, they are presumably placed at the beginning for a reason. Because Genesis provides context for the texts that follow, it also provides context for the overarching narrative argued for within this thesis. In relation to the biblical story of suffering, the Genesis creation narratives serve two key functions. First, Genesis 1 establishes the concept of the *imago dei* and the nature of humanity as inherently relational. Second, Genesis 2-3 provides the first case of suffering on the part of both God and humanity, establishing "suffering" as a central theme within the canon.

Genesis 1:26-28 presents several challenges in terms of translation and interpretation. The plural pronouns utilized in reference to God—"let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness"—seem to contradict the monotheistic leanings of modern Judaism and Christianity (Gen. 1:26).[111] Naturally, later developments in Christian Trinitarian theology provided alternate routes of interpretation in response to this verse. As Moltmann argues, despite the probable lack of intentionality on the part of

[111] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

the author, this plural language has been reinterpreted in light of the later gospel and provided the foundation for Trinitarian understanding of this passage.[112]

Though a Trinitarian interpretation was surely not intended by the biblical author, the existence of later Trinitarian interpretations of the passage complicate the connected doctrine of the *imago dei*. The parallel between the plural God and created humanity poses a challenge. What does it mean to be made in God's image, especially given that God is to be understood as three mutually indwelling persons? Moltmann addresses other interpretations of the *imago dei* in response to this challenge, making a distinction between the theological and anthropological understanding of humanity's "likeness to God."[113]

Analogies to substance, form, proportionality, and relation all serve primarily to differentiate humanity from other animals or parts of creation, rather than beginning with humanity's relation to God.[114] The *imago dei* is a statement of God's relationship with humanity before it is a statement of the nature of humanity.[115] Much like the later differentiation between Adam and Eve, "the God who creates for himself his image on earth finds his correspondence in that image."[116] Humanity is created to correspond to God—to be in relationship with God. Humanity, then, not only serves as God's

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[112] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God,* 218.

[113] Ibid, 220.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid.

counterpart but as a revelation of God's "splendour" and representative within creation.[117] It is not enough, then, to interpret humanity's "likeness to God" as an anthropological feature. Rather, it is the whole existence of humanity that bears the *imago dei.*[118]

Moltmann argues that humanity's inheritance of the *imago dei* is similar to representative divinity within Egyptian royal theology, wherein the Pharaoh is interpreted as a "copy of God."[119] The Genesis reinterpretation of this concept has, according to Moltmann, "revolutionary political potential," as it redistributes the Egyptian conception of likeness to God, removing it from its place among royals and attributing it to humanity at large.[120] The *imago dei*, then, becomes a radical statement of equality and shared divinity, reaffirming and even emphasizing the theological claims made earlier in this thesis. Not only are humans only complete in the *imago dei* when in relationship to one another, but this relationship is not one that resembles a unilateral power structure that excludes the masses. The king is not the only one who shares in God's likeness. Rather, the entirety of humanity bears this kinship and, most importantly, those who live in relation to others exemplify it in its fullest sense.

I have previously argued that true relational power inherently involves suffering, as suffering is the capacity to be acted upon. As Genesis 1 establishes the relationship of God and humanity, Genesis 2-3 provides the first account of what precisely being in relationship entails. It quickly establishes that the created person does not share in God's

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[117] Ibid, 220-21.

[118] Ibid, 221.

[119] Ibid, 219.

[120] Ibid.

ability to be self-sufficiently inter-relational. In order to be fulfilled, the singular person must find a suitable being that corresponds to it (Gen. 2:18). Despite a great deal of searching among the creatures that had already been created, the person's counterpart could not be found (vv. 18-19). Finally, God separates the singular person that was created in God's likeness and splits it into two (vv. 21-23). The two persons were not only similar in form and likeness to God (v. 23) but could regain their interpenetrative relationality, once again becoming "one flesh" (v. 24).

Adam and Eve are not only representative of the *imago dei* that is shared by all of humanity, but also demonstrate humanity's purpose and goal of relationality. In the relationship between Adam and Eve, there is no unilateral power, but relational power—neither is made to be ashamed (v. 24). However, when Adam and Eve obtain the ability to discern between good and evil (Gen. 3:1-7), becoming susceptible to death and non-being, they experience one of Soelle's three qualities of affliction: isolation.[121] The two become estranged to one another, and they feel shame. Quickly, when accused by God, the two turn against one another in blame (vv. 8-13), fleeing from the possibility of suffering and further isolating themselves. They abandon the relationality that they were created to embody. The couple chooses the knowledge of non-being, gaining the great burden of suffering in anticipation of death (vv. 17-19). In their creative activities, they will feel physical and mental pain (vv. 16-18). With their newfound freedom, humanity gained a state of affliction. This punishment begs a question: Does God also share in this affliction?

[121] Soelle, 14.

The following summary concludes the narrative: "Then the LORD God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever'" (v. 22). In taking from the tree, humanity gained in its likeness to God. Humanity gained the necessary side-effect of the knowledge of non-being, which is suffering. If God already possessed this knowledge, God must also be understood as possessing this suffering. On its own, this affliction is not positive, but it can be taken up in love and relationship to be transformed. Thus, the central conflict of the biblical narrative is established: both humanity and God suffer as a result of their shared nature, but paradoxically seek an end to suffering through relationship with one another.

Throughout the other chapters of Genesis, other stories of suffering and relationship are offered. The first death is experienced, solidifying the finite nature of humanity (4). God is grieved by humanity, feels regret for the act of creation, and moves to destroy the earth (6-9).[122] God dialogues with Abraham and changes God's course of action (18:22-33). In the first opening chapters of Genesis, God is depicted as suffering in relation to humanity and changing as a result of the petitions of human beings. It is clear that the God of Genesis is not a God that is impassible—the God of Genesis is deeply related to creation, moved by the actions and words of those human beings with whom

[122] Notably, Gen. 6:6 is the first instance within the Hebrew Bible of עָצַב (Strong's H6087), meaning "to be in pain." Interestingly, this term may also be utilized to indicate shaping, forming, or copying. Though the flood narrative of Gen. 6-9 is not a central concern within this thesis, there is room within biblical scholarship for an examination of the flood narrative in conjunction with the theological assertion of God's passibility. Within this narrative, God not only suffers because of humanity's sinfulness, but is moved in response to it. After the event of the flood is complete, God is again moved by Noah's existence and forms a covenant with humanity as a result.

God is in relationship, and is inextricably tied to the fate chosen by creation within the Garden.

Exodus

"Getting free of existing suffering," what Soelle describes as "the greatest theme of the Bible," is the focus of the book of Exodus at large.[123] The Israelites are presented as "groaning" in their state of slavery, crying out (Exod. 2:23-25). God takes notice of their suffering and remembers God's covenantal relationship with them (25). The narrative then presents the story of the collaborative effort between God and Moses to free the Israelites from their suffering. The plight of the Israelites is undeserved—it is not a punishment for their misdeeds or some result of their own actions.[124] Their suffering is not God's will.[125] Rather, it is the will of the overlord, Pharaoh, to inflict punishment upon them in the name of greater productivity and material wealth.[126]

The Pharaoh is a being of unilateral power occupied with creaturely passions. Fittingly, the Pharaoh is depicted as a character that rarely shows personal agency or emotion. The puzzling meaning of the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart (which comes to fruition first in 7:13) is indicative of his lack of agency within the Exodus narrative itself. Pharaoh serves a purpose as an obstacle, being objectified rather than having any real power. This both establishes the Pharaoh's power as illusory and empowers God and Moses in comparison. The Pharaoh's primary character trait is impassibility, unwavering

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[123] Soelle, 109.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid.

and dispassionate resolve in the face of Moses' requests. This is contrasted with God's cooperative dialogue with Moses, a sign of God's willingness to be acted upon by a human agent. The immovable Pharaoh and his various arbitrary cruelties are absurd so that they may highlight the alternative: the compassionate, suffering Yahweh.[127] This contrast is central in the Hebrew Bible's presentation of the narrative.

Throughout the texts that follow Exodus, the remembrance of slavery in Egypt becomes a warning, promise, and ritual. Even today, Yahweh's characterization as the God that released the Israelites from captivity is cherished as one of the most important tenets of Judaism. Yahweh's covenant with Israel builds upon a foundation of compassionate recognition of suffering. Following from the establishment of the *imago dei* and the first demonstration of both divine and human suffering, the exodus from Egypt emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and taking up suffering so that it may be conquered. In this narrative, the biblical authors tackle the problem of suffering imposed by unilateral power and provide an alternative that gives them hope to defeat it.

Reexamination in Exile

The contemplation of suffering by biblical authors continues through the other books of the Hebrew Bible. The destruction of the divided kingdom of Israel, first by the Assyrians and again by the Babylonians, is a frequent concern that the Hebrew Bible addresses. The exile of the Israelites from their promised land that followed these instances of horrific destruction is also incredibly important, both in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish religious tradition. For a people group that placed a great emphasis on the

[127] Ibid.

land that they claimed, tying their identity and religious faith to the land itself, being forcibly removed from that land was devastating and demanded examination. As many of the texts of the Hebrew Bible date to the post-exilic period, within which the Israelites attempted to find the purpose or cause of their affliction, the question of suffering can be found frequently throughout. Among the explorations of suffering to be found within the Hebrew Bible, aside from those previously discussed, the topic seems to be most pronounced among the eighth-century prophets and the poetic books. Among these, two specific books will be highlighted for their relevance to the discussion at hand: Hosea and Job.

Hosea's marital metaphor for the destruction of Israel and impending exile is a difficult and violent one. The utilization of brutality against women to illustrate God's intentions is a problem that must be addressed with care. While there is no question that the metaphorical presentation in Hosea of Israel as a whoring wife is an insufficient one, there may be more to glean from the book of Hosea than its violence (Hos. 2:2-15). The decision to compare Israel to a wife and Yahweh to a husband is an informative one. Though the metaphor may not be one that depicts the equality of two partners historically, associating the relationship between Yahweh and Israel as a covenantal marriage suggests that each partner is connected to and deeply affected by the other. Just as Israel is influenced by God, God is influenced by the actions of Israel and the Israelites. Unfortunately, the actions of the Israelites put the relationship in jeopardy. God does not punish the people directly, but gives them up to the "natural consequences of

their own actions."[128] The folly of Israel is moving away from relationship with God, toward non-being.

As the Israelites turn away from relationship with God, they also turn away from relationship with one another, primarily as seen in the clash between the social classes. The eighth-century prophets, including Hosea, focus on social justice in response to this trajectory toward non-being. The consequence of turning away from the suffering of others in self-preservation is further alienation and the stagnation of oneself. God is not, however, indifferent to the suffering that the Israelites endure as a result of their turning away. Rather, Hosea is careful to demonstrate that God laments the suffering of Israel.[129] Because humanity is autonomous, human beings can choose estrangement from God. As this choice results in the suffering of humanity, it also results in the suffering of God.[130] God laments aloud, "How can I give you up, 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" (11:8). God is stricken by the decisions made by human beings, moved to compassion by God's desire for relationship with them. Despite God's care and concern, the autonomy of creation necessitates the

[128] Fiddes, 24.

[129] Ibid, 25.

[130] Ibid.

ability to choose non-being. The great struggle and affliction of God is this consequence, and the alleviation of suffering becomes the most vital goal.[131]

Job also explores the problem of suffering. While Williams characterizes Job as eventually "awed to silence, not by divine love, but by God's absolute power," a conclusion that would run contrary to the canonical narrative of suffering, alternative interpretations of the book of Job are possible.[132] It must be noted that Job frequently occupies itself with difficult questions and protest. The book of Job is somewhat akin to a Socratic dialogue, within which Job is confronted by strife and forced to contemplate its source. Throughout, Job attempts to find answers as he ponders options offered by those close to him and even directly from God. Clearly, Job is blameless for his torment (Job 1:1, 8). Job's final submission in the knowledge of God's absolute power is a somewhat unsatisfactory one. Though Job repents "in dust and ashes," the reader is left to question why this must be so (42:6). If Job is blameless, is he wrong in merely daring to question the state of his punishment?

Soelle characterizes Job in an interesting fashion. Soelle compares the book of Job to a folktale, in which mortal humans are tested by a trickster god.[133] The difference between Job and the typical mortal protagonist is that Job has no hope of conquering his various obstacles—Job's trials are not made up of feats of heroism, but endurance

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[131] Williams suggests that the prophets were prevented from explicitly identifying God's suffering due to reverence for the holy. The writers were likely hesitant to make such claims about the divine, so there may be layers of intent to be uncovered if the texts are given proper consideration. Williams asserts that the prophets *do* describe a God that suffers, despite the clandestine nature of the depictions (31-33).

[132] Williams, 29.

[133] Soelle, 112.

tests.[134] Soelle rightly points to the stark difference between the tyrant-God of Job and the lamenting God of the prophets.[135] The God who suffers in the alienation of humanity cannot be the same God who rebukes the faithful for questioning the purpose of their affliction.

Soelle's solution to this contradiction is found within Job 19:25, in the form of a disputed phrase: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth."[136] Soelle equates the phrase translated as "Redeemer" within the NRSV with "advocate" or "blood-avenger," arguing that the figure Job appeals to within this verse is not the God who has inflicted him with such suffering.[137] Though Soelle goes on to insist that Job's answer to this unearned suffering is an atheistic cry that will be later answered in Christ,[138] I disagree with this conclusion.

As previously noted, Job's questioning takes the form of a Socratic dialogue, offering multiple potential causes of Job's suffering. The musings of Job and the various voices he consults may be reflective of the dialogue occurring within the author's own community. In the face of human suffering, Job is a series of answers that encourage dialogue. There is a reason why Job is such a perplexing text: for all of the questions that the book of Job raises, it answers very few of them. The most important conclusion for this thesis is that the authors of the Hebrew Bible were actively contemplating the role of

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[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid, 117.

[136] Ibid, 118.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Ibid, 119.

suffering in their lives, an engagement the book of Job clearly demonstrates. Further, this contemplation did not exclude God. Amidst its various depictions of God's character, the Hebrew Bible offers a God that suffers as humanity does. These writings provide the bedrock for later reinterpretations of suffering in light of the cross.

Cross

The meaning and purpose of suffering is demonstrated through what Jeff Pool calls the "Christian symbol of divine suffering," or Jesus of Nazareth.[139] While the many depictions of suffering throughout the Hebrew Bible call into question the purpose of suffering, offering varying answers, the incarnation provides what the Christian faith identifies as the final word on the matter. In the suffering of Christ, the power of human suffering in general is embodied and illustrated.

Pool's argument begins with an appeal to the *imago dei* shared between God and humanity, asserting that the awareness of this likeness was lost among human beings with the introduction of sin.[140] However, full awareness was not lost entirely, as one can observe its presence in a number of writings and human endeavors before it is fully illuminated in Christ.[141] Pool argues that God's choice of incarnation and death was intended to reawaken the knowledge of the *imago dei* in humanity, essentially providing an example for human beings to follow in the wake of the resurrection.[142] In Pool's

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[139] Pool's book *God's Wounds: Hermeneutic of the Christian Symbol of Divine Suffering*, echoes this phrase in is subtitle. Jeff B. Pool, *God's Wounds: Hermeneutic of the Christian Symbol of Divine Suffering,* vol. 1 (Cambridge, England: James Clarke & Co), 2011.

[140] Pool, 182.

[141] Ibid.

[142] Ibid, 184.

words, "through Jesus of Nazareth, God-become-human, God displays to humans their authentic creatureliness with God."[143] Christ is both a demonstration of the *imago dei* and of how likeness to God is best illustrated by human persons.

Of course, Pool's characterization of the *imago dei* challenges the previously developed conception of likeness to God that appeals to Moltmann. Pool claims that the *imago dei* is only truly realized after the divine action of incarnation, arriving at post-resurrection universalism.[144] If accepted, this view of humanity's likeness to God conflicts with the comparison Moltmann makes between royal divine inheritance and universal divine inheritance. Because Pool claims that human beings did not participate in the full *imago dei* before the resurrection, the unique appeal of universal divine inheritance that Moltmann favors is lost. Though Pool's analysis affirms universal salvation, this theory excludes all human beings who lived before Christ from full realization of the *imago dei.*

Additionally, there is a clear connection between likeness to God and awareness of non-being within the fall narrative, especially when the two creation narratives (within Gen. 1 and Gen 2-3) are examined separately. Acknowledgement of sin in the fall does not lessen humanity's realization of the *imago dei,* as Pool suggests, but increases it by allowing humanity greater awareness of non-being. It is only in light of this connection that one can go on to assert that Christ is the fully realized embodiment of the *imago dei* —only in total alienation and affliction does Christ fulfill this role. Pool goes on to affirm

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[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid.

that divine suffering is disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth, further emphasizing the importance of the knowledge of non-being as an aspect of the *imago dei.*[145] Surely, if God chooses to experience affliction and the threat of non-being—actual death—through Christ, the same phenomena cannot prevent humanity from fully realizing likeness to God. Rather, likeness to God is an inherent quality in all human beings, the *purpose* of which is demonstrated in Christ.

The *imago dei* not only results in the awareness of suffering, but in the divine capability to conquer suffering through relationship. In sharing God's likeness, the God who suffers, dies, and continues to live shares this ability with human beings. The crucifixion is a demonstration of the possibility of the conquering of human suffering, insofar as it is the choice of God to claim non-being and change as a result of this claim. In light of the cross, humanity is shown what is possible and the question of suffering is answered: in suffering, one gains the ability to conquer suffering in community. Fiddes summarizes this conception of the cross as such: "by responding to the self-giving love displayed in God's encounter with death, we are enabled to co-operate with God in new possibilities for life which he eternally offers to human personalities, in this life and the life to come. So God wins our response to him, the response that nullifies non-being where our lack of response had given it power over us."[146] Though God is to be understood as having suffered before the incarnation, God's suffering reaches its full

[145] Ibid, 189.

[146] Fiddes, 267.

meaning, becoming its "most creative and persuasive," in Christ, generating a new understanding of suffering in its wake.[147]

The reality of Christ's suffering must be taken seriously. Soelle criticizes the tendency of theologians throughout history to neuter the agony of Christ, both as depicted in Gethsemane and on the cross.[148] Jesus' expressions of affliction are clear within the biblical text. In Matthew, Jesus suffers from alienation from his companions, finding himself awake and alone as they sleep, despite his pleas for them to stay awake with him (26:36-46).[149] As Soelle argues, this command to remain awake and vigilant with Christ is not only directed at the disciples, but is a directive for all followers of Christ.[150] Further, the suffering of Christ cannot be considered to be unrepeatable—the suffering and death alone that was experienced by Jesus is "appropriated" by all who experience pain, affliction, and impending death.[151] The gritty reality of the crucifixion that is depicted within the gospels is surely a testament to this fact. This is a reality acknowledged by both the gospel authors and the characters within the crucifixion narrative. The mocking tone of Mark's chief priests and scribes as they remark, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe," is demonstrative of the incredibly human quality of Christ's death (15:31-32). The death of Christ not only demonstrates the

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[147] Ibid.

[148] Soelle, 80-81.

[149] Ibid, 79.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid, 82.

ability of humanity to take up powerful suffering, but also reassures the sufferer that *God understands.* God does not identify with the oppressed arbitrarily, but does so from a place of experience.

Revelation

If the death and resurrection of Christ is to be understood as the climax of the biblical narrative, Revelation is to be understood as its grand conclusion. The book of Revelation offers humanity a fantastical imagining of the eschaton, a glimpse at the culmination of God's work in creation. Though I do not wish to claim that Revelation is made up of foretold premonitions, as this is certainly not the case, it does present an illustration of what the "goal" of being may be. Revelation serves as the summary statement for the broad biblical question: "Why do we and how ought we suffer?"

Kitamori directly references Revelation in his discussion of suffering as God's essence.[152] The reason why Kitamori utilizes the text in support of his conclusion is obvious; Revelation frequently highlights a theme of suffering as ultimate divine power, placing suffering and death at the forefront of the battle between good and evil. Kitamori quotes the following from Revelation 1:17-18, "I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever."[153] This characterization of God is repeated in 2:8.[154]

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[152] Kitamori, 45.

[153] Kitamori's translation reads "I died, and behold I am alive for evermore," while the NRSV reads as quoted (45).

[154] Ibid.

Revelation repeatedly points to the paradox of God's power in suffering, naming Christ "the Lamb that was slaughtered" (5:12). While the biblical author expresses the expectation that the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" will conquer and open the scroll of the seven seals, a Lamb that has been slaughtered appears instead, subverting the expectations of onlookers and the author (5:5-11). The characters within the narrative continue to point to this subversion of expectations, drawing attention to it. They sing, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9). "Many angels" continue, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (5:12). Revelation clearly links the death of Christ with glory and victory in the eschaton, affirming and emphasizing the overarching narrative of the biblical text. The slaughtered Lamb of the narrative's climax returns in full power, having taken up and conquered suffering, so that God will be glorified and helpless suffering can be conquered for all. In God's suffering, humanity may fully claim its own suffering. Rather than seeking ascetic acceptance of pain that is blind to its reality, "they did not cling to life even in the face of death," embracing suffering in its ability to empower justice (12:11).

Though a literal interpretation of these verses may be appealing, leading to an affirmation of what Soelle criticizes as Christian masochism or martyrdom, it is clear that death for death's sake is not what is intended. Written within the context of a depiction of the Lamb as "slaughtered," the tale of the faithful who happily accept their deaths at the

hands of beast cannot be considered as mass suicide (13). Rather, the acceptance of death that is described within Revelation is a powerful taking up of suffering and persecution, a march toward non-being that strips evil of its power. In embracing the reality of suffering, the saints reject the worldly, unilateral structures of power that the beast may offer them and accept the relational power of Christ. Christ's suffering and death are starkly contrasted with the obsessive acquisition of power sought by the narrative's adversarial players—the "presentation of seals (and war horses), trumpets (and monster beasts), and the Dragon and the Great Harlot."[155] The latter endeavor is not successful, ultimately overpowered by the sacrifice of Christ. The resulting moral of the narrative is not that Christians ought to go seeking their own destruction, but that they ought to face suffering with the dignity required to make it visible. In emerging from our own encounters with the beast, we may be enlisted to fight the beasts that others face. Only in utilizing suffering to liberate the oppressed may we move toward the final glorification of God. Revelation, therefore, is the biblical text's conclusion *and* moral directive.

Synthesis

The structure of the biblical narrative is, therefore, as follows: (1) God creates humanity in God's image and sharing in God's likeness, capable of knowing and experiencing suffering by virtue of being in relationship with the other; (2) the history of humanity is textured by the question of suffering and this question's many possible answers, the most important of which is the acknowledgement of a God who hears the cries of sufferers and works to liberate them; (3) the purpose of suffering is demonstrated

[155] Robert W. Canoy, *Atonement in the Apocalypse: An Exposé of the Defeat of Evil* (Macon: Smythe & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2017), 142.

in the life, suffering, and death of Jesus Christ, which also allows God to conquer non-being via God's inter-relational nature; and (4) the glorification of God and the final destruction of helpless suffering is realized in the eschaton via the suffering and resurrection of Christ and all who follow him. This summation of the biblical narrative is certainly not exhaustive or fully comprehensive, but it does offer a skeletal structure of the text within which other pieces of scripture may be interpreted. This narrative structure affirms and is affirmed by the theological position of "process-oriented passibilism" described earlier. The claims that make up this approach, namely that God suffers powerfully and wishes for humanity to access the same powerful suffering, are found to be sufficiently supported by the biblical text.

Chapter 3: Forming a Hermeneutic of Powerful Suffering

How, then, ought biblical texts be approached if the interpreter is employing a process-oriented passibilist perspective? If the biblical narrative is a story of suffering, how ought we examine the texts that do not appear to directly fit within the narrative's progression? The following hermeneutical guidelines are intended to provide parameters for interpreting the biblical text through the lens of powerful suffering. This strategy is informed by a variety of other approaches to hermeneutics and interpretive tools. Henceforth, this strategy will be referred to as the "hermeneutics of powerful suffering."

Warrant and Methodology

The hermeneutics of powerful suffering are patterned after two key approaches to biblical interpretation: thematic approaches and various hermeneutics of suspicion. The

strategy to be formed within this section draws upon key aspects from each category due to its methodological similarity.

First, a hermeneutic of powerful suffering resembles other thematic interpretive strategies due to its emphasis on a central biblical theme around which all texts are to be centered. This central theme provides the basis for interpretation. From this starting point, interpreted texts can be categorized as either consistent or inconsistent with the theme. Various causes of a text's dissonance may then be explored. These causes may be, upon examination, identified as inauthenticity, cultural biases, or intentional obscurity. Alternatively, the interpreter may be free to accept inconsistent texts as outliers that exist within a larger, mostly consistent work, accepting their existence, but choosing to give preferential weight to texts that are consistent with the interpretive framework. Outlier texts exist for every interpretive method.

Augustine employs a thematic interpretive strategy. Augustine places an interpretive emphasis on love, asserting that one who does not gather from the text the love of God and neighbor has not understood the text at all.[156] According to Augustine, if an interpreter does not or cannot interpret a specific biblical passage within the framework of his conception of love for God and neighbor, the interpreter has failed to understand scripture in some way.[157] The "true" meaning of scripture has not yet been uncovered by the interpreter. Thus, it is the interpreter's job to uncover this meaning and

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[156] Augustine, *On Christian Teaching,* trans. by R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27-28.

[157] Ibid.

fully grasp it. Those passages which appear to contradict the theme of love when interpreted literally must be intended, according to Augustine, to be read allegorically.

Walter Brueggemann employs an interpretive strategy that emphasizes the theme of the "land" and "landedness."[158] Brueggemann's approach closely mirrors that of this thesis, differing largely in the content of the chosen theme but remaining methodologically similar. Brueggemann describes the difference between his approach and an existentialist approach as follows:

> Our study of land suggests that [an existentialist] approach is a misunderstanding of biblical categories. The central problem is not emancipation but *rootage*, not meaning but *belonging,* not separation from community but *location* within it, not isolation from others but *placement* deliberately between the generations of promise and fulfillment. The Bible is addressed to the central human problem of homelessness (*anomie*), and seeks to respond to that agenda in terms of grasp and gift.[159]

This approach to interpretation and theology attempts to adhere to what Brueggemann identifies as the central categories within the biblical text. A hermeneutic of powerful suffering approaches the biblical text in a similar way, identifying key categories within the theme of suffering that inform the method—i.e., moving away from unilateral power and toward relational power or affirming the role of God as sufferer rather than God as the arbitrator of punishment. Though both approaches appear rather circular, they embrace their circularity, emphasizing the importance of cross-referencing between the biblical text and claims from natural theology.

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[158] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 1-5.

[159] Brueggemann, 200.

Brueggemann also differentiates his approach from that of Gerhard von Rad.[160] Von Rad coined the phrase "salvation history," approaching biblical interpretation via the events of God's action in time.[161] This approach places a greater emphasis on history than place, reinforcing a dichotomy between space and time that Brueggemann criticizes.[162] Regardless, there is a precedent within the history of biblical interpretation and biblical theology for an interpretive approach that relies upon a theme or series of thematic categories. In Brueggemann's case, this hermeneutical strategy serves to further inform practical conclusions about homelessness, social justice, environmental justice, and other aspects of our current reality.[163] Its purpose is to uncover biblical truths that may have been overshadowed by previous hierarchal preferences in theology and interpretation, such as space/time or individualism. This aim is also true of the hermeneutics of powerful suffering, as its goal is to assist interpreters in revealing aspects of the biblical text that may have been obscured by a false preference of unilateral power over relational power.

The second category of influence is that of suspicion. A hermeneutic of powerful suffering may be categorized as a hermeneutic of suspicion in that it seeks to criticize previous interpretive endeavors that it perceives to have led to greater marginalization or oppression of a specific group.[164] Though a hermeneutic of powerful suffering identifies

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[160] Ibid.

[161] Gerhard von Rad, *"From Promise to Fulfillment,"* in *Moses*, 68 (James Clarke & Co.: 2012).

[162] Brueggemann, 200.

[163] Ibid, 202.

[164] Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Book House, 2020), 142.

with a wider group of people than that of feminist, liberation, or queer hermeneutics, its primary aim is to salvage those aspects of the text that allow the previously oppressed to find liberation. Traditional modes of interpretation that emphasize depictions of God's perceived unilateral, coercive power have contributed to the further oppression of those who suffer unjustly, many of whom also exist in groups that can identify with other hermeneutics of suspicion. By instead emphasizing relational power and its importance within the biblical text's overarching narrative, a hermeneutic of powerful suffering seeks to empower the sufferer and advocate for social justice. Interpretations of suffering within the biblical text as "weak" or "pitiable" are to be critiqued as products of a framework that values unilateral power, while interpretations of suffering as a powerful, intrinsic element of loving relationship are to be affirmed and restored to their place at the center of the biblical story. Because of this, a hermeneutic of powerful suffering may work alongside other hermeneutics of suspicion to offer liberation for marginalized groups. Such an approach also hopes to further enhance the work of feminist criticism, within which the suffering Christ's traditional association with submission has been an interpretive obstacle.

Finally, and for fairly obvious reasons, a hermeneutic of powerful suffering deeply identifies with literary criticism. Because the hermeneutic begins with the assertion that the biblical text features an overarching narrative of suffering, it is necessarily concerned with the way in which various texts fit into the narrative and serve its purposes.[165] As such, a hermeneutic of powerful suffering will seek to analyze both the

[165] Ibid, 14, 143.

literary context of specific passages and their featured characters, internal plots, and narrative perspectives. While not every biblical text can be understood as a literal narrative, within the framework of this hermeneutic all biblical texts are analyzed as a part of the larger, canonical narrative. The biblical text is analyzed in its final form both as a series of individual passages and as a canon. The interpreter is therefore concerned with what an individual text says on its own and what purpose the text serves in its canonical context, as part of the overarching narrative.

All of these strategies—emphasis on a theme or series of categories, suspicion, and literary critique—inform the basis of a hermeneutic of powerful suffering. This strategy mirrors that of previous interpreters and biblical scholars, drawing upon their methodological insights for greater clarity in its formation. The proposed guidelines and claims for a hermeneutic of powerful suffering are as follows: (1) texts are to be analyzed as part of a canonical narrative of powerful suffering; (2) texts are to be understood as both theological and anthropological, with God and humanity sharing the role of narrative protagonist; (3) texts that depict God's suffering or desire for relationship with humanity are to be considered intentional; (4) interactions between God and humanity are to be considered intentional; (5) the text ought to be read from the perspective of the sufferer; (6) depictions of power must first be considered through the lens of relational power.

Expansion of Guidelines

(1) Texts are to be analyzed as part of the canonical narrative of powerful suffering.

The biblical narrative outlined in the previous chapter serves as the basis of this hermeneutic. Other texts may contradict the overarching narrative, contribute to it, or be deemed irrelevant to it. For example, certain laws or lineages within the Old Testament may not contribute to the overarching narrative and may be better examined via an alternative strategy. The existence of an overarching narrative does not guarantee that every text will fit perfectly within the set parameters. However, there are texts that may have been previously deemed irrelevant or contradictory that find new poignancy within the established narrative of suffering. The interpreter ought to examine the context of the passage within the larger narrative, any intertextually recurring elements within the passage, and any instances in which the passage directly references suffering or change indicative of suffering (characters being acted upon). Additionally, characters or figures within the text that inflict suffering upon others ought to be given sufficient attention, as their role may influence the way in which the text influences the larger narrative. Historical context is also important to this guideline, as the context in which the text was crafted, copied, and redacted may contribute to its interpretation within the narrative. For example, could the text have been historically influenced by an earlier text, or are connections between the two reliant upon the text as it stands canonically?

(2) Texts are to be understood as both theological and anthropological.

Classically, the biblical text has been considered primarily theological, or a text specifically about God. A purely theocentric reading can lead to the neglect of

anthropological features in the text, interpreting human agency as the mere illusion of power that serves a theocentric purpose.[166] A process-oriented perspective must reject this tendency of biblical hermeneutics to read God as the sole protagonist of the biblical text. Rather, the biblical text is to be understood as a record of the relationship between God and humanity, with both parties acting as the narrative's protagonists. When the role of humanity is undermined in biblical interpretation, the only conclusions to be drawn are purely theological, relating only to the character and actions of God. If the only answers one can gather from the biblical text are those regarding God's suffering and role in suffering, humanity is left with little to actually *do*. However, if the biblical text is interpreted as a treatise concerning both God and humanity, readers are offered demonstrations of right action and thinking. The biblical text has much to say about God, but it also has a great deal to say about humanity. The protagonist of the human being cannot be neglected within a hermeneutic of powerful suffering. This approach takes seriously the notion, derived from process theology, that human beings are capable of influencing good around them, literally acting as God's hands in the world. Therefore, interpreters ought to pay attention to when human beings act, how they act, and how they collaborate with God to influence change, especially via powerful suffering.

[166] This argument is utilized by Jeff Pool, who argues that some understandings of the *imago dei* within scripture have been obscured by anthropocentrism. Pool instead opts to move toward "radical theocentricity" in his understanding of humanity and scripture.

(3) Texts that depict God's suffering or desire for humanity are to be considered intentional.

The problem within biblical interpretation of characterizing biblical depictions of God's suffering as purely allegorical or anthropomorphic has already been explained in the previous chapter. Therefore, a hermeneutic of powerful suffering draws upon the theological claims of a process-oriented passibilist perspective in taking literally biblical depictions of God's suffering and desire. This is the case for both Christ as the incarnation and various instances in which God appears, speaks, or is described. This hermeneutic avoids the problem of God's suffering by embracing it at the onset of the interpretive endeavor. If the depiction of God's suffering at hand cannot be reasonably accepted for whatever reason (if God's suffering is depicted as coercive action, for example), alternate interpretations may then be explored. However, the first and most preferable interpretation of God's suffering and all expressions of it must be considered literal.

(4) Interactions between God and humanity are to be considered intentional.

Just as humanity is to be considered a second protagonist within the biblical text, interactions between God and humanity are to be taken seriously. Rather than interpreting the actions of humanity on the behalf of God as a front or vehicle for God's coercive power, these interactions are to be initially interpreted as intentional on the part of God. For example, the utilization by God of Moses in the liberation of the Israelites may be deemed within a coercive power perspective as unnecessary, as God must be capable of liberating the Israelites without Moses' assistance if God is coercively omnipotent.

However, a hermeneutic of powerful suffering will reject this interpretation and prefer a more literal interpretation of the Exodus narrative—that Moses was key in the liberation of the Israelites and served both as God's liaison to Pharaoh and as a powerful partner in the bringing of plagues and the parting of the sea. This interpretation avoids the complications of forcing the text to conform to a view of God as coercively omnipotent due to a commitment to viewing the interactions between God and human beings as purposeful. This guideline also serves to further emphasize the importance of viewing God's relationship with humanity as a meaningful relationship that involves suffering love, altering both God and humanity over time.

(5) The text ought to be read from the perspective of the sufferer.

Within texts that feature multiple characters or perspectives, preference ought to be initially given to that of the sufferer. The "sufferer" is specifically distinguished from any being that causes suffering. The interpretation ought to empathize with the plight of the sufferer. Depending upon the agency of the characters involved, the sufferer may be deemed as empowered by suffering (if one has taken it up and conquered it) or as oppressed by suffering (if one has been caused to suffer helplessly). Beings depicted as possessing unilateral power and using it to cause undue suffering will almost always be considered antagonistic toward the "sufferer"—in some cases, this may mean that God will play the role of antagonist. The interpreter should not avoid texts that depict God as an antagonist within this framework. As is the case with Soelle's reading of Job, this can sometimes illuminate an alternate interpretation. This orientation of perspective is not always obvious. Sometimes, as could be considered the case in Judges 19-21, the

"sufferer" does not speak and is objectified within the text. Searching for these hidden sufferers is an important task for a hermeneutic of powerful suffering. In other cases, every agent within the narrative may be considered to be a "sufferer." Regardless, an interpretation that allies itself with the sufferer's perspective is preferred over an interpretation that identifies with those who inflict suffering upon the helpless.

(6) Depictions of power must first be considered through the lens of relational power.

Obviously, there are instances within the biblical text in which the reader is intended to identify with unilateral power in a positive way. This is the case in any instance within the Old Testament in which God extolls punishment or is said to directly cause destruction, death, or other pains. These depictions are not to be forced to fit within the narrative of powerful suffering if they are incompatible. However, wherever possible, depictions of both divine and human power are to be first considered as relational power. This is the case through a great deal of the prophets, in which God "gives up" Israel to outside forces, but must not necessarily be thought of as the direct agent of destruction. Similarly, the utilization of Cyrus the Persian in the liberation of the Israelites can be understood as God employing persuasive, relational power over unilateral power in an act of liberation. Any instance in which power is depicted as positive ought to be given this consideration. If this reorientation is not possible, the interpreter ought to refer back to the previous guideline and seek the perspective of the sufferer. In some cases, reconciliation will be difficult and alternative strategies may be employed. It is up to the interpreter to decide how to treat entirely contrary texts. However, it is unlikely that

nothing can be illuminated by a hermeneutic of powerful suffering. At the very least, a passage may be criticized for its lack of cohesiveness within the larger narrative and its preference for those who inflict suffering or prefer non-being. Recognition of the human authorship and the historical context of the text allow for such discrepancies and disagreements to exist alongside overarching narrative. A hermeneutic of powerful suffering will open new doors of interpretation, allowing texts that appear oppressive to offer new hope to those who suffer.

Chapter 4: Interpreting the Song of Songs as a Test Case

Selection of the Text

The Song of Songs, otherwise known as the Song of Solomon or Canticles, is an anomaly in biblical interpretation. Its presence within the canon has puzzled and confounded scholars for centuries, warranting countless examinations of its potential interpretation and use. David Carr writes that one of his students once referred to the Song of Songs as the bizarre, sensual red dress of the biblical text.[167] When thought of in purely allegorical terms, its blatantly sexual innuendo poses more problems than it solves for those who wish to purify the book of its scandalous imagery. When examined as a text that lacks direct theological significance, the mystery of the book's canonization is left unsolved. In the history of interpretation of the Song of Songs, each scholarly contribution appears more like a scream, lost among hundreds of other shouts, than a development.

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[167] David McLain Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 145.

This is the context within which any approach to interpreting the Song of Songs must proceed. While providing a comprehensive reading of the book that solves all of the various mysteries and disagreements that surround it is impossible, the addition of a reading that utilizes a hermeneutic of powerful suffering will offer a method of joining conflicting theories and illuminating elements that have not yet been highlighted. In testing the hermeneutic that was developed within the previous chapter, a biblical book that has taxed the imaginations of scholars throughout the history of biblical interpretation seems to be a fitting test case.

The Song of Songs also features a series of bizarre characteristics that make it an excellent test of the ability of a new hermeneutic. The Song contains no explicit reference to God or any divine being, contains an array of terms that are not utilized in any other part of the Hebrew Bible, and features shockingly affirmative depictions of human sexuality that are not directly mirrored in any other biblical text. How, then, could a book like the Song of Songs fit within the biblical meta-narrative of suffering? If the approach I have developed is sufficient in both appropriately understanding the Song of Songs within the context of the biblical meta-narrative of suffering *and* is capable of adding additional insight to the enterprise of interpreting the Song of Songs, it will be proven a useful strategy.

Previous Scholarship

The authorship of the Song is disputed, and the stance of popular scholarship on this issue has fluctuated over time. The text characterizes itself as Solomonic in origin,

regardless of its historical authorship.[168] Even if the Song of Songs was not authored by Solomon himself, dating within the reign of Solomon is based on a number of textual clues, including the frequent reference to material wealth and luxury, a deep knowledge of Egyptian poetic form, and a generally pan-Israelite setting.[169] However, efforts to accurately date the Song of Songs are as broadly sweeping as efforts to interpret it. Other scholars trace the Song's origins to popular entertainment, describing it as a drinking song or form of erotic poetry.[170] The authorship and dating of the Song is not as important to a hermeneutic of powerful suffering as its place within the canon. It is sufficient to accept that the Song itself intends to be understood as Solomonic in origin and bears resemblances to Egyptian love poetry.

The truly puzzling history of the Song is to be found within the saga of its canonization. How could a bizarre, explicitly sexual poem find its way into the canon? Even more shocking is the tendency of ancient scholars to place the Song of Songs on a pedestal of holiness. Famously, the Rabbi Akiba noted the Song as the "holy of holies," noting that "no day outweighed in glory the one in which Israel received the Song of Songs."[171] The origin of the book's title also implies its importance, intending to present the book as the "best" of all songs.[172] There is evidence that the canonization of the book

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[168] Duane A. Garrett, ed. David S. Dockery, *The New American Commentary,* vol. 14 (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 352.

[169] Garrett, 352.

[170] Theophile J. Meek, ed. by George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible,* vol. 6 (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951), 91.

[171] Rabbi Akiba is quoted by Meek, 91.

[172] Ibid.

was disputed, though its final inclusion within the canon is indisputable and important to remember.[173] The anomaly of the book's inclusion has since become the primary goal of interpretation. John T. Bunn characterizes the history of the book's interpretation as a "series of attempts to justify its presence in the canon."[174] The book's usage in Jewish praxis may be of assistance in illuminating its canonization. The Song of Songs is significantly tied to Passover rituals, being privately read by adherents in conjunction with the holy day.[175] Does this mean that a reading of the Song must operate exclusively within this ritual use? I do not think that this is the case. After all, even within the context of this utilization of the Song, readers are warned against reading the book without proper preparation or maturity, surely due to its frequently explicit language.[176] Theophile J. Meek even argues that the original controversy of the canonization of the Song may have been due to its usage as a popular drinking song.[177]

In addition to taking seriously the placement of the Song of Songs within the canon and the controversy surrounding that canonization, the relationship of the book with surrounding texts is also vital. As previously noted, the Song is placed in relation to other festival scrolls and bears similarities in usage. Further, the Song bears striking linguistic similarities to other biblical books, such as the garden imagery in Genesis or

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[173] Ibid.

[174] John T. Bunn, ed. by Clifton J. Allen, *The Broadman Bible Commentary,* vol. 5 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1969), 128.

[175] Jennifer Wright Knust, *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 31.

[176] Ibid, 27.

[177] Meek, 91.

the marital language utilized throughout the prophets. Duane A. Garrett criticizes any reading of the Song that appeals to other biblical texts for interpretation, a critique that a hermeneutic of powerful suffering will implicitly reject.[178] When reading the canon as it exists now, intertextual analysis is both common and entirely acceptable. Unless one hopes to glean the precise intention of the biblical author in complete isolation from other texts, an endeavor that I would consider both impossible and without practical purpose, an intertextual reading of the Song is not problematic. The more important question to answer is, "What is the role of the Song of Songs in the canon?" What purpose does it serve? One finds a variety of answers to this question within scholarship.

First, the Song of Songs has been historically subjected to allegorical readings of varying severities. One must be careful not to characterize all allegorical readings of the Song as the same—there is a great deal of nuance among these varying interpretive strategies. In terms of various binary relationships, the Song has been interpreted as allegorical of the love between Yahweh and Israel, Christ and the church, and Solomon and the virtue of wisdom.[179] Allegorical strategies have been employed by Hippolytus of Rome, Origen, Jerome, and Augustine.[180] Roman Catholic tradition has also found within the Song threads of veneration toward the Virgin Mary, namely in the book's lengthy sequences of admiring metaphors.[181] The allegorical approach has been criticized heavily

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[178] Duane A. Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs,* vol. 23B, *The Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. 2004), 102.

[179] Garrett, 353.

[180] Ibid.

[181] Ibid, 354.

and has largely fallen out of popular usage. Garrett alleges that the Song does not imply that an allegorical reading is intended, as the language it utilizes is grounded in realistic metaphor rather than fantastical imagery.[182] Garrett further argues that an allegorical approach risks describing God's love for creation with the same explicit language utilized to describe human sexuality, an implication that he finds to be abhorrent.[183] In an earlier commentary, Garrett describes this consequence of an allegorical reading of the Song as follows: "As Eros is legitimized as an expression of spiritual desire, there is ultimately no difference between reading the Bible and reading pornography."[184]

Of course, not all allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs are so straightforward. Gregory of Nyssa's allegorical reading of the Song analyzes the text in various layers, characterizing it as a poem that borrows mundane language to describe the divine.[185] The text can be about human relationships while simultaneously pointing toward the desire of the soul for the divine.[186] This reading does not necessarily compare love for God with human sexual desire, but it does utilize the same language to communicate the otherwise incommunicable.[187] More recent examinations of the Song that seek to validate its depiction of human sexuality grant similar grace to allegorical

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[182] Ibid, 355.

[183] Ibid.

[184] Garrett and House, 100.

[185] *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 25.

[186] Ibid.

[187] Ibid.

readings.[188] To entirely reject any allegorical approach as either an ascetic attempt at erasing the affirmation of sexuality within the Song or a dangerous step toward sexualizing God, as many modern interpreters have done, is to reject the ability of such a text to function in multiple ways. This reading will not reject outright the utilization of an allegorical understanding within the larger framework of a hermeneutic of powerful suffering, as reading the text in this way may allow it to offer deeper insights.

In lieu of an allegorical reading, other methods of categorizing the Song of Songs typically rely on the form and genre of the book for guidance. Garrett lists the various categories ascribed to the song as dramatic, historical, cultic, funerary, wedding, and love song literature.[189] Garrett favors categorizing the Song as a love song, similar to other love poetry within Ancient Near Eastern cultures and canonized due to its similarity to various forms of wisdom literature.[190] This is likely the best way to categorize the genre of the Song, as it lacks in narrative structure and bears little resemblance to other forms of poetry utilized in cultic practices.[191] However, when the book is deconstructed and its various pieces are examined individually, it may be categorized differently. For example, Elizabeth Huwiler characterizes the two passages that will be most closely examined in this thesis, 3:1-4 and 5:2-7, as independent narratives.[192] The labelling of these passages

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[188] Carr; Knust.

[189] Garrett, 358-365.

[190] Ibid, 365-367.

[191] Ibid.

[192] Roland E. Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs. New International Biblical Commentary*, vol. 12 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 226.

as narrative "dream sequences" is not uncommon and is shared by Meek.[193] When 3:1-4 and 5:2-7 are not described as dream sequences, they are often instead categorized as literal narrative sequences that describe real events.[194] Describing even these two individual texts as narrative sequences poses interpretive problems. The sequences lack cohesion with the texts that precede and follow them. The portions of the Song that surround these sequences do not reference the events of them in any way. Further, characterizing even these two sequences within the Song as narratives unnecessarily complicates the book's overall genre. Why would sections of erotic love poetry be interrupted by small, disconnected stories?

It is best to understand every part of the Song of Songs as love poetry, as its various voices are most understood when they are not confined to specific "characters" or the constraints of plot. Over-emphasizing the "reality" within the Song diminishes its ability, as poetry, to speak to multiple situations and circumstances, and risks contributing to a reading that arbitrarily seeks narrative consequences. The interpreter must also be careful to avoid reading *too much* poetic metaphor into the text. While Garrett rejects allegorical interpretations of the Song and categorizations of 3:1-4 and 5:2-7 as narrative sequences, his metaphorical interpretation of 5:2-7 is inappropriate. Garrett's interpretation of 5:2-7 will be further critiqued within the following application of the hermeneutic of powerful suffering.

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[193] Meek, 127.

[194] Bunn, 142.

The central problems explored within the history of the interpretation of the Song of Songs are generally the Song's canonization, purpose, and moral or theological efficacy. Why has such a text been canonized and how ought it be utilized as a part of the canon? Though there are countless scholars who have addressed these issues, few have done so satisfactorily. There will likely never be a comprehensive reading of the Song of Songs that will solve all of the mysteries that surround it. Much like Revelation, the Song of Songs is steeped in lofty, metaphorical language that speaks to both the reality that we experience and realities that we have yet to grasp. Perhaps this is the appeal of the Song: it reaches toward something that we have yet to fully attain and entices its reader with imagery of the beautiful, grand, and utterly desirable. Desire is the central focus of the Song of Songs. By again examining the Song through a different lens, that of powerful suffering, its central motif of desire can be removed from its place as taboo and unholy, allowing a reading that affirms both human and divine relationships.

Applying the New Hermeneutic

Overview

It must first be noted that some of the guidelines for utilizing a hermeneutic of powerful suffering will not be directly applicable when interpreting the Song of Songs. For example, explicit depictions of God's suffering are simply not found within the Song, so they cannot contribute to the analysis directly. However, if there is a case to be made that God's suffering is present within alternative, allegorical readings of the Song of Songs, the third guideline (texts that depict God's suffering or desire for humanity are to

be considered literal) becomes applicable. This is also the case for the fourth guideline (interactions between God and humanity are to be considered intentional).

The Song of Songs must first be considered within the canonical meta-narrative of powerful suffering, as per the first guidelines. The validity of an intertextual reading of the Song of Songs has been confirmed, but this does not yet solidify its place within the canon. The importance of the Song lies in its unique motifs, including its explicit affirmation of human desire. It is not alone in its lack of divine presence, as Esther also lacks explicit mention of God. The Song does stand alone in its positive portrayal of human love, devoid of any prohibitions that restrict sexuality. This makes including the Song in discussions of sexual expression absolutely vital.[195]

How, then, does the Song fit within the meta-narrative? The Song of Songs is situated among the Hebrew Bible's many texts that attempt to explore the question of suffering. Though the Song does not appear to feature much of what Soelle characterizes as affliction, it is entirely focused upon the anticipation of suffering in the name of love. The Song is primarily a text about desiring. As Fiddes discusses, eros inherently involves suffering. The speakers within the Song of Songs continually express their willingness to be persecuted in the name of their love (1:1, 3:1-4, 5:2-7, 8:1-3, 8:7), warnings to others about the risk of suffering in the name of love (2:7, 3:5, 8:4), and the pain that results from their relationship (4:9, 5:8, 6:5). The text repeatedly affirms the mutuality of their relationship and desire for one another (2:16, 7:10). The text also affirms the strength of their mutual love, describing it as "strong as death, passion fierce as the grave" (8:6). It is

[195] Murphy and Huwiler, 242.

clear that the Song of Songs fits within the meta-narrative of powerful suffering by affirming suffering love. It would be challenging to interpret the Song as holding unilateral power over relational power, as its most central motif is mutual desire. Without reading the Song allegorically, it depicts human desire, often in the form of sexual desire, as good. Within the context of wisdom literature, it offers its own answer to the question of suffering: if one must suffer to love, one will embrace the prospect of suffering. While the Song does not necessarily feature elements of social justice, it is consistent with the claim that desire for relationship and relational power, the ability to be acted upon or to change in relationship, is preferable over indifferent, coercive power.

In order to read the Song of Songs as both theological and anthropological, Garrett's assertion that describing God in erotic terms is akin to pornography must be challenged. Though Garrett's analysis of the Song seeks to affirm the goodness of human sexuality with the text, Garrett arbitrarily encases "good" sexuality within the context of legal marriage, harkening back to a view that characterizes human sexuality as inherently corrupt.[196] This compartmentalization of "good" sexuality versus "bad" sexuality contradicts Garrett's initial claim that sexuality is affirmed as good within the creation. If sexuality is inherently good, it does not require conditions in order to be so. What Garrett approaches, but ultimately rejects, is the claim that *eros* is, in itself, a divine virtue. For Garrett, erotic desire requires marital boundaries to *become* good, rather than inherently being so. The text itself contradicts this view, as it never explicitly marks the sexuality that it depicts as occurring within the confines of marriage, nor does it shy from blurring

[196] Garrett and House, 102.

the categories of binary sex.[197] Any reading that would confine the depictions of sexuality within the text in this way are extra-biblical are not evident within the text itself.

Additionally, the Song never depicts the fulfillment of any sexual acts, only going so far as the speakers describing their yearning for one another.[198] Even as a text about human sexuality, the Song is hardly pornographic, unless, of course, the interpreter draws this conclusion from the text implicitly. This is the case with Garrett's reading of 5:2-7, which he characterizes as a metaphor for a woman's feelings of rejection and pain at the conclusion of intercourse.[199] The text hardly warrants a reading of this kind, which relies so heavily on innuendo that it borders on being ridiculous. It is surely not the Song of Songs itself that causes Garrett's belief that an allegorical reading is blasphemously pornographic.

The source of the problem that Garrett points toward in an allegorical reading is the denial of the goodness of erotic desire. A hermeneutic of powerful suffering not only affirms the role of erotic desire in the relationship between God and humanity, but relies upon it. It is God's desire that necessitates God's passibility and, therefore, God's love. Within this framework, a theological reading of the text is made possible and helpful. As Carr argues, the poetic form of the Song makes its various metaphors and language easily reapplied.[200] The Song embraces the risk of desire—the risk that we face as we allow

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[197] Knust, 32-33.

[198] Carr, 149-150.

[199] Garrett and House, 213-217.

[200] Carr, 145.

others to act upon us in relationship.[201] This risk is mirrored in our relationship to God and God's relationship to us, as both parties risk themselves in desiring and seeking relationship.[202] Driven by the second guideline of a hermeneutic of powerful suffering, the nuanced allegorical approach of Gregory of Nyssa can be appropriated. Though this reading emphasizes human desire more than other allegorical readings tend to, it also recognizes the important connection between our desire for one another and God's desire for us.

Choosing a more precise pericope within the Song of Songs for analysis will be helpful in testing the hermeneutic of powerful suffering. The two complimentary sequences within 3:1-4 and 5:2-7 make up the only portions of the Song of Songs in which the text describes an instance of violence. Though 3:1-4 does not contain the violent incident that is found in 5:2-7, the two portions of the text are best analyzed as a pair. Because 5:2-7 describes an episode of violence, in which the vocalist recounts being beaten by guards, analyzing this passage and its pair will assist in understanding the book as a whole as it is illuminated by a hermeneutic of powerful suffering. What follows is a close analysis of Song of Songs 3:1-4 and 5:2-7.

Text Analysis

The first sequence (3:1-4).

The sequence begins with the female speaker setting the scene. The phrase "upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves" suggests a dream-like state (3:1).

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[201] Ibid, 147.

[202] Ibid.

Though the speaker seeks the subject of her love, she does not find him. In the following verse, the speaker rises and wanders the city, seeking her lover, but she, again, does not find him (v. 2). She passes wandering guards whom she asks about her lover's whereabouts (v. 3). Soon after, she finds her lover, holds him without letting go, and brings him to her "mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me" (v. 4). Finally, the sequence ends with the adjuration refrain, "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the wild does: do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!" (v. 5).

Though the categorization of this passage as a narrative is not problematic when the passage is isolated, it does not serve a directly narrative purpose within the wider context of the Song. Additionally, its fluctuating setting and strange sense of time do not establish it as a comprehensive story. The speaker appears to seek her lover in her dreams, rises from her sleep, and then seeks him in the streets. After he is found, she does not take him back to the place where she was sleeping before, but to her mother's home. The sequence of events does not work well outside of poetic metaphor. Rather, the text is better understood as an illustration of the speaker's longing for her lover and willingness to seek him out. The risk of this seeking is only fully understood within the context of the later, similar sequence in 5:2-7. In this first sequence the city is friendly to the speaker and does not harm her.

The text is relatively easy to view from the perspective of the "sufferer," as the one who suffers within this text is the speaker. She continually seeks and cannot find her lover, causing her distress. This feeling of estrangement can also easily double as a

theological allegory for the experience of estrangement between God and humanity. Viewing the many layers of meaning that the text offers allows one to place many entities into the role of speaker: God yearning for humanity, humanity yearning for God, or human beings yearning for other human beings. When the text is viewed theologically, with God in the place of the speaker, the sequence perfectly describes the phenomenon of God seeking relationship with humanity and facing estrangement. The God who possesses absolute unilateral power would not wander the streets seeking the beloved, but a God who possesses absolute relational power, powerful suffering, must do so in order to be fulfilled.

The adjuration refrain that closes this sequence is puzzling. The refrain itself is sometimes understood to be a warning against extramarital or premarital sex.[203] An interpretation of the refrain that is more consistent with the Song's general approach to human sexuality and desire is one that is revealed by a hermeneutic of powerful suffering. When one chooses to join in relationship to another, whether the other is God or another person, one accepts a certain amount of risk. Perhaps one will be abandoned, hurt, rejected, or, more positively, fundamentally changed by the relationship. To enter into relationship with another is to risk one's being, becoming willing to change in response to someone else. This risk is what the speaker warns the daughters of Jerusalem of—do not awaken love until you are prepared for it! It requires fully taking up the possibility of suffering for one to truly love meaningfully. This reading is most consistent with the Song's affirmation of desire and role as a guide for meaningful relationship.

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[203] Garrett and House, 217.

The second sequence: 5:2-8.

Unlike the first sequence, the beginning of the second sequence does not necessarily imply a dream-like state. Rather, the speaker explains, "I slept, but my heart was awake" (5:2). While this could imply that she is speaking as if experiencing a dream, it is much less clear than the first sequence. The speaker may also be restless, sleeping, but waiting for something to happen. She is alerted when her beloved begins knocking, calling, "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night" (v. 2). Unlike the first sequence, we are now offered a second perspective: that of the lover. He speaks in adoration of his "perfect one," calling for her from outside. A literal interpretation of the lover's dewy hair is likely appropriate, a sign of his devotion and arrival to his beloved's home before dawn.[204] Though the text could be interpreted as euphemistic here, such a reading is not clearly evidenced by any textual clues. The speaker responds to her lover's calls with a series of protests and hesitations, saying, "I had put off my garment; how could I put it on again? I had bathed my feet; how could I soil them?" (v. 3). It is clear that the speaker is to be understood as prepared for bed, having undressed and washed her feet appropriately.

Despite her misgivings, she is persuaded in the following verse by the actions of her lover. She says, "My beloved thrust his hand into the opening, and my inmost being yearned for him. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt" (v. 4-5). Again, though interpreting these verses as a euphemistic description of intercourse is tempting, there are

[204] Bunn, 142.

no explicit textual clues to point to this reading aside from the reader's own personal interpretation. A literal interpretation is also possible, as door latches of the period were sometimes designed to only allow entry if the person inside of the room also grasped the handle, freeing the latch.[205] The usage of "liquid myrrh" could also be interpreted as a literal description of anointed oils, but may also be interpreted as decorative language that enhances the reader's understanding of the speaker's longing.

By the time the speaker opens the door, her beloved is gone (v. 6). Interestingly, she notes that her "soul failed me when he spoke," implying that her failure of resolve to open the door for her beloved caused his disappearance. Again, she seeks him but cannot find him. In this sequence, the guards that find the speaker in the city are not kind. She says, "they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle, those sentinels of the walls" (v. 7). Finally, the sequence ends with an alternative adjuration refrain that reads, "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him this: I am faint with love" (v. 8). This time, the speaker never finds her lover and remains in a state of yearning for him.

The beating of the speaker at the hands of the guard within this sequence is understood by some interpreters as a punishment for her "inability to control her emotional involvement" with her lover.[206] Garrett's interpretation is similar, but forces the entire sequence into a metaphor for intercourse that leaves the female partner feeling rejected, the beating of the guards serving as a symbol for the pain of losing one's

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[205] Ibid.

[206] Ibid, 142.

virginity.[207] As noted above, a reading of this sequence as a series of euphemisms is not indicated by the text itself, requiring some effort on the part of the interpreter to make clear connections. There is no textual indication that the sequence ought to be read as a general metaphor for the loss of a new wife's virginity. This interpretation implies that the text acts as a warning against pursuing love frivolously or desiring for another without restraint, but if this were the case, one would expect the first sequence to also contain some act of punishment or violence.

The guidelines of a hermeneutic of powerful suffering guide interpretation by requiring a shift in perspective. Instead of viewing the guards that beat the speaker as arbitrators of some punishment for wrongdoing, we ought to view the text from the perspective of the sufferer: the speaker. It is the speaker's perspective that is most important for understanding the text. This allows us to view her beating at the hands of the guards not as punishment, but as a risk that she has taken up in pursuing her lover. Despite her suffering at the hands of those who would interrupt her pursuit and take her from her lover, she continues. The sequence does not end with the speaker learning her lesson and controlling herself, but with another affirmation of her yearning love. The speaker accepts the risk of suffering and continues on in her desire. The unilateral power that the guards utilize to inflict suffering upon the speaker is condemned, while the speaker's relational power, via her desire for her lover, is reaffirmed.

Further, the speaker recognizes her shortcomings within her relationship. Though her lover called to her, she failed to respond. The established hermeneutic allows us to

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[207] Garrett, 214.

also shift perspectives to a different sufferer: the speaker's lover. He is described as calling from the door, waiting in the dew, mutually yearning for his beloved. However, his calls are not answered. Perhaps they are both at fault for the estrangement that they feel as a result of this encounter—the masculine lover turns away too soon, and the feminine beloved does not answer soon enough. They both fail to offer themselves fully. The desire of both lovers within this sequence, unlike the first sequence, also reinforces the importance of mutual desire within the Song. The love between the two figures is not hierarchal or exploitative, but is mutual.[208]

When read theologically, the text need not describe God explicitly. This would only be the case if the entire sequence were understood solely via innuendo. Rather, the speaker or the lover at the door can be understood as God. God waits for humanity's call from within, but initiates relationship to find that we have walked away in our impatience, unwilling to risk ourselves. God knocks at the door, but we hesitate and find ourselves in a state of estrangement from God, searching and calling in our desperation. Though God seeks relationship with humanity and suffers literal death, God yet lives and continues to desire us.

Practical Application

As a text that speaks about the relationship between human beings, the Song of Songs establishes the goodness of human desire, unrestricted by the boundaries of any binary or prohibition. It denies the claims of stark asceticism, instead establishing mutually desiring love as love that mirrors the divine. The text also offers wisdom for

[208] Murphy and Huwiler, 242.

those who seek meaningful and fulfilling relationships, sexual or otherwise: meaningful relationships require that one desires connection with another and is willing to risk themselves for it. The acceptance of the risk of suffering is a necessary part of entering into a relationship. Emerging from suffering with one's love intact is the ultimate proof of lasting love. When this is applied to all human relationships, it becomes clear that the taking up of suffering is necessary to love meaningfully. When one flees from suffering, ignores it, or otherwise believes that it is to be avoided, one misses a crucial aspect of loving relationship. One must endanger their being in relationship to truly experience compassionate love, and it is only in this way that one could hope to reach those who are suffering alone.

The Song need not be understood solely as a text about humanity alone, despite the absence of explicit references to God. There is a reason why the Song of Songs has been interpreted allegorically by so many theologians and interpreters, and it reaches beyond a mere fear of human sexuality. The desire described within the Song is a divine desire, recalling a higher love to which we aspire. We yearn for the mutual, meaningful connection that the Song sings about. When one reads the Song of Songs, one is turned toward the divine. However, an allegorical reading that is not cautious may result in the denial of the goodness of desire or the material altogether. These texts are only truly revealed theologically if the desire of God for relationship with humanity is affirmed. An interpreter need not give up an allegorical reading of the Song of Songs in favor of a reading that affirms human desire. Interpreting the Song allegorically is possible when one's understanding of God's power is shifted to include erotic love for humanity. Within

a hermeneutic of powerful suffering, an understanding of God's desire is a fundamental theological claim that must be considered seriously.

Thus, a hermeneutic of powerful suffering not only establishes the Song of Songs's place within the canonical meta-narrative as a love poem seeking to understand desire and suffering in the midst of other explorations of the same issue, but opens the door for an interpretation of the Song that allows for the text to speak both theologically and anthropologically.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The theological assertions of Fiddes, Williams, Soelle, Moltmann, Kitamori, and others have been synthesized to produce a process-oriented passibilist theology that affirms God as the relational sufferer, seeking relationship with humanity. This conclusion is found to be supported by the biblical text, within which a meta-narrative of powerful suffering can be revealed. The best way to solve the problem of texts that do not fit cleanly within this meta-narrative is to form a hermeneutic of powerful suffering that utilizes a process-oriented passibilist lens. Finally, this hermeneutic is shown to be useful in its application to Song of Songs 3:1-5 and 5:2-8, which grants the Song of Songs a role within the meta-narrative of powerful suffering and assists in fostering a better understanding of the text as both anthropological and theological.

The biblical text opens with the first account of human suffering and closes with hope for a future devoid of suffering. Finding ourselves somewhere in the middle of these events, we are offered a paradox: take up suffering so that one may eliminate the

suffering of others. *Midsommar*'s Christian stood in his apathy, devoid of empathy for his partner like a watching God-king, incapable of understanding her plight. Similarly, it sometimes appears as if many in our world today have given up their compassion in favor of power. As long as one gains materially or in reputation, the sufferings of fellow human beings are inconsequential. I have experienced many crises of conscience within the strange context of the American COVID-19 crisis. Amidst the physical suffering endured by many, the nation faces political and cultural upheaval in the form of some of the largest civil rights protests that the country has ever seen.[209] As we are isolated in our homes or thrust into a dangerous world, it seems much easier to close ourselves off from the risk of relationships. Bonding with our fellows means risking not only our understanding of ourselves and the world, but sometimes our physical well-being.

Despite these circumstances, sufferers can be seen emerging from their dark nights every day. Those who continue to care for the sick, provide essential goods, teach, and cry for justice do so in the midst of their own sufferings and in spite of them. Like God, we must face non-being, claim it, and work to conquer it for others. It is only through love and meaningful relationships, mirroring those of Christ, that we can hope to relieve our grief. As a student of theology and biblical interpretation, I have often felt as if my contributions to humanity's sufferings are insignificant. The solution to this feeling

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[209] Though civil rights protests have been instrumental in the fight for racial equality in the United States for decades, the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests far surpassed known attendance records and continue to draw crowds as I am writing this thesis. This is likely due to record high unemployment in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, which allowed many who would have been working to attend protests instead. Additionally, growing civic unrest and more widespread circulation of incidents of police brutality on social media drew crowds in every state, as well as a number of other countries. Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020.

of insignificance is to be found in the practice of compassion, even as it is expressed via biblical interpretation. Through a hermeneutic of powerful suffering, we must witness the wailings of the many sufferers within the biblical text and cry out alongside them.

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