Suffering God and Sovereign God in Exodus: A Collision of Images

A survey of Exodus studies from the perspective of their God-talk reveals a predominant use of sovereignty metaphors.[1] It is a sovereignty commonly defined in a certain way. God is not only king, lord, and judge, but also one who stands outside of the world and speaks and acts on the creation with absolute authority. Or, God is presented not only as one who takes the initiative, articulates a purpose and sets the agenda, but also as one who is in total control of nature and history, who brooks no opposition and bends every power in heaven and earth to fulfill the divine word and will.[2] I would contend that sovereignty cannot be so defined and still be true to the texts; it needs some correction in view of other metaphors for God in Exodus. Moreover, it is not common for such studies to be mindful of the range of suffering images for God to be found in Exodus, that is, those metaphors that reflect a divine entry into the sphere of the created such that God and God's ways with the world are genuinely affected thereby.[3]

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1. These reflections emerge from the writing of a commentary on Exodus, in the Interpretation series (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), as well as a critique of my book *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), namely, that I gave insufficient attention to how the suffering and monarchical images of God were to be related. This paper begins to address that issue.

2. As examples, see M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 101: The Bible "not only assumes or deploys but also inculcates a model of reality where God exercises absolute sway on the universe (nature, culture, history) in conspicuous isolation and transcendence"; yet, strangely, he can also speak of God as one who "at times yields to despair" (p. 109). T. W. Mann, *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 84–85: "Perhaps the most important way [of exalting Yahweh] is to show that Yahweh is in control of events in the narrative from the outset." Even in the opening two chapters of Exodus, where God is rarely noted, it is not uncommon for such language to be used. See, for example, the statement in Cheryl Exum's fine study regarding Moses' mother entrusting him to the boat on the river: "Matters are now in the hands of the deity." But the narrative states only that Moses is in the hands of women, especially Pharaoh's daughter ("'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8–2:10," *Semeia* 28 [1983]: 77).

3. I use the word *suffering* in a broad sense, encompassing such matters as receptivity, affectivity, vulnerability, pathos, passion, empathy, genuine interaction with the world, dependence on the created orders of being, and even self-limitation, if carefully defined. The word *suffering* makes clear that this is a matter of actuality for God, not just potentiality. Moreover, as will be made clear, suffering is an active, not a passive word. For recent discussions of divine suffering, see Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God: Divine Suffering in Contemporary Protestant Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985).

4. See George Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988); Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

5. One example of a helpful, if isolated reflection is that of Moshe Greenberg: "Those who are brought close to God retain their integrity even in moments of closest contact. They are not merely passive recipients, but active, even opposing respondents. There is true address and response, genuine give and take. The human partner has a say in shaping the direction and outcome of the events" (*Understanding Exodus* [New York: Behrman, 1969]), 94.

6. See my initial suggestions in "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," *HBT* 10 (1988): 47–70; *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 24–29.

A few scholars have lifted up the role of Moses, and Jon Levenson has worked in helpful ways with divine and human interrelationships in the Sinai texts.[4] But, a sustained look at the God of the book of Exodus, especially taking into account the suffering metaphors, remains to be undertaken.[5]

Out of an interest in content issues, I will be all too brief in outlining my approach. My look at some pertinent Exodus texts proceeds on the basis of the final form of the text. The interpreter is therein faced with a composite text addressed to an unknown historical setting. At the least, however, this redaction is not socially or theologically disinterested; something is at stake for the redactor, but what is at stake is uncertain at the present level of inquiry. This theological study may help get at that; an initial probe suggests an exilic provenance, in which captive Israel finds itself in straits similar to its forebears in Egypt and in the aftermath of the golden calf apostasy. Israel in exile stands in need of *both* deliverance and forgiveness. [32]

While this layered text shows linguistic and rhetorical signs of attempts to unify the material, it has not been at the expense of flattening it out into a narrative that is theologically tension-free. One is faced with some jarring theological juxtapositions—often recognized by source critics. For example, the pyrotechnical theophany of chap. 19 in which God is unapproachable, even dangerous, is set alongside the quiet theophany of chap. 24, in which God is quite approachable and no special precautions need be taken.

The relationship between theology and narrative continues to be a problem of some consequence.[6] We learn from a number of Old Testament texts that story and generalization do not stand opposed to one another; in fact, they may be integrated (e.g., Exod 34:6–7). While not many statements about God move within a more abstract sphere, the fact that they exist at all indicates that the God who is the subject of sentences in the narrative has a significance in some way related to those abstractions. In other words, we have an *inner-Old Testament warrant* to engage in more general reflections about the God who is rendered in the story. That there is a certain deliberateness regarding the God who is so rendered can be seen, for

example, in the virtual absence of God-talk in some Exodus narratives (e.g., 1:1–2:22; 5:4–21).

One way to look at such theological matters is to probe the God-talk in the various narrative units in terms of the metaphoric semantic fields represented and then explore possible interrelationships. I here single out suffering and sovereignty.[7] I believe this probe will show how *common understandings* of sovereignty in Exodus (and elsewhere) are subverted by suffering metaphors, and an understanding of sovereignty more congruent with the text can emerge.

I have come away from my study of Exodus with two primary theological convictions: (I) A theology of creation shapes the book of Exodus in a fundamental way; (II) The God of Exodus is both sovereign and suffering. We will take a brief look at the first in order to set the stage for the second. The way in which God is perceived to be related to the world will shape what is impossible in terms of talk of God's sovereignty and suffering. [33]

I. A Theology of Creation

Exodus presents the redemption from Egypt within a context informed and undergirded by a God who acts as Lord of heaven and earth. It is the Creator God who redeems Israel from Egypt. Until recently, the interpretation of Exodus has been overwhelmed by attention to the theme of redemption. So much so, that standard introductions to the Old Testament often start at this point. The theme of creation is often ignored or noticed only in bits and pieces of text, with no overarching importance for the interpretation of the book as a whole. Certainly von Rad's important article from the 1930's has had an inordinate influence at just this point, with its claim regarding the secondary role of creation in Israel's theological formulations.[8] Recent discussions, however, have commonly shown the inadequacy of this claim.[9]

Generally, God's work in *creation provides the basic categories and interpretive clues* for what happens in redemption. God's work in creation has been shown to be life-giving, life-preserving, and life-blessing (e.g. 1:7, 12, 20). What God does in redemption is in the service of these endangered divine goals in and for the creation. The hymnic celebration of that redemptive act in Exodus 15 is permeated with creation-talk, in terms of vocabulary, structure, and theme. Not only is an *experience* of God's work as creator necessary for participation in the exodus—otherwise there would be no people

7. This presupposes my discussion of anthropomorphic metaphors in *The Suffering of God*, 5–12.

8. Gerhard von Rad, "The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation," in *Creation in the Old Testament* (ed. B. W. Anderson; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 53–64.

9. E.g., these two articles in *Creation*: H. H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation: 'Creation Theology' as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology," 102–17; Claus Westermann, "Biblical Reflections on Creator, Creation," 90–101.

to redeem, an *understanding* of God's work as creator is indispensable for the proper interpretation of what happens—there would be no exodus as we *know it* without it having been informed by that understanding.

The basic creation themes in Exodus are:

(a) A creation theology provides the *cosmic purpose* behind God's redemptive activity on Israel's behalf. While the liberation of Israel is the focus of God's activity, it is not the ultimate purpose. The deliverance of Israel is ultimately for the sake of all creation. As 9:16 states: "I have let you live so that my name may be declared throughout all the earth." The issue for God finally is not that God's name be made known to Israel, but that it be declared to the entire earth. God's purpose in these events is creation-wide. What is at stake is God's [34] mission to the world, for as 9:29 and 19:5 (cf. 8:22; 9:14) put it, "all the earth is God's." Hence, the *public* character of these events is a very important theme throughout the book. It is crucial that all the world be able to observe what God is doing for Israel, for they are the ultimate object of that activity (see 15:14–16; 18:1, 8–12).

(b) God's redemptive activity is set in terms of a *creational need*. The fulfillment of God's creational purposes in the growth and multiplication of Israel is endangered by Pharaoh's attempted subversion thereof. If Pharaoh persists in his anti-life policies at precisely that point at which God has begun to actualize the promise of creation (1:7) — cutting off Israel's fruitfulness (1:8–14), then God's very purposes in creation are being subverted, and God's creational mission will not be able to be realized. God's work in and through Moses, climaxing in Israel's crossing of the sea on "dry land," constitutes God's efforts of re-creation, returning creation to a point where God's mission can once again be taken up.

(c) God's redemptive activity is *cosmic in its effects*. Generally speaking, the Lord of heaven and earth is active throughout Exodus, from acts of blessing to the use of aspects of nature in the plagues, the sea crossing, and the wilderness wanderings. More specifically, Exodus 15 confesses that God's victory at the sea is not simply a local or a historical phenomenon, but a cosmic one. God's defeat of the powers of chaos results, not simply in Israel's liberation, but in the reign of God over the entire cosmos (15:18).[10]

(d) God's calling of Israel is given *creation-wide scope*. The theme of "all the earth is God's" is picked up again in 19:4–6, a divine invitation to Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.[11] Israel is called out from among other nations and is commissioned to a task on behalf of God's

10. In some ways, Exodus 15 is to the Old Testament what Colossians is to the New Testament. Exodus 15 is also one of the texts appointed for Easter Sunday. Such expressions of triumph must not take away from the reality of the pain and suffering experienced on the way to that point in the journey. This is particularly important for those readers, such as the exiles, for whom the triumph can only be hoped for.

11. My understanding of covenant in Exodus 19:3–6 is in terms of a vocational covenant within the context of the Abrahamic covenant. See my commentary, *Exodus*, forthcoming.

earth. Israel is to function among those nations as a priest functions in a religious community. Israel's witness to God's redemptive activity (18:8–12) and the obedience of the law is finally for the sake of a universal mission.[12]

(c) Finally, God's own relationship to the creation is seen in terms of an *immanental involvement*. As we shall note below, God has not chosen the way of *radical* transcendence. God has entered into the very life of the world and is fully engaged there on behalf of the [35] divine purposes. The primary "form" in which God has chosen to be so engaged is in the human form of the theophany— from the call of Moses (3:1–6) to the sea crossing (14:19) to Sinai (24:9–11). This action bespeaks God's: (i) identity with human beings, a sharing in the human condition; (ii) willingness to undergo change, taking on a non-divine form and directly experiencing what that entails; (iii) vulnerability, risking a response in the human encounter that is other than faith or obedience. But God does not thereby give up sovereignty; indeed, it is a sign of strength for God to do just this. God's sovereignty is made manifest in assuming a vulnerable form in the midst of the world.[13] This leads to the next section.

II. God Both Sovereign and Suffering

Generally, Exodus presents God as highly engaged in the events of which it speaks, though a more unobtrusive, behind-the-scenes activity is evident in chaps. 1–2, 5, and 18. Images of divine sovereignty are certainly prominent. For example, God's lordship is evident in the proclamation of the law and the call to obedience; God's judging is experienced by the Egyptians. God's kingship, however, is explicitly confirmed only once (15:18), somewhat surprising given the sovereignty issues in the narrative. At the same time, there seems to be a difference in the effectiveness of God's activity, indeed the very nature of the divine sovereignty, depending upon whether God is working in history or nature. We look at each in turn.

(a) *God's sovereignty over nature.* God's relationship to nature is apparently conceived in terms of sovereign control. God seems to be able to work in and through the natural order at will, wherever and whenever God wills to accomplish the divine purpose. Witness the plagues, the use of wind and sea, the provision of food and water in the wilderness, the natural pyrotechnics at Mount Sinai. The natural order is not resistant to the divine will; it "fulfills his command" (Ps 148:8).

At the same time, the narrative introduces at least four qualifications to this divine sovereignty in nature. [36]

(i) The divine working in nature is usually in coordination with human activity. Hence, the use of the rod by Moses/Aaron in the plagues or at the

12. The discussion of E. W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 122–25, is helpful here.

13. For further discussion of these aspects of theophany, see my *Suffering of God*, 79–106.

sea crossing or in the wilderness is an integral element in what happens in the natural order. Human agency is especially clear in the sweetening of the bitter waters and the provision of water from the rock (15:22–27; 17:1–7). Or, in the four cases where a plague is removed, God acts "according to the word of Moses" (8:13). There is a complex understanding of agency in connection with each of the plagues. Moses and Aaron would not be effective without God's power working in and through them, and God is dependent on Moses and Aaron, working in the world of nature in and through that which is not divine.

(ii) The divine use of nature is not "supernatural" or "unnatural," but congruent with what is possible for nature to become if properly used or improperly exploited. For example, the provision of food and water in the wilderness is, in each instance, a divine use of normal creational processes (e.g., manna and quail). Or, the strong east wind pushes the sea back. Or, the plagues (including the final plague) are instances of divine judgment in which the natural orders are caught up in a sin/consequence vortex, either as cause or victim. Pharaoh's anti-life measures against God's creation have unleashed chaotic powers that threaten the very creation God intended.

Without going into detail, those elements of the natural order that are on the *victimizing* side are all out of kilter with their created way of being (much beyond any "pain" built into the creation). They all appear in distorted form. Water is no longer water; light and darkness are no longer separated; diseases of people and animals run amok; insects and amphibians swarm out of control. While everything is unnatural in the sense of being beyond the bounds of life as created, "hypernatural" (that is, nature in excess) may better capture that sense of the natural breaking through its created limits, not functioning as God intended. This is a picture of creation gone berserk, reverting to a state of chaos. The theological grounding for this is an understanding of the symbiotic relationship between moral order and cosmic order, where the divine judgments grow out of, are intrinsically related to the (evil) deed. In effect, God gives Pharaoh up to reap the "natural" consequences of his anti-creation deeds. Moderns who look in the face of the consequences of an abuse of the environment, e.g., the depletion of the ozone layer or the misuse of atomic energy, know something of what this is about. A kind of hypernaturalness is often the result.

(iii) The divine use of nature is, therefore, not arbitrary, but responds to specific situations in the created order. The plagues are not some capricious divine move, but congruent with the anti-creational sins of Pharaoh. Or, the use of the wind and the waves in the sea crossing is congruent with the cosmic nature of the struggle. The battle was not simply against "flesh and blood," but against the cosmic forces of evil, embodied in the Pharaoh. (At the same time, Pharaoh is an historical figure who is individually responsible.)

(iv) The factors of timing, placement and range for both plague execution and removal no doubt give testimony to the divine control of nature,

but these factors are also to be related to the stylized form of the narrative. The formally controlled character of the narrative and the hyperbolic use of language (cf. the pervasive use of *kol,* all/every) suggests a special literary purpose, even the possibility of a dramatic setting for this material. While this does not finally take away the witness to divine control, it introduces an element of qualification.

The upshot of this is that the language of divine sovereignty is certainly appropriate, though not in an unqualified way. God does not act in nature in ways totally independent of the created order of being. We cannot factor out the complexities of the divine, human and cosmic interaction, but God's use of nature certainly exhibits a strong element of rule and control.

(b) *God's sovereignty over the human order.* This order of divine rule seems to be differently conceived, in terms other than absolute rule or control. Unlike nature, human beings have sufficient freedom and power to be resistant to the word and will of God. This becomes a point where the metaphors of divine suffering become prominent in the narrative, subverting a common understanding of sovereignty in Exodus, while enabling a more appropriate view to emerge. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart has tended to crowd out consideration of God's relationship to other human beings in Exodus. [38] Placing Pharaoh in this larger relational context may help shed some light on this perennial discussion. Among the many examples one might cite, let me take up four types:

(i) *The divine decision* (3:7–10; cf. 2:25). This divine word to Moses, part of the first word from God in Exodus, is *programmatic;* the narrator's report in 2:24–25 helps establish this. *The God who acts in the narrative is understood to be the kind of God portrayed here.* This divine word is in the first person, coming directly from God's own heart and will. Characteristic of this word is an interweaving of metaphors of sovereignty and suffering, signaling a way in which subsequent God-talk is to be interpreted.

God's sovereignty is evident in the divine initiative, the setting of the agenda, the will to deliver Israel, and the announced ability to accomplish this. Alongside this, however, is a sphere of God-talk uncommonly related to sovereignty.[14] God sees Israel's afflictions and "knows" their sufferings. For God to "know" the people's sufferings testifies to God's *experience* of this suffering, indeed God's *intimate* experience. God has so entered into their sufferings as to have experienced what they are having to endure. God does not remain safe and secure in some heavenly abode, untouched

14. The kingship ideal in Israel (and the ancient Near East) includes such themes as the care and protection of the poor and needy (cf. Psalm 72). At the same time, it would be over-extending the metaphor, and even reductionistic, to suggest that every instance of the divine pathos is interpretive of sovereignty metaphors. Moreover, the way in which such metaphors function (for any people) is decisively informed by the experience of imperfectly realized forms of human sovereignty. Other metaphors are needed in order to realize what shape the divine sovereignty truly entails.

by the sorrows of the world. God is not portrayed here as a typical monarch dealing with the issue through subordinates or at some distance. God does not look at the suffering from the outside as through a window; God knows it from the inside. God is internally related to the suffering, entering fully into the oppressive situation and making it God's own. For God to *know* suffering is, to follow the metaphorical grain, to allow suffering to enter deeply into the divine being.

Yet, while God suffers with the people, God is not powerless in the face of it. However much God's work may be complicated by it, the actual situation does not finally define what is possible for God. This evidences the divine sovereignty. Even more, the divine suffering is in itself a powerful force, focusing the divine energies on the situation. But, for God to deal with such a situation by entering into it, and working on it from the inside rather than from the outside, charts certain directions for the nature of the divine involvement and [39] delimits the divine possibilities. Or, as will be made clear below, sovereignty and suffering qualify one another.

It is also to be noted in this text that God does not act alone in bringing Israel out of Egypt; both God and Moses are the subject of the exodus (3:8, 10; cf. 6:13, 26–27; 32:7). The divine sovereignty is seen in that God takes the initiative, invites Moses, sets the purpose, and is engaged in the task. But God does not act alone and depends on Moses in carrying out the tasks involved. This means that God gives up total control of the ensuing events. Responsibility has been placed in Moses' hands to do with as he will. God will now have to work in and through Moses' frailties as well as strengths. This will mean something less than what would have been possible had God acted alone. Israel recognizes the importance of this non-divine involvement in its post-exodus confession (14:31): "they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses."

(ii) *Divine engagement with individuals. The five women in chaps. 1–2.* The virtual absence of God as subject in these chapters (though enough is said to place God on the scene) introduces one way in which God is active in the Exodus narrative. Ironies abound in these chapters, including the decision of Pharaoh to let daughters live, with the effect that their activity thwarts his plans. This also becomes a point of *divine irony.* God uses the weak, what is low and despised in that world, to shame the strong (see Jer 9:23; 1 Cor 1:26–29). Rather than using power as it is usually exercised in the world to carry out the divine purpose, God works in and through persons who have no obvious power; indeed, the women chosen are unlikely candidates for the exercise of power. The high role given Pharaoh's daughter (a non-Israelite at that!) is seen in the direct verbal and thematic parallels between her activity and that of God in chaps. 3–18: she "comes down," "sees" the child, "hears" its cry, takes pity on him, draws him out of the water, and provides for his daily needs.

In such moves, God opens himself up to risk and vulnerability, for these persons could fail and God would have to begin again. God, whose

plan for Israel's future rests squarely on the shoulders of a baby in a fragile basket, places the preservation of that future in the hands [40] of five lowly women. Yet, they prove to be highly effective against ruthless forms of systemic power, and God is not the subject of a single verb in their various undertakings. God works throughout this section of Exodus in unobtrusive, unlikely and vulnerable ways.

This sets the stage for what follows. While God will fill the scene more evidently in the ensuing narrative, these opening chapters provide a hermeneutical base from which one is to interpret the fundamental character of that divine activity.

Moses. The dialogical interchange between God and Moses in chaps. 3–6 consists of eight objections raised by Moses to the divine commission, with various divine responses. Moses is anything but deferential; disagreement, argument, and even challenge play an important role. This response on Moses' part is due to the kind of God who has confronted him. God's word to Moses has been of such a character that it draws the other into a genuine conversation. The divine holiness (3:6) is of such a nature that it invites rather than repels human response. God does not demand a self-effacing Moses, but draws him out and works with him, "warts and all." The oft-noted speech disability of Moses adds an ironic twist to this point. It is not only a human being that challenges God; it is an inarticulate one who does so and holds his own!

Moreover, God treats the dialogue with Moses with integrity and honors his insights as important ingredients for the shaping of the task. God is clearly the authority, but God's approach is non-authoritarian in nature. God will move with Moses, even adapting original divine plans (e.g., the role of Aaron) in view of Moses' considerations. God's way into the future is thus not dictated solely by the divine word and will. God has now placed that word and will in the hands of another to do with what he will.[15] That is for God a risky venture, fraught with negative possibilities. At the same time, this enhances rather than compromises the kind of sovereignty which Exodus wishes to claim for God.

Even more, it is Moses' persistence that occasions a greater fullness in the divine revelation. Human questions find an openness in God and lead to fuller knowledge. God thus reveals himself, not simply at the divine initiative, but in interaction with a questioning human [41] party. Simple deference or passivity in the presence of God would close down the revelatory possibilities. It is important to note that God is not thereby de-mystified

15. See the comparable statement of von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 2:73: "What makes it [prophecy] such a tremendous responsibility is the fact that the prophet is thus the one who puts the will of Jahweh into effect: Jahweh thereafter commits himself to stand by the decision of his ambassador."

through further understanding. In fact, the more one understands God, the more the divine inexhaustibility becomes apparent.[16]

From another perspective, this text witnesses to God's initial lack of success in persuading Moses to take up his calling. All of God's persuasive powers are brought to bear on Moses and he remains unconvinced for some time. God's best efforts do not meet with instant success. Whatever power God uses in this encounter, it does not overpower Moses. Hence, in 4:10–17, in the face of Moses' resistance, God must resort to Plan B, calling Aaron to be Moses' voice. Obviously, God is not delighted with this option; in fact, God is angry. But God goes with what is possible; using Aaron is now the best option available to God. God always aims for the best in every situation, but God must often work with options that are less than the best (witness Aaron's later failure as a leader in chap. 32). God often has to accept what people do with the powers they have been given, even to resist God's efforts to persuade.

This dialogue is picked up again in chaps. 32–34. Once more Moses enters into debate with God, this time regarding the initial divine response to Israel's apostasy. In view of Moses' argumentation, God reverses himself with respect to the announced judgement (32:14).[17] What Moses has to contribute counts with this God. *God has so entered into relationship with him that God is not the only one who has something important to say.* In fact, the ongoing conversation in chaps. 32–34 issues in a number of shifts in the divine response to what has happened, climaxing in the decision to accompany Israel on its journeyings and to renew the covenant.

In this context, God proclaims to Moses the most basic characteristics of the divine nature (34:6–7): merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but not neglecting just judgment. It is noteworthy that this common confession, in which *God* defines the most basic divine character, is filled with metaphoric language that does not bespeak kingship, judgeship or lordship, at least [42] in terms of the basic grain of those images. The final phrases do speak of judging, and that is not unimportant, but this is not presented as a constant divine attribute and the other images fill the scene. And, yet, the very way in which God chooses to exercise those attributes bespeaks sovereignty (see 33:19).

This discussion should also be related to the text's clear indication that God's knowledge of the future is limited (4:8–9). In the midst of their continuing dialogue, God acknowledges to Moses the uncertainty of the people's response by repeatedly using conditional language. *If* they do not

16. See Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 330: "The more one understands God the more mysterious God becomes. And the deeper one penetrates this mystery the more interesting it becomes."

17. On the divine repentance theme, see my "The Repentance of God."

believe the first sign, they may believe the second. *If* they do not believe these two signs or listen to Moses' voice, a third sign will be given. This suggests that God is certainly aware of the possibilities of their response; one might even say that God, given a thoroughgoing knowledge of Israel, knows what the response is likely to be. There will be no surprises for God in the sense of not anticipating what might happen. Yet, in God's own words, God does not finally know. It is possible that a spontaneous response on the part of the people will issue in a result different from what God now sees as probable.[18]

Pharaoh. The long history of interpretation associated with the hardening of Pharaoh's heart makes this issue more complex than it is. In this context, we can only give some basic directions.[19] The character of the above-noted divine-human interaction suggests that God is no more controlling of Pharaoh's will than of Moses' will. In fact, a certain parallel is evident between Moses' numerous objections and those of Pharaoh; in both cases God struggles at length with the will of a human leader. Overall, the issue of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is best explained via Jeremiah, where the theme of hardening is related to the people of Israel (e.g., 7:26).

Both God and Pharaoh are subjects of the hardening verbs, and in the plague sequence, God first becomes the subject only after the sixth plague. Even then, God's hardening does not control the situation (note that God has to harden repeatedly), as Pharaoh's repentance of sin makes clear (9:27; 10:16; note the *narrator's* acknowledgment of "sin" in 9:34). Finally, however, it may be said that God's hardening activity gathers momentum and drives the judgmental events [43] to their disastrous end (as in the fall of Jerusalem). God's activity hardens Pharaoh's own obduracy to the point of no return. Ps 81:11–12 captures this sense: "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would have none of me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels." Thus, there is a limited amount of deterministic language that one can use at the end of the narrative (if you come too close to the falls in your canoe, the trip over the edge becomes inevitable). But Pharaoh's own decisions have been important in moving the course of events to this point.

Generally, the struggle with Pharaoh would not redound much to the glory of God if it were only a matter of God's outwitting a windup toy. For God's victory to mean something, the opposition cannot be a pushover. If Pharaoh is a puppet in the hands of God, then God's renown is not particularly enhanced, one of the divine objectives of the narrative. As elsewhere in the Old Testament, God does not rid the world of evil with a snap of the divine finger.

18. For further Old Testament examples, see my *The Suffering of God*, 45–49.
19. See my commentary on *Exodus* for discussion.

Certainly one basic concern of chaps. 1–15 is who will finally be recognized as the sovereign one, Pharaoh or Yahweh. But a parallel issue is: *what* is the appropriate nature of sovereignty? Pharaoh's and Yahweh's ways of being sovereign are often contrasted. To anticipate the discussion below: Yahweh's sovereignty is qualified by suffering, Pharaoh's is not. It is Pharaoh who is the unmoved mover.

More briefly, let me cite two spheres of divine activity that reveal a sovereignty that is less than absolute:

(iii) *The people of Israel* (13:17–21). More generally, one might cite the oft-noted movement of Israel from lament to praise in chaps. 1–15. The very shape of the narrative is such that God enters into an interresponding relationship with human beings.[20]

In this transitional passage, the narrator highlights the divine leading. God is concerned that Israel not take the most traveled route from Egypt to Canaan. The divine concern is that the people might change their mind if forced into battle. This shows that God must take into account prevailing socio-political forces as well as people's emotional make-up in charting a way into the future. One might expect that God, with all the power at the divine disposal, would not back off from leading the people into any situation. God would just mow the enemies [44] down! No, the human situation makes a difference regarding the divine possibilities, and hence affects the divine decisions. The exercise of the divine sovereignty in providential activity is thus shown to be of such a nature that it could not ignore or override whatever obstacles might come along. In fact, this divine concern suggests the possibility of failure; the people could decide to return to Egypt. Divine providence is thus shown not to stand over against careful divine planning in view of human circumstances.

(iv) *The world* (2:23–25). In this transitional passage, which moves quickly from earthly palace to heavenly throne, the narrator shows that happenings on the world scene make a difference with respect to the divine possibilities. When kings die, it makes a difference to God. The death of the king of Egypt provides for new possibilities or opportunities for God. Changes in world situations provide the occasion for change in God's way of relating to that world. The long period of waiting in Egypt, then, has been due not to some divine quietism, but to God's waiting for the right configuration of human and natural events to put a new level of activity together on Israel's behalf.

20. See Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981). See also the unpublished 1984 Heidelberg dissertation of Frederick Gaiser, "Songs in the Story." He states helpfully regarding this pattern: God's "guidance of history is pastoral, interested not so much in simply making things happen, but in bringing his people more closely into a trusting relationship with him and securing their ongoing existence."

Some general observations. The net effect of the discussion to this point is that we have side by side in various Exodus narratives some strong uses of both sovereign language and suffering language. A theological consideration must ask how these metaphoric fields might be related to one another.

One of the issues with respect to images of God has to do with what may be called a metaphorical canon within the canon. Certain images of God are more central than are others; these then function to determine whether a given metaphor is appropriate, is being misused, has been exhausted, or is of low referential value, and how it is to be qualified. For example, one can claim that Hosea's metaphor of "dry rot" (5:12) for God has a low revelatory capacity by measuring it over against such "controlling" metaphors. The task is to sort through the images used in the Old Testament, seeking *by inner-biblical warrant* to determine those that are central. I have sought to show elsewhere[21] that such inner-biblical criteria would include: pervasiveness, distribution, and the nature of the genres and the traditions in which the metaphor is used. Extra-biblically, one might speak of these criteria: [45] how true they are to life; the richness of association in common human experience; their capacity to capture, organize, focus and communicate the experience of God. Clearly, metaphors from both the sovereignty and suffering metaphoric fields would belong among the "controlling" category of metaphors.

The neglect of the suffering metaphors in the history of God-talk shows, however, not only how difficult it has been to hold these metaphoric fields together in the same mind, but also that the metaphors of sovereignty have more often than not been *the* controlling sphere of images (see below). One effect of this has been that the sovereignty metaphors have commonly been left largely unqualified, with a consequent univocal reading of them. And one way to define *idolatry* is: a univocal reading of metaphors for God.[22] A recovery of the "controlling" status of the suffering metaphors will have a decisive effect on common understandings of sovereignty.

As we have shown, both of these spheres of language are interwoven in the book of Exodus. When one lets these metaphors engage one another, even struggle with one another, what sort of theological coherence becomes available? This is possible only if, in this engagement, these two metaphoric fields significantly qualify one another, with sovereignty qualifying suffering and suffering qualifying sovereignty. The end result is that suffering and sovereignty stand alongside one another in a metaphorical dialectic. *Suffering and sovereignty are internally related to one another in God, such that the sovereign God is always suffering and the suffering God is always sovereign.* Contextual factors, however, the needs of a given time and place,

21. "The Repentance of God," 52–59.

22. One might suggest that the theologies of the death of God in the 1960's were concerned precisely with this point

may call for one metaphoric field to achieve some ascendancy over the other. Hence, given the present common understanding of sovereignty, suffering will have a more decisive effect on sovereignty than the other way round. Our study to this point has shown how the suffering images in Exodus subvert such a common understanding of sovereignty, correct our reading of the text, and help to lift up proper understandings.

In the first instance, the qualification of divine suffering that occurs in view of divine sovereignty particularizes the "is not" side of the metaphor drawn from human suffering. For example, God is not [46] overwhelmed by the experience; indeed, God is energized by it. God does not become incapacitated or stymied in the face of suffering; God is able to use suffering to find ways of moving into the future when all hope seems to have faded away. God suffers *as God;* hence, God's Godness is not adversely affected thereby. God's saving will does not waver. God's purposes for the creation remain constant. God's love continues steadfast. God's faithfulness perdures in the face of human disloyalty.

In the second instance, suffering qualifies sovereignty. Having decided to relate to the world in such a way as to be genuinely affected thereby, God becomes vulnerable. The "is not" side of metaphors such as king, judge or lord thereby comes into view. God will work in the world in and through that which is not God with all the potential for disappointment, frustration and failure that that entails. Even more, God will not pull back into a sovereignty without suffering, even temporarily, for that would break the divine resolve to be so related to the creation.[23] This means that common understandings of divine sovereignty must be transformed in view of a God who resolves to suffer so.

Let me work briefly with three recent studies as a way of illustrating how this perspective might be used in an evaluative way as well as help us move this discussion along.

(1) E. W. Nicholson.[24] This book, helpfully concerned with the development of covenant as a theological idea in Israel, has a major concern with texts in Exodus 19–24. I am most interested in sparring with Nicholson in his chapter on the "distinctiveness of Israel's faith," particularly on the understanding of God which emerges. A few representative theological statements (emphases mine):

> "In the Old Testament Yahweh is creator but *radically* transcends his creation. The *distance between him and the human world is polarized"* (p. 200). He speaks of "a *radical* differentiation between the divine and the human world, between God and his creation" (p. 207). "Such 'disenchantment of the world' [elsewhere 'desacralization'] is represented by . . . the decisive

23. Sternberg (*Poetics of Biblical Narrative*) seems at times to exercise this option. For example, God retains "the privilege of intervening at any moment" or can engage in a "suspension of omnipotence" (p. 110).

24. *God and His People*, 191–217

> break with the typical creation-theology of the ancient Near East: God is not continuous with his [47] creation, *does not permeate it,* is not to be identified with, or represented by, anything within it, but stands *outside* his creation confronting it with his righteous will" (pp. 207–8). "The making of the covenant was not only upon Yahweh's initiative; more than that, he himself was a partner to it . . . life for Israel was understood as *fellowship* with Yahweh who had entered a covenant with this people" (p. 215). He also wants to speak of Israel's *"free* decision to be obedient and faithful to him" (p. 216).

The predominant images for Nicholson are certainly those of sovereignty, but it is sovereignty informed by a view of the relationship between God and world such that they are "radically" distinct. But, how is it theologically possible to use words like "partner" or "fellowship" for God if God stands "outside" the creation? How can a "radically transcendent" God be a "partner" in any genuine sense? That's having your cake and eating it, too! In these formulations God and creation are so disjunctive that any contact between the two could only be seen in terms of lightning bolt or laser beam. The only way in which "partner" and "fellowship" could fit with this is if they have an esoteric meaning quite removed from their normal senses. In other words, if language such as "partner" is going to be used, and Nicholson is quite correct in doing so, it will qualify sovereignty in a fundamental way, and the radically disjunctive language will have to be set aside. Nicholson is to be commended for joining the crowd in breaking away from treaty or agreement or contractual language for covenant, but he also needs to break with the kind of divine sovereignty language often so much a part of that view of covenant.

Moreover, the strong element on human choice and free decision in his discussion has a sharp ironic sense. The only way in which one can have such a strong view of human freedom in the face of such a sovereign God is with a heavy dose of deism—a move that Nicholson does not want to make. It is also time to rid the world of "desacralization" language; as Jer 23:24 puts it, "the world is full of God."

(2) Patrick Miller.[25] I'm appreciative of this article for the important place divine sovereignty is shown to have in the Old Testament (including Exodus) and the clarity with which it raises a number of these [48] issues. Finally, however, I do not think Miller has sufficiently considered the qualifying role of the suffering images. He claims that King, Judge and Warrior are "controlling images" for God in the Old Testament (pp. 129, 141). I assume that this means that they exercise a qualifying impact on all other metaphors. Hence, whatever other metaphors might mean, they have to be congruent with the basic meaning of these controlling metaphors.

25. "The Sovereignty of God," in *The Hermeneutical Quest* (ed. D. G. Miller; Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1986), 129–44.

At one point in his article, Miller shows how this might be done. He speaks of an "opening up" of the definition of kingly power so that shepherd can become incorporated among these images, yet "the meaning and force of this [kingly] theme remains the same throughout the Bible" (pp. 130–31). Among those meanings is God's *"control* of nature and history," a recurring theme (pp. 130, 133–34, 141; his italics, though it is not entirely clear how strong he considers "control" to be). It seems clear that here the king metaphor norms the shepherd metaphor; shepherd only enhances the "protection and care" elements in the controlling king image. Whatever the shepherd metaphor might entail, it is subordinate to the king metaphor. Any aspect of the shepherd metaphor that is not congruent with the king's "control of nature and history" belongs to the "is not" of the shepherd metaphor.

At the same time, there are three places in the article where the consistency of this perspective seems to falter. In a one sentence comment on the royal theme in the New Testament (p. 131), Miller speaks of "a suffering love that is willing to take all their [the enemies] attacks." It is not typical of (even ideal) kings, however, that they simply suffer all attacks from their enemies. Hence, clearly, the king metaphor is being qualified by a metaphor of another sort. I would suggest that the field of suffering metaphors has entered into the discussion unacknowledged.

Or, in connection with the judge image, he speaks of God being "not dispassionate, but passionate and compassionate" (p. 131). Yet, dispassionateness" is certainly one thing a true judge is all about. Once again, the judge metaphor is being qualified by a metaphor of another sort. Moreover, his citation of Gen 18:25, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" in this connection might also be noted. Here [49] Abraham calls God judge, but at the same time calls the judge to account in terms of an inherent righteousness in the created order of things. God certainly created such a moral order in freedom, but once having created it, God's sovereignty is thereby qualified. God is subject to the very moral order God put into place, in the sense of having to respond to injustice in some way. God cannot not respond to injustice.[26] This also qualifies the king metaphor, in the sense of one who is in control of things and who cannot be called to account.

Finally, in connection with the warrior image, Miller says that "the struggle [against the principalities and powers] goes on" (p. 134). If God

26. Contra Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil,* 149–50, who wishes to speak instead of God's "unlimited freedom, a freedom unlimited even by his own principles of justice and generosity." Yes, the decision will be God's, but not finally in independence of God's own righteous order. What remains open in the text is what it will take for God to be righteous. Levenson's work is a powerful testimony to the witness of some Old Testament traditions to the vulnerable sovereignty of God as Creator. He does not, however, consider how this vulnerability might be related to the work of God in the exodus, though his discussion of covenant suggests a direction in which he might go.

is King and Warrior who "controls nature and history," is it meaningful to speak of a "struggle" in any real sense? Another metaphor has entered the picture, such that some basic meanings of God as Warrior (and King) have been subverted. If the struggle in which God is engaged against the powers of evil is a genuine struggle, then the metaphors of King and Warrior have been transmuted by another set of metaphors.

It appears that there is, finally, a recognition that the metaphors of King, Judge and Warrior are basic, but that they need to be qualified by another metaphoric field. Whatever place these three metaphors may have in the Old Testament's understanding of God, metaphors from the suffering field qualify them in important ways.

(3) Erich Zenger.[27] For Zenger, Israel's situation in exile is seen to parallel that of the exodus; they are "afflicted, wretched, and poor." God's response to this situation, while often cast in terms comparable to, and grounded in, God's earlier action on behalf of Israel is a new reality. The exodus has revealed the kind of God God is, but the *means by which God will act this time* differs from the exodus in substantial ways. "The first exodus involved the annihilation of Israel's enemies, but this destructive aspect has now faded away" (p. 26). In this new exodus, "God will end Israel's suffering without the use of war and destruction." It will be a "peaceful miracle."

In Isa 51:9–10, Israel calls on God to do things in accord with the ways of the first exodus. In 51:12–16, "God takes up this appeal to unlimited power but gives it a new direction intended to wean Israel away from all ideas of a strong God who destroys the others; he wants [50] Israel to discover that he is a loving God who wants to bestow new life, firstly and foremostly to Israel" (p. 27). God is still the transcendent Lord, but without recourse to the mythology of the struggle of the gods. In fact, the theology of war has had a baneful effect on Israel. "Those for whom victory or defeat are the only alternatives are easily led by historical realities to declare God a loser" (p. 28).[28] Rather, God "turns to Zion like a loving mother in a personal relationship." The servant Israel "cries for vengeance, but in reply God puts forward the picture of the Suffering Servant who, by renouncing power and accepting suffering, becomes a witness to the power of reconciliation and love that can change the world" (p. 28). The vision of Isa 2:4 captures this sense of the effects of God's new way of being the Exodus God. The other nations of the world are *drawn* into this sphere of peace and well-being.

Zenger's language is not entirely consistent in seeking to describe what has happened to the images for God. He speaks of the metaphors of war and power as *"transmuted* into that of the caring shepherd of his people"

27. "The God of Exodus in the Message of the Prophets as Seen in Isaiah," in *Exodus: A Lasting Paradigm* (ed. B. van Iersel and A. Weiler; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 22–33.

28. One might also ask whether "loser" language is only appropriate for warrior metaphors, indeed, whether it would be entirely inappropriate to use failure language for God in some texts (e.g., Hos 11:1–9).

(Isa 40:9–11). Moreover, in Isa 52:7–10, the theme of the arm of the Lord "is taken over from the tradition of the struggle of the gods and the Exodus battle and *transformed* into a 'pacifist' sense" (p. 29; emphases mine). The new Exodus will be a peaceful, solemn procession (52:11–12). But, then, he changes the verb and says that Yahweh the Shepherd "once again *replaces"* Yahweh the Warrior described in the first Exodus.

To transmute or transform is not to replace, however. It must be insisted that the Isaianic hermeneutic consists, not in jettisoning the old imagery of God as Warrior, but of transforming it, now to function as God's powerful ways of love and suffering. Sovereignty language for God must be given a more prominent place than Zenger seems to suggest. For example, he shortchanges the theme of divine wrath in the later Isaianic corpus (e.g., 47:14–15). At the same time, Zenger's work shows that it is a sovereignty that is not correspondent with the usual ways of thinking about such an image. God's rule is of a different order. To use other words, the images of the suffering [51] God have served a qualifying function. Sovereignty has taken suffering into account, while itself retaining an important qualifying role for suffering.

As a way of concluding, let me raise two questions that Zenger does not address: To what degree is the Isaianic interpretation new? Our study has uncovered a hermeneutic within Exodus itself that anticipates the Isaianic perspective. Isaiah is not a radical reinterpretation of Exodus, but extends a direction of thought already present there. A suffering God is clearly in evidence in Exodus, and it remains for later witnesses such as Isaiah and the New Testament to work this out at greater depth. In other words, the transmutation of sovereignty metaphors in view of suffering ones is characteristic of both traditions.

If this is true of two such significant Old Testament traditions, any contemporary formulation of divine sovereignty and divine suffering must give this perspective a significant place. The upshot of this is that the divine suffering metaphors have a place of prominence not commonly given them. In New Testament terms, this means that the cross must be a primary qualifying metaphor for any doctrine of God. So often the Christological formulations of the church have been accompanied by an amazingly imperious notion of God. These reflections suggest that those contemporary theological formulations of the doctrine of God that give as prominent a place to suffering metaphors as sovereignty metaphors are truest to at least one central strand of Old Testament thought. In other words, the sovereignty of God must finally be defined in terms of how it looks when nailed to a cross. The oft-used phrase, "crown of thorns," captures this dialectic well. 1 Cor 1:27–28 would seem to be dependent upon these Old Testament themes (cf. also Jer 9:23–24): "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are."

A second question: To what degree can the Exodus texts serve as a paradigm for contemporary Christian reflection and action?[29] The answer to this question is by no means obvious, not least given certain reservations about this paradigm expressed among even liberation theologians.[30] Do we now read Exodus *only* through the eyes [52] of Isaiah, so that Isaiah's fuller transmutation of the warrior metaphor is the definitive one? From the perspective of the canon as a whole, one could say that Exodus can no longer be read in isolation from Isaiah. But, does Exodus still offer some important insights into God's ways with the world independent of this reading? Zenger seems to recognize only these matters: the Exodus remains foundational in showing that God enters into the struggle on behalf of the poor and afflicted. It serves to demonstrate where God's priorities are, defining who God is and what this God is about in the world. The new work of God emerges out of that experience, in continuity with that old work, but now in view of new times and places.

But, further questions need to be raised. Is the Isaianic development a matter of *Israel's* progress in understanding? Or, does Isaiah witness to an evolution in the *divine* way with the world, a change of means and methods by which to achieve the same divine goals in view of *God's* experience? Have all of God's ways with the world been transmuted into "Love your enemies," heaping coals on their heads? Or, is it a contextual matter? For the circumstances inherent in the Egyptian situation, God's warrior ways, as qualified by the suffering images of Exodus, were the only possible mode in order to accomplish Israel's liberation. For Isaiah's time, God's warrior mode is more completely transmuted. Yet, there may be other times and places for God to act as warrior in a less qualified way.

In other terms, does God deal with the Hitlers of this world only in terms of suffering love and patience, or is there room for God to take the way of Exodus again in view of the circumstances? If the latter, any execution of judgment of a coercive sort on God's enemies must be congruent with the images of divine suffering. How this can be made coherent is beyond the scope of this paper, but two directions for thought might be noted.

29. See the collection of essays in Bas van Iersel and A. Weiler, eds., *Exodus: A Lasting Paradigm* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987).

30. In liberation theology the images of the exodus God can be sharply rejected or function paradigmatically. Hence, J. S. Croatto (*Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981], 29), who rejects the metaphor, 'lord,' because "that is to project onto God the 'shadow' of the oppressor whom we know and who plays with the lives of others," can in the next sentence speak of "God acting violently because the situation of the Hebrews admitted of no other path. . . . Justice is a radical good that demands of *love* (paradoxical as it may seem) a *violent* action." On the other hand, Carol Christ (*Laughter of Aphrodite* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987], 73–81) rejects the warrior God of exodus as a liberating image for feminist theology: "This God of war stands for too much that I stand against." See also the use only of non-violent exodus themes in the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.

One, the wrath of God—which participates in both suffering and sovereign metaphoric fields[31] —would seem to function only in a non-interventionist fashion in the life of the world; it is a divine seeing to the moral order of things. Two, whether human beings are ever to serve as instruments of the wrath of God, either to exact punishment or to take up arms in the name of God, would seem to be even more difficult to justify.

31. See the discussion of the wrath of God in terms of the divine pathos in A. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 279–306.

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