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Uncovering the Roots of the Crucified God: How Walter Brueggemann's Old Testament Theology Challenges and Contributes to Jürgen Moltmann's and Jon Sobrino's Interpretations of the Cross

Patricia A. Sharbaugh

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HOW WALTER BRUEGGEMANN'S OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY
CHALLENGES AND CONTRIBUTES TO JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN'S
AND JON SOBRINO'S INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CROSS

A Dissertation submitted to the
McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Patricia A. Sharbaugh

May 2009

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Patricia A. Sharbaugh

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ABSTRACT

UNCOVERING THE ROOTS OF THE CRUCIFIED GOD:
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By

Patricia A. Sharbaugh

May 2009

Dissertation Supervised by Professor Ann M. Clifford

This dissertation provides a study and analysis of Old Testament theology's discernment of God through hiddenness, silence, absence, and suffering and then brings into conversation notions of God drawn from these Old Testament traditions with notions of God drawn from an interpretation of the cross. This exploration is done through an in depth study of Walter Brueggemann's Old Testament theology of God as both a challenge and a contribution to the interpretation of the cross of Jesus Christ in the works of Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino.

The interpretations of the cross in the works of Moltmann and Sobrino recognize that the cross of Jesus Christ evokes a crisis for theology based in the discontinuity between the questions raised from the depths of suffering and the promises and purpose of God. Brueggemann discerns a similar crisis as central to Old Testament theology, a crisis that arises when the experience of suffering evokes questions and challenges for the

covenantal theology that is the dominant theology of the Old Testament. All three scholars recognize that God's life giving and transforming power is not extrinsic to but is revealed in the midst of the unresolved conditions of life in the world. This insight leads these scholars to insist that the essence of Christian faith emerges not through freedom from the conflict but through entering into the midst of the conflict with hope. In the contemporary world the questions raised from the depths of suffering have become more sharply focused and beg for a response. A dialogue between the Old Testament theology of God of Brueggemann and the theologies of the cross of Moltmann and Sobrino deepens understanding of both the questions raised by suffering and a biblical response that resists resolution yet offers hope.

DEDICATION

For my husband, John J. Sharbaugh
and our children Patrick, Rebecca, and Molly
with love, delight, and gratitude

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It is with pleasure that I thank all the people whose contributions have led to the writing of this dissertation. I begin by thanking my dissertation director, Dr. Anne M. Clifford, for her enormous investment of time, support, encouragement, energy and insight. She is an inspirational teacher, theologian, and mentor. I am especially grateful to her for continuing to work with me through the completion of this dissertation despite the fact that she has moved from Duquesne and is no longer obligated to complete this work. Her continued efforts on my behalf are an example of the dedication she has toward her students and her vocation.

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My initial attraction to biblical theology began during my studies at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. The writing and teaching of Dr. Donald Gowan, Dr. Robert Gagnon, Dr. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, and Dr. Dale Allison Jr. inspired me to seek answers to my theological questions in and through the biblical text. More importantly, the example that they set as persons of faith and their encouragement and support of me as a student inspired me to continue my studies in the hope of following in their footsteps.

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*The heaven you promised, O God,
does not move me to love you.
The much feared hell does not move me nor stop me from offending you.
You move me, O Lord, seeing you nailed to a cross and reviled;
I am moved by the sight of your wounded body;
I am moved by your sufferings and your death.
Finally, I am so moved by your love
that even if there were no heaven
I would love you,
and if there were no hell I would fear you. You do not need to offer me anything for me
to love you,
for even if I did not expect what I hope for
my love would be as great as it is now.¹*

¹ Lope de Vega, quoted and translated by Marina Herrera in "Who do You say Jesus is?" in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 75.

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Introduction

In the article, “Abraham Joshua Heschel: the Pathos of God,” John C. Merkle recounts a story that Abraham Heschel was fond of telling.¹ The story involves two Jewish men, one wealthy and the other poor. Through the generosity of the wealthy man, they share a compartment on a train traveling from Warsaw to Paris in the late 1940’s. In the evening, the wealthy Jew takes out his prayer shawl and begins to pray. The poor Jew refuses to pray claiming that because of Auschwitz, he will never pray again. The next morning, however, when the wealthy Jew once again takes out his prayer shawl and begins to pray, the poor Jew joins him. When their prayers are completed, the wealthy Jew asks the poor Jew why he had changed his mind. The poor Jew replies, “It suddenly dawned upon me to think how lonely God must be; look with whom He is left. I felt sorry for Him.”² This story illustrates one of Heschel’s most startling claims, a claim that he repeats in several books. Heschel claims, “Faith is the beginning of compassion, of compassion for God.”³

A similar sentiment can be gleaned from a portion of a poem written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer during his imprisonment in Berlin during World War II.

Men go to God when they are sore bestead,
Pray to him for succor, for his peace, for bread,
For mercy for them sick, sinning, or dead;
All men do so, Christian and unbelieving.

Men go to God when he is sore bestead,
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead’

¹ John C. Merkle, “Abraham Joshua Heschel: the Pathos of God,” *Christianity and Crisis* 45 no. 20 (December 9, 1985): 493-496.

² *Ibid.*, 493.

³ *Ibid.*

Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.⁴

The reflections of these two theologians, one Jewish and one Christian, arise from the ashes of the devastation caused by World War II. Both men endured intense personal suffering during the war and had a profound awareness of the massive suffering left in the wake of the collapse of political, cultural and religious institutions in Europe. Their contemplation of God in the midst of this experience of suffering, an experience of suffering that moved beyond rational explanation, led them to a deep understanding of God's participation in the suffering of human beings. In fact, both Heschel and Bonhoeffer indicate that the depth of God's participation in human suffering is so profound that the relationship between human beings and God is one in which human beings are moved to compassion for God.

The insight that faith involves compassion for God opens the door to important questions. Traditionally, God's compassion for human beings is the subject of theological reflection but reversing the direction of compassion from human beings to God points to a revolution in the notion of God. If God is the subject of human compassion, questions about God's power, transcendence, and sovereignty arise. In addition, the importance of the role and participation of human beings in a dialogical relationship with God is emphasized. The painful life experiences of Heschel and Bonhoeffer led them to contemplate these questions and through that contemplation express insights into the relationship between human beings and God that challenge traditional notions of God.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 348-349.

Heschel and Bonhoeffer provide contemporary historical examples of the dialectical relationship between theology and experience. While the painful life experiences of Heschel and Bonhoeffer led them to a profound understanding of God's suffering with and for human beings, their insights were not entirely new but have roots in both Scripture and the Jewish and Christian theological traditions that are foundational for their faith.

The Tanakh is the foundational source for Jewish reflection upon God's participation in suffering. The experience of slavery in Egypt, the Babylonian Exile, the Lament tradition, and the books of Job, Ecclesiastes and Lamentations provide resources for further reflection on the theological theme of God's participation in suffering. Study and exploration of these sources in the Tanakh led to the Shekinah theology of the Rabbis' and to Heschel's articulation of the pathos of God.⁵

In the Christian tradition, the Cross of Jesus Christ is the focal point for exploring God's participation in suffering. The theology of the cross is a "thin tradition" that has threaded its way through the history of Christian thought and practice. This tradition's focus is on the cross as the permanent question and crisis in all theology, a crisis that is not overcome in the resurrection.⁶ The basis of this crisis lies in the discontinuity between Jesus' experience of God's presence and activity during his life and ministry, and the stark experience of God's silence and inactivity on the cross.

The crisis, however, runs deeper than Jesus' experience. Behind that crisis lies the problem of suffering and the question suffering and the often painful experience of

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 267-274.

⁶ Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press, revised edition 2001), 104.

life in the world raises for understanding a God of promise, justice, righteousness and love, as well as the paradox of understanding God's divinity revealed in God's humiliation, self-surrender, helplessness, and humanity. From this perspective, the cross is not the means for rising above the conditions of life and attaining access to the power and glory of God but is the challenge to enter into the midst of peril, suffering, and death with hope. It does not discern the presence of God in success or power but finds God in the places of abandonment, and in the midst of all that seems to contradict God.

The theology of the cross is a spirit and method for doing theology.⁷ This spirit and method recognizes that the crisis of the cross, as Moltmann describes in the title of his book, *The Crucified God*, is the foundation and criticism of all Christian theology. It is always polemical, always arising in opposition to the prevailing theology of glory. The cross raises epistemological questions about how to know and recognize God and makes visible the openness of the history of God for the history of the world.

The themes of the silence or absence of God, the suffering of God, and lament are central to systematic studies that are within the tradition of the theology of the cross. Surprisingly however, these systematic studies do not make use of Old Testament theology steeped in these same themes. The Old Testament is referred to for background of New Testament texts and as a means for assessing Jesus' self understanding but Old Testament theology's discernment of God through hiddenness, silence, absence, and suffering are not addressed. In addition, the integral role these traditions play in the formation of Israel's faith are ignored.

Christian Old Testament scholars note that the traditions of lament and the silence or absence of God form an integral part of the faith of Israel that calls for a human

⁷ Ibid., 111.

response of faithful protest, complaint, and insistence to God. Samuel Ballentine, Walter Brueggemann, Donald Gowan, and R.W.L. Moberly are Old Testament scholars who in their respective studies of lament and the silence of God in the Old Testament discuss the cost of the suppression or neglect of these traditions for Christian scholarship and practice.⁸ These scholars note that the result of neglecting these Old Testament traditions is suppression or denial of negative human experience as integral to faithful living. Accompanying this suppression are tendencies toward closure in theology rather than openness to questions, especially questions that might doubt emphases on obedience and trust as the primary responses of the faithful, and might give inadequate attention to the role and freedom of the human partner in the interrelationship between God and human beings.

As a result of the neglect of these and other Old Testament traditions, systematic treatments in the tradition of the theology of the cross are subject to weaknesses that beg to be addressed through interaction with Old Testament theology. Those weaknesses include: difficulty sustaining the tension between the transcendence and immanence of God, the tendency to emphasize the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son while neglecting the relationship of Jesus to the kingdom and to Israel, neglect of the role and freedom of the human partner in the relationship between God and human beings, and a tendency to under-emphasize the importance of justice issues and the development of an adequate social ethic.⁹

⁸ Samuel Ballentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 5; Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986) 57-71; Donald Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 12-24; R.W.L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-101.

⁹ Hall, 137-154.

While the cross of Jesus Christ is the most radical expression of God's embrace of pain in Christian theology, notions of God drawn from silence, hiddenness, and suffering are not absent from the Old Testament but in fact play an integral role in the formation of Israel's faith. The Crucified God is a New Testament discernment but the openness of the history of God for the history of the world, God's embrace of pain, and the discernment of God through what seems to oppose God is an Old Testament testimony as well.¹⁰

This dissertation will study and analyze Old Testament theology's discernment of God through hiddenness, silence, absence, and suffering and then bring into conversation notions of God drawn from these Old Testament traditions with notions of God drawn from an interpretation of the cross. This exploration will be done through an in depth study of Walter Brueggemann's Old Testament theology of God as both a challenge and a contribution to the interpretation of the cross of Jesus Christ in the works of Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino.

The rationale for choosing Walter Brueggemann's work in Old Testament theology is a simple one. His corpus offers numerous resources for relating Old Testament theology of God to systematic interpretations of the meaning of the cross. Brueggemann's Old Testament theology resonates with the theology of the cross in that it is both dialectical and polemical. Brueggemann provides documentation and analysis that demonstrates that the Old Testament as speech about God contains both a testimony that expresses the majority voice in Israel's theology and a counter-testimony expressing

¹⁰ In his book, *The Theology of the Jürgen Moltmann*, Richard Bauckham proposes study of the revelation of God on the cross of Jesus Christ in the context of the Old Testament's revelation of God as a way to more fully contemplate "God's non-incarnate suffering." Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Jürgen Moltmann* (London: T & T Clark Ltd, 1995), 66-67.

the minority voice. The majority voice embraces a "common theology" that asserts that life is created and ordered under the governance of a sovereign God. This theology is contractual, covenantal theology that generally identifies the order of creation with the current social arrangement of the ruling class. Such theology serves to legitimate the existing structure. Brueggemann argues that what is remarkable about the Old Testament is that, while it claims this "common theology," at the same time it testifies to a crisis in that theology. That crisis is given expression by the minority voice, a voice that embraces pain and through that embrace challenges the common theology of the majority voice. The crucial importance of the minority voice is expressed by Brueggemann. He writes,

Faith is against voicelessness, against a society in which speech about power and powerlessness is banished and in which social power is so concentrated that it need no longer listen and is no longer capable of hearing. ...The primary critical function of the Bible is to keep the voice of hurt present in the public process. That voice, so cherished and honored in the Bible, is the voice of the marginal, whose testimony is oddly transmitted to us in the canonical process, as the voice of God.¹¹

In addition to noting the importance of the minority voice for Old Testament theology, Brueggemann also points out the centrality of the dialectic of exile and homecoming. He states that because the majority of claims about God's presence and promises are made in the situation of exile, Yahweh's presence is discerned as entering into exile with Israel in order to "transform exile into a viable place for life."¹²

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 92.

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 171.

According to Brueggemann, Yahweh enters into the risk and vulnerability of Israel's life in the world in order to be in solidarity with Yahweh's at-risk people.¹³ Brueggemann writes that the New Testament dialectic of cross and resurrection is anticipated by the Old Testament's dialectic of exile and homecoming. In both testaments, the core and counter testimony remain in profound but necessary tension with one another. This tension cannot be resolved because both testaments are dealing with God's revelation in the midst of the unresolved conditions of life in the world.

Brueggemann discerns in Old Testament theology a notion of God that maintains a tension between God's freedom and sovereignty and God's fidelity to the point of pathos. He also recognizes that in the Old Testament God is found where God's people are in peril, in exile, among the oppressed, and in the midst of all that seems to contradict God. Furthermore, he recognizes the importance that the silence, absence, and suffering of God play in the formation of Israel's faith so that he describes submission to God and assertion over/against God as two divergent but equally important postures of faithful response for Israel. By acknowledging these postures, Brueggemann articulates the significant role of the human partner in the relationship between God and human beings.

This dissertation begins with an in depth study and analysis of Brueggemann's Old Testament theology of God focusing particularly on the crucial importance of the minority voice that embraces pain and challenges the majority voice that legitimates power structures and in so doing in fact challenges the prevailing perception of God's ways in the world. The results of this study and analysis will then be brought into

¹³ Ibid., 201.

conversation with the "thin tradition" of the theology of the cross in the works of two influential contemporary theologians, Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino.

In regard to the second major element of the dissertation, Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino have been chosen because each has written interpretations of the cross that are widely read and discussed. Each in differing ways has influenced theologians who have studied their interpretations of the Cross. Moltmann and Sobrino provide this dissertation, therefore, with two strong contemporary works in the tradition of the theology of the cross that complement each other. Moltmann and Sobrino have also engaged in mutual dialogue and work with similar theses, which each have developed in very different contexts.

Jürgen Moltmann is a German Lutheran theologian writes in the context of post World War II Europe. His book, *The Crucified God*, explores the meaning of the cross through the question of suffering. The focus of Moltmann's work is not on what the cross means for human beings but on what the cross says about God. Influenced by Heschel, Moltmann finds manifested in the cross, the pathos of God – God's suffering and sacrificial loving in solidarity with and for God's people. The strengths of Moltmann's interpretation of the cross include his argument for a concept of God that begins in the cross and challenges the presuppositions of theism, and his articulation of Christ's solidarity with the forsaken of the world. Moltmann demonstrates how the God of theism, by separating the divine self from suffering also devalues human life. Human life is vulnerable. Love exists in vulnerability for one another. In allowing for the suffering of love in God, for God's openness to the open wound of suffering, Moltmann asserts the value of human life and love lived in God's presence.

While Moltmann offers rich and challenging insights through a notion of God drawn from the revelatory event of the cross, his interpretation has some noteworthy shortcomings. Moltmann does not adequately acknowledge either the tragic magnitude of suffering in the world or the presence of evil and the causes of rejection and forsakenness. In addition, his interpretation concentrates almost exclusively on the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son and does not pay adequate attention to Jesus' relationship to the kingdom or to the role of human beings in their relationship to God. Finally, he does not maintain the tension between the transcendence and immanence of God so that at times he seems to resolve that tension in resignation to suffering and at other times to resolve the tension by arguing for an eschatological pantheism that questions the meaning of human freedom and history and ultimately ends in a theology of glory.

Jon Sobrino is a Spanish Catholic theologian and a Jesuit priest who lives and ministers in El Salvador. Sobrino is influenced by Moltmann's work and adopts a similar thesis for his interpretation of the cross, concentrating on drawing an understanding of God from the revelatory event of the cross.¹⁴ He moves beyond Moltmann, however, by analyzing that thesis through the lens of liberation theology and his own personal experience of living in the midst of poor, oppressed, and persecuted people. Sobrino seeks to understand the relationship between the crucified God and crucified people of El Salvador. Sobrino affirms many of the strengths of Moltmann's work. He articulates the importance of dialectical knowledge as an epistemological principle, views the cross as the outcome of God's openness to history, and upholds the solidarity of God with God's

¹⁴ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 240-246.

suffering people. In addition, Sobrino's work corrects several of the weaknesses in Moltmann's interpretation of the cross. Through the lens of liberation theology, Sobrino draws attention to the "anti-kingdom" and therefore to the reality of evil and the causes of rejection and forsakenness. He also moves beyond Moltmann's emphasis on the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son to include Jesus' relationship to his mission and therefore to the kingdom. In this move, Sobrino claims an understanding of Jesus' divinity through a relational versus ontic identity and works to articulate an understanding of Jesus' faith. Finally, Sobrino is more successful than Moltmann in maintaining the tension between God's transcendence and immanence.

Sobrino draws on the Old Testament in order to articulate a notion of Jesus' faith experience, as well as to appeal to traditions that would influence Jesus' conception of his mission. Sobrino's analyses of the faith of Jesus, Jesus' relationship to his mission, and a relational versus ontic understanding of Jesus' divinity offer insights that could be enriched through dialogue with Old Testament theology of God. In addition, a dialogue between the Old Testament theology of God of Brueggemann and the theologies of the cross of Moltmann and Sobrino can contribute to challenging and enriching some key theological points that Moltmann and Sobrino share. Among the points that this study proposes to address are:

- The knowledge of God drawn from hiddenness, absence, and silence;
- The significance of history and the openness of God to history; and
- The discernment of God's fidelity to the point of pathos and its meaning for the interrelationship of God and human beings.

Methodology and Chapter Topics

This study will begin with a presentation of Brueggemann's approach and method for doing Old Testament theology. In the first chapter, issues of interpretation in Brueggemann's Old Testament theology will be addressed. These issues include: the role of rhetoric and imagination, speech as response to exile, intertextuality, the importance of the dialectical and dialogical quality of the text, the open and polyvalent quality of the text, the relation of Jewish and Christian readings vis-à-vis each other, and the question of supersessionism. In addition, Brueggemann's model for interpreting the Old Testament involving the dialectic of testimony and counter testimony will be given attention. Finally, themes of major importance to this study in Brueggemann's works, such as the theodicy question and the matrix of exile, will also be featured in this chapter.

A discussion of Brueggemann's Old Testament theology concentrating on the counter testimony of Israel will be the major topic of the second chapter. Here the focus will be the themes of God's hiddenness, ambiguity, suffering, and silence, and the importance of these themes for Old Testament theology and the notion of God. Brueggemann's analysis of the role of lament as a public voicing of pain, grief, and sorrow in the unfolding drama between God and Israel will also be given substantial attention.

The third chapter will concentrate on the interpretation of the cross in the theologies of Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino. The mutual dialogue and similar themes in the work of Moltmann and Sobrino will be addressed. This chapter will also provide some assessment of the contribution each makes to the theology of the cross, and the strengths and weaknesses of their interpretations of the meaning of the cross.

The fourth chapter is the pivotal chapter of this study. Through summary analysis of the work of Brueggemann, Moltmann, and Sobrino, it will bring into conversation notions of God drawn from Old Testament traditions with notions of God drawn from interpretations of the cross. Included will be a discussion of the use of the Old Testament in the work of Moltmann and Sobrino, the questioning of presuppositions in their work that ignore Old Testament theology, and the enrichments that insights from Brueggemann's Old Testament theology can provide.

The concluding chapter will explore the implications of this study for Christian theology and practice. The focus will be on the insights gained for a theology of the cross through the incorporation of Old Testament theology's discernment of God in silence, absence, hiddenness, and suffering. Attention will be given to Christian theology's response to the theodicy question, the role and significance of history in Christian theology, the role and freedom of the human partner in the relationship between God and human beings, and the role of lament in Christian theology and practice.

The interpretations of the cross in the works of Moltmann and Sobrino recognize that the cross of Jesus Christ evokes a crisis for theology based in the discontinuity between the questions raised from the depths of suffering and the promises and purpose of God. Brueggemann discerns a similar crisis as central to Old Testament theology, a crisis that arises when the experience of suffering evokes questions and challenges for the covenantal theology that is the dominant theology of the Old Testament. All three scholars recognize that God's life giving and transforming power is not extrinsic to but is revealed in the midst of the unresolved conditions of life in the world. This insight leads these scholars to insist that the essence of Christian faith emerges not through freedom

from the conflict but through entering into the midst of the conflict with hope. In the contemporary world, the questions raised from the depths of suffering have become more sharply focused and beg for a response. A dialogue between the Old Testament theology of God of Brueggemann and the theologies of the cross of Moltmann and Sobrino will deepen understanding of both the questions raised by suffering and a biblical response that resists resolution yet offers hope.

Chapter One

Overview of Brueggemann's Old Testament Theology

This study proposes to explore Walter Brueggemann's contribution to Old Testament theology in order to learn if his insights may enrich and perhaps even fill in what is lacking in the theologies of the Cross of Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino. It is fitting, therefore, that Brueggemann's theology be treated at the outset. In Part V of his *Theology of the Old Testament*, also the book's final section, Brueggemann considers the question: What may "come next in Old Testament theology?"¹ Any attempt to answer this question requires that one first have a good grasp of the state of biblical studies today. A succinct and helpful treatment can be found in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*.²

Between Two Horizons, is a collection of essays written to address issues arising from the question, "What effects should an interest in theology produce in the reading of Scripture?"³ The editors, Joel B. Green and Max Turner, note several factors that influence the contemporary setting for biblical scholarship. These factors include: a shift in the focus of biblical interpretation from "behind the text" issues to a focus on "in the text" issues and the theological community responding to the text, the rejection of the hegemony of historical critical methodology and an accompanying openness to methodological pluralism in biblical studies, and increased attention to the relationship

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 707.

² Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

between biblical studies and contemporary theology.⁴ It is noted that while this shift provides fresh approaches to the text it also erodes shared foundations on which to build hermeneutical constructs.⁵ Green states that the dilemma for contemporary biblical theology is a false choice between modernity's claim that textual meaning can be tied with certainty to historical reconstruction and post-modernity's rejection of that certainty and subsequent positing of endless meanings with no criteria for evaluating a "good" reading from a "bad" one.⁶

While *Between Two Horizons* is focused on the relationship between New Testament studies and systematic theology, Walter Brueggemann's methodology for interpreting the Old Testament is clearly set within the contemporary intellectual setting for biblical theology discussed in this book. Brueggemann's interpretation of the Old Testament is focused on "in the text" rather than "behind the text" issues. He claims that not only is methodological pluralism necessary for a good reading of the Old Testament, but in fact pluralistic theological interpretations are formative for the Old Testament text itself.⁷ Finally, he insists that all good interpretation of the biblical text arises from and is influenced by the prevalent concerns and questions of the contemporary culture in which the theologian interpreting the text lives.⁸ The contemporary intellectual setting for biblical theology provides Brueggemann with the opportunity to take a fresh approach to the Old Testament. At the same time, this setting also forces him to wrestle with the lack of certainty that exists for biblical theology because of the rejection of the certainty of historical reconstruction and the plurality of possible meanings arising from post-modern

⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁶ Ibid., 238-239.

⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony*, xv-xvi.

⁸ Ibid., 11-12.

interpretations. Brueggemann argues however that this lack of certainty is not merely a contemporary problem arising in the wake of post-modern interpretation. Rather, lack of certainty is a theological problem that motivates the writing and formation of the Old Testament text and is ultimately rooted in the character at the heart of the biblical narrative, God.⁹

This chapter will present Brueggemann's approach and method for doing Old Testament theology. Among the topics to be addressed are: issues of interpretation including the role of rhetoric and imagination, speech as response to exile, the importance of the dialectical and dialogical quality of the text, the open and polyvalent quality of the text, the relation of Jewish and Christian readings vis-à-vis each other, and the question of supersessionism. In addition, Brueggemann's model for interpreting the Old Testament involving the dialectic of testimony and counter testimony will be given attention. Themes of major importance to this study in Brueggemann's works, such as the theodicy question and the matrix of exile, will also be featured in this chapter.

Old Testament Theology: Issues of Interpretation and Brueggemann's Methodology

Brueggemann begins his book, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, by recounting major movements in biblical interpretation from the Protestant Reformation to the contemporary situation. Brueggemann claims that until the twentieth century scholarly biblical interpretation was linked to the Protestant Reformation through shared motivation. He argues that a major issue for the reformers was the tension between evangelical faith based on scripture and the authority of church tradition. Church tradition was perceived by the reformers as "a censoring activity that prevented the Bible

⁹ Ibid., xv, 42.

being taken on its own terms and being forced to conform to established categories and claims.”¹⁰ He points out that while, Luther and the reformers sought to free scripture from the authority of church tradition, that freedom rapidly found other forms of bondage, first in Protestant orthodoxy and then in the hegemony of historical critical methodology arising in the wake of the Enlightenment.¹¹

Brueggemann notes that the rise of science and philosophical advances in the seventeenth century had a profound effect on epistemology in the field of biblical studies.¹² The shift in confidence away from the authority of the institutional church and toward the authority of autonomous reason led to an emphasis on objectivity and detached scholarly evaluation of scripture. Accompanying this effort to obtain objective knowledge was a positivism that claimed that “what is knowable can be exhaustively known by human thought.”¹³ Brueggemann argues that the apparent objectivity and detached scholarship of historical criticism was appealing to those engaged in the movement to allow the Bible to speak on its own terms free of established categories and claims. Unfortunately, as it turned out historical criticism was not as objective or as detached as the proponents of this method believed it to be.¹⁴ The historical critical method for interpreting Scripture replaced the theological claims of church tradition with the rational, intellectual claims of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment rationality was adverse to what Brueggemann calls the “hiddenness, density, and inscrutability of the text.”¹⁵ The difficulty the proponents of historical critical methodology had with the non-

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ Ibid., 10-14.

¹² Ibid., 8-10.

¹³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 14.

¹⁵ Ibid.

rational element of Scripture resulted in forcing the Old Testament to comply with the claims and categories of Enlightenment epistemology. Brueggemann writes,

The *theological result* is that much of what was crucial in the testimony of ancient Israel was explained away. The *literary result* is that much of what was most interesting and compelling about the literature was “resolved” by cutting apart into sources and layers much that the artistry of the Bible intended to locate beyond such facile decoding.¹⁶

Brueggemann argues that the history of biblical interpretation following the reformation is a history plagued by the “oddness” of the biblical text. He uses the word “oddness” to point to the tension that is consistently present between the claims of the Bible and the traditions of the institutional church.¹⁷ According to Brueggemann, the language and demands of the Bible are not easily tamed or reduced and therefore do not easily fit within the claims and categories of the institutional church. The institutional church on the other hand insists that its foundational traditions are based on and in continuity with the Bible.

Brueggemann notes that the freedom the reformers sought to let the Bible speak on its own terms was a freedom that proved too difficult to maintain. The “oddness” of the text was a challenge to the certitude sought by the reading communities of either the Reformed tradition or the Roman Catholic tradition.¹⁸ The “oddness” of the text was also a challenge to the community of scholars replacing the claims and categories of the institutional church with the claims and categories of Enlightenment rationality.

Brueggemann argues that the freedom the reformers sought to let the Bible speak on its own terms was re-newed in the interpretation of Karl Barth. Brueggemann points to Barth’s commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans as a pivotal point in biblical

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

interpretation. Barth recognized that the “oddness” of the text was theological and he challenged the presuppositions of historical critical methodology appealing to Anselm’s notion of “faith seeking understanding.”¹⁹

The pivotal turn in Barth’s work was the recognition that natural reason and contemporary philosophy should not be the starting point for interpreting the biblical text, but instead the biblical text should question and challenge natural reason and contemporary philosophy. Barth claimed that the starting point for reading the text was faith in Jesus Christ.²⁰ He argued that the Bible had its own unique claims and categories that were normative for faithful interpretation. Barth’s work was charged with fideism, a charge that was not unfounded and yet his interpretive work revealed that the supposed objectivity of historical critical methodology was itself a form of philosophical fideism.²¹

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the intellectual assumptions of cultural progressivism dominated the culture, the academy, and the church.²² The proponents of historical criticism influenced by the assumptions of cultural progressivism viewed the Bible as a series of religious developments progressing toward a “reasonable” religious culture.²³ Barth’s work pointed to important aspects of the text that under this system had been ignored or considered outmoded based on a theory of cultural progressivism. His dialectical theology emphasized the crises for human reason, faith and morality provoked by the biblical text. Barth’s interpretation of the biblical text emphasized the importance of rhetoric and the relationship between speech and reality.²⁴ While biblical

¹⁹ Ibid., 16-18.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 16.

²³ Ibid., 12-13, 16.

²⁴ Ibid., 17-20.

interpretation in the post-modern period has moved beyond the work of Barth. The importance of faith as a starting point for theological inquiry, the role of rhetoric, the relationship between speech and reality and the dialectical nature of the biblical text remain important themes in the Old Testament interpretation of Brueggemann.

Surprisingly, Brueggemann states that the council of Trent was correct in asserting that biblical interpretation cannot be done outside of a faith tradition.²⁵ He argues that the Tridentine formula of “scripture and tradition” recognizes that there is no “presuppositionless exegesis.” Tradition, understood as the accumulative substance of church teaching, appropriately provides a lens for interpreting scripture.²⁶ The understanding of the importance of faith for interpretation is the factor that leads Brueggemann reluctantly to continue to refer to the Old Testament canon as the Old Testament rather than to refer to this canon as the Hebrew Bible. Brueggemann is sensitive and supportive of the impetus to overcome supersessionism by replacing the name Old Testament with the Hebrew Bible and yet he argues this does not appropriately take into consideration the context of the interpreter. Brueggemann clearly asserts that dialogue and at times even preference for Jewish interpretation is essential for the Christian interpreter. At the same time however, it is essential to realize that the Christian interpreter reads the Old Testament toward the New Testament while the Jewish interpreter reads the same books toward the Talmud.²⁷ These differences should not prevent dialogue between Christian and Jewish interpreters but the influence of different faith traditions on interpretation cannot be ignored. While Brueggemann

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 1-2.

²⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 107-112.

upholds the importance of tradition as a presupposition for interpreting scripture, he nevertheless contends that it is imperative that faith traditions remain open to the questions and challenges posed by the text.²⁸

Brueggemann notes that contemporary biblical interpretation is described by the term postmodern. He describes the term postmodern,

I have no special brief for that term, but take it as a shorthand reference to the end of a cultural period that was dominated by objective positivism that made a thin kind of historical scholarship possible, and that granted interpretive privilege to certain advantaged perspectives.²⁹

Contemporary biblical interpretation takes place in the larger context of an epistemological break in Western culture. That epistemological break came about with the realization that in the wake of the Enlightenment, knowledge had too easily yielded to claims of certitude which were then used to secure sociological, cultural and political power.³⁰ Historical critical methodology had provided a means for using the biblical text to give legitimacy to the claims of certitude and forms of power in Western European culture.

Brueggemann points to the insights of Paul Ricoeur in order to highlight some of the major differences between postmodern interpretation and historical critical methodology.³¹ Brueggemann points out that Ricoeur insists on the importance of “in the text” and “in front of the text” issues as opposed to the “behind the text issues” that dominated historical critical interpretation. Ricoeur notes that narrative is an essential aspect of the Old Testament text. Narrative, as a form of literature, creates its own world and engages the imagination of the reader. As the reader relates the world “in the text” to

²⁸ Ibid., 105-107.

²⁹ Ibid., 61.

³⁰ Ibid., 60.

³¹ Ibid., 57.

the world in which they are living, the possibilities expressed by the text are imaginatively generated and assert influence upon the world of the reader.³² Therefore, the world created in the text does not have to correspond or reflect to the reality “behind the text.” Historical criticism’s focus on the “world behind the text” meant that the reality of the text was measured against historical reality “behind the text” but the power the text had for “construing, generating and evoking an alternative reality” was ignored.³³

The power of the text to evoke an alternative reality lies in both the rhetoric of the text and in the imagination of the reading community. Brueggemann insists that imagination is a “crucial ingredient” for Israel because it is through imagination that rhetoric has the power to evoke, generate and create alternative realities. Imagination however has not been highly regarded by historical critical methodology which prefers “sober descriptiveness.”³⁴ Brueggemann claims that while rhetoric has the power to evoke an alternative reality it at the same time “precludes excessive certitude.”³⁵ He argues that the Western theological tradition has been uncomfortable with the lack of certainty “in the text” of the Old Testament. He writes,

Our intellectual inheritance has characteristically preferred “being” to rhetoric, and therefore has assumed that metaphysics is a much more serious matter than is speech. The outcome is that issues of God are foreclosed before disputatious utterance rather than in and through disputatious utterance.³⁶

Brueggemann claims that the connection between speech and reality is among the most difficult issues he confronted in writing an Old Testament theology.³⁷ He does not

³² Ibid., 57-59.

³³ Ibid., 59.

³⁴ Ibid., 67.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 65.

³⁷ Ibid., 65.

want to deny that speech in the Old Testament has no concern with being and yet he is aware that the intellectual tradition of the West has placed primary emphasis on metaphysics and has considered rhetoric as far less significant. He argues that while Israel makes some assumptions about what is real, it is not willing to protect those assumptions by silencing competing claims. In addition, Brueggemann desires to emphasize the vital role of speech in the Old Testament in relation to God's presence. Brueggemann argues that it is through Israel's speech that God's presence in and with Israel continues. He writes,

I shall argue, nonetheless, that practically and concretely, the very character of God in the Old Testament depends on the courage and imagination of those who speak about God, and who in speaking make available to Israel (and belatedly to the church) not only God, but a specific God of a very odd and unprecedented kind.³⁸

Brueggemann's interpretive method gives primary attention to the role of rhetoric and therefore emphasizes rhetorical criticism.³⁹ He states that in rhetorical criticism attention is paid not only to what is said but also to the way it is said.⁴⁰ Brueggemann contends that Old Testament rhetoric is pluralistic, not given in one unified voice but in competing claims. It is only through attention to the voices of these competing claims that the reality of God is spoken.⁴¹

Brueggemann's emphasis on rhetoric and speech leading reality is the reason the metaphor and imagery of a courtroom is used to organize his book, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*.⁴² In a courtroom there are competing versions of reality and the testimony of witnesses is used to arrive at truth. There is a

³⁸ Ibid., 65.

³⁹ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 54-55.

⁴¹ Ibid., 66.

⁴² Ibid., xvi.

common thread in the testimony witnesses give in a courtroom because the witnesses are describing either the same incident or the same person. Nevertheless, it is recognized that different people see the same situation or understand the character of the same person from differing points of view. Truth is determined by review and acceptance or rejection of a witness's testimony.

The metaphor of the courtroom used by Brueggemann emphasizes the role of rhetoric, pluralism and the tentativeness of faith claims in the Old Testament.

Brueggemann contends that Old Testament claims for God are not based on history "in a positivistic sense" or on ontology. Rather, theological claims are expressed rhetorically, advocated amid counterclaims and are open to review and dispute. Brueggemann states that recognizing this disputatious process in the text and in the interpretive community is essential for understanding the "unsettling settlements" that become the theological truth-claims of Israel.⁴³

Brueggemann's emphasis on this disputatious process highlights the dialectical nature of the biblical text. One way in which the imagery of the courtroom fails for Brueggemann's theological project is that in a courtroom, it is generally assumed that some of the testimony is inaccurate, misleading or deceitful. Dispute leads to truth only through elimination of false and inaccurate versions of either the event or character in question. In using the metaphor and language of the courtroom for biblical theology, however, Brueggemann is not claiming that in the competing testimonies of the biblical text, one claim is true and another false. Rather, there is truth in each of the competing testimonies and it is only through dialectical engagement of these competing claims that the God of Israel emerges. Brueggemann contends that the dialectical nature of the text

⁴³ Ibid., xvii.

and interpretive community is not randomly chosen but is an essential component of the process of seeking to know and live with Yahweh.⁴⁴

Brueggemann argues that the narrative framework of scripture enhances the dialogue between the text and the lived experiences of the people of Israel. Scripture testifies to unfolding events in Israel's history that are possible only because of God's intervention.⁴⁵ Israel articulated these events in a narrative framework and celebrated those events in their traditions. The stories of God's intervention in Israel's history formed the narrative of the Old Testament and fed the imaginations of the people of Israel who celebrated those stories through tradition. Through narrative, a dialogue is created between tradition, scripture and the lived experience of Israel. The dialogue between tradition, scripture and the lived experience of Israel involves tension between traditions celebrating God's intervention in past historical events and the questions that arise about God and are directed to God concerning new events. Brueggemann points out that it is the tension between the constant and dynamic that has led many to conclude that Old Testament theology is an oxymoron.⁴⁶ This tension exists because the Old Testament is not interested in ontological claims but in religious questions that arise from life circumstances.

In an article, "Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern," Brueggemann points to three major dialectical rubrics that illustrate the tension between the constant and the dynamic as an essential aspect of the Old Testament text. The three dialectical rubrics he describes are: covenant and exile, hymn and lament, and presence and

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 69-71.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 40.

theodicy.⁴⁷ Each of these pairs has a stabilizing and destabilizing element. In the first pair for example, Brueggemann notes that the covenants with Abraham, Noah and Moses which were both demanding and reassuring provided structure and stability for the people of Israel. The experience of exile however destabilizes the assurance of the covenants. The exile plays a prominent role in both the formation and writing of the Old Testament text and so there is a dialectical interplay between covenant and exile throughout the Old Testament.⁴⁸

In each of the pairs that Brueggemann describes there is a tension. On one side of the tension are traditions that celebrate positive experiences of Gods' presence and activity that give constancy to Israel's faith. On the other side are traditions that testify to the often painful experience of life in the world and therefore question the certainty of Israel's truth-claims. Brueggemann argues that the Old Testament text refuses the certainty of either side of the tension. It resists silencing the questions raised by exile, lament or theodicy in order to protect the certainty of covenant, hymn or presence; but it also resists accepting destabilization as a new form of certainty. It is insistent upon the truth-claims of covenant, hymn and presence in the face of counter claims. Furthermore, the insistence upon covenant, hymn and presence forms and creates a counter reality for the people of Israel that often deepens their faith in the midst of chaotic, painful and turbulent events.⁴⁹

Brueggemann notes that Israel's dialectical testimony to God is a challenge for Christian interpretation. He writes, "Christian interpretation has a deep propensity to

⁴⁷ Walter Brueggemann, "Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (Spring 1997): 4-9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

give closure, to end the dialectic, to halt deconstruction, and to arrive as quickly as possible at affirmation.”⁵⁰ He gives two examples of affirmations of Christian faith that are often used to resolve the dialectic present in the Old Testament text. The first is that because God is gracious all will be well, an affirmation Brueggemann argues is readily accepted by our therapeutic culture.⁵¹ The second is Christological. Jesus is the fulfillment of all Old Testament claims and therefore the dialectical nature of the Old Testament is resolved through Christ.⁵² Brueggemann argues that both the biblical text and life itself testify to the inadequacy of these two affirmations.⁵³ He claims that the need to maintain dialectical theology in interpreting the Old Testament is similar to the need to maintain the dialectic between cross and resurrection in Christian theology.⁵⁴ Both the dialectical theology of the Old Testament and the dialectic of cross/resurrection in the New Testament are necessary because testimony is formed, influenced and shaped by life experience and life experience is formed, influenced and shaped by testimony. This interplay of testimony and life experience is not only a vital element in the formation of the biblical text but is also an important factor for interpreting communities.

Brueggemann points to Hans Urs von Balthazar’s observation of three distinct periods in Jesus’ life in order to contextualize the interpreting community. According to Balthazar’s observation, Friday, Jesus went to the cross. Saturday, Jesus went to the dead. Sunday, Jesus went to the Father.⁵⁵ Friday is a day of suffering, aloneness and unutterable waste. Sunday is a day of liberation and rebirth. Saturday is the journey in

⁵⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 400-403.

⁵⁵ Brueggemann, “Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern,” 9.

between these two days.⁵⁶ Saturday is marked by waiting for liberation while aware of and actively engaged in relieving the magnitude of suffering in the world. Brueggemann argues that Christian work in the world is Saturday work and therefore Christian interpretation of Scripture is Saturday interpretation.⁵⁷ It is interpretation that seeks certainty in a truth free from the conditions of the world while also entertaining questions arising from engagement in, with and through the ambiguity of life in the world.⁵⁸

Brueggemann's Interpretive Model

Brueggemann's interpretive model emphasizes the role of rhetoric in shaping Old Testament's theology of God. The dialectical tension between testimony and countertestimony that he maintains in this book, *TOT*, is a development of a model he first articulated in two articles published in 1985: "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation," and "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain."⁵⁹ In the first of these two articles, Brueggemann draws attention to the fact that the organization of the Old Testament material has a vital influence on the theology the interpreter draws from the Old Testament.⁶⁰ He points out that there has been a movement from organizing the material of the Old Testament according to one centralized theme to organizing that material according to a bi-polar scheme. The following are a few examples of the bi-polar schemes Brueggemann uses to illustrate this movement in interpretation. Claus Westermann uses the poles of blessing and deliverance to organize the Old Testament material. Samuel Terrien organizes the material into the

⁵⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 402.

⁵⁷ Brueggemann, "Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern," 9.

⁵⁸ Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 no. 1 (January, 1985): 31.

⁵⁹ Walter Brueggemann, "Shape for Old Testament Theology, I," 28-46; idem, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 no. 3 (July, 1985): 395-415.

⁶⁰ Brueggemann, "Shape for Old Testament Theology, I," 28.

two categories of aesthetic and ethical. Paul Hansen uses the categories of cosmic and teleological.⁶¹ These bi-polar schemes recognize the complexity of the Old Testament material and seek to maintain the tension of the dialectical theology that is central to the Old Testament.

In the two articles discussed above, Brueggemann begins to articulate his own bi-polar scheme. He proposes to organize the material of the Old Testament into two categories that he labels “structure legitimation” or “the majority voice” and “the embrace of pain” or the “minority voice.”⁶² Dividing the Old Testament into “voices” draws attention to the role of rhetoric in shaping Old Testament theology. His bi-polar scheme is centered on competing rhetorical theological claims. Organizing the material of the Old Testament into two competing rhetorical claims places emphasis on the polemical, open, provisional, and dialogical nature of Old Testament theology.⁶³

Brueggemann states that the majority voice embraces a “common theology.” In using the term “common theology,” Brueggemann is harkening back to an article written by Morton Smith in 1952.⁶⁴ In this article, Smith proposes that Israel’s understanding of God emerged from and was influenced by a common theology, which permeated the Middle East during the time of Israel’s formation. Brueggemann agrees with Smith’s observation arguing that some of the central theological insights of Old Testament theology are given shape by this “common theology.” The central theological insights in the Old Testament that partake of this “common theology” include the following points. First, the theological insight that life is created, ordered and governed by God. Second,

⁶¹ Ibid., 29.

⁶² Ibid., 30; idem, “Shape for Old Testament Theology, II,” 398-399.

⁶³ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 64-89.

⁶⁴ Brueggemann, “Shape for Old Testament Theology, I,” 32; idem, “Shape for Old Testament Theology, II,” 395.

the order of the world and God's providence over the world are beyond historical circumstances. Third, God's ordering and governing of creation is foundational for the ordered structure of society and gives the ordered structure of society legitimacy. Fourth, God's relationship with ordered society is a contractual arrangement in which those who maintain the order of society and therefore live according to God's commands are rewarded while those who detract from that order are punished.⁶⁵

Brueggemann argues that while the insights of Israel share elements with the "common theology" of the Mid-East, the theology of Israel is at the same time radically different from the surrounding cultures. This difference arises from the remarkable move made in the Old Testament to include not only the theological insights of the majority voice but a challenge to those insights as well. That challenge comes in the form of the minority voice that testifies to a crisis for the theological claims of the majority voice. The crisis arises from experiences of pain that move beyond a rational explanation and cannot be fit into the contractual theology articulated by the majority voice of Israel. Brueggemann refers to this crisis as the *embrace of pain* and defines that *embrace* as follows.

By *embrace of pain* is meant the full acknowledgment of and experience of pain, and the capacity and willingness to make that pain a substantive part of Israel's faith-conversation with its God. Such an act of *embrace* means to articulate the pain fully, to insist on God's reception of the speech and the pain, and to wait hopefully for God's resolution.⁶⁶

Brueggemann argues that the inclusion of this voice is remarkable because even though this voice challenges the speech about God of the majority voice and therefore challenges the traditions and structures of Israel, it is not silenced but is included in the

⁶⁵Brueggemann, "Shape for Old Testament Theology, I," 32-41; idem, "Shape for Old Testament Theology, II," 395-396.

⁶⁶Brueggemann, "Shape for Old Testament Theology, II," 398.

Old Testament text.⁶⁷ The testimony of the minority voice is not given by those outside of Israel or by later detractors of Israel's faith. Rather, this voice arises in the midst of Israel. It is a faithful voice that is foundational for Israel's understanding of God. Furthermore, Brueggemann contends that while this voice is the minority voice in Israel, it has disproportionate importance because it is through this voice that Israel's faith remains open to hearing God. He writes,

Faith is against voicelessness, against a society in which speech about power and powerlessness is banished and in which social power is so concentrated that it need no longer listen and is no longer capable of hearing...The primary critical function of the Bible is to keep the voice of hurt present in the public process. That voice, so cherished and honored in the Bible, is the voice of the marginal, whose testimony is oddly transmitted to us in the canonical process, as the voice of God.⁶⁸

In *TOT*, Brueggemann takes the model he has proposed in these two articles and uses it to organize the material of the Old Testament. Using the guiding metaphor of a courtroom, the material he categorizes as the "majority voice" in these articles becomes "testimony" in his book. Likewise, the term "minority voice" becomes "countertestimony." He divides the book into four sections entitled: "Israel's Core Testimony," "Israel's Countertestimony," "Israel's unsolicited Testimony," and "Israel's Embodied Testimony." While dividing the material into these four sections gives structure to the book, there is not a strict adherence to these categories. This is particularly true of the material Brueggemann includes under the category "countertestimony." Countertestimony is not limited to the section of the book under that title. Instead, countertestimony exerts influence throughout the entire book. Just as Brueggemann argues that the countertestimony of Israel exerts a disproportionate

⁶⁷ Ibid., 400-406.

⁶⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 92.

influence on the Old Testament text, countertestimony likewise exerts a disproportionate influence on the theology Brueggemann draws from the Old Testament material.⁶⁹

Brueggemann's Old Testament theology is more attentive to points of disruption, incongruity, and inconsistency in the text than to the constancy of major theological themes in the Old Testament. This is due to the fact that Brueggemann contends that uncertainty has a greater influence than certainty in generating and shaping the Old Testament text and therefore it is the minority voice or the countertestimony that drives the drama in the Old Testament.⁷⁰ That the drama of the Old Testament is driven by uncertainty rather than certainty is visible through attention to two themes that are of major importance in Brueggemann's Old Testament theology: exile and theodicy.

Central Themes in Brueggemann's Interpretation of the Old Testament

Brueggemann states that the majority of contemporary Old Testament scholars operate from the premise that the texts of the Old Testament do not receive their final form before the sixth century BCE or thereafter.⁷¹ This means that the Old Testament is in large part a product of and a response to the Babylonian Exile. The significance of this fact lies in the recognition that the exile was a time of profound crises for Israel. The Babylonian Exile marked the failure of Israel's sociopolitical structures and called into question the theological certitude of Israel's faith.⁷² In fact, according to Brueggemann, these failures and the questions these failures left in their wake became the motivating driving force that energized the production of the literature written at this time.⁷³

Furthermore, not only did the exile leave its mark by inspiring the theologians of Israel to

⁶⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 322-323.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 323-332; 398.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 75.

answer questions emerging from the failure of all of Israel's institutions, but it also became, as Brueggemann asserts, the matrix for understanding their faith. The literature that arose as a response to exile was also shaped by the exile. It was shaped both by the vulnerability and risk that became, during and after the exile, a characteristic feature of Israel's self-identity and by the fact that the articulation of faith in response to exile is an act of daring imaginative counter reality.⁷⁴

Brueggemann writes, "following the disruption of 587 BCE, under Babylonian or Persian aegis, Jews understood themselves to be exposed, vulnerable, and at risk without the visible supports of a stable homeland."⁷⁵ Brueggemann claims that this self-understanding is formative for the text of the Old Testament. As an illustration, he points to the fact that the Torah ends with Moses and the people of Israel standing before the Promised Land and yet not in possession of it.⁷⁶ This points to a self-identity rooted in exile with all of its risks and fragility but nonetheless living courageously with a belief in homecoming and the fulfillment of all God's promises. Israel's self-identity as a homeless people becomes then not a description of an historical past but a paradigm for understanding faith in Israel at all times. According to Brueggemann, that faith is a practice of counter-reality. Israel envisions the world in the way of Yahweh when the circumstances they live in do not match the vision. The faith of Israel is characterized by vulnerability, risk, and fragility, a faith that must survive in a world characterized by instability and yet Israel increasingly looks to the text for its stability.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 74-78, 321-322; Idem, *Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, 22-23.

⁷⁵ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 22.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Brueggemann argues that the texts of the Old Testament claim a daring, imaginative counter-reality. The exiles relied on re-use of older material and interpreted that material in imaginative ways in the face of their current circumstances. Brueggemann asserts that this daring interpretation is an artistic rendering of reality that challenges the reader to move beyond historic circumstances and forge forward in resilient hope.⁷⁷ Brueggemann points to the Deuteronomic texts, Job, the texts of the Exilic Isaiah, and the texts concerning Priestly presence as examples of daring imaginative formulations. They are daring and imaginative because they cannot base their claims on data pulled from historical lived experience. For example, according to Brueggemann, the priestly sections of Torah dare to claim that sacrifice and temple are central and significant at a time when the temple has been destroyed. Exilic Isaiah makes its claims for homecoming with only an anticipation of international upheaval and the writers of the Deuteronomic texts and Job only imagine that torah righteousness is a useful subject for reflection during a time of extreme national or personal crises.⁷⁸

This articulation of counter-reality has two important functions. First, it articulates fully the pain of the situation of exile. Second, it dares to hope for transformation of those circumstances. Brueggemann writes, “And so, taken in large, these materials are to be understood as an act of unrestrained grief, which denied nothing, and as a counter-act of defiant hope, which refused to give into circumstance.”⁷⁹

According to Brueggemann the theme of exile, and the metaphor of exile and homecoming are formative for both Israel’s faith and the Old Testament text that is

⁷⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 76.

shaped by that faith. The exile is a “paradigmatic event” for Israel.⁸⁰ This means that the exile does not remain in the past as a remembered event but becomes an interpretive lens for understanding all life experiences that call into question God’s sovereignty and fidelity.⁸¹ For this reason, the fact that Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology begins by stating that the text of the Old Testament is situated in the matrix of exile is significant for understanding the role of Israel’s countertestimony in Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology. The fact that the claims of the Old Testament are recorded during a time of profound crises and as an act of interpretation of that crises results in the inclusion of a variety of voices, a rich tapestry of understanding. This rich tapestry is forged in the risk and vulnerability that becomes, according to Brueggemann, characteristic of the self-identity of Israel.

The same risk and vulnerability that becomes characteristic of Israel’s self-identity also becomes characteristic of Israel’s practice of faith so that theological claims are made with awareness that life can and does often contradict those claims. Questions, therefore, are not only tolerated but are cherished as necessary conditions for faithful living. The questions of Israel revolve around the theme of theodicy. Brueggemann insists however, that the theme of theodicy is expressed differently in the Old Testament than it is in philosophical reflection on theodicy beginning with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.⁸² In philosophical reflection, theodicy takes the form of “justifying the ways of God to man.”⁸³ In the Old Testament, however, the theodicy question is a challenge to

⁸⁰ Ibid., 77, 323.

⁸¹ Ibid., 322.

⁸² Ibid., 739.

⁸³ Ibid.

God that takes the form of protest and refuses to concede to rational explanation.⁸⁴

Silencing the questions would be an act of denial, a means of closing God off from the most painful and sometimes most profound aspects of life. Most importantly, the core claims of Israel's testimony are made from within the crises of those core claims and so testimony gets its structure and form from countertestimony right from the start. The two are fundamentally interwoven.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Brueggemann's Methodology

Brueggemann's methodology for Old Testament theology is criticized for numerous reasons. He is criticized for his lack of attention to history, his neglect of the subject of inspiration, and his inattentiveness to the canon, Christian tradition or other interpretations of scripture.⁸⁵ While these critiques focus on different areas that lack attention in Brueggemann's interpretation of the Old Testament, they also share common ground. They all claim that Brueggemann's lack of attention to history, divine inspiration, canon, or tradition is the result of his dismissal of "behind the text" issues. For example, in a review article, Paul D. Hanson writes, "For Brueggemann, history is irrelevant to this subject. He doesn't care what really happened; he doesn't think it profitable to explore the real-life context in which the Israelite God was revealed. His approach is ahistorical."⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ibid., 739-740.

⁸⁵ Brevard Childs, "Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53 no. 2 (2000): 228-233; Donald E. Gowan, "Brueggemann's Old Testament Theology: A Review Article," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 20 (December 1998): 89-98; Paul D. Hanson, "Can We Find God without History? The Story of One Scholar's Failed Attempt," *Bible Review* 15 (December 1999): 29-31, 43-44; Dennis T. Olson, "Biblical Theology As Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann and Bakhtin," *Biblical Interpretation* 6 (April 1998): 162-180.

⁸⁶ Hanson, 29.

Gowan critiques Brueggemann's lack of attention to the subject of divine inspiration and states that his lack of attention to the topic of inspiration combined with his lack of attention to the "word behind the text" results in viewing the biblical text as "a purely human product, Israel's testimony to Yahweh."⁸⁷ Despite this strong statement pointing to what he considers a major weakness in Brueggemann's approach to the Old Testament, Gowan begins his article with praise of Brueggemann's work. Gowan compares the arrival of Brueggemann's *TOT* with the appearance of Gerhard von Rad's theology of the Old Testament stating that like von Rad's theology, Brueggemann has taken an original approach that stands out from other Old Testament theologies and perhaps points toward the future direction of biblical interpretation.⁸⁸

It is Brueggemann's original approach to the Old Testament that calls forth such strong critique of his work. What gives his theology both strength and weakness is his emphasis on rhetoric. Brueggemann acknowledges the Western intellectual tradition has been ill at ease with the lack of certainty in rhetoric and has much preferred metaphysics to rhetoric.⁸⁹ Adding to the intensity of the critiques of Brueggemann's methodological focus on rhetoric is Brueggemann's own use of rhetoric in his book. Gowan argues that he indulges in phrases that are difficult to understand and describes his choice of vocabulary as "free-wheeling."⁹⁰ Gowan uses as examples titles of sections in Brueggemann's book such as, "The Density of Nouns of Sustenance," and "Contradiction Concerning Exclusionary Rules."⁹¹

⁸⁷ Gowan, 90.

⁸⁸ Gowan, 89.

⁸⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 65.

⁹⁰ Gowan, 96.

⁹¹ Gowan.

Robert K. Gnuse also makes note of Brueggemann's excessive use of rhetoric. Gnuse claims that while Brueggemann's rhetoric gives the impression that he opposes historical critical methodology, in fact the book he has produced would not be possible "without the heritage of several centuries of historical critical scholarly groundwork."⁹² Gnuse writes, "I believe that Brueggemann, like all of us at times, got carried away with his rhetoric in this volume and did not really mean to leave the impression that he is so totally opposed to the traditional critical methods of textual analysis."⁹³

Brueggemann's rhetoric does imply a split with historical criticism that is more profound in expression than it is in reality. An exploration of Brueggemann's publications over several decades reveals his great familiarity and ability to use the tools of Critical analysis. Even in *TOT*, it is historical criticism that allows him to understand the role of rhetoric in the Old Testament text. For example, when Brueggemann discusses the influence of the exile on the production and writing of the Old Testament text and on the self-identity of the people of Israel he is using historical critical methodology both for the dating of texts and for analysis of the traditioning process that he claims contributed to the texts final form.⁹⁴

While Gnuse acknowledges that Brueggemann's lack of attention to critical issues and his original form of organization of texts and concepts is frustrating for critical scholars, he argues that Brueggemann's work "provides a religious intellectual with a sensitive feeling for what is being said in the First Testament in existential terms rather

⁹² Robert K. Gnuse, "Words that Testify to God: The Theology of the Old Testament by Walter Brueggemann." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 31 no. 3 (Fall 2001), 94.

⁹³ Gnuse, 94.

⁹⁴ Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 15-27.

than exegetical or historical categories.”⁹⁵ Gnuse points in this quote to the strength of Brueggemann’s work. That strength lies in his attention to issues that have been ignored by historical critical methodology. His focus on rhetoric does draw attention to the text itself rather than to what lies behind the text but in doing this Brueggemann does not claim that there is no reality behind the text or that the Bible is merely a human product. Rather, his claim is that the reality behind the text cannot be fully known and what can be known is known through rhetoric.⁹⁶ His use of rhetoric draws attention to faith and the role of the texts in generating, maintaining, and encouraging the faith of the people of Israel as well as the faithful of generations of believers, both Jewish and Christian, who have relied on the biblical text for both identity and stability. The certainty that Brueggemann points to is not the certainty of history or the certainty of metaphysics. It is the certainty that God is involved in, with and under all the existential conditions of human life. God is revealed in the midst of these conditions and can only be testified to in and through these conditions.

Brueggemann’s methodology produces a compelling Old Testament theology. His rhetorical methodology is strengthened and dependent upon his vast and profound knowledge of the biblical text, a knowledge acquired through years of writing and teaching, which is then combined with his immense interest and knowledge of a wide range of theological issues. The result is an approach that is fresh and at the same time grounded in critical scholarship. The claims of Hanson and Gowan that Brueggemann ignores reality and history, and that he understands the Old Testament as merely a human product are short sighted. These criticisms arise because Brueggemann’s methodology,

⁹⁵ Gnuse, 91.

⁹⁶ Brueggemann, 53-71.

focused on rhetoric, engages aspects of the Old Testament that challenge the rational categories used by scholarly critical analysis.

The strength of Brueggemann's theology lies in his ability to move beyond scholarly critical analysis and engage the existential theological issues provoked in and through the text. By emphasizing rhetoric, he draws attention to both God's engagement with human beings in and through the ambiguities of lived experience and the role and responsibility of human beings for engagement with God. Brueggemann's theology recognizes that the biblical text is open, provisional and has been shaped by a traditioning process. That process involves imaginative re-use of biblical traditions as Israel encounters new and often painful experiences that call into question their understanding of God. Brueggemann's theological method uses the traditioning process that is operating in the formation of the biblical text as a foundation for his Old Testament theology. His Old Testament theology therefore attends to the disruptions and incongruities in the text because he recognizes these disruptions and incongruities to be the source for deeper theological insight. His approach recognizes that the dialectical tension between the constant and dynamic is an essential component of the revelation of God in the text. Israel's faith is influenced by tradition but questions that arise from new experiences are vital because it is through these questions that Israel's faith remains deeply connected to life in the world. Brueggemann's theology recognizes that it is the questions of the minority voice that most often lead to new theological insights and that keep Israel's faith open to hearing the voice of God.

Brueggemann's theological sensitivity to the voiceless and oppressed, a sensitivity that runs through all of his publications, influences the theology he draws from

the Old Testament. Because of this sensitivity, Brueggemann emphasizes the Psalms and the Prophets as sources for theological reflection.⁹⁷ While his sensitivity shapes his choice of material, thereby limiting it, at the same time it gives strength to his interpretation because this sensitivity is a vital component of both the Old Testament text and the faith of Israel. Gowan writes, “If his prose is more reminiscent of Greek than Hebrew, his spirit is distinctly Hebrew (a complement, when it comes from another student of the Old Testament).”⁹⁸

In addition, Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology embraces the diversity of the Old Testament. Through this embrace of diversity, Brueggemann allows both God’s passionate involvement in the ambiguities of Israel’s lived experience and the questions that the ambiguities of lived experience evoke for understanding God to emerge from the text and lead theological inquiry. Gowan writes,

One of the great contributions of the book is its success in showing that the diversity in the Old Testament can (and should) be taken not as an embarrassment to be ignored, a problem to be solved, or a fault making it useless, but as an accurate reflection of what life in this world is really like and a reflection of a God who is both daunting and intensely fascinating—such that the reflection (if not the God who has really produced it) ought to be taken with the utmost seriousness for its potentially transforming power.⁹⁹

Brueggemann’s methodology, emphasizing aspects of the Old Testament text that have been overlooked by historical critical analysis, leads to an Old Testament theology that is sensitive to the voiceless and oppressed, recognizes the role and importance of the theodicy question and exile for shaping the text and seeks to allow the dialectical tension

⁹⁷ Gnuse, 95.

⁹⁸ Gowan, 96.

⁹⁹ Gowan, 96.

of the text to lead to deeper theological insights. These same themes are essential in interpretations of the cross.

The interpretations of the cross of Moltmann and Sobrino emphasize God's revelation in the midst of the voiceless and oppressed, recognize the role and importance of the theodicy question, which suffering poses, and attend to Jesus' experience of abandonment for shaping Christian theology. Their interpretations of the cross also seek to allow the dialectical tension between cross and resurrection to lead their readers to deeper theological insights. For this reason, Brueggemann's Old Testament theology is an excellent source for conversation with the theologies of the cross of Moltmann and Sobrino. Before moving to analysis of the work of Moltmann and Sobrino, it is important to conduct a thorough study of the role of countertestimony in Brueggemann's Old Testament theology. Because Brueggemann's theology recognizes that it is the questions of the minority voice in the Bible that most often lead to new theological insights and that keep Israel's faith open to hearing the voice of God, a careful analysis of the minority voice is essential.

Chapter Two

The Embrace of Pain: “Countertestimony” in Brueggemann’s Old Testament Theology

“Testimony” is the keyword in Walter Brueggemann’s major tome, *The Theology of the Old Testament*.¹ Not only because the book’s subtitle, “*Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*” draws attention to it, but also because testimony is the beginning point for his reflection on the God of Israel. Brueggemann explains what he means by “testimony” in the context of a “lawcourt,” which serves as his dominant metaphor. The dynamics of adjudicating a case based on testimony provides him with the structure for *The Theology of the Old Testament*. It is through the word testimony, and its role in arguing competing truth claims in a court of law, that the major themes of Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology are explicated. Those themes include: the essential role of speech in Israel’s understanding of God, the relationship between speech and reality, the importance of competing versions of reality in Israel’s theological claims, the role of speech in shaping reality, the contingency of God on Israel’s speech, and the observation that Israel’s speech about God is through the fabric of lived experience so that all knowledge of God is provisional, open ended, and dialogical. These major themes are important throughout Brueggemann’s *The Theology of the Old Testament*, which is divided into four parts each representing the forms of testimony: core testimony, countertestimony, unsolicited testimony, and embodied testimony.

A discussion of Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology concentrating on the countertestimony of Israel will be the major topic of this chapter. The role and function

¹ Donald Gowan in a critique of Brueggemann’s book, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, draws attention to the book’s central theme of testimony. Gowan describes B’s book as a detailed study of “Israel’s language about God.” Donald E. Gowan, “Brueggemann’s Old Testament Theology: A Review Article,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 20 no. 2 (December, 1998): 89, 91.

of the countertestimony, the dominant themes of the countertestimony, and the importance of these themes for Old Testament theology and the notion of God will be the focus. Brueggemann's analysis of the role of lament as a public voicing of pain, grief, and sorrow in the unfolding drama between God and Israel will also be given substantial attention.

Definition, Function, and Form of Countertestimony

Of the four types of testimony treated by Brueggemann in *Theology of the Old Testament*, countertestimony is the most important for this study. "Countertestimony" represents what Brueggemann refers to in other writings as the "minority voice" of Israel, the voice that expresses both Israel and God's "embrace of pain."² According to Brueggemann, although the number of texts that express Israel's embrace of pain are few in number, these texts carry a disproportional importance because of the crucial role and function of the countertestimony in the Old Testament.³ Countertestimony, therefore, is vital in shaping Brueggemann's *TOT*, and his Old Testament theology as a whole, including his understanding of the theology of God and his articulation of the unfolding drama between God and Israel.

It is important to note Brueggemann's insistence that countertestimony arises in the Old Testament in the face of the claims of the core testimony, provided by the majority voice. Biblical faith consists of a tension between the majority voice of Israel with its claims for God as an active, powerful agent who creates, promises, delivers, commands, and leads, and the minority voice that questions the certainty of those claims

² Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 no. 3 (July, 1985): 398-399.

³ *Ibid.*, 414; Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997): 322-323.

through open, honest testimony about the lived experience of pain.⁴ Both the core claims of the testimony and the challenge of the countertestimony are essential in the articulation of Israel's faith. In keeping with the lawcourt metaphor that provides the structure for *TOT*, Brueggemann compares countertestimony to cross-examination. After the testimony, after the witness articulates his or her version of reality, the cross-examination challenges that account of reality, questions it, and searches it for truth and reliability.⁵

For Brueggemann, it is important that this cross-examination not be done by detractors of the faith, by those outside of Israel, or after the text is formed. Rather, this cross-examination emerges from within the text, is found throughout the text, is part of the formation of the text, and is in fact characteristic of the text. Brueggemann therefore asserts that the countertestimony does not rise from a lack of faith but is rather a characteristic feature of Israel's faith. Brueggemann describes the faith of Israel as a disputatious, questioning faith that attends to disruptions and incongruities and will not close itself to the realities of lived experience in order to support a closed determined system or to legitimate existing structures.⁶

According to Brueggemann, the core and counter testimonies of Israel belong together. The counter testimony of Israel is not voiced in one large and sweeping claim but emerges slowly and painfully as the nation of Israel and individual members of Israel live their lives in the midst of the unresolved conditions of the world, waiting and hoping for the God of the core testimony to intervene on their behalf. It is when life becomes unbearable, when the intervention of God is not on the horizon, that Israel's

⁴ Ibid., 145-205.

⁵ Ibid., 317-318.

⁶ Ibid., 323-332.

countertestimony, Israel's cross-examination of God, finds voice.⁷ Israel dares to complain to God and to question God. Israel's complaint and questioning of God is both honesty about its pain, and a means to mobilize God to be faithful to the claims of the core testimony. According to Brueggemann, Israel challenges God, "to be Yahweh's best, true self."⁸

The questions Israel asks: How long? Why? Where? Is the Lord among us or not? are questions that arise from the pain of their experience. The people of Israel have faith in the God of the core testimony and yet experience the pain of abandonment. Therefore, questions emerge concerning on the one hand God's reliability and fidelity, and on the other God's sovereignty and power. Two basic questions emerge: 1) If Israel is abandoned is God reliable? 2) If God is reliable and yet Israel is abandoned is God sovereign? Both questions are forged in the furnace of painful life experience that is incongruous with the version of reality proclaimed in the core testimony.⁹

In his article, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," Brueggemann defines pain as "any dysfunction in the relationship with God, and any derivative dysfunction in the disorder of creation or society."¹⁰ Two trajectories of pain are noted here. The first is a vertical trajectory of pain involving disruption in the relationship between God and human beings. The second is a horizontal trajectory of pain involving relationships between and among human beings as well as disruption between human beings and the created world. Brueggemann insists that there is a connection between notions of God and the structures and power relationships among

⁷ Ibid., 319.

⁸ Ibid., 321.

⁹ Ibid., 319-325.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II," 398.

human beings. The voice of pain, particularly the voice of the oppressed (the widow, the orphan, the alien), challenges both the notions of God and the legitimacy of the structures and power relationships of society.¹¹

In the same article, Brueggemann asserts that in the Old Testament this pain is fully “embraced” by both Yahweh and Israel. He writes, “Such an act of *embrace* means to articulate the pain fully, to insist on God’s reception of the speech and the pain, and to wait hopefully for God’s resolution.”¹² This statement points to another important dimension of the function of the minority voice in Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology. Fully embraced pain involves both the articulation of that pain by the speaker and the reception of that pain by God who has the power to change the situation. The speaking of this pain is not simply therapeutic, a release of pent up feelings, but is rather received and heard by God who will respond to what has been spoken. So this speech is dynamic. It changes the situation, shapes the relationship, and drives the drama. It has the powerful potential to evoke a response and that potential is what gives the minority voice its disproportionate importance in the Old Testament.

What is hinted at in these statements from Brueggemann’s article, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain,” is the crucial function of the minority voice in Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology. It is this voice that Brueggemann claims challenges all settled notions of God and challenges the legitimacy of structures based upon these settled notions of God. Brueggemann insists that the powerful of society, the ones who oversee its structures, have a profound interest in maintaining the *status quo*. In order to maintain the *status quo*, the voice of pain must be ignored. The

¹¹ Ibid., 399, 414-415.

¹² Ibid., 398. Emphases in direct quotes will be maintained throughout this paper.

surprising fact is that this voice of pain is not ignored in the Old Testament. God is not immune from the questions raised from pain. This minority voice opens the future for both God and Israel by challenging and insisting on a response from God. According to Brueggemann, not only does God hear and accept this painful speech, but also God and the drama between God and Israel are changed by this speech. In discussing the Psalms of lament in his book, *Finally Comes the Poet*, Brueggemann writes,

The alienation and the rage have long festered in the silence.... Finally comes the poet to speak the rage and resentment that will tolerate no prosaic utterance. The indignation is not resigned. It is an act of insistence and of hope. Indignant hope is sounded because the speaker believes there is still this one to whom speech may be effectively addressed. There still is a serious conversation partner. In the very act of this speech, the world is already reshaped. It is reshaped with a chance of community and communion. It is reshaped with a possibility for dignity and self-respect. There is speaking and a passionate conviction that there is listening.¹³

This text points to the power of speech to reshape reality. Buried in the belief that speech has this transforming power is a conviction that God is open to hearing this speech, that God has the power to change the situation, and that God's hearing will evoke a response. Brueggemann writes, "There are, however, ample Biblical texts to suggest that it is the voice of human hurt and hope that evokes the presence and response of God."¹⁴ According to Brueggemann, it is the countertestimony, the minority voice of Israel, which drives and shapes the drama between God and Israel.

Moving to a more specific analysis of Brueggemann's articulation of the countertestimony in his Old Testament theology can only proceed through observation of the fact that this countertestimony plays a primary role throughout Brueggemann's Old

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

Testament theology and is therefore not easily isolated. At first glance it would appear that the dominant themes of the countertestimony are in fact isolated in the Part II of Brueggemann's *TOT*. In that section, entitled, "Israel's Countertestimony," Brueggemann discusses three themes of the countertestimony: God's hiddenness, ambiguity, and negativity. The fact is, however, that countertestimony is not limited either in this book or in his other writings to these three themes. Rather, the countertestimony of Israel has a pervasive influence on all sections of Brueggemann's book and therefore all forms of testimony discussed in the book. Countertestimony arises from the start with Brueggemann's assertion that Israel's faith is "situated in the matrix of the exile."¹⁵ Throughout his discussion of the core testimony there are hints of the countertestimony hidden within. In the section of his book addressing Israel's unsolicited testimony, countertestimony has a decisive role in the drama of relationships Brueggemann discusses. Finally, in the fourth section entitled, "Israel's Embodied Testimony," countertestimony is influential in all forms of the mediation of Yahweh in Israel that he addresses.

The Countertestimony within the Testimony

The interweaving of testimony and countertestimony begins with the fact that Israel's testimony about God is given in the context of relationship with God. Israel does not speak of God's characteristics separately from God's relatedness to Israel. Brueggemann states that Israel's characteristic speech about God is articulated in full verbal sentences. This fact, he claims, is evidence that Israel's foundation for speech

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 77.

about God is interwoven with their relationship to God.¹⁶ These sentences involve God as a subject of an active verb followed by Israel as the direct object, the recipient of God's actions. God as subject of the sentence has the power to act and transform but those actions are tied to Israel as the recipient of those actions.

Brueggemann points out that Israel's testimony is characteristically concerned with specific actions of God.¹⁷ These specific actions of God are summarized by Brueggemann through the verbs create, promise, deliver, command, and lead.¹⁸ In the section of *TOT* entitled, "Testimony in Verbal Sentences," God's power to transform is emphasized. Brueggemann writes, "It is evident from the outset, in Israel's most characteristic testimony, that right speech about Yahweh concerns Yahweh's power to transform, to create, and to engender."¹⁹ While the emphasis is on God's power to transform, Brueggemann insists throughout this discussion that God's power has a direct object, Israel, and so God's actions are bound to the situation of the people of Israel. In fact, these full verbal sentences are given in the context of narrative, given in the midst of stories describing the sociopolitical and theological circumstances of the people of Israel.

The articulation of testimony in full verbal sentences from within the context of narrative shapes Israel's testimony to the actions of God.²⁰ As discussed previously, these narrative accounts of Israel situated in the matrix of exile tell the story of a people at risk, vulnerable, and fragile. So while Brueggemann's section dealing with active verbs emphasizes God's active, powerful presence, within this section is the recognition

¹⁶ Ibid., 122-126.

¹⁷ Ibid., 145.

¹⁸ Ibid., 145-205.

¹⁹ Ibid., 139.

²⁰ Ibid., 145.

that God's active, powerful presence is articulated from within situations in which that presence is not evident.

For example, in Brueggemann's discussion of Israel's testimony of God organized around creation verbs, he writes, "In the Old Testament, creation faith receives its fullest articulation in Isaiah of the exile."²¹ The Babylonian Exile was a time of chaos and anxiety for the people of Israel who were vulnerable enough to believe that the power of Babylon and the power of the Babylonian gods had forever overwhelmed Israel and had defeated and were more powerful than Yahweh. According to Brueggemann, the creation texts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Genesis acted as subversive literature and provided Israel with a vision in contrast with the reality of their circumstance, a resilient hope in God's power, and an affirmation of Israel's status before God.²² These texts allowed Israel to reenact liturgically a counter reality and through that reenactment restore confidence in Yahweh and a derivative confidence in their own ability to act responsibly in freedom despite the power of Babylon.²³

A second example of the role of exile in shaping the core claims of Israel's faith is given in Brueggemann's discussion of God as the subject of the verb to promise.²⁴ Brueggemann points to two Hebrew verbs that are used in the Old Testament to supply the substance of God's promises. Those verbs are "to give" (*ntn*) and "to bless" (*brk*).²⁵ The verb to give (*ntn*) is associated with God's promise of the gift of land to Israel. Brueggemann indicates that this association links God's promises to concrete material

²¹ Ibid., 149.

²² The texts Brueggemann discusses are Isaiah 45:12-13; 40: 28-31; 43:1-44:2; Jer 10:1-16; Amos 4:13; Gen 1:1-2:4; Ibid., 150-154.

²³ Ibid., 151.

²⁴ Ibid., 164-165.

²⁵ Ibid., 165.

existence in the world.²⁶ Brueggemann defines the verb to bless (*brk*) as, “a bestowal of life-force, related to the generativity, birth, and reproduction, which the powerful giver entrusts to the recipient.”²⁷ With this verb, Brueggemann recognizes that God’s promise to bless Israel is life giving. The significance of the linkage of God’s promises to concrete, material existence and the recognition of the life-giving force of Yahweh’s blessing in Israel’s testimony is shaped however by the exilic situation in which the texts are formed. Israel, living in a situation in which it is obvious that God’s promises have not been fulfilled, waits. The testimony of Israel is shaped by waiting.²⁸ That waiting is formative for Israel’s understanding of God’s promises. Israel does not simply remember the promises of God. Rather, the promises are reflected upon in new circumstances where more is demanded and are therefore broken open so that waiting becomes the ground for deeper intimacy with God that opens the future for newness between God and Israel.²⁹

Brueggemann notes that Israel makes no concession to the exile.³⁰ Rather, through the exile new claims of God’s promises exceed the old. Exilic claims of promise reveal two important features of Israel’s notion of God. The first is that according to Israel’s testimony, God intends to enter into exile with Israel.³¹ Exilic promises of deeper intimacy with God indicate God’s determination to enter into risky solidarity with Israel. The second feature of Israel’s notion of God is that God’s presence is life giving and

²⁶ Ibid., 169.

²⁷ Ibid., 165.

²⁸ Ibid., 169.

²⁹ Ibid., 169-173.

³⁰ Ibid., 177-181.

³¹ Ibid., 171.

transformative. God's new more intimate relationship with Israel will transform the exile from a place of death to one of life.³²

Finally, Brueggemann discusses several other verbs in the section of his book called, "Testimony in Verbal Sentences." The verbs discussed are verbs of deliverance, command, and leading. In each case, the narrative structure of Israel's testimony shaped by the paradigmatic role of the exile is given primary emphasis. For this reason, in Brueggemann's Old Testament theology, all of Israel's claims given in its core testimony hide within them a form of countertestimony. Within the order given in creation, hides the unresolved tension of chaos. Within claims of God's promises, hides waiting in the midst of lives that contradict those promises. Within the claims of God's deliverance is the reality of lives characterized by subjugation to oppressive powers, etc.³³

Therefore, in Brueggemann's discussion of the core testimony of Israel given in full verbal sentences, several important themes of countertestimony emerge. First, Israel's testimony is a practice of counter-reality so the awareness of the incongruity of life with the claims of the testimony is a foundational element of Israel's faith and Israel's testimony. Second, the actions of God are always tied to Israel's concrete material existence in the world and so the fragility and vulnerability of Israel's existence also characterizes God's presence in and for Israel. God's relationship with Israel involves risky solidarity for God. Finally, the faith of Israel is characterized by waiting and that waiting provides the fertile ground for new hope and transformation. These three themes filtering through the core claims of Israel's testimony given in full verbal

³² Ibid., 164, 171.

³³ Ibid., 205-209.

sentences results in an unresolved openness to Israel's faith and that unresolved openness is written into Israel's testimony about God.³⁴

Brueggemann states that the verbs of God (creation, promise, deliverance, command, and lead) form the main themes of Israel's faith and are articulated within the context of the narrative of the Pentateuch which ends in Deuteronomy 34 with Moses able to see and yet not enter the Promised Land. He refers to these themes as "recitals of waiting."³⁵ Brueggemann insists that this waiting is not a theological problem but a theological datum. He writes,

The wonder of this faith is that the circumstance faced did not discredit the testimony of the verbal sentence; nor does the testimony lead to denial about the circumstance. Rather *the literature is put together in order to exhibit and to explore the tension between verbal testimony and circumstance*, with the clear "canonical" insistence that the testimony will prevail over every circumstance."³⁶

Unresolved open tension between circumstances and core testimony is, according to Brueggemann, characteristic of the Old Testament and therefore is an important theme in Brueggemann's Old Testament theology.

Brueggemann's analysis of the core claims of Israel's faith concludes with an exploration of Israel's use of adjectives and nouns. Brueggemann asserts that in order to move from specific actions of God to more general claims, Israel makes a rhetorical maneuver from describing God in full verbal sentences to using adjectives and then nouns.³⁷ With this rhetorical move comes a more stable understanding of God articulated in creedal statements and noun metaphors. Countertestimony surfaces in this section of *TOT* in several important ways.

³⁴ Ibid., 209-210.

³⁵ Ibid., 211.

³⁶ Ibid., 210.

³⁷ Ibid., 230.

The guiding text for the section of *TOT*, entitled, “Adjectives: Yahweh with Characteristic Markings,” is the creedal statement of Ex 34:6-7:

The Lord, the Lord,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children’s children,
to the third and the fourth generation.³⁸

Brueggemann claims that the intense scholarly attention focused on this text is the result of the recognition that this text is “an exceedingly important, stylized, quite self-conscious characterization of Yahweh.”³⁹ God is described in this statement with a profound collection of adjectives: merciful (*rhm*), gracious (*hnn*), slow to anger (*'rk 'ppym*), steadfast love (*hsd*), and faithful (*'emeth*).⁴⁰ Brueggemann states that this collection of adjectives has a cumulative effect indicating “Yahweh’s intense solidarity with and commitment to those to whom Yahweh is bound.”⁴¹

Yet despite its exceedingly positive claim, countertestimony is hidden within this “creedal statement” of Exodus. That countertestimony is present in two ways. First, it is present through the context of the narrative in which this statement occurs. The statement is made at the end of a dramatic interaction between Israel and God mediated through Moses. Because of the Golden calf incident, Israel’s entire future with God is in

³⁸ Scripture quotation from the New Revised standard Version of the Bible, (USA: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1989), used by Brueggemann, *Ibid.*, 215.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 216-217.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

a situation of extreme risk. Through Moses' intercession on Israel's behalf, a situation that might have led to the death of Israel instead becomes the place of renewed relationship with Yahweh based in Yahweh's intense solidarity with and for Israel.⁴²

The second way that countertestimony is present in the creedal statement of Ex 34:6-7 is within the text itself. Verses 6 and 7a speak of a merciful and gracious God bestowing favor, while verse 7b speaks of God's punishment. Brueggemann sees a profound tension between these verses. Brueggemann recognizes two common arguments that are used to relieve this tension. First, it can be argued that God's actions in the second half of the verse are necessary in order for God's mercy, kindness, etc. to be carried out to those harmed by wickedness. Second, it can be argued that the disproportionate granting of God's mercy, grace, steadfast love, and faithfulness (granted to the thousandth generation) to God's punishment (granted to only four generations) renders the second half of v. 7 a way to further emphasize the extent of God's fidelity and mercy. Ultimately, however, Brueggemann asserts that the two halves of the verse contradict each other. There is a profound tension between the two statements that cannot be reconciled and that according to Brueggemann is a theological disclosure indicating a tension or contradiction "in the very life and character of Yahweh."⁴³

Problematic Interpretive Issues in Brueggemann's Theology of God

This tension or contradiction "in the very life and character of Yahweh" is a very significant theme in Brueggemann's theology of God. The tension or contradiction in God is rooted in the unresolved open tension between circumstance and core testimony that Brueggemann finds characteristic of the Old Testament. In a footnote to his article,

⁴² Ibid., 217.

⁴³ Ibid., 227.

“Costly Loss of Lament,” Brueggemann writes, “In two recent articles I have suggested that the tension between God’s omnipotence and God’s pathos may be the shaping problem for doing Old Testament theology.”⁴⁴ Brueggemann refers to this tension in several different ways in the articles and books leading up to the publication of *TOT*.

In the two articles referred to by Brueggemann in the above quote, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation,” and “A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain,” he refers to the tension or contradiction in God as; “God above the fray” and “God in the fray.”⁴⁵ “God above the fray” is the God of the majority voice, a God who legitimates structure, and is free from the ambiguities of social processes.⁴⁶ While “God in the fray,” is the God of the minority voice, the God who embraces pain and therefore opens the possibility for new forms of structure in society.

In these same articles, Brueggemann detects two movements in God. The first movement Brueggemann detects is that Israel’s sin and disobedience leads to an intensification of Yahweh’s anger and impatience. This same sin and disobedience of Israel, however, leads to a second movement in God. That movement is described by Brueggemann, as a movement in the heart of God, a patience, a holding onto promises despite disobedience and a yearning for relationship with Israel.⁴⁷

While it is not explicitly stated in these articles, it is clear that Brueggemann associates “God above the fray” with God’s omnipotence, anger, and impatience and “God in the fray” with God’s pathos, patience, forgiveness, and yearning for relationship.

⁴⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, (1986): footnote 32, 70.

⁴⁵ Walter Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology I: Structure Legitimation,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (July 1985): 30-31; idem, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology II,” 396-397.

⁴⁶ Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology I,” 31.

⁴⁷ Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology II,” 397.

While “God above the fray” is supposedly the God who is free from the ambiguities of social processes, nevertheless, the “God above the fray” described by Brueggemann is conditioned by Israel’s behavior. At the same time, Brueggemann seems to operate from a preconceived understanding of power that shapes his interpretation of the texts (more will be said about this in what follows). Brueggemann’s discussion of the contradiction in God in these two articles begins a trajectory in his work. That trajectory is an increasingly defined understanding of God’s omnipotence, freedom, and sovereignty associated with an intensification of God’s anger leading toward abandonment and a corresponding association of God’s fidelity and reliability with compassion to the point of pathos.⁴⁸

In *TOT*, Brueggemann uses the terms unlimited sovereignty and risky solidarity to speak of the tension or contradiction in the life and character of God. He writes,

My thesis for thematization of Israel’s testimony concerning Yahweh is this: Yahweh is a Character and Agent who is evidenced in the life of Israel as an Actor marked by unlimited sovereignty and risky solidarity, in whom this sovereignty and solidarity often converge, but for whom, on occasion, sovereignty and solidarity are shown to be in an unsettled tension or in an acute imbalance. *The substance of Israel’s testimony concerning Yahweh, I propose, yields a Character who has a profound disjunction at the core of the Subject’s life.*⁴⁹

Brueggemann acknowledges that sovereignty and solidarity converge in Israel’s testimony. When Israel appeals to God for solidarity that appeal is made on the basis of God’s sovereignty and likewise when Israel praises God for God’s incomparability it is often God’s fidelity and faithfulness that is articulated.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Brueggemann

⁴⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 268-276; 283-313.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 268-269.

insists that often in the testimony of Israel, God's sovereignty and solidarity do not converge and in fact the testimony of Israel consists of contradictory notions of God.⁵¹

Throughout *TOT*, Brueggemann refers to God's sovereignty as Yahweh's self-regard. He never overtly defines what he means by self-regard but the term is used in reference either to certain qualities of Yahweh (undomesticated, free, transcendent) or to refer to certain actions that stem from "unfettered sovereignty" such as severity beyond reasoned response, violence, wild capriciousness, or sovereignty without principled loyalty.⁵² The best description of Brueggemann's understanding of Yahweh's self-regard is "Yahweh's determination to be taken seriously on Yahweh's own terms."⁵³

Brueggemann's interpretation of God's sovereignty and his notion of a profound disjunction at the core of God's life are considered problematic in several critiques of his work.⁵⁴ Terence Fretheim in the article, "Some Reflections on Brueggemann's God," argues that the theme of God's will is neglected in Brueggemann's Old Testament theology.⁵⁵ Fretheim claims that there is a difference between a *circumstantial* will of God and an *absolute* will of God.⁵⁶ There are certain decisions made by God that will never be revoked or rethought.⁵⁷ Therefore certain decisions or actions of God, such as

⁵¹ Ibid., 269-272.

⁵² Ibid., 213, 250, 303.

⁵³ Ibid., 303.

⁵⁴ Brevard S. Childs, "Walter Brueggemann's Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53, no. 2 (2000): 231-231; Terence E. Fretheim, "Some Reflections on Brueggemann's God," in *God in the Fray*, edited by Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1988): 27-37; Paul D. Hanson, "Can We Find God Without History? The Story of One Scholar's Failed Attempt," *Bible Review* 15 (December 1999): 43; Brian Rice McCarthy, "Response: Brueggemann and Hanson on God in the Hebrew Scriptures," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 no. 3 (September 2000): 615.

⁵⁵ Fretheim, 29.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 30; Fretheim, "Will of God in the Old Testament," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Ed. David Noel Freedman. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 915.

⁵⁷ Fretheim refers to three irrevocable decisions of God. One, God's decision never to destroy the earth in flood like ways (Gen 8: 21-22). Two, covenant with Abraham (Gen 15: 7-21). Three, commitment to Israel (Ex 34:10). Fretheim, "Some Reflections on Brueggemann's God," 32.

God's anger and actions resulting from that anger are necessary reactions to circumstances but are not a reflection of the *absolute* will of God. Rather these actions resulting from God's *circumstantial* will are in relationship to the actions of Israel and in service to the *absolute* will of God.

Fretheim states that Brueggemann's neglect of the theme of the will of God results in problematic interpretations of texts in the Old Testament. Fretheim uses Brueggemann's assessment of the incongruity of Exodus 34:6-7 as an example. While Brueggemann sees the punishment of violators as incongruous with God's mercy and graciousness, Fretheim disagrees. Fretheim writes,

Why should love be inconsistent with "just judgment"? Why is divine judgment an act of unfaithfulness? Why cannot judgment be in the service of graciousness? Why is a word or act "against Israel" by Yahweh incongruous with God's will "for Israel"? I would claim that divine judgment is *always* in the service of God's loving and saving purposes, and their juxtaposition in Ex 34:6-7 says precisely this.⁵⁸

While Fretheim argues that the lack of stability in Brueggemann's understanding of God might be corrected by appealing to a more developed theological understanding of God's will, Brevard Child's thinks Brueggemann's understanding of God is inadequate because Brueggemann does not pay adequate attention to the canonical witness of the Old Testament. Childs writes, "When Brueggemann assigns an independent role to such traditions as countertestimony, he is running in the very face of Israel's canonical witness."⁵⁹ Childs claims that Brueggemann sets up an endless task for the interpreter of negotiating between competing claims for God with the result that Brueggemann ultimately loses the stability of the God of Israel.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁹ Childs, 230-231.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 231.

A third interpreter, Paul Hanson, is also concerned with the lack of stability in Brueggemann's God and attributes it to Brueggemann's rhetorical focus and lack of attention to history with the result that Brueggemann finally articulates a "flawed understanding of Israel's God."⁶¹ These three significant voices of Old Testament scholarship reject Brueggemann's understanding of God because of the instability of that God. Each suggests a different way to stabilize Brueggemann's understanding of God.

The concerns about Brueggemann's notion of God expressed by Fretheim, Childs, and Hanson are valid and significant. There are several problematic interpretation issues that affect Brueggemann's notion of God in *TOT*. First, when Brueggemann refers to God's sovereignty as self-regard, he interprets that sovereignty in a way that moves beyond the testimony of Israel. Second, Brueggemann overstates the case for the instability of God in *TOT*. Third, he organizes the material of *TOT* in a way that both emphasizes the instability of God and supports a description of God's sovereignty as self-regard. Before discussing these problematic issues and their affect on Brueggemann's notion of God in *TOT* however, attention will first be given to the fact that Brueggemann's notion of God in *TOT*, has its foundations in the theological concerns that are prevalent throughout Brueggemann's writing.

In a personal interview, Brueggemann indicated that during the writing of his book, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*, it became apparent to him what themes and direction his writing needed to take in the future.⁶² In that book, Brueggemann addresses several problems of contemporary faith that he believes are the result of tendencies toward closure and reductionism in theological interpretations of the

⁶¹ Hanson., 43.

⁶² This information was shared during a personal interview with Brueggemann at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary on June 12, 2006.

Old Testament. These concerns include the reduction of the drama of guilt and forgiveness to a mechanical rational system, the silencing of the poetic language of the Bible through rational theological analysis, and the silencing of voices of pain.⁶³ Brueggemann further notes that the silencing of the voices of pain is not disinterested but arises from investment in the *status quo*. Protecting the security given by triumphalist faith claims (*theologia gloriae*) requires the silencing of challenges to those claims.⁶⁴ Those challenges come with the voicing of pain. He therefore links the role and function of the voicing of pain to the theology of the cross.⁶⁵

Finally, Brueggemann believes that it is the notion of God in the Old Testament given through the practice of speech that finally is the force of destabilization and is therefore resisted. He writes,

We are always shocked that the massive sovereignty of God yields before us, and the suffering love of God demands so much. We can hardly endure the strange juxtaposition of sovereignty and grace: the sovereign one who is shockingly gracious, the gracious one who is stunningly sovereign. The shock of such a partner destabilizes us too much. The risk is too great, the discomfort so demanding. We much prefer to settle for a less demanding, less overwhelming meeting. Yet we are haunted by the awareness that only this overwhelming meeting gives life.⁶⁶

A survey of Brueggemann's writing since the publication of *Finally Comes the Poet* reveals a consistent concern with certain Christian theological issues that he believes are both prevalent and destructive. Those issues include an enlightenment mentality that he claims does not acknowledge the irrationality of the human process and an inability to speak or think of God as a party at risk. Brueggemann asserts that the denial of the

⁶³ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 14-15, 20-22, 45-50.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 80-84; *idem*, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 60-64; *idem*, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology II," 399, 406.

⁶⁵ Walter Brueggemann, "The Friday Voice of Faith," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36, no. 1 (April 2001): 13.

⁶⁶ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 45.

irrationality of the human process as well as denial of God as a party at risk results in the silencing and denial of expressions of rage and pain, conversion of feelings of rage and pain into guilt, and a spirituality that is weighted toward submission, humility, and obedience and assumes that God is always in the right.⁶⁷ These theological concerns form the foundation for Brueggemann's reading of the Old Testament that leads to his theology of God.

Brueggemann does not deny that his understanding of God is unstable but he asserts that this understanding of God is faithful to Israel's testimony.⁶⁸ The appeals to God's will, canon, and history made by Fretheim, Childs, and Hanson as ways to stabilize the understanding of God in the Old Testament would be seen by Brueggemann as ways of reducing God to a settled, less demanding, less overwhelming presence. He would further assert that these ways of reducing God at the same time silence the voice of pain in the Old Testament. Brueggemann strives to allow that voice to speak and to follow the testimony of that voice despite the risk such a journey might present.⁶⁹

The fact that Brueggemann's notion of God is rooted in his theological concerns however does not negate the difficulties in his interpretation. One problematic issue affecting Brueggemann's notion of God in *TOT*, is his interpretation of God's sovereignty as self-regard. The characterization of God's sovereignty as self-regard implies a motivation that is not necessarily supported by the testimony of Israel. Brueggemann begins his discussion of "Yahweh's uncompromising, unaccommodating sovereignty" by noting three terms used by Israel to describe that sovereignty: glory,

⁶⁷ Brueggemann, "The Friday Voice of Faith," 15.

⁶⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 303.

⁶⁹ In the interview conducted June 12, 2006, I asked Dr. Brueggemann to address the critiques of Childs. He said, "I think Child's is a silencer." He also said that he believed that to ignore some voices in the Old Testament or to suppress those voices by appeal to theological summaries is a slippery slope.

holiness, and jealousy.⁷⁰ These three terms are Old Testament biblical words. By contrast, Fretheim lists some descriptive words Brueggemann uses in *TOT*, to describe God's "unsettled and unsettling" sovereignty: "savage, odd, abusive, mean-spirited, wild, self-indulgent, unreliable, unstable, capricious, irascible, irrational, sulky, and more." Fretheim notes that "none of them are biblical words."⁷¹ What accounts for the movement in Brueggemann's work from biblical words describing sovereignty to the harsh interpretive non-biblical words he chooses to describe that sovereignty?

In *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, Brueggemann discusses Ezekiel's understanding of God. Brueggemann writes,

The key to Ezekiel's proclamation of God is this: *God will not be mocked*. God will not be presumed upon, trivialized, taken for granted, or drawn too close. God takes being God with utmost seriousness and will not be caught in any partisan alliance or any efforts at use. God will not be pressed into the service of any other cause, no matter how noble or compelling.⁷²

In this book, Brueggemann contrasts Ezekiel's understanding of God with Jeremiah's noting that Jeremiah's God is "one with whom one can engage and struggle" while Ezekiel's God "stands and watches at a distance."⁷³ While Brueggemann's exploration of competing notions of God in the texts of Jeremiah and Ezekiel illustrates the tension in God between sovereignty and solidarity, the language of *Hopeful Imagination* does not resort to the harsh rhetoric found in *TOT*.

In *TOT*, Brueggemann also anchors his discussion of God's holiness in the book of Ezekiel. His discussion in *TOT* however moves from a description of Ezekiel's

⁷⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 283-296.

⁷¹ Fretheim, "Some Reflections on Brueggemann's God," 33.

⁷² Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 53.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 53.

understanding of God as one who will not be impinged upon to a description of God's motivation, God's reasons for God's holiness. Brueggemann writes,

In the end, the notion of Yahweh's holiness suggests that Yahweh cares most about Yahweh's own name, reputation, and character – even more than Yahweh cares for Israel. Yahweh does indeed penultimately care about Israel, and so the Holy One comes to save Israel. Some texts - the more decisive texts, I believe, related to this notion of holiness – make clear that finally Yahweh cares most about Yahweh's own self.⁷⁴

Brueggemann supports his assertion with texts from Ezekiel: 39:7, 36:22-32, and 39:25-27. These texts do express God's concern for "My holy name" and even suggest that God's motivation for saving Israel is concern for that name. But there is also recognition of Israel's sin. Israel has profaned God's name among the nations and there is concern expressed for the nations: "and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes (Ezek 39:23)." Furthermore, God's intent is to correct the situation, a situation that according to the book of Ezekiel has come about as a result of Israel's sin, by saving Israel. Therefore, it is difficult to support Brueggemann's assertion that Yahweh cares more about Yahweh's own self than Israel.⁷⁵

Brueggemann's interpretation of God's sovereignty as self-regard and the heightened rhetoric centered around the issue of sovereignty in *TOT*, is the culmination of the trajectory discussed previously that begins in Brueggemann's articles, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation," and "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain." The trajectory toward an increasingly defined understanding of God's omnipotence, freedom, and sovereignty associated with an

⁷⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 290.

⁷⁵ Donald E. Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 128-130.

intensification of God's anger leading toward abandonment and a corresponding association of God's fidelity and reliability with compassion to the point of pathos begins with Brueggemann's use of the terms, "God above the fray" and "God in the fray."

Fretheim claims that these terms are problematic. He writes,

The biblical God is transcendent *within* relationship (never "above" it); the God active "in the fray" and "embracing pain" is so engaged as the immanent *and* transcendent one. The godness of God is revealed precisely in *that* God wills-once and for all- to enter into the fray and by *the way in which* God embraces the pain: steadfast in love, faithful to promises, and unwaveringly willing the salvation of Israel and the world.⁷⁶

Fretheim argues that Brueggemann has separated transcendence and immanence by associating immanence with the relational qualities of God and transcendence with the non-relational qualities of God.⁷⁷ This is not completely accurate, however. Despite Brueggemann's use of the terms, "God above the fray" and "God in the fray," he does not actually associate transcendence with the non-relational aspects of God. Rather, he divides God's relational qualities into two movements: 1) an intensification of anger and 2) a yearning for relationship (pathos). The problem in Brueggemann's notion of God that eventually cumulates in his description of God's sovereignty as self-regard is this division of the relational qualities of God.

Brueggemann's description of God's sovereignty as self-regard contributes to the emphasis on the instability of God in *TOT*. When addressing the issue of God's abandonment of Israel during the exile, Brueggemann writes,

This abandonment, moreover, is not harshness in the service of any rehabilitation. It is simply a departure from solidarity for the sake of self-regard. To the extent that the witnesses have seen rightly, *this testimony*

⁷⁶ Fretheim, 27.

⁷⁷ Fretheim, 28-29.

places at the center of Israel's life a massive Holy Problem. Israel must learn to live with the problematic character of Yahweh.⁷⁸

This quote reveals that Brueggemann's inclination to understand God's sovereignty as self-regard leads to the conclusion that God is the problem for Israel. Is this really an accurate assessment of the testimony of the Old Testament? It seems a much stronger case could be made that the testimony of Israel regards Israel's sinfulness as a problem for God. Brueggemann addresses as remarkable the fact that Israel keeps alive the cherished voice of the minority, of the oppressed, of those in pain.⁷⁹ He does not address as remarkable however the fact that Israel testifies to Israel's own sinfulness and disobedience. Brueggemann writes of Israel's exilic self identity as people who are vulnerable, at risk, fragile. He does not address, however, Israel's understanding of themselves as sinful. In a critique of Brueggemann's work, Donald Gowan writes,

The human predicament as described by Brueggemann is life in crises, with consideration of the literature of complaint, petition, and thanksgiving. Here one realizes that in spite of the thoroughness of Brueggemann's treatment of the Old Testament there is something missing. Earlier he described Israel's disobedience, but in this chapter on the individual he has little to say about sin. The crises he takes up are largely attributed to the behavior of others or to Yahweh, rather than to wrong choices. There is nothing in the book quite comparable to Eichrodt's full discussion of sin and forgiveness.⁸⁰

This missing component leads Brueggemann to attribute the contrast between God's anger and mercy to instability in God. Rather than seeing anger as a reasonable and necessary response to Israel's behavior, Brueggemann isolates that anger and makes it part of the problematic character of God. Brueggemann's association of anger with "God above the fray" and the isolation of that anger from the behavior of Israel,

⁷⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 311.

⁷⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 92.

⁸⁰ Gowan, "Brueggemann's Old Testament Theology," 94.

contributes to the emphasis on the instability of God in *TOT*. When the relationship between God's anger and the behavior of Israel is clearly reflected upon however, a different understanding of God's otherness, holiness, and sovereignty emerges.

An example of this can be seen by examining Gowan's discussion of Ezekiel's understanding of God's sovereignty in the book, *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel*. In that discussion, Gowan explores the same passage from Ezekiel that Brueggemann uses in discussing God's sovereignty in *TOT* (Ezek 36:22-32) but draws attention to the predicament of God caused by God's relationship to sinful Israel. A key phrase in Ezekiel is "for the sake of my holy name." Gowan like Brueggemann asserts that divine freedom is affirmed by this phrase. Yet Gowan adds that this phrase is held in tension with another. "Profane my holy name," a phrase used to describe the result of Israel's sin. Gowan writes,

How could anything a human being did "profane" God's name- understanding "name," as it is used in the Old Testament, to mean one's character, one's essential nature (e.g., Pss. 9:10: 109:21). It seems to be possible because God in his freedom has chosen to make himself intimately associated with a group of people who bear his name, who may take his name in vain, who may bring shame on his name by their behavior.⁸¹

Gowan continues his discussion by emphasizing the fact that God's actions concern God's reputation in the world. God's sovereignty matters for Israel and for the nations. Therefore, Israel's sin matters for Israel and for the nations because at stake is "knowledge of the true character of the one called Yahweh."⁸² So while Gowan's discussion of Yahweh's sovereignty is similar to Brueggemann's in its focus on divine freedom, a conclusion that God's sovereignty could be described as self-regard is negated

⁸¹ Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books*, 129.

⁸² *Ibid.*

through attention to the limits placed on God's sovereignty through God's covenant with Israel and a concern for knowledge of God in Israel and among the nations.

Contributing to the difficulties in Brueggemann's notion of God are presuppositions concerning God's power that affect Brueggemann's interpretation of the Old Testament text. In a critique of Brueggemann's work, Dennis T. Olson points out that while Brueggemann is very critical of reductionism in Old Testament theology, he has largely understated his own reductionism.⁸³ One important aspect of Brueggemann's notion of God that suffers from reductionism is his interpretation of God's power.

In the beginning of Brueggemann's discussion of the countertestimony of Israel he writes, "I regard hiddenness (especially in the wisdom traditions) as countertestimony only because Israel's core testimony regarded Yahweh's 'action in the world' as highly visible, evoking terror in the enemy and praise in the beneficiaries of that 'action.'"⁸⁴

Likewise, Brueggemann gives active, transformative verbs primacy over other forms of testimony.⁸⁵ Brueggemann approaches his interpretation of the Old Testament with the presupposition that God's power is as an active, transformative force operating upon Israel from without. This presupposition results in an implicit exclusion of either God's solidarity with Israel or a notion of God working from "within" Israel as forms of God's power.

A good example of this presupposition influencing Brueggemann's interpretation of the Old Testament can be seen in his discussion of God's announcement to save Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exod 3:7-10). Brueggemann discusses this passage in a section of

⁸³ Dennis T. Olson, "Biblical theology as Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann and Bakhtin," *Biblical Interpretation* 6 (April 1998): 167.

⁸⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 318.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

the book entitled, “Does Yahweh Contradict?”⁸⁶ Brueggemann defines what he means by contradiction. He writes,

But by contradiction and inconsistency, I mean not an acknowledged change, but *a powerful insistence, assertion, or decision that flies in the face of a previous insistence, assertion, or decision, without any acknowledgment of a reversal.*⁸⁷

Brueggemann asserts that when God informs Moses that he has observed the plight of the people of Israel and intends to save them, God uses first person pronouns indicating his direct action on Israel’s behalf. Brueggemann sees as a “contradiction” the fact that God’s actions are mediated through Moses and are therefore less direct than originally announced. While Brueggemann acknowledges that the statement in verse 12, “I will be with you,” is an indicator of Yahweh’s presence in full power. He nevertheless concludes, “For our purposes, the point to be noticed is that Yahweh, in spite of determined intention, undertakes Israel’s emancipation much less directly than Yahweh had announced.”⁸⁸

Brueggemann’s understanding of God’s actions through Moses as not only indirect but even evidence of God’s inconsistency indicates that Brueggemann’s concept of God’s power is limited to external transformative actions. By contrast, Gowan discusses the significance of the phrase, “I will be with you,” for Israel in his book, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary*. Gowan explores the numerous uses of the phrases “I will be with you,” or “God be with you,” in the Old Testament and concludes, “We are beginning to see that in Israel no stronger promise of God’s help could be offered than the one typically associated with his presence with a

⁸⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 362.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 364.

great man who had been called to carry out his work against all odds: ‘Fear not; I am with you.’”⁸⁹ In Gowan’s interpretation, solidarity is a form of God’s power. God’s presence with Moses *is* God’s way of direct intervention for Israel. If solidarity is a form of God’s power, there is no contradiction and therefore this passage of scripture cannot be used to support an understanding of instability in God.

Further evidence of Brueggemann’s reduced notion of God’s power can be seen in his inclusion of all wisdom material under the rubric of the countertestimony of Israel. Brueggemann’s reason for this inclusion begins with an assumption that Israel’s core testimony emphasizes the actions of God. Recognizing that a great deal of the time, God’s active, visible presence was not evident to Israel, Brueggemann asserts that Israel resorted to a second way of testifying to Yahweh (wisdom literature), a way that contemplated God’s “hidden” actions in the context of the ordinary living out of life.⁹⁰

Childs, however objects to Brueggemann’s inclusion of all wisdom literature under the rubric of countertestimony. He writes,

Then again, to include wisdom theology under the category of countertestimony is largely artificial since, as we now recognize, wisdom functioned throughout the entire spectrum of Israel’s witness ---narrative, law, hymnody---and as a positive formulation of the core testimony of its faith.⁹¹

Brueggemann’s inclusion of wisdom literature under the rubric of countertestimony has its foundation in his reduced understanding of God’s power. If in wisdom literature, Israel contemplates God working from “within” Israel in hidden ways; one could conclude that God’s power is a transformative power working with and through human

⁸⁹ Donald E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 59.

⁹⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 318.

⁹¹ Childs, 229.

beings. Brueggemann reading through his own presuppositions of God's power, however, sees instead a "countertestimony" that arises despite the waning of God's active, transformative presence.

Like Brueggemann's description of God's sovereignty as self-regard, Brueggemann's presuppositions limiting his understanding of God's power to external transformative actions contribute to the emphasis in *TOT* on God's instability. Fretheim writes that Brueggemann's emphasis on the instability of God is "a postmodern restatement of sovereignty."⁹² This statement is true if the focus is on Brueggemann's attempt to hear a plurality of theologies of God in the Old Testament Text. Brueggemann, however, does not allow his understanding of God's power, which is clearly influenced by classical Protestant notions, be challenged by the text. Rather his presuppositions provide the framework for the arrangement of material and the subsequent interpretation.

Brueggemann's description of God's sovereignty as self-regard, and his reduced notion of God's power affect the arrangement of material in *TOT*. In articles leading up to the publication of *TOT*, Brueggemann consistently refers to the minority voice in Israel as the voice of pain.⁹³ He introduces the section of his book called, "Israel's Countertestimony," by addressing the themes that are prominent in the minority voice of Israel: the incongruity of lived experience with the claims of the core testimony, God as a party at risk, the open expression of rage and pain, and the role of complaint in mobilizing God to act on behalf of Israel.⁹⁴ However, Brueggemann's exploration of the

⁹² Fretheim, "Some Reflections on Brueggemann's God," 25.

⁹³ Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology I," 43; idem, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology II," 399; idem, "Costly Loss of Lament," 58; idem, "Friday Voice of Faith," 19-20.

⁹⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of Old Testament*, 317-324.

countertestimony of Israel in *TOT* lacks the drama of relationship with Israel that is so central to his exploration of the minority voice in other publications.⁹⁵ In *TOT*, Brueggemann does not discuss the relationship between God and Israel under the rubric of countertestimony but holds that discussion for subsequent sections of the book called, “Israel’s Unsolicited Testimony,” and “Israel’s Embodied Testimony.”⁹⁶ Yet, the drama of the relationship is a central component for understanding the essential role played by the minority voice in the testimony of Israel. In Brueggemann’s other publications, it is the drama of this relationship that expresses the important theme of God as a party at risk and focuses on the tension between God’s sovereignty and fidelity. By holding discussion of the drama of relationship between God and Israel to a different section of the book and therefore removing countertestimony from its narrative context, the emphasis in the section of the book focused on countertestimony shifts from the voice of pain and the new relationship between God and Israel forged by this voice of pain to the instability of God and the “problem” of God’s sovereignty.

Having made the case that Brueggemann’s notion of God in *TOT* has overstated the instability of God in the Old Testament, it is important to note the important function the instability of God plays in Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology. It has been previously noted that Brueggemann finds problematic for Old Testament theology two forms of denial. The first is an inability to speak or think of God as a party at risk. The second is a denial of the irrationality of the human process. Brueggemann’s notion of

⁹⁵ Brueggemann, “A Shattered Transcendence” in *Biblical theology : Problems and Perspectives : in Honor of J. Christiaan Beker*, eds. Steven J. Kraftchick, Charles D. Myers, Jr., and Ben C. Ollenburger (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 169-182; idem, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology I”; idem, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology II”; idem, “Costly Loss of Lament”; idem, “Friday Voice of Faith”; idem, “The Shrill Voice of the Wounded Party,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 21 (June 1999): 1-25; idem, “Necessary Conditions of a Good Loud Lament,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 25, no. 1 (June 2003): 19-49.

⁹⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 407-564, 567-704.

God, while at times problematic is open and unresolved allowing exploration of the text of the Old Testament in a way that seeks to overcome these long held forms of denial. Overcoming this denial leads to new insights, new possibilities, new ways of speaking about God and for understanding the relationship between God and Israel.

God as a Party at Risk

In *Finally Comes the Poet*, Brueggemann discusses two “dangerous reductions” of the drama of guilt and forgiveness in the relationship between God and Israel. One dangerous reduction of that drama is the notion of strict retribution. In a system of strict retribution, everyone gets what they deserve. People who follow the commandments and live in a way pleasing to God are blessed. Those who do not are cursed. A second reduction of the drama of guilt and forgiveness is the notion of easy grace. Easy grace speaks of guilt too readily written off by God. God wipes away guilt, “by the blood” and everything is easily restored.⁹⁷ Brueggemann argues however that the drama of guilt and forgiveness is much more complex, involves much more anguish for both parties of the drama than either of these reductions articulate. Brueggemann writes, “The drama of guilt and grace does not happen in some automatic or mechanical way. It happens only through the fabric of care and suffering whereby God enters into every cubit of the process.”⁹⁸ Because God enters into every cubit of the process, God is a party at risk.

Brueggemann argues that the exile as paradigmatic event in Israel’s memory and in Israel’s faith is a crises not only for Israel but in the very life of God.⁹⁹ This assertion relies on two arguments. The first is that the speech of the Old Testament is realistic

⁹⁷ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 14-15.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 440-442; *idem*, “A Shattered Transcendence,” 172.

speech about God. Brueggemann writes, “Biblical theology, unlike historical criticism, requires us to approach the text more ‘realistically,’ as though this were indeed a word about God and about God’s life, very often a word from God about God’s life.”¹⁰⁰ The second is that a glimpse into the person of God is available to Israel through the metaphor of personhood as a governing image in the Old Testament text.¹⁰¹ Relying on these two arguments, Brueggemann asserts that the exile is a significant crisis in God’s own life.

The tension between God’s sovereignty and fidelity is a central feature of the crisis in God’s own life. The crisis in God’s own life begins in the crisis in the relationship brought about by Israel’s disobedience to the covenantal demands of Yahweh. Brueggemann refers to a “two-stage sequence” of God’s response to Israel. The first stage reflects God’s concern with the moral failure of Israel that results in punishment and judgment. This is the movement toward exile. The second stage reflects God’s fidelity and intention to restore the relationship between Israel and God, a movement toward homecoming.¹⁰² Brueggemann states that the overarching question throughout the crisis of exile and homecoming is the question of continuity. Brueggemann writes, “The theme of continuity asks whether the character of Yahweh continues to be the same character in, through, and beyond the exile.”¹⁰³

In order to explore the question of continuity, Brueggemann turns to three texts that he claims “represent theological reflection evoked by the exile” (Deut 4:23-31, Isa 54: 7-10, and Jer 31:35-37).¹⁰⁴ These texts contain within them a disjuncture that in the theological reflection of Israel is a disjuncture in the very life of God. The two stage

¹⁰⁰ Brueggemann, “A Shattered Transcendence,” 172.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁰² Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 308-310; *idem*, “A Shattered Transcendence,” 170.

¹⁰³ Brueggemann, “A Shattered Transcendence,” 172.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

sequence of God's response to Israel is evident as each of these texts speaks of destruction or abandonment of Israel by God. Yet also evident is God's movement toward restoration and the accompanying movement toward God's compassion. Brueggemann asserts that ultimately the theological reflection upon exile leads to a recognition of the vulnerability of God to the realities of Israel's life. The testimony of Israel is that Israel's disobedience puts the relationship in jeopardy, but the extent or depth of that jeopardy cannot be determined. Furthermore in Israel's testimony, God is depicted as suffering in solidarity with Israel and struggling for continuity in the midst of the brokenness.¹⁰⁵

The exploration of these exilic texts emphasizing the theme of God as a party at risk yields two important insights for the theology of God drawn from Brueggemann's Old Testament theology. The first is that God is a God who not only takes suffering seriously but that God is affected in God's very life by suffering. Brueggemann writes,

Israel sees through this crisis of God how real suffering is, how seriously suffering is taken, and how suffering impinges even upon the life of God, both to shatter something old in God's own life, and to evoke something utterly new in God's life.¹⁰⁶

The second insight is that this suffering evokes new depths of compassion in God.

Brueggemann writes,

Indeed, God's compassion seems to be the primary and powerful theological emergent of the exile. The exile evokes new measures and fresh depths of compassion in the character of God....Taken theologically; the Exile evokes in God a new resolve for fidelity, a resolve that was not operative prior to the hurt and dread of the Exile.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 173.

¹⁰⁶ Brueggemann, "A Shattered Transcendence," 173.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 180; idem, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 311.

Brueggemann sees in these two insights the beginning of a trajectory toward the theology of the cross, toward a “Cruciform claim for God.”¹⁰⁸ Brueggemann asserts that the dialectic of cross and resurrection is anticipated in the dialectic of exile and homecoming.¹⁰⁹ He argues that God is impinged upon by history and therefore the God that emerges from the exile is different than the God who abandoned. Brueggemann suggests that this theological insight of Israel resulting from the Exilic experience is formative for theological reflection on the crisis for God in the event of the abandonment and resurrection of Jesus.¹¹⁰ Both crises are forged by the drama of reconciliation that refuses reduction to a mechanical system and involves the suffering and compassion of God in “every cubit of the process.”¹¹¹

Denial of God as a party at risk is one way of reducing the complexity of the drama of guilt and forgiveness in the Old Testament. A second factor that contributes to the reduction of this complexity is the notion of strict retribution, the clear cut either/or categories of deeds/consequences. Brueggemann argues that while the majority voice of Israel testifies to a moral coherence in the world that is given shape and ordered by God, there are also literary-rhetorical strategies used in the Old Testament that call any simplified understanding of this coherence into question.¹¹² In the article, “The Shrill voice of the Wounded Party,” Brueggemann addresses four texts that provide examples of alternative literary-rhetorical strategies: the Exodus narrative (Exod 1-15), the second creation account (Gen 2-3), Psalm 7, his chosen representative of the complaint Psalms, and Job. The study of these texts yields the insight that the drama of guilt and

¹⁰⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 311.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 312; idem, “A Shattered Transcendence,” 181.

¹¹⁰ Brueggemann, “A Shattered Transcendence,” 181.

¹¹¹ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 15.

¹¹² Brueggemann, “The Shrill Voice of the Wounded Party,” 1-6.

forgiveness cannot be reduced to a simple two party interaction with Israel as the guilty party and God as the forgiving party. Rather, the text of the Old Testament points to other factors in the drama including: the presence of enemies of God and of Israel (e.g., the Pharaoh), the understanding of sin that points to something that is there before human choice (the snake in Genesis 3, the adversary in Job), and “the voice of the wounded and weak crying out in need and pain.”¹¹³ Brueggemann asserts that these factors are often neglected by Western spirituality with its “inordinate accent on guilt.”¹¹⁴ Moreover, the “enlightenment mentality,” which denies the irrationality of the human process, often eliminates the “cry of the wounded and weak” from the realm of worship contributing to an increased accent on guilt.¹¹⁵ The denial of God as a party at risk and the neglect of the cry of innocent suffering results in a warped view of the relationship between human beings and God. Both of these important neglected themes are central to Brueggemann’s theology of God and are prominent in his study of the role of lament in Old Testament theology.

The Role of Lament

Brueggemann’s work on the role of lament is indebted to the work of Claus Westermann.¹¹⁶ In an article, “The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament,” Westermann asserts that the place of the lament in Old Testament theology is in relation to the saving acts of God.¹¹⁷ Westermann points out that the lament was a natural, expected, and respected form of worship in Israel and with this form of worship

¹¹³ Ibid., 9,15.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹¹⁵ Brueggemann, “The Friday Voice of Faith,” 15-16, 19-20.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹¹⁷ Claus Westermann, “The Role of Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament,” *Interpretation* 28 (1974), 21.

came the recognition of both the finite and transitory existence of human beings and the openness of God to hearing and responding to their cries.¹¹⁸

Westermann notes that the tradition of lament has been widely neglected in Christian traditions. Evidence of this neglect can be seen, he argues, in the lack of recognition of two distinctive forms of lament: the lament of the dead, and the lament of affliction. In the Hebrew language, two different words distinguish these two kinds of lament. More importantly, according to Westermann, only the lament of affliction is addressed to God. The lament of the dead is secular. The reason for this is that while the lament of the dead looks backward, the lament of affliction reaches forward and asks God to relieve the suffering, to bring life out of a situation of crisis. The lament of affliction cries out for salvation. Westermann asserts that the distinction between these two forms of lament is lost because through neglect of the lament tradition, all lamenting is observed only through its outward manifestation, that of weeping.¹¹⁹

Furthermore, with the neglect of the lament tradition, there is an accompanying loss of attention to suffering and a shift in the understanding of salvation. The shift in the understanding of salvation is a shift that moves from salvation of the innocent sufferer to salvation of the guilty through the forgiveness of sins. Westermann writes,

But the lament is not a constituent part of Christian prayer, and we can say that in a certain sense the confession of sin has become the Christianized form of the lament: “*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa!*” the result of this is that both in Christian dogmatics and in Christian worship suffering as opposed to sin has receded far into the background: Jesus Christ’s work of salvation has to do with the forgiveness of sins and with eternal life; it does not deal however with ending human suffering.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 24.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 33.

In this shift, salvation in the Christian tradition narrows its focus concentrating on death as the cessation of life and neglects the power of death that is present in all forms of suffering.¹²¹

Brueggemann agrees with Westermann that the neglect of the lament tradition has had a negative impact on Christian theology. Brueggemann writes, “One obvious implication is that the loss of the lament psalms in the worship life of the church is essentially the loss of a theology of the cross.”¹²² Without attention to lament, Brueggemann argues, the drama of guilt and forgiveness is reduced to a system and the disorder at the margins of life, disorders that ill fit with a neat ethical system focused on sin and guilt are denied and covered up.¹²³

In fact, Brueggemann asserts that without the lament tradition the understanding of sin suffers from reductionism. Brueggemann points out that both Westermann and Lindstrom in their extensive studies of the lament psalms point to the presence of three parties in the drama. There is the speaker of the psalm, God, and the enemy and all play a dominant role. Often the enemy is depicted as having power over the innocent sufferer of the Psalm, power that is too difficult for the speaker to resist. This three party system prevents simplification of the drama between God and human beings and suggests that “sin is a power, which takes the forms of death, chaos, illness, disorder, and oppression.”

Reducing sin to ethical categories and shifting all forms of alienation to guilt has severe consequences for the community that comes to worship. Brueggemann argues that elimination of speech about chaos, illness, disorder, and oppression results in reduced forms of communion with God. People who live in the real world and know first

¹²¹ Ibid., 34.

¹²² Brueggemann, “The Friday Voice of Faith,” 13.

¹²³ Brueggemann, “The Shrill Voice of the Wounded Party,” 13-15.

hand the power of chaos, disorder, illness, and oppression in their own lives find no place in the relationship between God and human beings to express the anguish these powers create. Brueggemann argues that there are two identifiable postures that result from the denial of these feelings. The first is that persons immersed in these problems and having no way to direct their feelings to God withdraw from the relationship and are left with only their own judgment in trying to deal with these forces in their lives. This posture leads to loneliness and anxiety.¹²⁴

In the second posture, rather than withdrawing from the relationship, total sovereignty is given to God. Classical notions of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence are upheld and persons experiencing the effects of chaos in their lives convert their negative feelings into guilt. The reasoning behind conversion of negative feelings into guilt is that if God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent then the negativity in peoples' lives is their own fault. People operating with this view of the relationship between God and human beings are left with confession of sin and repentance as the only means for dealing with the overwhelming and complex feelings created by the powerful forces of chaos, illness, disorder, and oppression. This posture leads to disregard for a person's own judgment and a yielding of responsibility to God. Brueggemann argues that ultimately such denial leads to internalized rage that is directed either destructively toward the self or moves outward toward the oppressors.¹²⁵

The denial of the expression of negative feelings generated by the forces of chaos, illness, disorder, and oppression results in a reduced faith. Brueggemann writes, "Such a reductionist faith can scarcely help people who have a discerning sense of the brokenness

¹²⁴ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 44-48.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

in the world or in our lives.”¹²⁶ Brueggemann argues therefore that recovery of the lament tradition is essential in order to combat this form of denial that results in a reduction of the complexity of the drama of reconciliation, in a stifling of the theodicy question, and in limiting the “grid of interactionism” between God and human beings.¹²⁷

Brueggemann’s extensive study of the lament tradition in Israel leads him to claim that central to Israel’s faith is a “grid of interactionism.” Brueggemann writes,

This claim that dialogue is essential in Old Testament faith cannot be overstated. The core claim of the lament psalms, I suggest, is that in these poems, Israel holds up its side of the conversation, which is necessary if God is to be known by the Israelites.¹²⁸

Brueggemann sees the lament tradition as the essential element of this dialogue.

Without the lament tradition Israel’s speech to God becomes dishonest. This dishonesty results in a reduced understanding of God. God is either excluded from painful situations in life and therefore a practical atheism results, or human responsibility is yielded over to God with the result that dialogue between human beings and God instead becomes a monologue; God is praised but not honestly engaged. Moreover, these two different postures operating from the denial of the irrationality in human life also deny that God is a party at risk. Brueggemann asserts that the lament tradition takes seriously the claim that God is a party at risk and engages God in a way that impinges upon the life of God.

In several of his publications, Brueggemann notes an observation made by Hans Urs von Balthasar that in 1918 four scholars independently of one another wrote on “the

¹²⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹²⁷ Brueggemann, “Friday Voice of Faith,” 12; idem, “Costly Loss of Lament,” 61.

¹²⁸ Brueggemann, “Friday Voice of Faith,” 16.

dialogical principle of reality.”¹²⁹ These scholars began to articulate a relational understanding of personhood. Human personhood does not exist in isolation but is formed and lived always in relationship. Brueggemann uses the term “interactionism” to describe this dialogical principle of reality. He agrees with the analysis of Martin Buber that the identity of the *I* of the human person is dependent on the *Thou* of God, but believes it necessary to push beyond the dependence of human identity on the identity of God to articulate the understanding that God is also dependent on human beings for God’s God-ness.¹³⁰ This, he claims, is an insight of the lament psalms. He writes,

One of the enduring questions of the lament psalms is this: How seriously should we take their daring affirmation that God somehow depends upon Israel for God’s God-ness? My impression is that Israel pushes this symmetry very far. It is that pushing that makes the lament psalms so poignant and so problematic and that evokes in Israel a very different sense of faith and a very different notion of what it means to be a healthy self.¹³¹

Brueggemann claims that Israel’s “different sense of faith and very different notion of what it means to be a healthy self” are rooted in the genuine interactionism that is at the heart of the testimony of the lament tradition. He argues that the availability of the lament as a social construction of reality in Israel provided Israel with a means for redistributing the power between the two parties in the interaction, God and Israel. When Israel cried out from the pit, when the pain of Israel became speech, when Israel dared to ask God: How long? Why? Where? Is the Lord among us or not, Israel through this speech brought God into the pain of their experience and mobilized God to respond.¹³²

¹²⁹ Balthasar makes this observation in *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory I: Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 626. Brueggemann notes that the four scholars referred to by Balthasar are: Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Franz Rosenzweig, and Ferdinand Ebner. Brueggemann, “Friday Voice of Faith,” 16; idem, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 29.

¹³⁰ Brueggemann, “Friday Voice of Faith,” 17.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹³² Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 53-54; idem, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 398-399.

In Brueggemann's discussion of the redistribution of power between God and Israel, he appeals to the work of pediatrician, Donald Woods Winnicott. Winnicott conducted a study of mothers with babies and came to the conclusion that a "good enough" mother was a mother who encouraged the emergence of the baby's genuine self through the practice of allowing that child to have periodic omnipotence over her. The mother yields to and delights in the baby's *I* and through encouragement the baby comes to understand that the mother has love for the baby's genuine self. Without this "primal experience of omnipotence," the baby quickly learns to cover his or her real needs and appeal to the mother through a false self.¹³³

Brueggemann uses this "psychological analogue" for understanding the redistribution of power that occurs through the lament tradition. The lament gives Israel the freedom to assert omnipotence over God and therefore encourages the emergence of genuine responsible faith. Genuine responsible faith operates from genuine engagement of whole responsible selves with God, does not resort to denial, and therefore does not result in hidden or false selves in relationship to God.¹³⁴

Brueggemann appeals to "root persons" in Israel's narrative as exemplars of genuine interaction between God and Israel: Abraham and Moses.¹³⁵ Brueggemann notes that Abraham as the "father of faith" is known for his obedience and Moses as the "lawgiver par excellence" is known for bringing the commandments.¹³⁶ Yet, both Abraham and Moses are daring in their speech to God. They are not afraid to enter into risky dialogue with God, dialogue that challenges, even taunts God to act in the best God-

¹³³ Brueggemann, "Friday Voice of Faith," 18.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³⁵ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 54.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

like way possible toward Israel. Abraham dares to ask, “Shall not the judge of all the earth do right? (Gen 18:25).” Moses insists that God relent from God’s decision to “consume” Israel because of the sin of the golden calf incident (Ex 32:11-13). So the faith and obedience modeled by Abraham and Moses includes within it speech to God that is honest about experience in the world, that takes God on and questions God’s actions in response to the pain and injustice of the world.

The genuine interaction between Abraham and Moses displays a necessary re-distribution of power in the relationship between God and Israel. Brueggemann asserts that Abraham’s question, “Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?” is a question that God “broods” over. The initial response of God to Abraham’s questioning is silence, but God’s brooding over the question results, by the time of Hosea, in God’s embrace of compassion and resolve not to abandon Israel.¹³⁷ In Abraham’s dialogue with God then, power is re-distributed. Abraham’s question yields a new response from God.

The bold prayers of Moses take place in the context of God’s salvation of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Israel has left the harsh silence of oppression under Pharaoh to live in the freedom of Yahweh. Power has been re-distributed from Pharaoh to God. Moses brought the commandments to Israel and yet, according to Brueggemann, his prayers indicate that Moses has learned that coerced silence results in slavery.¹³⁸ Obedience to Yahweh is not coercive. The relationship between Israel and Yahweh is markedly different than the relationship between Israel and Pharaoh. Israel’s obedience to Yahweh is freely given obedience and honest speech is essential for freedom. Moses’ honest speech opens up new possibilities of freedom and obedience between God and

¹³⁷ While this statement is useful for illustrating Brueggemann’s view of interactionism, it is a very subjective interpretation of the biblical text. Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 58.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

Israel and results in the continuation of God's transformative presence with the people of Israel.

That God's transformative presence is a response to the cry of lament indicates the primary importance of the lament tradition in Israel. The public voicing of pain leads to God's salvation. In fact, Brueggemann claims that the interaction between the public voicing of pain in Israel and God's response to that public voicing is at the heart of the Exodus narrative.¹³⁹ God's intention to save Israel from slavery in Egypt is mobilized by Israel's lament.

And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition (Exod 2:23-25).

Through lament, God's transformative presence is evoked. Brueggemann writes,

The sequence of lament-response from God evidences that the sovereign presence of Yahweh would be neither visible nor effective unless Israel sounded its voice of protest and hurt. If Israel had remained mute in submission and passive in pain, then Yahweh's sovereignty would not be enacted.¹⁴⁰

Brueggemann argues that while the linking of the lament tradition with the salvation of God is of primary significance, it is not, however, God's only response to lament.¹⁴¹ A different form of response is seen in God's response to the lament of Job. Brueggemann states that the poem of Job is the "extreme articulation of lament in ancient Israel, in which the weak and wounded find voice against their suffering."¹⁴² Job accuses God of being unreliable and dishonest (Job 9:20-22). God's response to Job does not

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 65.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 63.

¹⁴² Brueggemann, "The Shrill Voice of the Wounded Party," 18.

answer Job's charge but instead emphasizes the freedom and sovereignty of God. What is interesting, however, is that despite the fact that God's response is incongruous with his petition, Job is moved nevertheless to yield to God in faith. Moreover, while God's answer to Job asserts God's free sovereignty, Job's speech is also praised. God praises Job for having spoken what is right (Job 42:7-8). Brueggemann argues that this praise of Job indicates God's preference for honest speech. Brueggemann's paraphrase of this verse reads, "Tell your three friends to clam up because they are so boring I am not going to listen to them anymore. But to you, Job, if you speak for them, I will listen, because you're my kind of guy."¹⁴³

God's response to Job indicates that while God values honest speech, God is not bound by that speech. God can hear dissent, respond, and maintain sovereign freedom. Yet even though Job's lament does not impinge upon God, does not result in God's embrace of compassion as Abraham's speech did, Job is not diminished by this speech nor does it cause distance between Job and God. Rather, Job draws nearer to God. Discussing the whirlwind speeches in the book of Job (Job 38-41), Brueggemann writes,

The outcome of this strange doxological and self-congratulatory response of Yahweh is not that Job is crushed and reduced to silence. Instead, the magisterial speech of Yahweh leads to an appropriate yielding (42:1-6). Job gains enough insight and reassurance to continue as a person of faith in a world that continues to be unjust. Faith, if it is to survive knowingly and honestly, must live in an unjust world. Theodicy is overridden by doxology.¹⁴⁴

Thus the laments of Israel result not only in God's embrace of compassion and in mobilizing God's saving presence, the lament tradition testifies to the fact that genuine

¹⁴³ Brueggemann, "Friday Voice of Faith," 21.

¹⁴⁴ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 62.

honest dialogue with God leads to deeper contemplative knowledge of God, even if that knowledge is hidden in darkness.¹⁴⁵

Another important role of the lament tradition is that it provides a form for the voicing of the theodicy question in Israel. Brueggemann argues that questions about justice rather than questions about God are central in Israel's testimony. The question of theodicy in Israel is not concerned with ontological evil. Rather it is a question about justice issues involving the distribution of goods and the distribution of power. The lament provides the normal mode for asking these justice questions in Israel. According to Brueggemann, an analysis of the complaint psalms reveals four important points made by the psalmist.

1. Things are not right in the present arrangement.
2. They need not stay this way but can be changed.
3. The speaker will not accept them in this way, for it is intolerable.
4. It is God's obligation to change things.¹⁴⁶

These complaints are directed toward God. Either the complaint is directed to God against neighbor or the complaint is directed to God against God. Both forms of complaint are essential in the question of justice. When things are not right in the social arrangement the question of justice has to be directed in both directions toward neighbor and toward God.¹⁴⁷ Recognizing two directions of complaint in the lament tradition indicates the interconnection between social arrangements and an understanding of God. Brueggemann maintains that the stifling of the theodicy question leads to legitimizing unjust social arrangements. Loss of the lament tradition results in coercive silence that

¹⁴⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 91-92.

¹⁴⁶ Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," 62.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

yields power to an illegitimate system and to a limited understanding of God that is used to give legitimacy to that system. Brueggemann writes,

A community of faith which negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne because the throne seems to be only a place of praise. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions at the throne, they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts....The order of the day comes to seem absolute, beyond question, and we are left with only grim obedience and eventually despair. The point of access for serious change has been forfeited when the propriety of this speech form is denied.¹⁴⁸

The centrality of the justice question in the lament tradition can be seen in the fact that all the examples discussed in the grid of interactionism above revolved around issues of justice. Abraham's dialogue with God in Genesis concerning the destruction of the innocent along with the guilty was a justice question. The Exodus narrative begins with a cry of lament concerning the injustice of Israel's slavery in Egypt. Finally, Brueggemann notes that "it is widely agreed that the Book of Job is Israel's most ambitious countertestimony concerning the crisis of theodicy."¹⁴⁹ Israel's lament to God from slavery is a complaint to God about neighbor. Abraham and Job complain to God against God.

This analysis of various responses of God to lament indicates the importance of the "grid of interactionism" for speech about God in the Old Testament. The various responses of God to the laments of individuals and Israel indicate that the dialogue is genuine. The freedom of both parties in the dialogue is maintained. God is free to embrace compassion, or to emphasize transcendence and sovereignty. Human beings are free to give voice to the injustice they experience in the world, either to God against

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 64.

¹⁴⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 386.

neighbor, or even to God against God. The lament tradition reveals the essential role the human partner has in the interaction between God and human beings. Brueggemann writes, “It is Israel’s ‘cry of absence’ that makes God’s speech of presence possible.”¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

The role of the minority voice, the voice of pain, the countertestimony of Israel is crucial and determinative in shaping Brueggemann’s theology of God. For Brueggemann, attention to the voices of pain necessitates openness to the text that risks assurance and certainty, even risks the stability of God. At the heart of Brueggemann’s notion of God is a tension between God’s sovereignty and fidelity. Brueggemann insists that while this tension results in an unstable notion of God, that unstable notion is faithful to the witness of Israel in the Old Testament. The instability of God is largely the result of the drama of reconciliation in the Old Testament that refuses reduction to any clear system. Brueggemann’s attention to the minority voice of Israel results in a theology of God that emphasizes the openness of God to history, and the vulnerability of God to the suffering of Israel.

Essential to Brueggemann’s theology of God, is the notion of God as a party at risk. This means that God is affected by the events of history, particularly events that are shaped by the drama of guilt and reconciliation. God emerges from the drama changed. The exile is the paradigmatic event of guilt and reconciliation in the Old Testament. According to Brueggemann, the exile is not only determinative for Israel’s identity but also asserts influence on God’s life. God is not only aware of Israel’s suffering but God enters into it, suffers with Israel, and struggles for continuity in the midst of

¹⁵⁰ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 65.

brokenness.¹⁵¹ God emerges from this suffering with new depths of compassion and a new resolve for fidelity.

Brueggemann's attention to the minority voice of Israel results in emphasis of theological themes that have been neglected by western Christianity. Brueggemann's attention to the lament tradition expands the focus of the drama of reconciliation from guilt and forgiveness to include issues of innocent suffering, the power of evil, and the presence of enemies in the drama. The acknowledgment of these other factors leads to an accompanying expansion of the role of human beings in the drama. Human beings are called to a genuine interaction with God that includes both the confidence to yield to God and the courage to take initiative and adopt a posture of assertion directed toward God. The role of human beings in the interaction is emphasized, and this role depends upon both the relational identity of human personhood and God's involvement in genuine dialogue. For genuine dialogue to occur, speech must be honest, the possibility of the redistribution of power must be present, and the freedom of both partners in the dialogue is essential. This dialogue includes going to God against neighbor but also the possibility of going to God against God.

According to Brueggemann, the practice of genuine dialogue is grounded in faith. This faith, however, is not certitude. Brueggemann points to Elie Wiesel as an example of faith without certitude. He writes,

I heard Elie Wiesel once asked whether he believed in God. He said, "No." He could not believe in god after the holocaust. "But," he said, "Yes, I'm a Jew, I must believe in God, so what I do is believe against God."¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Brueggemann, "A Shattered Transcendence," 173.

¹⁵² Walter Brueggemann, "Voice as Counter to Violence," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36, no. 1 (April, 2001), 32.

This faith will not deny the reality of the lived experience of pain in order to uphold a settled understanding of God. Nor will it allow the lived experience of pain to become a new form of certitude. Rather, Biblical faith is a faith of tensions between assertion of the core claims of Israel's faith and questions that are directed against those core claims from the human experience of pain. Faith in Israel is therefore "interpersonal, dynamic, and an ongoing process that is endlessly negotiated and never settled."¹⁵³ Brueggemann writes, "Biblical faith is not and never intends to be a statement of outcomes. It is, rather, a dip into the drama of life and death that continues to be underway."¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Brueggemann, "Necessary Conditions for a Good Loud Lament," 28.

¹⁵⁴ Brueggemann, "Voice as Counter to Violence," 33.

Chapter Three

The Theology of the Cross in the Works of Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino

The interpretations of the cross in the works of Moltmann and Sobrino recognize that the cross of Jesus Christ evokes a crisis for theology based in the discontinuity between the questions raised from the depths of suffering and the promises and purpose of God. Moltmann and Sobrino concentrate on God's entry into the world through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They emphasize the particularity of Jesus' history and the scandal of the cross. They work to articulate an understanding of God drawn from hiddenness, absence, silence, and suffering. Each recognizes that God's life giving and transforming power is not extrinsic to but is revealed in the midst of the unresolved conditions of life in the world. This insight leads them to insist that the essence of Christian faith emerges not through freedom from conflict but through entering into the midst of conflict with hope.

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret the theologies of the cross of Christ developed by Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino. A summary and analysis that takes into account the background, influences and context of each theologian will be provided. The strengths, weaknesses, and contributions of each theologian will be accessed.

The tradition of the theology of the cross is rooted in the New Testament. As early as 56 C.E. when Paul wrote a letter to the Christian community in Corinth the tendency to allow the resurrection and continuing presence of Christ to overshadow Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross has been a temptation.¹ In his book, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the form of a Commentary*, Donald Gowan notes the implications of this tendency for Christian theology. He writes,

¹ I Cor 1:18-2:2.

The triumph of the resurrection of Christ and the continuing experience of his risen presence in the midst of the early Christian communities meant the language of forsakenness had no natural place in the New Testament... It seems fair to say that for the writers of the New Testament, all the feelings of godforsakenness expressed by the writers of the Old Testament have been absorbed by Jesus on the cross.²

Nevertheless, beginning with Paul a “thin tradition” threaded its way through the history of Christian thought and practice, a tradition that looked to the cross not from the standpoint of having been overcome but as the permanent question and crisis in all theology.³ From this perspective the cross is not the means for rising above the conditions of life and attaining access to the power and glory of God but is the challenge to enter into the midst of peril, suffering, and death with hope. Theology with a focus on the cross does not discern the presence of God in success or power but finds God in the places of abandonment, and in the midst of all that seems to contradict God.

The theology of the cross is a spirit and method for doing theology.⁴ This spirit and method recognizes that the crisis of the cross, as Moltmann describes in the title of his book, *The Crucified God*, is the foundation and criticism of all Christian theology. It is always polemical, always arising in opposition to the prevailing theology of glory. The cross raises epistemological questions about how to know and recognize God and makes visible the openness of the history of God for the history of the world.

In contemplating the cross of Jesus Christ and its meaning, Martin Luther was the first theologian to use the phrase “the Crucified God.”⁵ His use of the phrase indicated not only an epistemological contention that knowledge of God from the cross opposes the

² Donald Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 16.

³ Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, revised edition 2001), 104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 47.

knowledge of God through works, but also that in the cross God's visible being toward the world is revealed in what seems to oppose God. In an article entitled "Jürgen Moltmann's Theology as a Theology of the Cross," Don Schweitzer notes that in a study of Luther's theology, Walther von Loewenich points to two significant changes in Christian theology brought about by Luther's methodology. The first is that the theology of the cross becomes a guiding principle for understanding Christian theology rather than one topic among many. The second is that a minority tradition is established in Christian theology that emphasizes the discontinuity between the gospel of Jesus Christ and human wisdom.⁶

Background and Influences on Jürgen Moltmann's Theology

Moltmann follows Luther in understanding the cross as a guiding principle for Christian theology. He writes,

The death of Jesus on the cross is the centre of all Christian theology. It is not the only theme of theology, but it is in effect the entry to its problems and answers on earth. All Christian statements about God, about creation, about sin and death have their focal point in the crucified Christ.⁷

In addition, like Luther, Moltmann sees a discontinuity between the gospel of Jesus Christ and human wisdom. In exploring the cause and extent of that discontinuity and its implications for understanding God, however, Luther and Moltmann are quite distinct. Both Luther and Moltmann look to the cross as the focal point for understanding the relationship between God and human beings, but the questions they ask of that relationship differ. Because their questions are shaped by their experiences and their cultural contexts, they arrive at different theological insights. Luther's understanding of

⁶ Don Schweitzer, "Jürgen Moltmann's Theology as a Theology of the Cross," *Studies in Religion* 24, no. 1 (1995): 95.

⁷ Moltmann, 204.

the relationship between God and human beings is formed in the context of the problems he identifies in the triumphal church of his day and his protest against it. For Luther the relationship between God and human beings is characterized and determined by sin. The inability of human beings to understand God and their tendency toward self-deification are the result. The cross reveals the true relationship between human beings and God. For Luther that relationship revolves around an understanding that human beings are the guilty party in the relationship and through the cross God is revealed as their savior. According to Luther, this understanding of the relationship between God and human beings is the determining shape of all Christian theology.⁸

Moltmann's context for understanding the relationship between human beings and God is the apathy and despair of post World War II Germany. His context is marked by the failure of all German institutions, political, economic, religious and social, the atrocities represented by the name Auschwitz, and the guilt caused not only by the failure of Christian churches to resist Nazism but the actual complicity of these Christian churches in the hegemony of the Nazi government before and during the war.⁹

Moltmann understands sin to play a role in the discontinuity between the gospel of Jesus Christ and human wisdom, but sin for him is not his central focus. His focus widens to include the problem of innocent suffering and shifts to explore the meaning of God's revelation on the cross of Jesus Christ through the questions raised from the midst of suffering humanity. For Moltmann, the questions about God spring not from a church that claims too much power but from a church that is struggling with both identity and

⁸ Schweitzer, 96 -97.

⁹ Robert T. Cornelison "The Development and Influence of Moltmann's Theology," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 15-16.

relevancy.¹⁰ The questions Moltmann addresses move him beyond Luther as he allows the theology of the cross to more thoroughly question and re-shape traditional doctrines of God.¹¹

In an article entitled “Jürgen Moltmann’s Theology as a Theology of the Cross,” Don Schweitzer argues that Moltmann’s theology of the cross is distinctive because of the particular way Moltmann understands the relationship between cross and resurrection and his interpretation of the resurrection in light of Old Testament promises.¹²

Schweitzer notes that in Moltmann’s early seminal work, *Theology of Hope*, he recovers eschatology as a major but neglected theme of biblical theology.¹³ In this recovery, Moltmann emphasizes the historical and dialectical nature of the eschatological promises of God in the Old Testament. Historical, because history is the mediator of God’s revelation and God’s revelation concerns the temporal and material. Dialectical, because God’s promises were spoken to and take form in the midst of life experiences that contradict those very promises. God’s promises are dialectically related to present circumstances. Those promises point to a future that will be achieved only through overcoming the evil and contradiction of that present circumstance. Moreover, the eschatological promises spoken through the prophets were not merely a way of understanding history but a means for transforming history.¹⁴

According to Schweitzer, this way of understanding promise in the Old Testament provides the foundation for Moltmann’s understanding of the relationship of cross and

¹⁰ Moltmann, 7-28.

¹¹ Schweitzer, 104-107.

¹² *Ibid.*, 102-103.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 97-103.

resurrection in the New Testament.¹⁵ Resurrection hope does not merely triumph over the cross. Rather, the cross and resurrection are related both historically and dialectically. The cross of Jesus Christ is historical. It is the temporal and material revelation of God in the midst of all that contradicts and opposes God. The resurrection reveals God's promise to overcome this evil and contradiction but it does not merely point to the understanding that God opposes sin, suffering, death, and humiliation. It reveals the means for transforming that evil and contradiction. Therefore, the cross is the key to interpreting the nature and extent of resurrection hope in Moltmann's work and in addition, this resurrection hope is related to the eschatological promises of the Old Testament.¹⁶

Moltmann's distinctive understanding of the relationship between cross, resurrection, and Old Testament promises is the result of a broader theological methodology. Schweitzer analyzes Moltmann's methodology in "The Consistency of Jürgen Moltmann's Theology."¹⁷ In this article, Schweitzer argues that Moltmann's understanding of biblical theology is the basis for his overarching theological method. Schweitzer once again points to Moltmann's analysis of the biblical traditions in the book, *Theology of Hope*. Schweitzer states that in this book, Moltmann recognizes a dialectical pattern in Israel's theological tradition. That dialectical pattern emerges from the recognition that struggle was a foundational part of Israel's theology. While Israel relied on originating event/experiences, i.e. the exodus from Egypt, the theological insights from those experiences were not locked into the past but were reopened when

¹⁵ Ibid., 98.

¹⁶ Ibid., 97-103.

¹⁷ Don Schweitzer, "The Consistency of Jürgen Moltmann's Theology," *Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (1993): 197-208.

new experiences challenged those insights. Traditional theological understandings were read in light of new experiences that often resulted in a struggle for new understandings of these traditions. Often, as a result of this struggle there was a reformulation of Israel's theological traditions.¹⁸ Schweitzer argues that not only does Moltmann recognize this pattern in biblical theology but Moltmann's theology consistently displays this same methodology. Schweitzer writes,

As in *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann again develops his thought according to the dialectical pattern of development found in the biblical traditions. First comes the discussion of the new context which reveals the inadequacy of previous doctrinal formulations. Then comes a rereading of the tradition's originating event/experiences in light of the concerns and insights arising from these new experiences. Finally comes the attempt to relate the Christian theological tradition to these new experiences by reformulating traditional doctrines in terms of the rereadings.¹⁹

Schweitzer notes that Moltmann's theological approach combines Paul Tillich's emphasis on the need for Christian theology to be relevant to contemporary culture with the concern for the distinctiveness of Christian revelation in the work of Karl Barth.²⁰ He writes,

There is something inherently revolutionary about the way Moltmann holds present experience and the biblical witness together in a productive tension. By dialectically relating the biblical witness of eschatological hope and present experience, Moltmann's theology continually works towards new understandings of God and the world which both relate to and transcend present experience.²¹

Because the foundation of Moltmann's theological approach rests upon the rereading of tradition in light of contemporary questions and struggles, his theology is influenced by a broad range of philosophical and theological sources as well as his own

¹⁸ Ibid., 198-199.

¹⁹ Ibid., 203.

²⁰ Ibid., 206.

²¹ Ibid., 207.

experience. The questions forged in suffering that lie at the heart of Moltmann's theological project began in his own personal experiences during World War II. Drafted into the war at the age of eighteen he experienced the violence of battle. He writes,

But then, miraculously and with great difficulty, I survived the firestorm of the RAF-Operation "Gomorra" which destroyed my hometown of Hamburg in July 1943; 40,000 were killed in the last night of the raid, including my friend, Gerhard Schopper, who was blown up right before my eyes. It was during that night that I first called out to God - "Where is God?" and "Why am I not also dead?" - questions that have not left me to this day.²²

Moltmann was captured and spent three years as a prisoner of war in Belgium, Scotland, and England. In the isolation of imprisonment in a foreign country, he read scripture and found that it fed his imagination and emotional need. He experienced despair but also a powerful encounter with God that renewed his hope. God became for him a God who can be found behind barbed wire and is present with the broken hearted. This experience left him with the insight that suffering and hope reinforce one another. The mystery of God and the mystery of suffering are contemplated together. In contemplating suffering, God can be found; and contemplation of God leads one to become sensitive to questions of suffering.²³

In addition to Moltmann's experience as a political prisoner, he witnessed the destruction of his own country's institutions and the atrocities of genocide committed under the Nazi regime. This led Moltmann to explore the implications of the meaning of the cross not only in light of personal suffering but also in light of world history and politics. In an article, "The Development and Influence of Moltmann's Theology," Robert T. Cornelison notes that while the sociopolitical framework is important in any

²² Jürgen Moltmann, "Lived Theology: An Intellectual Biography," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9-11.

serious study of a theologian's work, it is of vital importance for understanding Moltmann. Cornelison points out that not only is Moltmann's theology clearly influenced by the social and political events of post World War II Germany, but through these events Moltmann is led to a realization that all theology is political, that all theological discourse will either promote or hinder liberation. As a result, his theology is firmly political in character.²⁴

Following his release from captivity after the war, Moltmann began his theological studies at Göttingen. It was there that Moltmann was introduced to the theology of Karl Barth. He was especially impressed by Barth's early recognition that the church in Germany had become so aligned with the culture that it had become ineffective.²⁵ This recognition had led Barth to a shift in theological method. While his theological teachers had focused on the subjectivity of the human person as the recipient of revelation, Barth's focus was on the transcendent, wholly other God as the source of revelation.²⁶

Barth, like Moltmann, was influenced by Luther in adopting the cross as the critical revelation of God. Barth, however, moved beyond Luther by more fully and consistently working out the implications of God's suffering on the cross giving kenosis (Phil 2:17) a primary place in his understanding of God's relationship with humanity.

²⁴ Cornelison, "The Development and Influence of Moltmann's Theology," 15; Robert T. Cornelison, "The Reality of Hope: Moltmann's Vision for Theology," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 48, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 116.

²⁵ This recognition came after his teachers supported the war policy of Wilhelm II of Germany in 1914. Cornelison, "Development and Influence," 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

Barth argues that God, who loves in freedom and is not limited by suffering, nevertheless through self emptying love takes suffering upon Godself for the salvation of the world.²⁷

Barth's biblically oriented, christocentric, trinitarian theology clearly influences the theology of Moltmann.²⁸ In an autobiographical article, Moltmann discusses the esteem with which he had held Barth during the dissertation phase of his doctoral studies. He writes, "Like others who said after Hegel philosophy was impossible, I saw no further possibilities for theology beyond Barth: He said it all."²⁹ In the same article, however, Moltmann discusses that his movement beyond Barth began when he heard lectures by theologian Arnold van Ruler discussing his "Theology of the Apostolate" and his "Kingdom of God Theology."³⁰ While Barth had made eschatology a central theme of his writing, it is in understanding the implications of eschatology that Moltmann finds Barth's theology inadequate. Moltmann finds that because Barth places so strong an emphasis on the transcendence of God, on God's otherness, he fails to address the transformation of the world. In Barth's theology, the Trinity remains a revelation of the changeless eternity of God, and is therefore the same in the past, the present, and the future. From this perspective, the cross is viewed as the place of eschatological fulfillment of God's purposes for the world. The futuristic elements of eschatology are ignored. Eschatology is understood as "realized eschatology," the revelation of God on the cross is seen largely as an indictment of human history and the relevance of the Christian message for the transformation of society is neglected.³¹

²⁷ Ronald Goetz, "Karl Barth, Jurgen Moltmann and the Theopaschite Revolution," In *Festschrift: A Tribute to Dr. William Hordern*, ed. Walter Freitag (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: University of Saskatchewan, 1985), 18-19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁹ Moltmann, "Lived theology," 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

³¹ Cornelison, "Development and influence," 20-22.

Moltmann's recognition of this weakness in Barth became clarified for him when we was introduced to Ernst Bloch and began to study Bloch's philosophy. Discussing Bloch's influence on his thought, Moltmann writes,

All at once the loose threads of a biblical theology, of the theology of the apostolate and the kingdom of God and of philosophy, merged into a pattern for a tapestry in which everything matched.³²

According to Cornelison, in Bloch's three volume philosophy, *Principle of Hope*, he "rediscovers" the role of eschatology in the messianic impulses of Jewish and Christian scriptures. This rediscovery challenges Bloch to rethink the understanding of history that dominated philosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Those centuries had understood history in a teleological sense so that the past was studied for the impulses that had led to the present and then the future. Bloch, examining the messianic impulses of Jewish and Christian scriptures, saw that it was the hope for the fulfillment of God's promises that gave meaning to the past and to the present. As Cornelison notes, while Bloch was an atheist in a "Feuerbachian sense," and therefore understood eschatology differently than the Jewish and Christian scriptures did, he nevertheless saw the prominent role eschatology played in the historical process. In Bloch's thought, the future is not the place of the fulfillment of God's promises but a vacuum into which human beings project their hopes and wishes. These projected hopes and wishes give meaning to the past and the present.³³ Hope, therefore has a prominent role in the historical process and history is viewed as a transcendent horizon. Cornelison writes,

In Bloch's view, then, the present is filled with possibilities and an openness because what is ultimately possible is not determined by the past, but by the anticipated future. The present is not filled with accretions

³² Moltmann, "Politics and the Practice of Hope," *The Christian Century* 87 (March 11, 1970): 289, quoted in Cornelison, "Development and Influence," 19.

³³ Cornelison, "Development and Influence," 19.

from the past, but with the potentialities of the promised future; in a word, history becomes filled with HOPE.³⁴

Bloch's recognition of the role of hope in the historical process and his vision of history as a transcendent, open horizon influenced Moltmann's theology. For Moltmann, however, the future is not a vacuum into which the hopes and desires of human beings are projected. Rather, the future has content. It is filled with the resurrection promise of the kingdom of God. Human beings cannot perceive this future and yet it is guaranteed. The present then is the interim period between promise and fulfillment, a time filled with potential, anticipation, and meaning. Cornelison describing Moltmann's understanding of the role of resurrection hope in history writes, "The completion of fragmentary existence, the fulfillment of human hopes, the peace and joy of the kingdom can be anticipated proleptically in the present."³⁵

The centrality and meaning of eschatology in Moltmann's work is shaped by Bloch's philosophy but Moltmann's understanding of the relationship of God to that eschatological history is influenced by the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel. In an article, "The Hegelian Element in Von Balthasar's and Moltmann's Understanding of the Suffering of God," Brian J. Spence writes,

The systematic heart of the theologies of Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Urs von Balthasar involves an insight which is drawn from Hegel's philosophy of religion: the notion that the Incarnation has implications both for human history and the inner life of God, and that it expresses the relationship between these two.³⁶

According to Spence, Hegel understood the incarnation as the point of reconciliation of the contradiction between God and the otherness of creation that has its

³⁴ Ibid., 18-19.

³⁵ Ibid., 22.

³⁶ Brian J. Spence, "The Hegelian Element in von Balthasar's and Moltmann's Understanding of the Suffering of God," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 46.

culmination in the contradiction between nature and spirit in human beings. The cross is the focal point of the reconciliation. Through the cross the negative and painful experiences of finitude, even death, are taken up by God who in the incarnation is both God and a human being. These negative experiences are not simply overcome as atonement theology suggests but are taken into the inner life of God. Hegel's trinitarian perception of God and God's relationship to human history becomes for Moltmann a source for understanding God's relationship to suffering.³⁷

The thought of Bloch and Hegel provide Moltmann with contemporary philosophical reflections on the relationship between history, eschatology, and the Trinity. Moltmann's use of these themes is deepened through his reading of Pietist authors. In "The Role of Pietism in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann," J. Steven O'Malley notes that Moltmann makes reference either directly or through allusion to many German Pietist authors as well as their sources for thought.³⁸ One of the influential sources that definitively shaped Moltmann's theology was Joachim de Fiore (1131-1202). O'Malley reports that when directly asked about the influence of Joachim de Fiore on his work, Moltmann replied, "tersely and in a softened voice" that he was the "last surviving" Joachite.³⁹ O'Malley indicates that Joachim's symbolic and prophetic interpretation of scripture and its relationship to history as well as the impact Joachim's work had on Western Christianity interested Moltmann and became influential for Moltmann's understanding of the relationship between history, eschatology, and the

³⁷ John David Jaeger, "Jürgen Moltmann and the Problem of Evil," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 53, no. 2 (Fall, 1998): 6; Jürgen Moltmann, "The Crucified God: Perspectives on a Theology of the Cross for Today," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 9 (December, 1974): 26; Spence, 46-51.

³⁸ J. Steven O'Malley, "The Role of Pietism in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 48, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 121-122.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

Trinity. Joachim's work inspired his followers to view Christianity as a compelling force for liberty in both church and society. Moltmann writes,

If we want to overcome the monotheistic interpretation of the lordship of God by the trinitarian understanding of the kingdom, then we must go back to Joachim of Fiore, and rediscover the truth of his trinitarian view of history. Joachim counted as an "Enthusiast" and outsider. But in fact, ever since the middle ages, there is hardly anyone who has influenced European movements for liberty in church, state and culture more profoundly than this twelfth-century Cistercian abbot from Calabria, who believed that in his visions he had penetrated the concordance of the Old and New Testaments, and the mystery of the book of Revelation.⁴⁰

Finally, the work of Rabbi Abraham Heschel had a profound influence on Moltmann's theology. Heschel's theology with its central pillar, the pathos of God, is a key influence in Moltmann's understanding of God's freedom, suffering, and involvement in history.⁴¹ Moltmann credits Heschel with overcoming the apathetic axiom that had developed in the Jewish faith in a parallel fashion to the same axiom in the Christian faith. This apathetic axiom centers on a presupposition that God does not suffer and reached its highpoint during scholasticism in the middle Ages.⁴²

Moltmann notes that in the book, *The Prophets*, Heschel claims the theology in the Hebrew Bible does not propose an "idea" of God but rather expresses the experience of people living in the "situation of God."⁴³ Countering Jewish philosophers of religion, such as Jehuda Halevi, Maimonides, and Spinoza who claim that God is free of passion, Heschel claims that the Hebrew Bible reveals a God who is passionately involved with human beings. According to Heschel, God's passion is not like the passion of irrational human emotions with its source in the limitations of finitude. Rather, God's passion is

⁴⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 203, quoted in O'Malley, 123.

⁴¹ Jaeger, 6; Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 270-272; idem, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 18.

⁴² Moltmann, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 18.

⁴³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 270; idem, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 18.

grounded in love from the fullness of God's being for the people with whom God freely, by means of the covenant, enters into relationship.⁴⁴ Heschel claims that the heart of prophetic proclamation lies in the belief that God is interested in God's people to the point of God's willingness to suffer on their behalf.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the prophet filled with the spirit of God, is open in sympathy to feel the feelings of God and therefore bring God's presence to the people opening history to God's action and hope.⁴⁶

Moltmann describes Heschel's theology as a bipolar theology. In this bipolar theology, God is free and transcendent and yet at the same time open to the actions and suffering of God's people.⁴⁷ For Moltmann, Heschel's insights about God's suffering for God's people and his bipolar theology is deepened through studying the theology of the rabbis', particularly Shekinah theology, God's indwelling with the people of Israel.⁴⁸ Referring to the work of P. Kuhn, Moltmann asserts that Shekinah theology discusses a two-fold presence of God. God is in heaven, yet he is also with the low ones and with the humble. God is God of the gods, but also brings about justice for the widow and orphan and like a servant carries a torch in front of the people of Israel. God's presence in this two-fold way opens up history because God's accommodation to the limitations of human beings is also the anticipation of his future indwelling in all of creation.⁴⁹

Heschel uses the term pathos to describe God's openness to the suffering of human beings. In describing the pathos of God, Heschel speaks of God's wrath as grounded in the love of God. God's anger and suffering over the disobedience of the

⁴⁴Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 270.

⁴⁵Ibid., 271.

⁴⁶Moltmann, *Journal of the Theology of South Africa*, 18-19

⁴⁷Ibid., 19.

⁴⁸Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 273; idem, *Journal of the Theology of South Africa*, 19.

⁴⁹Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 273; idem, *Journal of the Theology of South Africa*, 19.

people of Israel is not an anthropomorphic projection of irrational human emotions but rather wounded love.⁵⁰ For Heschel the suffering of God is grounded in the love of God. It is the signpost of the life giving relationship of God toward human beings. While Moltmann recognizes that Christian theology with Christ as mediator is inherently trinitarian and therefore differs from the bipolar theology proposed by Heschel, he nevertheless recognizes in Heschel's work the presupposition for understanding the passion of God in the New Testament and the open vulnerable love at the heart of Christian existence.

Moltmann's Theology of the Cross

While all of Moltmann's theology is influenced by the theology of the cross, he most fully develops the implications of the cross for Christian theology in the book, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation for Christian Theology*. In the introduction to that book, Moltmann writes,

In front of me hangs Marc Chagall's picture "Crucifixion in Yellow". It shows the figure of the crucified Christ in an apocalyptic situation: People sinking into the sea, people homeless and in flight, and yellow fire blazing in the background. And with the crucified Christ there appears the angel with the trumpet and the open roll of the book of life.⁵¹

The painting illustrates so many of the themes Moltmann develops in the book, *The Crucified God*. It offers the reader the dialectical image of the crucified Christ standing in the midst of death yet with the open book of life. It highlights the solidarity offered by Christ, who with wounds reminiscent of his own suffering stands in the midst of suffering. It gives the image of Christ in the context of an apocalyptic situation, which points to the destruction of the suffering in this world and to the beginning of a new

⁵⁰ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), vol. 2, 59-78.

⁵¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 6.

creation. Moltmann claims that his book, *The Crucified God*, is not meant to be a dogmatic conclusion, but an invitation to rethink the meaning of the cross, a meaning that for Moltmann can only be glimpsed through the issue of theodicy. He writes, “The universal significance of the crucified Christ on Golgotha is only really comprehended through the theodicy question.”⁵²

Although the question of theodicy lies at the heart of Moltmann’s entire theological project, he is opposed to any explanation of suffering. He writes,

The desire to explain suffering is already highly questionable in itself. Does an explanation not lead us to justify suffering and give it permanence? Does it not lead the suffering person to come to terms with his suffering, and to declare himself in agreement with it? And does this not mean that he give up hope of overcoming suffering?⁵³

Moltmann’s exploration of the meaning of the cross therefore is not to provide an answer, an explanation of suffering in light of God, or an explanation of God’s righteousness in the face of suffering. Rather, Moltmann seeks to allow the questions raised in or by suffering to provide the framework for theological exploration.

The questions that form the framework for his exploration of the meaning of the cross are questions that are sensitive to the particular issues of theodicy in the twentieth century. In an article, “Theodicy from Ivan Karamazov to Moltmann,” Richard Bauckham notes that Moltmann’s exploration of the meaning of the cross through the lens of theodicy is strengthened by its attentiveness to the particular shape of the theodicy issue in contemporary culture.⁵⁴ Bauckham examines the themes of modern theodicy through analysis of the writings of Dostoevsky, Camus, and Wiesel. The themes that

⁵² Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 52.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Richard Bauckham, "Theodicy from Ivan Karamazov to Moltmann," *Modern Theology*, vol.4 no.1 (October 1987): 83.

Bauckham discusses – dissatisfaction with theism, the advent and eventual inadequacy of protest atheism, and the loss of humanity in the face of the loss of God – are themes addressed by Moltmann in *The Crucified God*.

For Moltmann the issue of theodicy is personal and political rather than cosmological.⁵⁵ He notes that modern protest atheism arose because of the inadequacy of theistic concepts of God in the face of innocent suffering.⁵⁶ Moltmann describes theism as religion or philosophy that starts with the question of finitude in the world and seeks an answer in God. Theistic theology and philosophy looks for God in the gaps. Beginning with what is decaying, transitory and mortal; it seeks an answer in a God that is indivisible, unchangeable and eternal. If change, mortality, and corruption are experienced as disaster and misery, then salvation is the opposite of those things. Moltmann contends that in antiquity, people looked to God for the answer to the problem of finitude that dominated their lives. Their lives were marked by a prevalence of death, unjust social structures and the unpredictability of nature. Metaphysics was an assumed part of their reality. There was a presumption that divine powers were real and present and this transcendent reality was both attractive and terrifying. Their questions did not have to do with the existence of God. Their questions were about how the history of humanity, swamped in ignorance, impermanence, and death could participate in eternal, divine being. Knowledge, immortality and union with God were sought out as the answer to death and impermanence. Christianity's message was that the God they were seeking as an answer to ignorance, impermanence, and death had become incarnate in Christ for their salvation. In Christ, God had become as they were, swamped in

⁵⁵ Warren McWilliams, "Divine Suffering in Contemporary Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33, no. 1 (1980): 36.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

ignorance, impermanence, and death so that they could participate in eternal, divine being.⁵⁷

Moltmann argues that the mystery of the relationship between transitory humanity and the all powerful, perfect, and infinite Being became the mystery of how this Being became incarnate and suffered and died in Jesus of Nazareth. Moltmann lists the questions that dominated early, developing Christology: “How can the intransitory God be in a transitory human being? How can the universal God be in an individual? How can the unchangeable God “become” flesh? How can the immortal God suffer and die on a cross?”⁵⁸ The answers given to these questions presupposed the God of theism, a God who does not change or suffer, and the Christian thinkers of antiquity did not allow the suffering and death of the eternal Son of God to alter or challenge those presuppositions. Consequently the history of Jesus of Nazareth and his experience of abandonment on the cross was not the focus of theology. Instead, theology focused on the pattern of incarnation and resurrection, humiliation and exaltation, asserting that the God of theism descended in the incarnation to save humanity from finitude and the God of theism was resurrected so that humanity could participate in eternity.⁵⁹ Moltmann points out that though we call this Christology from “above” it really has its origins “below” in the questions about finitude.⁶⁰

⁵⁷Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 87-92.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁹ Paul L. Gavriluk claims that contemporary theology reads the doctrine of impassibility discussed during the patristic period without attention to its function and comes to shallow and negative conclusions about its value. He argues that contemporary theologians are setting up a false dilemma between divine impassibility and divine passibility and ignoring the problems inherent in asserting a notion of unrestricted divine passibility. Paul L. Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2-6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

For Moltmann, recognizing the dominance of a theistic understanding of God in Christian theology is significant because it was this dominance that led to the advent of protest atheism. He argues that atheism begins with the same questions as theism, questions springing from the experience of finitude, impermanence, and death. Atheism however draws a very different conclusion. Atheism does not find an answer to the brokenness of the world in the wisdom and goodness of God, but rather sees the brokenness of the world as absurdity. There is nothing else, there is no ultimate meaning.⁶¹ Moltmann claims however that atheism is subject to and cannot escape the very same concept of God that theism holds. The God theism presupposes, the God who does not suffer, does not change, is omnipotent, and eternal is the very God atheism rejects.⁶²

Moltmann appeals to Ivan Karamazov's iconic speech in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky as representative of this form of protest. Ivan's argument is directed specifically against an eschatological theodicy that explains or justifies suffering as a means to achieve some eschatological purpose of God. For Ivan, God cannot be used to silence the protest against the suffering of even one innocent victim. Ivan ends this speech by stating, "I accept God, understand that, but I cannot accept the world that he has made."⁶³ Ivan's problem is the absurdity of innocent suffering in the world and in the face of that suffering; he cannot accept the God of theism.

Moltmann also notes however that when the God of theism was rejected by the advocates of protest atheism the power once given to God was now handed over to

⁶¹ Ibid., 219.

⁶² Ibid., 221.

⁶³ Ibid., 220.

human beings. When the answer to humanity's finitude was no longer the God of theism, human beings were looked to as the source for overcoming the problem of suffering and finitude. Moltmann argues that ultimately the political movements of Nazism and Stalinism showed that protest atheism was an inadequate response to suffering. These movements began in protest against the acceptance of human suffering because of a theistic concept of God and yet they resulted in the suffering and massacre of innocent human beings on an unprecedented scale. These movements showed that with the loss of God came an accompanying loss of humanity.⁶⁴ Moltmann points out that in the book, *L'homme revolte*, Albert Camus highlights the fact that atheism is not a solution to the problem of theodicy because it only shifts from justifying suffering on account of an eschatological purpose of God to justifying suffering in order to bring about a society designed by human beings. God is replaced by human beings who allow innocent suffering in order to bring about a new world of human justice.⁶⁵

In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann describes theism and atheism as "brothers" because both draw conclusions about divine being from the world and both understand God and suffering to be in contradiction to one another. Moltmann credits Camus with the insight that classical protest atheism does arise against a concept of God inferred from Greek tragedies but from a biblical notion of a personal God.⁶⁶ The key issue for protest atheism is not the question of the existence of God but the question of God's righteousness in the world. Theistic explanations of suffering that continue to hold God and suffering in contradiction to one another only exacerbate the problem of God's righteousness in the world.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 253.

⁶⁵ Bauckham, 85; Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 222.

⁶⁶ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 221.

Moltmann denies that a theistic concept of God is applicable to Christian belief in the crucified God.⁶⁷ He claims that a theology of the cross moves “beyond theism and atheism.”⁶⁸ Moltmann’s response to the theodicy problem begins with Jesus’ cry from the cross “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? (Mark 15:34).” For Moltmann, this question cried out by Christ in his suffering on the cross is evidence that the question of God and the question of suffering belong together. “Suffering,” he says, “reaches as far as love itself.”⁶⁹ Moltmann sees suffering as a signpost of vitality and life. He writes,

But the more one loves, the more one is open and becomes receptive to happiness and sorrow. This may be called the dialectic of human life: we live because and in so far as we love – and we suffer and die because and in so far as we love. In this way we experience life and death in love.⁷⁰

For this reason, Moltmann claims, “the God of theism is poor. He cannot love nor can he suffer.”⁷¹ By contrast, Moltmann asserts that what distinguishes the Christian concept of God is open, vulnerable love. The open, vulnerable love of God is concerned and involved with the condition of people living in the world. Theodicy therefore is not a question at all it is the “open wound of life in this world.”⁷² For Moltmann, it is by recognizing God’s participation in the “open wound of life” that the meaning of the cross can be spoken, a meaning that leads to a “revolution in the concept of God.”⁷³

Moltmann claims that Christian theology starts in a revolt in the concept of God that begins in Jesus’ cry of dereliction from the cross. That Jesus died a “blasphemer” according to Jewish law and a “rebel” according to the Romans is significant, but

⁶⁷ Ibid., 214.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 249.

⁶⁹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 51.

⁷⁰ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 253.

⁷¹ Ibid., 253.

⁷² Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 227; idem, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* 49.

⁷³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 201; idem, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 12.

surpassing that significance and of central importance in understanding the meaning of his death is the fact that Jesus died abandoned and rejected by God.⁷⁴ The implications of Jesus' abandonment and rejection by God are only understood in light of the doctrine of the Trinity and according to Moltmann the doctrine of the Trinity has its basis in the event of the cross. Moltmann quotes B. Steffen,

It is not the bare trinitarian formulas of the New Testament, but the constant testimony of the cross which provides the basis for Christian faith in the Trinity. The most concise expression of the Trinity is God's action on the cross, in which God allowed the Son to sacrifice himself through the Spirit.⁷⁵

Moltmann states that the theology of the early church made the starting point for discussing the Trinity the generation of the Son by the Father.⁷⁶ Moltmann argues that the starting point for discussing the trinity is not the generation of the Son by the Father, but rather the Crucified One. He states,

Thus one starts with the history of God at the cross and searches backwards into the condition of the possibility of *this* history in God, and one arrives from the dereliction of Jesus, which has happened, to the eternal generation of the Son.⁷⁷

From this perspective, Moltmann argues, one does not arrive at an invisible being of God behind history but rather in the visible God who is open to world history.⁷⁸

Moltmann claims that the cross makes visible the openness of the history of God for the history of the world. If the history of God is open to the history of the world God is not unmarked by this history. Moltmann therefore claims that the cross interprets the

⁷⁴ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 152.

⁷⁵ B. Steffen, *Das Dogma vom Kreuz. Beitrag zu einer staurozentrischen Theologie* (1920), 152, quoted in Jurgen Moltmann, "The 'Crucified God': God and the Trinity Today," in *New Questions on God*, ed. Johannes B. Metz, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 32-33.

⁷⁶ Moltmann, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 22.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

resurrection and not vice-versa.⁷⁹ On the cross, God meets death with his own eternal life.⁸⁰ God takes nothingness and all that is contrary to God into God's being. The resurrection is not a miracle that transforms the Crucified One into a glorified risen being but rather the beginning of the eschatological transformation of the world by its Creator who takes the history of the world's suffering into himself and redeems it by giving that suffering and death his eternal life. Christ's death is the eschatological ground of the new creation.⁸¹ Moltmann writes, "The new and scandalous element in the Christian message of Easter was not that some man or other was raised before anyone else, but that the one who was raised was the condemned, executed, and forsaken man."⁸²

Moltmann claims that the epistemological principle of the theology of the cross is a dialectical principle. On the cross, the deity of God is revealed in paradox.⁸³

Moltmann writes,

When the crucified Jesus is called the 'image of the invisible God', the meaning is that *this* is God, and God is like *this*. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity.⁸⁴

According to Moltmann, the cross resists interpretation because its theology begins with contradiction and cannot be built upon premature correspondences.⁸⁵

Moltmann claims that the cross brings something new to the metaphysical world. The rejected, suffering, and dying of the Son of God calls for a fundamental change in the order of being of metaphysical thought.⁸⁶ It no longer begins with the limitation of

⁷⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 182; idem, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 24.

⁸⁰ Moltmann, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 14.

⁸¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 162.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 175.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

finitude and seeks the solution in God but rather, it begins in the observation that God and suffering are no longer contradictory.

In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann addresses the implications that the recognition that God and suffering are no longer contradictory has for the relevance and identity of Christianity in the world. The first implication is that because Christ has suffered, human beings are no longer alone in their suffering. Moltmann observes that for the poor of Latin America and other groups of people whose faith is forged in misery, the focus of their faith is not in the joyful feasts of Christmas and Easter but in the solemn remembrance of Holy Week. The Christ upon whom their devotion rests is the crucified Christ. In gazing upon the crucified Christ they do not see simply another human being suffering as they do, but rather they see the suffering pain of God's love for them, solidarity with their brother Christ and an implicit protest against the suffering they themselves experience.⁸⁷

Moltmann states that the transformation of the poor through the "mysticism of the cross" comes not because Christ in his sufferings is like them but rather because Christ represents for them active suffering on their behalf. The suffering of Christ is not the result of passive acceptance of fate or failure. The suffering of Christ is the result of his actively claiming the righteousness of God for the rejected, of his claiming to be the friend of sinners, and of his proclamation that God is on the side of the godless.⁸⁸

The Christian message is not simply that God became a human being, or that God took on the condition and limitations of humanity. The Christian message is that God

⁸⁷ Ibid., 49-50.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 51.

became the kind of human being no one wants to be, God became God-forsaken, God became the rejected one. Moltmann writes,

To suffer and to be rejected are not identical. Suffering can be celebrated and admired. It can arouse compassion. But to be rejected takes away the dignity from suffering and makes it dishonorable suffering. To suffer and be rejected signify the cross. To die on the cross means to suffer and to die as one who is an outcast and rejected.⁸⁹

Christ's cry from the cross, "My God, My God why have you abandoned me?" is the cry of the outcast and the rejected one. It is a cry that indicates not only God's participation in suffering, but also God's protest against suffering.⁹⁰

Recognizing that the cross reveals both the mystery of God and the mystery of suffering has a second implication. That is that if the crucified Christ is the central revelation of God for Christians then this revelation is the foundation for both serving God and for experiencing God in the world. Moltmann claims that all Christians must answer the question, "Which God motivates my faith: the crucified God or the gods of religion, race, and class?"⁹¹ He argues that philosophical notions of God, notions that ascribe to God unity, indivisibility, lack of beginning and end, immortality, and immutability, have dominated Christian faith in the past and continue to strongly influence Christian faith in the present. This has encouraged Christians to see in God the answer to their finite and transitory existences. God is viewed as the highest authority figure and takes on the image of Caesar. The ideal relationship of Christians to God therefore is depicted as one of obedience and reverence. Moltmann argues that this

⁸⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁰ Jaeger, 9.

⁹¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 201.

understanding of God keeps human beings children, removes them from their humanity, and alienates them from their freedom and joy.⁹²

The revolution in the concept of God that Moltmann articulates throughout *The Crucified God* is a notion that liberates human beings from a theistic or philosophical understanding of God and therefore views Christian practice as a liberating practice. Moltmann writes,

The important thing, therefore, is to think of the God of the cross quite consistently not only in the sphere of theology but also in the sphere of social life and the personality of man, in the realm of society, politics, and finally even that of cosmology.⁹³

Furthermore, if the Crucified Christ is the focus of faith, God's presence will be found not in power, wealth, and success, but in the lowly, in the suffering, in the rejected and dying. Moltmann writes, "The person who believes that God is to be found in the God-forsakenness of the crucified Jesus believes that he sees God everywhere, in all things."⁹⁴

The third implication for Christian practice revealed by recognizing God on the cross is grounded in Moltmann's emphasis on eschatology and trinity. Moltmann speaks of the cross as a "trinitarian event." In that event the Father and Son are separated through forsakenness and yet together in their mutual surrender to the event. This event affects God and through this event, the spirit proceeds. Moltmann writes,

What proceeds from the event between Father and Son is the Spirit which justifies the godless, fills the forsaken with love and even brings the dead alive, since even the fact that they are dead cannot exclude them from this event of the cross; the death in God also includes them.⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid., 250.

⁹³ Ibid., 216-217.

⁹⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 79.

⁹⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 244.

In the event of the cross, God has taken the history of suffering and the limitation of finitude into God's self, into the Trinity. Moltmann's panentheistic concept of God claims that God is not in history but history is taken up into God, into the Trinity, and is being integrated into the "history of God."⁹⁶ Moltmann claims this understanding of God moves beyond theism and atheism and into new creation and theopoiesis.⁹⁷

The implications of this for Christian practice are two-fold. First, human beings are called to participation with God in facing suffering and death with hope and love; and second, they are called to communion with God by living into the new creation through liberating praxis. For further reflection, Moltmann offers a picture of the Trinity as an open circle. He argues that the early church envisions the Trinity as a closed circle of perfect being. Barth, he claims, follows the early church in picturing the trinity as a closed circle. In Moltmann's vision, the Trinity begins in the dialectical event of the cross and continues as eschatologically open history.⁹⁸ Moltmann returns here to his key focus on open vulnerable love. The Spirit, as open vulnerable love, is open to the future history of humanity. That history contains the whole of forsaken humanity but also offers the future of God's new creation. As Christians participate in this open Trinity, they participate in the suffering of God but also in the joy, hope, and love of God. The crucified Christ is the transition, is the ground for redeemed existence leading to an eschatological future in which, "God may be all in all (1 Cor 15: 28)."⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Ibid., 277.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 277.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 255.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 255-266.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Moltmann's Theology of the Cross

Critiques of Moltmann's theology of the cross largely pivot around various aspects of the relationship between God and suffering that Moltmann articulates. There are charges that Moltmann does not respond adequately to the theodicy issue.¹⁰⁰ There are claims that his notion of God, attributing suffering and change to God, makes God unstable.¹⁰¹ Finally, some argue that by attributing redemptive power to God's suffering, Moltmann's theology of the cross both sanctions suffering and contributes to oppression rather than to liberation.¹⁰² While there are valid points in each of these charges, many critiques of his work have misrepresented Moltmann's theology by not adequately addressing the major themes of his work. The center of Moltmann's theology of the cross is a rethinking of the meaning of the cross in light of suffering, a rethinking that involves a new understanding of the relationship between God and suffering, a redefinition of God's power, and a recognition that God's power and life operates within history rather than operating upon the world from outside history.¹⁰³

Because Moltmann claims that his book, *The Crucified God*, is an exploration of the meaning of the cross through the lens of theodicy, he is open to claims that his work does not provide an adequate answer to the issue of theodicy. Moltmann clearly articulates, however, that his theology is not an answer and does not intend to provide an answer to the theodicy issue.¹⁰⁴ For Moltmann, choosing the lens of theodicy to explore the meaning of the cross is not one option among many equal options but rather the only

¹⁰⁰ Jaeger, 12.

¹⁰¹ Dennis W. Jowers, "The Theology of the Cross as Theology of the Trinity: a Critique of Jürgen Moltmann's Staurocentric Trinitarianism," *Tyndale Bulletin* 52, no. 2 (2001): 252.

¹⁰² Millicent C. Feske, "Christ and Suffering in Moltmann's Thought," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 93.

¹⁰³ José Miguez Bonino, "Reading Jürgen Moltmann from Latin America," *Asbury Theological Journal* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 109.

¹⁰⁴ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 52.

valid option because the mystery of suffering is an inescapable reality of life in the world and it is from this reality that questions about God both arise and are addressed to God.¹⁰⁵

Despite the fact, however, that Moltmann is not claiming to answer the issue of theodicy there are aspects of human suffering that are largely ignored in his work. When Moltmann's writes, "suffering reaches as far as love itself,"¹⁰⁶ or "this may be called the dialectic of human life: we live because and in so far as we love – and we suffer and die because and in so far as we love. In this way we experience life and death in love,"¹⁰⁷ he implies a connection between suffering, love, and hope. There are forms of suffering that reinforce love, that intensify hope, suffering that leads to growth in love and in relationship to God. These forms of suffering are not chosen, but nevertheless, if embraced in faith provide a means of communion with God. Moltmann's statements about the connection between suffering, love, and hope are easily applied to these forms of suffering.

These statements, however, are not appropriate in addressing all forms of suffering. There is suffering in the world that is in no way redemptive. Suffering that cannot be spoken of in the context of love. Suffering, that kills both the body and soul of a person sometimes even before that person has the opportunity to be formed. There is suffering that separates a person from God before that person has any concept of hope that would allow him or her to even imagine that he or she has been abandoned by God. Moltmann's work does not address, nor can it address, the apparent meaninglessness of certain kinds of suffering in the world.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 51.

¹⁰⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 253.

In “Jürgen Moltmann and the Problem of Evil,” John David Jaeger raises the question of whether Moltmann’s work adequately addresses either the magnitude of suffering in the world or the root causes of that suffering.¹⁰⁸ Reflecting a similar theme, Bonino notes that Moltmann’s analysis of suffering that concentrates on psychological, cultural, and even ecological pain, reflects his European context and ignores the aspects of pain known in Latin America that are rooted in unjust economic and political structures.¹⁰⁹

Two methodological errors that are prevalent in Moltmann’s theology of the cross contribute to the shortcomings in Moltmann’s analysis of suffering. The first is that Moltmann is very selective in his appropriation of New Testament texts and therefore one-sided in his exploration of the meaning of the cross. The second is that Moltmann fails to make a distinction between sin and pain. Moltmann’s theology of the cross therefore focuses on the rejected and the forsaken but fails to appropriately address evil and the causes of rejection and forsakenness.

Wayne R. Herman in “Moltmann’s Christology,” points to Moltmann’s selective use of biblical texts. Moltmann, he claims, seems to begin with presuppositions and then finds support for his argument in a selected text.¹¹⁰ One example Hermann provides in order to support his argument is Moltmann’s selection of texts concerning Jesus’ teaching. Moltmann consistently chooses to focus on Jesus’ teaching of the graciousness of God as the exclusive and primary point of his teaching. He even argues that the rift that came about between John the Baptist and Jesus centered on this key point of difference. Herman points out that in Moltmann’s selection of texts to support his

¹⁰⁸ Jaeger, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Bonino, 110.

¹¹⁰ Wayne R. Herman, “Moltmann’s Christology,” *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 17, no. 1 (1989): 24-26.

argument he completely eliminates the element of judgment that is also part of Jesus' teaching.¹¹¹

Herman's second example is Moltmann's use of Jesus' cry of abandonment from the cross. Herman points out that Moltmann chooses this cry as the summary of the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross and eliminates the texts of Luke and John, sources for other interpretations of the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross.¹¹² In doing this, Herman claims that Moltmann "rejects other aspects of the passion narrative which do not fit with his interpretation and reads his interpretation into texts where it is not found."¹¹³ Hermann points out that in *Trinity and the Kingdom*, when discussing Jesus' appeal to his disciples to stay awake with him in Gethsemane, Moltmann writes, "for the first time he (Jesus) does not want to be alone with his God. He is evidently afraid of him. That is why he seeks the protection of his friends."¹¹⁴ Hermann writes,

Does not the fact that all three evangelists record Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane as being addressed to "my Father" tell against such an interpretation? Moltmann's interpretation of Jesus' experience in Gethsemane elucidates his own presuppositions about Jesus more than it elucidates Jesus' sense of abandonment by God.¹¹⁵

This example shows that Moltmann is so focused on the abandonment of Jesus by the Father that he completely ignores the abandonment of the disciples that is clearly described in all four gospels. In Moltmann's efforts to widen the understanding of the cross to include the problem of innocent suffering, he drops the dominant theological understanding of the cross as the place of God's judgment and salvation from sin. He makes a valuable contribution in widening the interpretation of the cross but by

¹¹¹ Ibid., 28.

¹¹² Ibid., 27.

¹¹³ Ibid., 27.

¹¹⁴ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 76, quoted in Hermann, 27.

¹¹⁵ Hermann, 27-28.

neglecting the interpretation of the cross as judgment of and salvation from sin, an interpretation that has dominated Christian theology; he ignores the problem of evil and the causes of pain and suffering. As a result, Moltmann's theology of the cross neglects the role of human responsibility in the drama between God and human beings.

Douglas B. Farrow argues in an article entitled "In the End is the Beginning: a Review of Jürgen Moltmann's Systematic Contributions" that one problematic feature of Moltmann's theology is that Moltmann links suffering with creation and therefore when he discusses the cross as an event that involves overcoming suffering he does not distinguish suffering arising from pain that is the result of sin.¹¹⁶ Farrow points out that while Moltmann objects to an ontological opposition between God and creation, his description of creation as a kenotic act of God in fact maintains that ontological opposition. Moltmann's panentheistic theology of the cross merely transfers that opposition to a sphere within God.¹¹⁷ In Moltmann's understanding of creation, God makes room in Godself for creation. Creation is other and otherness involves contradiction. Redemption, therefore must overcome all otherness and contradiction. Moltmann's theology is clear that redemption involves God's participation in overcoming otherness and contradiction and therefore God's participation in pain, but otherness as the result of creation is not distinguished from the rift between human beings and God created by sin. Farrow writes,

Is it still necessary to ask why this is objectionable? Where the divine love, secretly or openly, intentionally or unintentionally, is aimed at redeeming us from our otherness, gnosticism threatens....we should ask Moltmann whether it is right or wrong to accept the premise that the world *qua* world requires redemption, that creation requires the cross, love the

¹¹⁶ Douglas B. Farrow, "In the End is the Beginning: A Review of Jürgen Moltmann's Systematic Contributions," *Modern Theology* 14 (July 1998): 436-438.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 437.

death of the lover. Is it not the case that there is a tendency here – a very common tendency, to be sure, visible from the early fathers through to Barth – to run together the needs of the creature and the needs of the sinner in crypto-gnostic way?¹¹⁸

Moltmann's selective use of the New Testament and his blending of the "needs of the creature and the needs of the sinner" results in a neglect of the causes of rejection and forsakenness in his theology of the cross. These problems in Moltmann's theology lead Farrow to claim, "Theology cannot be done successfully from the standpoint of the victim, or from the victim's friends either, as the book of Job makes clear."¹¹⁹ Farrow claims that theodicy is a flawed method for theological inquiry. Perhaps the flaws in Moltmann's attempt could be corrected, however, by an appeal to a wider selection of texts not only within the New Testament but by also including Old Testament texts as well. Theodicy as a means of theological inquiry has been an important part of Israel's struggle to be in relationship to God from its earliest times. Theodicy has roots that go back to Abraham's question of God, "Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty?"¹²⁰ Moltmann's attempt to explore the meaning of the cross through the lens of theodicy would be strengthened by widening his selection of texts beyond Jesus' cry of abandonment on the cross.

Moltmann's selective use of biblical texts and his blending of pain with sin lead to problematic issues in his notion of God as well. In an article, "The Theology of the Cross as Theology of the Trinity," Dennis W. Jowers argues that Moltmann ignores important biblical themes such as: "the biblical testimony to man's insignificance in the eyes of God (e.g. Is. 40:15, 17: Dn. 4:35), the sovereignty, omnipotence, and immutability of

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 438.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 442.

¹²⁰ Genesis 18:23.

God, and above all, the absolute and uncompromisable unity of God.”¹²¹ Jowers claims that Moltmann’s disregard for these themes is the result of approaching the Bible from the perspective of a single principle, the “mutuality between hope and suffering, which Moltmann sees epitomized in the dialectic between resurrection and cross.”¹²² Jowers argues that Moltmann’s recognition of the mutual interdependence of hope and suffering is an important psychological insight but not a theological insight and does not lead to an adequate understanding of God. Jowers uses the example of a blind man. God’s participation in the blind man’s pain may give psychological comfort but will not restore his sight.¹²³ According to Jowers, not only does Moltmann’s notion of God lack an adequate concept of God’s power but it also ignores the doctrine of impassibility. Claiming that if God is changeable then God is unreliable, Jowers argues that Moltmann has misunderstood the purpose of the doctrine of impassibility which is to maintain that God is pure act.¹²⁴

This critique by Jowers, however, misses some key themes in Moltmann’s notion of God. First, Moltmann clearly states that God’s participation in suffering is not passive but active.¹²⁵ Second, Moltmann would claim that God’s involvement and participation in suffering point to what is unchangeable about God, God’s love. Moltmann is arguing for a new relationship between God’s power and love. God’s power is operative in God’s love. God’s transcendence is not distance from history but a transcendence that operates within history through transforming history.¹²⁶ Furthermore, Jowers ignores the role of

¹²¹ Jowers, 266.

¹²² Ibid., 265.

¹²³ Ibid., 252.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 255.

¹²⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 51.

¹²⁶ Moltmann’s attention to the active participation of God in suffering springing from God’s love and his emphasis on God’s power transforming history from within are also important components of the notion of

eschatology in Moltmann's understanding of God's power. An eschatological view of history does not simply point to a future hope, rather that hope is active in transforming the present. Furthermore, the cross is not simply a step to redemption but "a mode of being of God." God's being revealed in the event of the cross, however, is not a mode of being that operates upon the world from outside history, but one that is operating from within history and which is not visible except in faith.¹²⁷

In an article, "Reading Jürgen Moltmann from Latin America," Jose Miguez Bonino claims that one strength of Moltmann's eschatological understanding of history is its strong call for human praxis. Moltmann's notion of God that transposes God's transcendence from outside to within the realm of history breaks through the apathy of human life calling for liberating praxis. Yet, Moltmann's insistence that knowledge of God comes from the cross prevents political movements from claiming "divine legitimization."¹²⁸ Moltmann's call for human praxis might be further strengthened through a deeper appeal to the prophets of the Old Testament who, according to Heschel, open history to God's action in the world through their "co-feeling" with God.¹²⁹

Despite some weaknesses, Moltmann's theology of the cross makes some important contributions to theology. His major contribution to theology is his insight into the passion of God.¹³⁰ Moltmann makes a significant contribution to an interpretation of the cross by moving beyond a soteriological framework and focusing on the way in which God is affected by the event of the cross. Moltmann's insistence that the cross

God protected through "the gradual development of the doctrine of the incarnation in the patristic period." Gavriilyuk, 1-20,172-179.

¹²⁷ Bonino, 109.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 107-108.

¹²⁹ Heschel, vol. 2, 40.

¹³⁰ McWilliams, 37.

interprets the resurrection, that it is not just any man, but the Crucified One who is resurrected, that the history of human suffering is taken up into the history of God, provides a theological vision that takes present evil and suffering seriously and yet encourages hope for eschatological redemption. Moltmann's vision calls Christians to oppose the apathy of contemporary life and to participate in the passion of Christ and the passion of God by standing in solidarity with those who are suffering while at the same time maintaining a protest against all form of suffering.¹³¹

Background and Influences on Jon Sobrino's Theology

Jon Sobrino was born into a Basque family in Barcelona Spain in 1938. He joined the Jesuit order when he was eighteen years old and shortly after that, in 1958, traveled to El Salvador. At the age of twenty-seven Sobrino studied theology in Frankfurt, Germany and is well grounded in 20th century European theology often referring in his works to the theologies of Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Wolfhart Panneberg, and Jurgen Moltmann.¹³² Despite a thorough grounding in European Systematic theology, however, the two biggest influences on Sobrino's theology are his close association with Archbishop Oscar Romero¹³³ and his lived experience of ministry to the poor and oppressed people of El Salvador. Sobrino is described as a liberation theologian but it would be a mistake to gather from this label that he first studied and assessed liberation theology and then began to articulate it. Rather, reflection upon traditional theology in light of his experiences in El Salvador led him to insights that are

¹³¹ Ibid., 39.

¹³² Douglas McCready, "Old Wine in New Skins? Jon Sobrino's Liberation Christology," *Christian Scholars Review* XVI, no. 1 (1986): 300.

¹³³ Sobrino was Romero's theological advisor. He has described Romero as a close personal friend and mentor. John L. Allen Jr., "Vatican Censures Sobrino, Who Calls Procedures 'Not Honest,'" *National Catholic Reporter Conversation Café* (<http://ncrcafe.org>), 14 March 2007, 1; Jon Sobrino, Interview with BBC World Service, Broadcast 29 November, 1999.

in close association with the method and content of liberation theology. In an interview broadcast by the BBC, Sobrino states,

In a refugee camp in El Salvador, several times I went to say Mass. In the midst of so much tragedy, poverty and so on, all of a sudden I saw a peasant woman. And I said to myself spontaneously, when I looked at her face: "I have seen God". The depth of reality became present in the face of that woman: her dignity, her commitment to be there, her hope that maybe life would be better for her and for others: an experience of God. I think this is the origin of liberation theology.¹³⁴

In this same interview, Sobrino asserts that upon returning to El Salvador after his theological studies in Frankfurt, Germany he began to hear a new way of discussing theology, "a different language" and that this new and different language resonated with his experiences of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of very poor, very oppressed people.¹³⁵

Liberation theology is identified by particular methodological emphases. In an article, "Theological Method: the Southern Exposure," Alfred T. Hennelly, S.J. drawing from the work of Leonardo Boff, points to a cluster of five main methodological interests that characterize theologies of Latin American. These interests are: an emphasis on anthropology over ecclesiology, a utopian perspective over a factual one, a critical approach to theology over a dogmatic approach, an emphasis on the social over the personal, and orthopraxis over orthodoxy.¹³⁶ These five emphases are characteristic of Sobrino's approach to Christology.

In Sobrino's early work on Christology, *Christology at the Crossroads*, he clearly articulates his methodological approach. He points to the New Testament as a model for

¹³⁴ Sobrino, *Interview with BBC*.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Hennelly refers the reader to Leonardo Boff, *Jesucristo el Leberado: Ensayo de Cristologia Critica para Nuestro Tiempo* (Buenos Aires: Latinamerica Libros, 1975) 59-61, in Alfred T. Hennelly, S.J. "Theological Method: The Southern Exposure," *Theological Studies* 38 (1977): 712.

approaching Christology. He claims that while the various writers of the gospels had faith resulting from the resurrection of Jesus, each writer recognized two important poles for discerning the meaning of that faith. The first was the actual events and concrete existence of the historical Jesus. The second was the particular historical and concrete situation of the community of faith that they were addressing. Sobrino's approach to Christology follows this New Testament model clearly emphasizing the events and concrete existence of the historical Jesus and approaching the meaning of those events and Jesus' existence from the perspective of the poor in Latin America.¹³⁷

Implicit in Sobrino's methodological approach is the recognition that theology is never value neutral, the interest and cultural situation of the theologian shapes the resulting theological analysis and has both practical and ethical implications.¹³⁸ The experiences leading to theological inquiry, the purpose of theology, and epistemological issues are all affected by the context in which theology is done. Sobrino is intent on delineating the differences between a European approach to theology and the approach to theology of Latin America because of the very different historical situations.

According to Sobrino, the quest for meaning drives theology in Europe and therefore European theology explores questions of meaning and how to understand rationally the existence of God in a world of suffering. European theology therefore relies on philosophy as a tool for the rational understanding of faith. In Latin America, however, the context for theology is the experience of poverty, oppression, and wide spread suffering. The questions asked are not about the meaning of life but how to find, protect and nurture life in the midst of a situation that leads to death. The problem in

¹³⁷ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1978), 9-14.

¹³⁸ Hennelly, 719.

Latin America is not the atheist but the non-person. Liberation theology does not seek so much to provide a rational basis for belief but to transform historical situation filled with human suffering. Liberation theologians therefore appeal to the social sciences rather than philosophy as a tool for expressing a transforming faith.¹³⁹

A second difference in the theological approaches of European and Latin American theologies lies in the relationship between theory and praxis. In Europe theology is intent on promulgating a set of truths that can be understood and believed and then acted upon. Ethical action follows correct belief. Liberation theology, however, holds ethical action, liberating action on behalf of the oppressed as primary and believes that it is through this action that theological truth will be understood and then expressed.¹⁴⁰

In liberation theology, theological truth comes through transforming action on behalf of the suffering and oppressed. Therefore, the root of knowledge of God is not wonder leading to analogy rather the root of knowledge of God is suffering and knowledge of God is dialectical. Knowledge of God springs from contradiction not similarity. This epistemological break is rooted in Scripture's testimony to a crucified God.¹⁴¹ The theology of the cross is foundational even in Sobrino's earliest theology. It becomes very personal for him, however, when six of his fellow priests, a cook and her daughter were murdered in his community at Central American University in 1989. Sobrino was attending a conference in Bangkok when the murders occurred. In discussing the importance of speaking of the God of the crucified Jesus in light of the experience of the people who continue to be crucified today, Sobrino writes,

¹³⁹ Ibid., 719-720.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 720-721.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 721.

I think there is no substitute for calling this God “the crucified God.” Allow me to say this with a very personal experience. On 16 November 1989, when the Jesuits of the Central American University were murdered outside their house, the body of Juan Ramon Moreno was dragged inside the residence into one of the rooms, mine. In the movement one book from the bookcase in the room fell on to the floor and became soaked in Juan Ramon’s book. That book was *The Crucified God*. It is a symbol, of course, but it expresses the themes of this chapter, God’s real participation in the passion of the world.¹⁴²

Sobrino’s Theology of the Cross

Sobrino opens his book, *Jesus the Liberator*, with a discussion of the choice of title for his book. In that discussion, he points out that particularly in Latin America it is only through faith that one applies the title “liberator” to Jesus. Historical reality points instead to Christ crucified. This dialectical tension between faith and reality expresses the heart of Sobrino’s theology of the cross.¹⁴³ This theology does not bypass reality but faces that reality with the hope that springs from the love of God revealed in the cross of the crucified Christ.

For Sobrino, Christology is the vital, essential center for understanding the love of God revealed in the cross of the crucified Christ. While Sobrino’s approach to Christology is through the historical Jesus (Christology from below) he recognizes that in Jesus, God is revealed. When speaking of the scandal of the cross, Sobrino writes, “And it is a scandal in the highest degree because the one who died on the cross was Jesus, the person who is recognized in faith as the Son of God and as God.”¹⁴⁴ He points out that the New Testament makes an unprecedented claim that through the life and cross of Jesus, God’s saving love for human beings is expressed and becomes real. Furthermore,

¹⁴² Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 235.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

the change in the relationship between human beings and God that is rooted in the cross of the crucified Christ is a change that is initiated by God. Sobrino writes, “Jesus did not make God change; Jesus is the historical sacrament in which God expresses his irrevocable saving change toward us.”¹⁴⁵

The centrality of Christ for Sobrino is clearly seen in his discussion of the term “Christ” as a “limit-theme” around which everything vital about human existence revolves: “transcendence, liberation, love, truth, justice, the sinfulness of the world, and the meaning of history.”¹⁴⁶ Sobrino points out that these concepts, transcendence, liberation, love, etc. are not known intuitively and therefore knowledge and understanding of these concepts cannot be isolated from the path one takes in seeking to understand them.¹⁴⁷ It is for this reason that Sobrino expresses hesitancy about the impact that the conciliar dogmatic definitions of Christ, particularly that of Chalcedon, have had on Christology. Sobrino recognizes that the Christological definition of Chalcedon should be highly valued because it “expresses the ultimate mystery of Christ and the ultimate structure of reality.”¹⁴⁸ He writes,

If Christ is like this, then reality too can be understood as the presence of transcendence in history, each with the proper identity and autonomy, without mixture or separation, by which I mean without the reductionisms that impoverish both, to which human beings are so prone.¹⁴⁹

He objects to the use of this dogmatic definition of Christ as a starting point for Christology however for several important reasons. First, Christological dogmas are not the beginning of Christology but are the result of prior knowledge of Jesus Christ given

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 230.

¹⁴⁶ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 346.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 346.

¹⁴⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 40.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 7.

in scripture. Second, the formula of Chalcedon is a limited expression because it is based in only one philosophical understanding of the world, a Greek understanding. This limitation is seen in the fact that Jesus is identified with the logos rather than identified by his relationship to the Father which is the primary way he is identified in scripture. Finally, Chalcedon states that Jesus is of two natures, divine and human, but Sobrino argues that knowledge of divinity and humanity only comes through Christ. The dogma presupposes that we can understand divinity and humanity without looking at Jesus. Sobrino argues that the use of this dogma as a starting point for Christology becomes dangerous when the concepts of divinity and humanity are universalized and separated from the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth. For Sobrino, the path to knowledge of these concepts must follow the path of the historical Jesus. It is in following the path of Jesus that one comes to knowledge about the meaning of the love of God revealed on the cross of the crucified Christ.¹⁵⁰

For that reason, Sobrino describes his path to understanding the meaning of the cross in *Jesus the Liberator* as a “historical-theological reading of the Christ who is Jesus of Nazareth.”¹⁵¹ It is the totality of Jesus the Christ that provides the content and meaning of Christology. In setting out the life of Jesus in three parts, his service to the kingdom, his relationship to God-the Father, and his death on the cross, Sobrino emphasizes Jesus’ relational identity.¹⁵²

Sobrino asserts that in Greek philosophy the basic understanding of a person is that a person is a rational animal. This understanding has survived and influenced modern philosophical understandings of subjectivity so that a person is defined by self-

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 40-41.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁵² Ibid., 6.

possession and a person's identity can be ascertained through knowledge of what the person thinks of him or herself. Sobrino points to a different understanding of human personhood rooted in trinitarian thinking and traceable to Augustine and Richard of St. Victor. According to this view, a person is defined relationally and his or her identity can be ascertained by examining who the person surrenders to and how that person lives that surrender.¹⁵³ Sobrino argues that a biblical view of the human person focuses not on self-possession but on the faith relationship of the person to God and his/her actions in the world resulting from that faith relationship.¹⁵⁴ In a biblical understanding of the human person, a person is determined not by self-possession but by self-surrender. According to Sobrino, to know who Jesus is depends on exploring his relational identity, an identity that involves Jesus' vertical relationship to God the Father and his horizontal relationship to the kingdom as he lives out his faith relationship to God the Father in obedience to his mission.¹⁵⁵

Sobrino argues that the essence of Jesus' person is constituted by his relationship to the Father. That relationship is characterized by Jesus' self-surrender to the Father in faith.¹⁵⁶ Sobrino identifies faith not as possession of God and his kingdom but as the constant seeking after God and his kingdom in the midst of concrete historical situations.¹⁵⁷ This definition of faith allows Sobrino to posit a dynamic, evolutionary view of Jesus' Sonship. He writes, "Thus we can claim that Jesus *becomes* the Son of God rather than that he simply *is* the Son of God."¹⁵⁸ Sobrino argues that temptation and

¹⁵³ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 72-73.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁵⁶ McCready, 303.

¹⁵⁷ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 95.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

ignorance are an essential part of a faith journey and highlights the temptation and ignorance that is described in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life. He asserts that what is unique about Jesus is his total trust and utter abandonment to the Father in the midst of temptation, ignorance, and concrete historical situations in which sin seemed to have more power than God. Sobrino points out that the New Testament describes Jesus as the Son and he therefore argues that Jesus does not reveal the Father, but reveals the Son and the way of being the Son.¹⁵⁹ Because Jesus' relationship to his Father involves his obedience to his mission, understanding the relational identity of Jesus cannot be isolated from an exploration of his relationship to the kingdom of God.

According to Sobrino, the historical mission of Jesus is to work in service of the kingdom of God. Sobrino points out several important considerations in regard to Jesus' relationship to the kingdom. First, Jesus did not preach about himself but about the kingdom. Second, just as Jesus' relationship to the Father is unique, his relation to the kingdom is as well. Jesus is aware of the fact that in and through his own person the kingdom of God is drawing near and is bold enough to assert that ultimate salvation is determined by the stance a person adopts toward Jesus' own person. Finally, that stance involves obedience and discipleship to Jesus.¹⁶⁰

Sobrino emphasizes the eschatological nature of the kingdom and points to crisis as a central component of eschatology. Crisis as a central component of the eschatological nature of the kingdom involves a tension between the temporal and the transcendent dimensions of the kingdom. Jesus works, and calls his disciples to work toward fashioning the kingdom but at the same time recognizes that the kingdom comes

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 95-105.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 41-61; McCready, 303.

about through grace, through God's drawing near and is ultimately a mystery. Sobrino claims that because the kingdom is eschatological and involves a crisis, discipleship involves conversion. The disciples of Jesus are called to make a decision for Jesus, a decision that is not in continuity with life as they know it. They leave behind life as they know it and live in a new way. That way involves working toward liberation.¹⁶¹

Sobrino prefers the word liberation to salvation in describing the work of Jesus and the disciples that follow him. Implicit in his use of the word liberation is an emphasis on transformation of the temporal world as an essential aspect of discipleship and a movement beyond an otherworldly individualistic piety that has at times been associated with the use of the word salvation. Liberation, he argues is a word that is correlated to oppression.¹⁶² Sobrino's use of the word liberation grows out of his understanding of sin.

Sobrino argues that Jesus understood sin as having both a personal and a social dimension. Sin is rooted in the heart of the human person and results in securing oneself over against God. This is the personal dimension of sin. This personal dimension of sin, the sin of not yielding to God, results in misuse of power toward neighbor so sin has a collective and social nature that manifests itself in unjust structures.¹⁶³ Sobrino describes sin as,

the willingness to offer anything and everything to God (ritual services, tithes, ascetic practices, and so forth) except one's own security. The God who is coming soon is rejected precisely because he is coming as a future that we cannot control, because God therefore calls into question the only thing that real sinners are not disposed to give up—their own security; and the real sinner is typified by the Pharisee and the person with power.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 61-67.

¹⁶² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 6.

¹⁶³ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 50-61.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

For Sobrino, sin involves the misuse of power. This misuse of power results in two identifiable groups of people, the oppressors and the oppressed. Sin affects each of these groups differently and consequently conversion calls each group to different actions of faith. The oppressed are called to trust in God despite the lack of evidence of God's active presence in the world. The oppressors are called to use their power to eradicate the sinful structures that lead to oppression and death.¹⁶⁵ Sin then is not simply something that must be pardoned but a power that must be eradicated.¹⁶⁶ Sobrino's use of the word liberation, therefore, points to recognition of the social and structural dimensions of sin and the need for transforming action resulting from converted lives lived out in love of God and love of neighbor.

Sobrino emphasizes that Jesus' mission is lived out in the midst of concrete, historical reality, a reality that is structured by sin. Jesus' work toward liberation therefore is met with opposition and conflict. He refers to this opposition as the anti-kingdom. Sobrino notes that the two poles of the relational identity of Jesus, his relationship to God the Father and his relationship to his mission, are continually changing and unfolding as Jesus lives out his life of faith. He does not possess God but remains in relationship to God as he encounters the power of sin in the world. Relying mainly on the Gospel of Mark,¹⁶⁷ Sobrino posits two movements in the life of Jesus separated by what he refers to as the Galilean crisis.¹⁶⁸ The first movement in Jesus' life (Mk 1-7) is characterized by Jesus' experience of the active, close, imminent presence of

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 55-61.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 51.

¹⁶⁷ Sobrino does note that each gospel, in its own way, recognizes a divide in Jesus' activity. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 93.

¹⁶⁸ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 93.

God resulting in Jesus' power to heal, call followers, and announce the arrival of the kingdom through his person. According to Sobrino, Jesus does not introduce a new concept of God in this part of his ministry. Jesus' understanding of God and of his mission is in continuity with the orthodoxy of his day.¹⁶⁹ The second movement begins in Jesus' separation from the Pharisees (Mk 8:13), the misunderstanding of the disciples as a group and Peter particularly (Mk 8:21, 33), and Jesus' realization that suffering and death are now part of his mission (Mk 8:31; 9:30; 10:32). This second movement culminates in Jesus' death on the cross. In this second movement, Jesus realizes that he is no longer called to eradicate sin but to bear it. He is no longer called to use his power to bring about the kingdom, but to sacrifice all that he is for the sake of the kingdom. His relationship with God in this second movement is characterized by darkness, absence, and the sense of abandonment. Suffering rather than power becomes the means of access to God. Jesus' relationship with the Father remains one of open, complete trust but that trust becomes trust against trust, trust without evidence, trust in darkness, trust that does not have rational content.¹⁷⁰

According to Sobrino, this second movement in Jesus' history reveals that the power that mediates God is the power of suffering love. The fullest expression of this love is revealed on the cross of Jesus Christ.¹⁷¹ Understanding the suffering love of God revealed on the cross, however, cannot be separated from the history of Jesus' relationship to the Father and to the kingdom. Sobrino writes, "It is a conviction derived from accumulated historical experience that love has to go through suffering."¹⁷² The

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 92.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 94.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 94.

¹⁷² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 228.

suffering of Jesus begins with incarnation. God's love expressed through the incarnation of Jesus is a love that goes through suffering. According to Sobrino, incarnation introduces becoming and the future as modes of God's being.¹⁷³ Associating God with becoming, having a future, with suffering is revolutionary and new. Sobrino notes that the cross of Jesus when understood against the backdrop of the whole of his life leads to a revolution in our understanding of God, a revolution that affects Christianity on both a theoretical and practical level.¹⁷⁴

Sobrino begins his discussion of the theology of the cross by pointing out two obstacles in the way of grasping the meaning of the cross. The first danger lies in isolating the cross from the concrete history of Jesus. The second lies in isolating the cross from God.¹⁷⁵ If one maintains the connection between the cross, Jesus' history and what the cross reveals about God, a new concept of God will emerge. Sobrino points out, however that allowing revelation to lead toward a new concept of God is often resisted. He demonstrates this fact by pointing to the difficulty that has existed historically in maintaining the scandal of the cross. He notes that even in the New Testament itself, there is a movement away from the raw sense of abandonment explicit in Mark's gospel. Sobrino claims that the reason for the difficulty in maintaining the scandal of the cross is that it transforms our questions and ideas of God.¹⁷⁶

Sobrino finds it extraordinary that Mark's anti-triumphant gospel was written down and included in the canon. As the first gospel written, Sobrino finds it to be "the most adequate" of the four gospels. He writes, "Mark's account seems to me, objectively

¹⁷³ Ibid., 242.

¹⁷⁴ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 179.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 181.

¹⁷⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 236-238.

and systematically, the most adequate because it conveys better than others the really tragic aspect of Jesus' death, its radical discontinuity with his life."¹⁷⁷ This discontinuity is expressed in the fact that on the cross there is no sign of the nearness of the kingdom, no indication that Jesus is victorious in defeating the anti-kingdom, and most importantly there is a discontinuity between the concept of God Jesus proclaims in his life and ministry, a concept best identified by Jesus' reference to God as a kind and merciful father, and his sense of God's absence on the cross. While Sobrino admits it is impossible to know with certainty Jesus' relationship to the Father when he dies, nevertheless Jesus' death, as it is depicted in the Gospels, shows more desolation than consolation.¹⁷⁸

Sobrino points out the difficulty that arises in relating God to the cross of Jesus is that presuppositions about God are questioned. Sobrino states, "knowing God always presupposes, in one way or another, relating God to something positive."¹⁷⁹ Yet Sobrino also points out that "according to scripture, we know God through what God *does* and *says* in history."¹⁸⁰ If both these statements are true then the cross raises serious theological questions. Sobrino points to a series of questions raised by the cross. Why, on the cross, does sin appear to have greater power than God? What does the cross say about what God does about suffering? How do inactivity, silence and withdrawal reveal anything about God?¹⁸¹

Sobrino notes that theological attempts to explain the relationship of God to suffering usually take two different approaches. In the first approach, it is assumed that God does not and cannot suffer; in which case the problem of God's suffering is ignored.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 238.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 238-239.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 246.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 240.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 239-240.

In the second approach, God's suffering is taken seriously and raised to the level of a scandal.¹⁸² Sobrino argues that both approaches are too extreme. Sobrino praises the theology of Moltmann for articulating a relationship between God and suffering that does not look to God as a solution to suffering but rather sees suffering as a means for knowledge of God. Yet, he criticizes Moltmann and Luther as well for taking the scandal of Jesus' abandonment on the cross too far. Noting Luther's statement, "Nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse,"¹⁸³ and that Moltmann indicates a "split within God and a breach between the Father and the Son,"¹⁸⁴ Sobrino argues that this is conceptual extremism. Instead, Sobrino describes God's suffering on the cross is a participation in the suffering of Jesus. God suffers by being Jesus' "non-active and silent witness."¹⁸⁵

If God's silence and inactivity are as Sobrino states, "the negative way that the cross affects God himself,"¹⁸⁶ then one has to struggle with what that silence and inactivity reveal about God. Sobrino points to the New Testament's explanation that on the cross it is God's love that is revealed.¹⁸⁷ This means that God's inactivity and silence are God's expression of love for human beings. God's love is seen in God's surrender of what was most precious to God, his son. This surrender of the son indicates that there is no limit to God's love for human beings.¹⁸⁸

Sobrino insists that the cross is the consequence of God's original choice for incarnation. In the incarnation, God chooses to draw near to human beings in love and on the cross God does not escape that choice even though remaining in loving solidarity

¹⁸² Sobrino is clearly referring to the work of Moltmann in this second approach. *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁸⁷ Sobrino refers to the new testament texts of Rom 8:32 and John 3:17. *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

causes God to suffer. Sobrino claims that the title “Crucified God” can be equated with the title “God of Solidarity.” He argues that solidarity is powerful. God’s power lies in God’s suffering love on behalf of the oppressed and lowly in the world. Sobrino writes,

What does Jesus’ cross really say? It says that God has irrevocably drawn near to this world, that he is a God “with us” and a God “for us.” And to say this with the maximum clarity he lets himself be a God “at our mercy.”¹⁸⁹

While Sobrino articulates a theology of the cross that emphasizes God’s power revealed in apparent weakness and knowledge of God forged in suffering, he guards against the conceptual extremism he accuses Moltmann and Luther of by pointing to other important revelatory moments in Scripture. God is revealed in creation in Genesis, liberation in Exodus, justice in the prophets, and silence in Job. Sobrino argues that it is a mistake to make any of these moments absolute or to try to systematize them. Instead, the revelation inherent in each event should be appreciated as one aspect of the great mystery that is God.¹⁹⁰

Another important revelatory event Sobrino points to is the resurrection of Jesus. Sobrino emphasizes the connection between cross and resurrection and with that connection in mind, claims that the resurrection confirms two truths. It confirms that the way of Jesus is the true way and it confirms that the love of God revealed on the cross, love in solidarity, suffering love has real power. Sobrino writes, “Without the resurrection, love would not be authentic power; without the cross the power would not be love.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 232.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 247.

¹⁹¹ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 261.

The revelation of God on the cross of Jesus Christ affects Christianity not only on a theoretical level but on a practical level as well. Sobrino argues that the resurrection reveals that Jesus' way to God is the true way. Resurrection hope, he argues, is not a general hope, but an apocalyptic one, a hope for justice in an unredeemed world. Following Jesus then involves living life on behalf of the little ones.¹⁹² Sobrino points to the example of Oscar Romero. Sobrino states that if there is any doubt about the power of solidarity, one need only look at the gratitude and enthusiasm of the poor in El Salvador when Archbishop Romero was offered personal protection from the Salvadoran government but refused it stating: "The shepherd does not want protection when his flock is denied it."¹⁹³ According to Sobrino, those words were accepted by the people as a clear expression of Romero's love for them.¹⁹⁴ He refers to a statement made by Ignacio Ellacuria who said, "In Monsignor Romero, God passed through El Salvador."¹⁹⁵

Sobrino points to the example of Romero in order to illustrate the practical affects of a theology of the cross. Romero is not only an example of someone who followed Jesus by living a life of solidarity for the poor but Romero also provides an example of someone for whom the poor, suffering, and oppressed became the access for communion with God. Sobrino relates a story that when Archbishop Romero addressed a group of terrorized peasants who had survived a massacre he said, "You are the image of the pierced savior."¹⁹⁶ Sobrino closes his book, *Jesus the Liberator*, with a chapter entitled, "The Crucified People." His claim is that the people of El Salvador, and all the worlds

¹⁹² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 275.

¹⁹³ Jon Sobrino, I. Martín-Baró, R. Cardenal, *La voz de los sin voz*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books; London: CIIR, 1985), 460, quoted in *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁹⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 245.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹⁶ Sobrino, Martín-Baró, Cardenal, *La voz de los sin voz*, 208, quoted in *Ibid.*, 255.

suffering and oppressed are the body of Christ on earth, that the poor are “the privileged locale of access to God.”¹⁹⁷ Following the way of Jesus involves transforming action for the most oppressed in this world. It is through this action that one will come into communion with God.

Sobrino claims that human sorrow is aroused when contemplating the suffering of God on the cross. Sorrow is also the attitude that leads one to recognize God in all the crucified people of history, to walk compassionately along side of them and to work to alleviate the causes of their suffering.¹⁹⁸ Sorrow, rather than wonder, or as Sobrino claims, as “a highly qualified sort of wonder” is the means of access of God.¹⁹⁹ For this reason, Sobrino claims, “In reflecting on God and the cross, whether one knows it or not, one is saying which God one believes in, one is setting out one’s vision of history and human beings.”²⁰⁰ Recognizing God on the cross, understanding the poor and oppressed as the “privileged locale of access to God” unmask idols and therefore leads to conflict. Discussing the causes of Jesus’ death, Sobrino writes, “To say Jesus died because of God’s design is, in my opinion, to say much too little. We do much better to say that Jesus died because he chose to bear faithful witness to God right to the end in a situation where people really wanted a very different type of God.”²⁰¹ Sobrino insists that the situation is not different for Jesus’ disciples in today’s world. Walking compassionately and in solidarity for the world’s poor and oppressed will lead to conflict because people are still looking for a very different type of God. Hope in the world continues to lie in

¹⁹⁷ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 207.

¹⁹⁸ Rady Roldán-Figueroa, “The Christologies of Luther and Sobrino and Pastoral Care,” *Apuntes* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 27.

¹⁹⁹ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 199.

²⁰⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 235.

²⁰¹ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 208.

human beings living lives centered on love of a particular God, the crucified God, and love of neighbor, lives intent on fashioning the kingdom while at the same time awaiting its arrival in grace.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Sobrino's Theology of the Cross

Critiques of Moltmann's theology of the cross centered on the relationship between God and suffering that Moltmann articulates.²⁰² Despite the fact that Sobrino's concept of the relationship between God and suffering is very similar to Moltmann's, there is scanty reference to the relationship between God and suffering in critiques of Sobrino's theology. Instead, critiques of Sobrino shift to concerns about his Christology. Sobrino is criticized for his selectivity of the Gospel texts in constructing the life of the "historical Jesus," for his "weak" view of sin, and for having an inadequate articulation of the uniqueness and divinity of Christ.²⁰³ In part, the shift to Christology in critiques of Sobrino's theology is the logical outcome of Sobrino's stated methodology, which is to follow the way of Jesus as the way to knowledge of God. Getting lost however, in critiquing Sobrino's Christology is to miss the forest for the trees. While Sobrino claims to come to knowledge of God through following the way of Jesus of Nazareth, his understanding of the relationship between God and suffering clearly influences his analysis of that path. In other words, Sobrino's concept of God and Sobrino's experience of God in the midst of a pastoral ministry that takes place in the context of poverty and oppression exerts a tremendous influence on his Christology.

²⁰² This is discussed on pages 121-122 of this chapter.

²⁰³ Georges Schrijver, "Christology from the Underside of History: the Case of Jon Sobrino," in *Myriad Christ*, (Leuven: University Press & Sterling, VA., 2000), 508; McCready, 311-312; William Cardinal Levada, *Notification on the Works of Farther Jon Sobrino, SJ*, (Rome: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2006), 1-11.

In his article, “Christology from the Underside of History: The Case of Jon Sobrino,” Georges De Schrijver notes two scholars who criticize Sobrino for his selectivity of biblical texts in constructing his understanding of the history of Jesus. Schrijver notes that in the article, “Jesus from the Other Side of History: Christology in Latin America,” Michael Cook claims that Sobrino’s approach is not historical but kerygmatic and lists three reasons that Cook uses to support that claim. Cook’s three reasons as reported by Schrijver are: Sobrino’s choice to follow mainly Mark’s gospel, his emphasis on the “Galilean crises” and his description of the praxis of Jesus, a description that is suspiciously similar to the praxis needs of Latin America.²⁰⁴ Schrijver also points to John P. Meier’s further criticism of Sobrino’s selectivity of biblical texts. Schrijver reports that Meier charges that while Sobrino claims to base his work on the “historical Jesus” his use of the biblical text is much more influenced by hermeneutics than by exegesis. Meier supports his argument by pointing to Sobrino’s references, noting that the leading authors Sobrino points to are Rahner, Pannenberg, and Bultmann, with very few references to German exegetes.²⁰⁵

It has already been noted in this paper that Sobrino claims to find Mark’s gospel the most “adequate” in reporting the death of Jesus and that Sobrino draws the life of Jesus mainly from the gospel of Mark concentrating on the Galilean Crises as a pivotal point in Jesus’ life.²⁰⁶ Despite Meier’s charge that Sobrino does not rely on Biblical exegetes, Sobrino does list the works of several biblical scholars he consulted in making this choice and he quotes as support the work of Leon-Dufour.²⁰⁷ Once Sobrino

²⁰⁴ Schrijver, 508.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 509.

²⁰⁶ This is discussed on pages 140 of this chapter. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroad*, 92-94.

²⁰⁷ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 236.

discusses the primacy of Mark's gospel, however he does not entertain any challenge or question from other gospel depictions of the life and death of Jesus. He makes his case for Mark's version as primary and from that point on draws his understanding of Jesus from this one gospel narrative. Sobrino's exclusive use of Mark's gospel for Jesus' life is largely not the result of exegesis but springs from his explicitly stated methodology. Sobrino begins his "historical-theological" view of Jesus' life by stating that the methodology of the four gospel writers was two-fold. Each writer began with faith in Jesus as the Christ derived from the resurrection of Jesus, and then interpreted Jesus' life in light of the needs, concerns and questions of the various communities they were addressing. Sobrino explicitly states that this is the methodology he intends to follow. Unfortunately, Sobrino defends his choice of Mark's gospel by appealing to exegesis. He could have made a better argument for the exclusive use of Mark's gospel by claiming that this gospel presented a view of the life and death of Jesus that most adequately addressed the needs, concerns, and questions of his explicitly stated context, the context of Latin America.

In an article, "Old Wine in New Skins? Jon Sobrino's Liberation Christology," Douglas McCready claims that the faults in Sobrino's Christology can be attributed to his "weak" view of sin. McCready charges that Sobrino emphasizes the external reality of oppression and does not address its internal dimensions. McCready writes,

Put plainly, Sobrino has a superficial, external understanding of sin. The problem is "out there, it's them, in society." Nowhere does he say, "I'm part of the problem because I'm a sinner in bondage to my own sinful nature (or even my own sinful practice)." But this is what the Bible says about human sin. Biblically, sin is an evil at the root of each individual human existence placing the person in opposition to—better, in rebellion against—God. Sin is also an external reality that oppresses, but the

biblical order is personal, than social, because sin against God issues forth in sin against others.²⁰⁸

In this critique, McCready reveals a “weak” read of Sobrino’s understanding of sin. A careful reading of Sobrino reveals that he views sin in exactly the way McCready claims is biblically correct. Sobrino states that sin begins in the individual person securing him or herself over/against God, holding onto his or her own power, not yielding to God and then using that power over/against neighbor.²⁰⁹ Once again, it is Sobrino’s explicitly stated context for doing Christology, from the point of the victims of oppression in Latin America, which dictates his emphasis on the external, structural dimensions of sin. Despite this emphasis in his work however, it is wrong to claim that he has a “weak” view of sin. In fact Sobrino specifically states that sin leads to death and that sin is not simply something that must be pardoned but a power that must be eradicated.²¹⁰

McCready continues his argument stating that because of Sobrino’s weak view of sin, he has a correspondingly weak Christology. McCready argues that Sobrino’s avoidance of ontological language and his emphasis on function verses essence are problematic. McCready claims that while Sobrino explicitly excludes Adoptionism from his Christology, he nevertheless makes statements that imply an Adoptionist understanding of Christ.²¹¹ While McCready’s statements concerning Sobrino’s view of sin do not adequately consider the depth of Sobrino’s analysis of sin, his statements concerning Sobrino’s Christology have some legitimacy.

²⁰⁸ McCready, 311.

²⁰⁹ Sobrino’s view of sin is discussed on pages 139-140 of this chapter. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 50-61.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

²¹¹ McCready, 311-312.

Objecting to the ontological language of the conciliar dogmatic definitions of Christ, Sobrino emphasizes Jesus' relational identity. Emphasizing the relational identity of Jesus is valuable. Sobrino's emphasis on Jesus' relational identity takes very seriously the humanity of Jesus and his struggle to live in the context of sin. It allows one to relate to Jesus, to understand the emphasis on the kingdom and its continued relevance, and it calls forth genuine discipleship. Nevertheless, the complete lack of ontological language in regard to Jesus in Sobrino's work does lead to confusion about the unique identity and the divinity of Jesus. When Sobrino writes, "Thus we can claim that Jesus *becomes* the Son of God rather than that he simply *is* the Son of God,"²¹² it is difficult to know exactly what he means by this and it is understandable that some may find traces of Adoptionism in his Christology.

McCready is not alone in this critique of Sobrino's Christology. On November 26, 2006, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith issued a *Notification on the Works of Father Jon Sobrino, SJ*. The notification makes the claim that in two of his books, *Jesus the Liberator* and *Christ the Liberator*, Sobrino makes "certain propositions which are not in conformity with the doctrine of the Church."²¹³ The notification lists six areas of Sobrino's work that contain errors: his methodology, Christ's divinity, the Incarnation, Jesus' relation to the Kingdom of God, Jesus' self-consciousness, and the salvific value of his death.²¹⁴ Five of the six areas listed as problematic have to do with Sobrino's Christology.

²¹² Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 105.

²¹³ Levada, 1; William P. Loewe, "The Sobrino File: How to Read the Vatican's Latest Notification," *Commonweal*, (18 May 2007): 11.

²¹⁴ Levada, 1.

Before moving into a discussion of the council's assessment of Sobrino's Christology, however, it is necessary to call attention to the methodology of the CDF in assessing Sobrino's work. Early in the notification the CDF states, "The Congregation does not intend to judge the subjective intentions of the Author."²¹⁵ This statement is interesting, because Sobrino is upfront about his intentions in the early pages of all of his books. In Sobrino's book, *Jesus the Liberator*, he writes, "The *purpose* of this Christology is to put forward the truth of Christ from the standpoint of liberation, and this means that it follow the lines I have set out some years ago."²¹⁶ In referring to "the lines I have set out some years ago," Sobrino refers to his book, *Christology at the Crossroads*, a book that is not included in the notification. In the preface to the English edition of the book, Sobrino states, "The Christology presented in this book is meant to be ecclesial, historical, and Trinitarian."²¹⁷ In that same preface, Sobrino makes note of his own limitations. He writes,

While these are the underlying intentions of this Christology, the author is also well aware of its deficiencies. First of all, it is addressed to a specific group of Christians, to those who have seriously committed themselves to the process of liberation. But while it is addressed to those Christians who have committed themselves to the cause of the masses, to the cause of the majority of Latin Americans, it does not offer an adequate analysis of the problems to be found in the Christology held by the majority of the population. Nor does it provide a clear and direct expression of what the majority think about Jesus.²¹⁸

The importance of noting the CDF's hesitancy in regard to judging Sobrino's intentions is that while they hesitate to judge his intentions, they summarize Sobrino's

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 6.

²¹⁷ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, xx.

²¹⁸ Ibid., xxvi.

carefully argued positions and make subjective comments about what Sobrino intended to say. For example, the notification states,

Father Sobrino considers the dogmatic development of the first centuries of the Church including the great Councils to be ambiguous and even negative. Although he does not deny the normative character of the dogmatic formulations, neither does he recognize in them any value except in the cultural milieu in which these formulations were developed.²¹⁹

There is no reference indicating where Sobrino made these negative evaluations of the dogmatic formulations. This summary of his “thinking” on this matter is subjective not factual and does not take into consideration Sobrino’s carefully laid out discussion about the role of the councils in Christology. As already noted in this paper, Sobrino does articulate what he considers to be limitations of the creeds as a *starting point* (my emphasis) for Christology. He expresses a concern that if the dogmatic creedal definitions of Christ are expressed as universal truths but are disconnected from the history of Jesus of Nazareth written in the gospels, then these dogmas can be used to secure an abstract faith that is disconnected from genuine discipleship. He also argues that the dogmatic definitions are not self-explanatory but are always in need of re-interpretation in light of contemporary issues, understandings and questions. The CDF’s summary of Sobrino’s position is a subjective characterization that contradicts Sobrino’s explicitly stated intent. In an article critical of the notification of Sobrino, William P. Loewe states, “In part, at least, the congregation seems to be applying Murphy’s Law: if something *can* be read in a sense contrary to the faith, it *will* be, whether or not the author intended that reading or the context warrants it.”²²⁰

²¹⁹ Levada, 2.

²²⁰ Loewe, 11.

Sobrino's explicitly stated intent in putting forth a book on Christology should not go unrecognized. His intent in writing a book on Christology from one specific, particular perspective is to offer new insights that both deepen understanding of traditional Christology and challenge some of its presuppositions that have allowed traditional Christologies to overlook the plight of the poor and oppressed. Similarly, he explicitly claims that the creeds are normative, that he does not seek to overturn them but to recognize their limitations and reinterpret them in light of contemporary questions and philosophical understandings. If Sobrino's stated intent is taken seriously, then the statements he makes about Jesus' relational identity rather than being dangerous can be understood as insights to be considered in deepening perspectives on the mystery of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, an evaluation of Sobrino's Christology should include consideration of statements Sobrino makes that do indicate the unique identity and the divinity of Jesus.²²¹

The one area that the CDF's notification of Sobrino identifies as problematic outside of Christology is Sobrino's methodology. The CDF objects to Sobrino's statements that the ecclesial "setting" for the Christology of Latin America is the "Church of the Poor." The CDF writes, "The ecclesial foundation of Christology may not be identified with 'the Church of the poor', but is found rather in the apostolic faith transmitted through the Church for all generations."²²² J. Matthew Ashley points out that the CDF chooses to use the phrase "foundation for Christology" which is quite different

²²¹ A few of these statements are reported on pages 134-135 of this chapter. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 230-232.

²²² Levada, 2.

than the choice of the phrase “setting for Christology” used by Sobrino.²²³ In several pages of argument, Sobrino states that while the texts about Christ are preserved and transmitted through the church, the transformation of lives through Christ is the primary setting for Christology. Sobrino argues that in Latin America, this “real setting” is among the poor. Sobrino argues that this is not an arbitrary choice but an essential choice because the poor “shed light” on Christology revealing new insights.²²⁴ Sobrino writes,

It is said of the Servant of Yahweh that God has set him up as a light of the nations. Pauline theology says that the *crucified* Christ is wisdom, and John’s theology says that we must fix our eyes on this man who was *crucified*. If these expressions are not understood as purely rhetorical, they are saying that there is something in this crucified man that gives our intellect a light it does not obtain in other places. This is exactly what I am trying to say about the world of the poor.²²⁵

Sobrino is arguing that the world of the poor “sheds light” on the way we read scripture and understand tradition. This light is the light of the theology of the cross. It raises questions from the lived experience of pain and challenges our presuppositions about God. Sobrino allows scripture and tradition read through the lens of the world of the poor to lead to new insights about the mystery of God and God’s relationship to suffering. Sobrino’s theology offers a penetrating critique of Western theological tradition. It is not surprising that Sobrino’s theology has led to conflict with the CDF. The conflict between the CDF and Sobrino is a conflict that illustrates the tension described by Walter Brueggemann as the tension between the majority and the minority voice, a tension that according to Brueggemann goes back to the formation of the Old Testament. Brueggemann claims that the Old Testament provides a “common theology”,

²²³ J. Matthew Ashley, “The Sobrino File: How to Read the Vatican’s Latest Notification,” *Commowael* (18 May 2007): 15.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 33.

but at the same time testifies to a crisis in that theology. That crisis is given expression by the minority voice, a voice that embraces pain and through that embrace challenges the common theology of the majority voice. The crucial importance of the minority voice is expressed by Brueggemann. He writes,

Faith is against voicelessness, against a society in which speech about power and powerlessness is banished and in which social power is so concentrated that it need no longer listen and is no longer capable of hearing. ...The primary critical function of the Bible is to keep the voice of hurt present in the public process. That voice, so cherished and honored in the Bible, is the voice of the marginal, whose testimony is oddly transmitted to us in the canonical process, as the voice of God.²²⁶

Sobrinó's theology is one of several contemporary theologies that give voice to the voiceless. It is a valuable voice. Sobrinó insists that the lived reality of pain of the poor and oppressed of Latin America is a crucible for contemplating the mystery of God revealed on the cross of Jesus Christ, a mystery that will challenge our presuppositions and deepen our understanding of both God and humanity.

²²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 92.

Chapter Four

Brueggemann, Moltmann, and Sobrino in Conversation

Both Moltmann and Sobrino view the cross of Jesus Christ as the most radical expression of God's embrace of pain. In Jesus' cry of abandonment from the cross, they discern a question that remains open and unanswered evoking a crisis for all Christian theology. That crisis revolves around the tension between the promises and purpose of God and the reality of the experience of suffering in the world. Brueggemann discerns a similar crisis as central to Old Testament theology, a crisis that arises when the experience of suffering evokes questions and challenges for the covenantal theology, which is the dominant theology of the Old Testament. In the contemporary world the questions raised from the depths of suffering have become more sharply focused and beg for a response. A conversation between the Old Testament theology of God of Brueggemann and the theologies of the cross of Moltmann and Sobrino will deepen understanding of both the questions raised by suffering and a biblical response that resists resolution yet offers hope.

The theologies of Moltmann and Sobrino are focused on God's entry into the world through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and lead to a notion of God drawn largely from God's revelation on the cross of Jesus Christ. This notion of God, drawn from the cross, involves the themes of hiddenness, absence, silence, and suffering. The insights of Moltmann and Sobrino can therefore be challenged and strengthened by Brueggemann's Old Testament theology of God, which recognizes the integral role the themes of hiddenness, absence, silence, and suffering play in Israel's discernment of God and in the formation of Israel's faith.

Through summary analysis of the work of Brueggemann, Moltmann, and Sobrino, this chapter will bring into conversation notions of God drawn from Old Testament traditions with notions of God drawn from interpretations of the cross. Included will be a discussion of the use of the Old Testament in the work of Moltmann and Sobrino, the questioning of presuppositions in their work that ignore Old Testament theology, and the enrichments that insights from Brueggemann's Old Testament theology can provide.

The Influence of Old Testament Theology on Moltmann's Theology of the Cross

The most important influence that Old Testament theology exerts on Moltmann's theology of the cross is as a model for his theological method. Moltmann's theological method is shaped by the process of formation that he sees operating in the formation of the Old Testament text. In *Theology of Hope*, that formation is described as a process of struggle between tradition and new experience. According to Moltmann, Israel's tradition was formed in the preservation of events in which God's promises were revealed. These revelatory events provided the foundation for Israel's traditions but because God's promises pointed to the future, those traditions did not remain static. As Israel encountered new experiences, questions of the tradition emerged. Israel endured a process of struggle between traditional understandings of the promises and demands of God and the questioning that was generated by new experiences. By allowing the questions, generated by new experiences to lead to a struggle with tradition, new insights

emerged, insights that lay dormant, undiscovered, powerfully hidden in the revelatory events preserved in Israel's tradition.¹

That same process of struggle is foundational for Moltmann's theology of the cross in *The Crucified God*. Moltmann begins with the contemporary questions raised by the loss of Christian identity and relevancy in Europe following World War II and allows those contemporary questions to lead to a struggle with the Christian tradition's understanding of God's promises and demands. He reaches back to the Christian revelatory event of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ preserved in the New Testament writings. He allows the contemporary problems of protest atheism and post-Christian humanism, responses to the questions raised by the massive suffering of the twentieth century, to lead to a struggle between contemporary experience and tradition from which emerges new insights that lay dormant, undiscovered and powerfully hidden in the revelatory event of the cross.²

Because Moltmann is re-reading the New Testament in light of contemporary experience, the question of God's relationship to suffering and the interest of liberation from constricting and dangerous socio-political institutions are prominent in Moltmann's analysis of the New Testament. Jesus is viewed as a political figure confronting the socio-political environment created by the both the Jewish religious leadership and the Roman political leadership.³ Jesus addresses both the failure of these socio-political structures to prevent suffering and the complicity of the socio-political leaders in causing suffering. Jesus is tried as a political rebel and a blasphemer. Lying behind Jesus'

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 95-127; Don Schweitzer, "The Consistency of Jürgen Moltmann's Theology," *Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (1993): 198-199.

² Schweitzer, 203.

³ Ibid.

historical trial is a trial of the God he proclaims. The God Jesus proclaims challenges the God of the Jewish religious authorities and the gods of the Roman Empire. Most importantly, Jesus is depicted as one who is abandoned by God. Jesus' abandonment by God on the cross is the Trinitarian event that reveals that God and suffering are not contradictory but that God is revealed in the midst of suffering.

While Moltmann's approach to reading the New Testament is shaped by his understanding of the theological method that led to the formation of the Old Testament text, he fails to adequately address the theology of the Old Testament itself and its role both in forming Jesus' understanding of God and in shaping the New Testament text. His reading of the issues that form the context for Jesus' preaching and teaching are shaped more by contemporary issues than by the Old Testament theology in which that teaching and preaching is rooted. His desire to see new revelation in Jesus informs his reading so that he assigns as novel to Jesus ideas that are imbedded deep within Israel's tradition. Moltmann addresses the fact that eschatology is vital to understanding the theology of the cross but he draws the content used to inform that concept from contemporary theology and philosophy rather than from the Old Testament. Finally, Moltmann's presuppositions about the understanding of the law at the time of Jesus are read into the text and Israel's understanding of the law is presented as a unified voice under the rubric of "legalism." This not only skews his understanding of New Testament theology but ignores the many voices and theologies that give the Old Testament its depth and texture.

Moltmann's most explicit use of the biblical text is concentrated in two chapters of *The Crucified God*: "The Historical Trial of Jesus" and "The Eschatological Trial of

Jesus Christ.”⁴ Both of these chapters deal with the history of Jesus. The first approaches the subject from a historical perspective, beginning with Jesus’ birth and following his life and ministry to his death on the cross. The second approaches the subject from an eschatological perspective beginning with the hope in God’s promises generated by the resurrection of Jesus and looking backwards to Jesus’ trial and cross for the meaning of those events.⁵ Moltmann indicates that both approaches are needed for complete understanding of the meaning of the cross. Moltmann’s re-reading of the New Testament in light of contemporary questions concentrates on the conflict between the God of Jesus and the God of the “guardians of the law.”⁶ Exploration of Moltmann’s depiction of this conflict reveals his problematic use of the Old Testament.

The conflict between Jesus and the “guardians of the law,” a conflict that results in the charge of blasphemy, dominates Moltmann’s discussion of Jesus’ way to the cross. Moltmann discusses several factors that contribute to the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leadership: the authority claimed by Jesus, the contrast between Jesus’ claim to authority and his poverty, and Jesus’ notion concerning God’s freedom to show grace. Moltmann’s discussion of these three factors is influenced by his presuppositions about the understanding of the law at the time of Jesus.

In Moltmann’s discussion of Jesus’ claim to authority as a contributing factor in the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities, he discusses both Jesus’ actions and his preaching. Jesus’ actions, such as: healing on the Sabbath, eating with sinners, and forgiving sins, shows a freedom from the law, a freedom that is possible only

⁴Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 112-145, 160-187.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 112-114.

⁶ Moltmann uses this term to refer to the Jewish leadership throughout his discussion of the history of Jesus. *Ibid.*, 112-187.

if one considers himself to have an authority above the law.⁷ In addition, in his preaching Jesus sometimes claims an authority above the Law of Moses as he does in the Sermon on the Mount.⁸ Moltmann describes Jesus' claim to authority as "above the limits of the contemporary understanding of the law" and as demonstrating "God's eschatological law of grace."⁹ He argues that through Jesus' claim of authority, he ceases to be a prophet in the succession of Moses.¹⁰ Moltmann interprets the conflict caused by Jesus' claim to authority in stark terms that move beyond the New Testament text and that emphasize a distinction between the God of judgment, represented by the "guardians of the law" and the God of grace, represented by Jesus. He argues that Jesus' claim to forgive sins "abolished the legal distinction between religious and secular, righteous and unrighteous, devout and sinful... and he revealed God in a different way from that in which he was understood in the law and the tradition and was perceived by the guardians of the law."¹¹ For Moltmann, a presupposition is operating and dominates his discussion of Jesus' history throughout these two chapters. That presupposition is that there is a stark contrast between Old Testament theology interpreted legalistically by Jesus' contemporaries and the theology of Jesus. The dominance of this presupposition is evident here because even as Moltmann discusses the factor of Jesus' authority, his presupposition regarding the contrasting theologies of the "guardians of the law" and Jesus becomes the interpretive lens for understanding Jesus' claim to authority.

The conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities is deepened by a second factor, the contradiction between Jesus' authoritative claims and the poverty that

⁷ Ibid., 128-129.

⁸ The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5.

⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 128.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 128-129.

Moltmann states “is characteristic of his whole appearance.” Moltmann describes this contradiction,

The source of the contradiction is that he, a human being who was powerless, should anticipate the power of God as grace amongst the rejected and the powerless. Through its association with his lowliness, his preaching was open to rejection. Through its association with his claim for authority, his humanity could be refuted by casting him out and killing him. The inner contradiction between his claim and his poverty is characteristic of his whole appearance. Such a claim associated with such poverty was bound to be understood as a contradiction.¹²

Again, in his discussion of Jesus’ poverty, Moltmann points to the power of God as grace and contrasts this with the God of judgment.¹³

While Jesus’ claim to authority and the contrast between that claim and his poverty are mentioned in Moltmann’s analysis as factors contributing to the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, it is the third factor that gets the greatest emphasis in Moltmann’s analysis of that conflict. That factor centers around the issue of God’s freedom to show grace. Moltmann argues that Jesus claims that God is free to show grace apart from the law while the “guardians of the law” are guilty of “legalism” and “codifying the will of God.”¹⁴

As Moltmann moves through his discussion of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leadership his rhetoric concerning the contrast in interpretation of the law between Jesus and the “guardians of the law” increases. He begins this discussion by noting the differences between Jesus and John the Baptist that culminate in Jesus’ break from John and the beginning of his own ministry. Moltmann notes that while both men claim that “the kingdom of God is at hand,” John points to judgment according to the law while

¹² Ibid., 131.

¹³ Ibid., 131.

¹⁴ Ibid., 132.

Jesus points to the unconditional and free grace of God to the unrighteous.¹⁵ After moving through Jesus' preaching and healing ministry and the increasing conflict between him and the guardians of the law Moltmann writes, "Consequently, his preaching set men free from the legalism with which they sought to bring themselves into accordance with the *God of vengeance*."¹⁶ By the time he gets to the description of Jesus' death by crucifixion he writes, "Does inhuman legalism triumph over the crucified Christ, or does God's law of grace triumph over works of the law and of power?"¹⁷ These statements indicate that the Jewish tradition at the time of Jesus was legalistic, claimed to have "codified the will of God," and served a "God of vengeance." Jesus is depicted in absolute contrast to the Jewish faith of his time rather than as a person springing from that faith tradition. Moltmann does not recognize that while Jesus differs from that tradition in some important ways he also makes statements that indicate continuity with the Jewish tradition of his time.¹⁸

Moltmann's depiction of the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities is marred by two interpretive errors. The first is that he reduces the complexity of the Old Testament and its interpretation by Jesus' contemporaries to a unified view that revolves around a retributive justice theme. The second has already been mentioned, Moltmann's presupposition that there is a stark contrast between Old Testament theology interpreted legalistically by Jesus' contemporaries and the theology of Jesus.

¹⁵ Ibid., 128-129.

¹⁶ Emphasis mine. Ibid., 143.

¹⁷ Ibid., 175.

¹⁸ In the article, "Torah, *Urzeit*, *Endzeit*," Dale Allison presents scriptural statements attributed to Jesus. Some show Jesus to be radical in his interpretation of the law. Others show Jesus to be conservative in his interpretation of the law. Dale C. Allison, "Torah, *Urzeit*, *Endzeit*," in *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 149-197.

Moltmann's error of reducing the complexity of the Old Testament and its interpretation by Jesus' contemporaries to a unified view that revolves around a retributive justice theme can be demonstrated through exploration of Moltmann's discussion of the role of "figures of messianic hope." Moltmann writes,

They all represented the victory of the righteousness of God according to the law with the exaltation of the righteous who suffer injustice on earth, and the putting to shame of the lawless and godless. The splendor of all their hopes was merely a reflection of the mighty and glorified *Torah* at the end of history.¹⁹

In this statement, Moltmann is asserting that there is a unified messianic hope in Israel and that hope involves the exaltation of the righteous and the putting to shame of the lawless. A careful study of the many messianic hopes in Judaism at the time of Jesus however reveals many expectations for the messianic figure ranging from a future political and spiritual leader to a prophet, a teacher or an eschatological priest. In the book, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*, N.T. Wright states, "It is important to recognize from the start that there was no single unified concept of the Messiah in the first century."²⁰ Wright goes on to list some of the messianic hopes of Israel: "the hope for liberation, for the end of exile, for the defeat of evil, for Yahweh to return to Zion."²¹ In an important text from Qumran, 4Q521, a discussion of the Messiah includes mention of releasing captives, giving sight to the blind, healing the wounded, giving life to the dead, preaching good news to the poor, leading those who had been cast out, and enriching the hungry. The obvious background of this text is Isaiah 61, the same

¹⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 129.

²⁰ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 75.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

text Jesus reads in the temple at the beginning of his ministry in Luke's gospel.²²

Moltmann's presentation of the messianic hopes in Israel at the time of Jesus as a unified voice centered around a notion of retributive justice is characteristic of his problematic use of Old Testament theology throughout his re-reading of the history of Jesus.

The Second major problem in Moltmann's depiction of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities is his presupposition that Judaism at the time of Jesus is characterized by "legalism" and is in stark contrast with the teaching and preaching of Jesus.²³ In a study of German-Jewish thought, Susannah Heschel discusses the prevalence of this presupposition operating amongst the best German Christian Scholars. She writes,

For the liberals and radicals of the Tübingen School, Judaism was the legalistic, religiously impure element within Christianity, against which gentile Christianity struggled during the first two centuries, eventually prevailing in the emergent church.²⁴

She further notes that the historical critical method of biblical interpretation did nothing to avert this presupposition,

The rise of critical biblical scholarship in Germany made use of anti-Jewish stereotypes developed by the anticlericalism of the Enlightenment to resolve the conflict between historical analysis and the dogma of revelation. Whatever elements in the Old Testament had been rejected by Christianity were said to characterize Judaism, and the religion was held to be simply a formal expression of the unfortunate character of the Jews as a people.²⁵

Through analysis of both twentieth century and contemporary scholars, Heschel demonstrates that despite thorough meticulous scholarship in investigating most of the

²² Luke 4:17-19; Donald Gowan, *Eschatology in the Old Testament* (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 2000), 38.

²³ In a careful and thorough study, E.P. Sanders shows that the claim of a radical difference between the notion of God of the "guardians of the law" and the notion of God of Jesus is false. E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

²⁴ Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 66-67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

historical background of biblical texts, many German biblical scholars continue to allow stereotypical assumptions about Judaism go unquestioned.²⁶ Moltmann's discussion of Jesus' history shows that these common stereotypical assumptions about Judaism lead him to make interpretive errors in understanding that history. One of the most important of those errors is his understanding of the charge of blasphemy that is leveled against Jesus by the Jewish leadership.

As argued above, while Moltmann mentions Jesus' claim to authority and the contrast between that authority and his poverty as contributing factors in the conflict between the Jewish leadership and Jesus, a conflict that resulted in the charge of blasphemy, the factor that dominates Moltmann's interpretation of this conflict is the contrast between Jesus' gospel of grace and the law. That this is the central understanding of Moltmann's interpretation of the charge of blasphemy cannot be denied. Throughout his discussion of the trial, Moltmann charges numerous times and in numerous ways that the basic conflict between the Jewish leadership and Jesus involved the understanding of God's righteousness and the relationship of that righteousness to the law. Moltmann writes, "The life of Jesus was a theological clash between him and the prevailing understanding of the law. From this clash arose the legal trial concerning the righteousness of God in which his gospel and the law were opponents."²⁷ In the gospel accounts of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin however, there is no reference to Jesus' interpretation of the law or to God's freedom to show grace. Instead, Jesus' proclamations concerning the temple and questions concerning his messianic identity are the focus. In *The International Critical Commentary on Mathew*, Dale Allison writes,

²⁶ Ibid., 230-242.

²⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 133.

Unfortunately Matthew (following Mark) does not spell out exactly what the Sanhedrin finds blasphemous (cf. the silence of 9.3). But Jn 10.36 has Jesus' claim to be the Son of God evoke the accusation of blasphemy, and this must be close to the sense in Matthew. The accusation of blasphemy is a response to Christology. Jesus, by claiming to be God's Son, to have a heavenly throne, and to be the exalted figure of Dan 7.13, insults the majesty of God.²⁸

Moltmann's presuppositions about Judaism at the time of Jesus lead him to misinterpret the reason for the charge of blasphemy against Jesus and miss that the charge involves Jesus' identity. This is surprising considering the importance of Jesus' identity as the Son of God in Moltmann's theological vision. Moltmann's presuppositions cause him to miss other themes in the New Testament text that are important to his theology as well. The relationship between God and eschatological history, the relationship between God and suffering, and the liberating nature of Christian faith are all affected by Moltmann's skewed interpretation of Old Testament theology.

Despite his claim that eschatology is essential for understanding Christian faith, Moltmann ignores the eschatological symbols in Jesus' ministry. Jesus' actions and preaching concerning the Sabbath, the temple, and torah, were less about correct interpretation of these Jewish symbols and more about Jesus' identity as an eschatological prophet.²⁹ The definitive feature of eschatology is that it offers a particular kind of hope, a hope focused on the in-breaking of a new age.³⁰ When Jesus announces that the kingdom of God is at hand and then offers forgiveness and healing on the Sabbath, he is claiming that God's eschatological promises are breaking into history

²⁸ W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *The International Critical Commentary: The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), vol. 3, 533.

²⁹ Wright, 58-73.

³⁰ Gowan, *Eschatology in the Old Testament*, 121-122.

through his person.³¹ This is why the question of Jesus' identity as the Messiah, and his statements about the temple are the focus of his trial before the Sanhedrin.

The significance of Moltmann's error in overlooking the significance of these symbols is even more glaring when these symbols are understood in the context of Judaism at the time of Jesus. Wright discusses the misreading of the Pharisees in contemporary scholarship. Wright claims that what is often missed in interpretations of the Pharisees is the larger purpose and reason for the pharisaic interpretation of torah. Wright writes,

The agenda of the Pharisees in this period was not simply to do with "purity," whether their own or other peoples'. All the evidence suggests that at least the majority of the Pharisees, from the Hasmonean and Herodian periods through to the war of A.D. 66-70, had as their main aim that which purity *symbolized*: the political struggle to maintain Jewish identity and to realize the dream of national liberation.³²

Wright claims that the source of controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees was a differing political vision. The Pharisees believed their security as a people was tied to the right practice of their traditions. The reason they looked for this security was not because they had "codified the will of God," or because they had a notion of a "God of vengeance."³³ Rather, the Pharisees were interested in preserving the faith identity of Israel making liberation and restoration of Israel possible. They wanted political liberation. Jesus believed that the liberation and restoration of Israel was already happening through his ministry. He was bringing the kingdom of God, a new age breaking into history and this new age required a new interpretation of the symbols of Israel. Jesus' vision is one of eschatological hope. The content of that hope came from

³¹ Wright, 58-60.

³² Ibid., 56.

³³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 132.

the eschatological promises of the Old Testament. These promises include: transformation of human society, transformation of the human person and transformation of nature.³⁴

In the book, *Eschatology in the Old Testament*, Donald Gowan discusses some important characteristics of Old Testament theology. It is a worldly hope that understands that the present circumstances are in need of transformation. People are called to work towards that transformation through repentance and obedience while at the same time recognizing that the future is in God's hands. Transformation of human society is emphasized over personal salvation. Finally, it is a comprehensive hope embracing liberation from all causes of oppression.³⁵

Moltmann's presuppositions about Judaism at the time of Jesus lead him to miss the cause of liberation in Jesus' preaching and teaching. It is not liberation from the law that is the focus for Jesus, nor a concern for less stringent religious practice, but the good news that God had drawn near to liberate Israel from all forms of oppression. Moltmann's claims to eschatological hope through Jesus would be deepened through engagement with Old Testament eschatology.

Moltmann's presuppositions about Old Testament theology affect the theme most central to his theology of the cross, the relationship between God and suffering. In Moltmann's theology of the cross, Jesus' cry of dereliction, "My God, my God why have you abandoned me?" (Mark 15:34) is of pivotal importance. It is this question on the dying lips of Jesus that Moltmann claims as evidence that the question of God and the

³⁴ Gowan, *Old Testament Eschatology*, 1-3.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 121-123.

question of suffering belong together.³⁶ He sees this cry as the starting point for discussion of the trinity and he argues that through this cry Jesus makes visible the openness of the history of God for the history of the world.³⁷ Moltmann claims that this statement is vital for understanding the identity of Jesus and the identity of God. Yet in his discussion of this vital statement Moltmann writes,

In the original Ps. 22 “My God” means the covenant God of Israel, and the “I” who has been forsaken is the other partner of the covenant, the righteous sufferer. But in Jesus’ case the cry “My God” implies the same content as his own message of God who comes close in grace, the message he had often expressed in the exclusive words “My Father”. And the community which may have placed these words from the psalm on the lips of the dying Jesus must have regarded them in this way and related the psalm to Jesus’ situation. He is no longer crying for Israel’s covenant God.....

If this were not so, then Ps. 22 on the lips of Jesus would merely show that after all his conflicts with the Pharisees and Zealots and their understanding of the law, Jesus had returned at his death to the God of the fathers. But this would mean the end of his novel message and the liquidation of his special mission.

Is Moltmann arguing that Jesus prays to a different God than his Jewish contemporaries? Is he arguing for a complete rejection of the God of the Old Testament? Is there no continuity between Jesus’ identity, mission, and notion of God and the traditions of Israel? It is one thing for Moltmann to argue that the cry on the lips of Jesus has more significance than on the lips of any righteous sufferer because he is the Son of God but in the statement quoted above, Moltmann goes further than that. Moltmann’s presuppositions about the notion of God of the religious leadership at the time of Jesus, lead him to deny any similarity between the notion of God of Old Testament theology and the notion of God of Jesus. Throughout Moltmann’s discussion of the history of

³⁶ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 49.

³⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 244.

Jesus there is no recognition of God's concern for the outcast, the widow, the orphan and the alien that is a vital tradition preserved in the Old Testament. In discussing the suffering of God, Moltmann makes use of Abraham Heschel's notion of the pathos of God and refers to the Shekinah theology of the Rabbis but he never discusses the fact that these important ideas are reflections drawn from the Old Testament texts.³⁸

This review of the Old Testament in Moltmann's theology of the cross has revealed that Moltmann's reading of the New Testament as background for his theology of the cross is subject to serious interpretive errors rooted in Moltmann's presuppositions about Judaism and the God of the Old Testament. Before bringing Brueggemann's Old Testament theology into conversation with Moltmann's theology of the cross, the role of the Old Testament in the theology of the cross of Jon Sobrino will be examined.

The Influence of Old Testament Theology on Sobrino's Theology of the Cross

Old Testament theology influences Sobrino's theology of the cross in several important ways. First, Old Testament theology reveals that God acts in history and this revelation is foundational for understanding God's action in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Second, Jesus' notion of God is formed by Old Testament theological traditions. Third, Old Testament traditions concerning the relationship between God and human beings form the basis for understanding the meaning of the cross. Unlike Moltmann, Sobrino emphasizes Jesus' continuity with the tradition of Israel while at the same time recognizing that what Jesus reveals about God moves beyond those traditions.³⁹

³⁸ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 270-273.

³⁹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 74.

Sobrino states that the subject of the Old Testament is not God in Godself but God as God is related to history. He points to four Old Testament traditions: the exodus, prophetic, apocalyptic, and wisdom traditions. In each of these traditions, God's relationship to history is different. The exodus tradition is marked by God's hearing the cry of the oppressed and God's saving actions as a result. The prophetic tradition is characterized by denunciation of the oppressors, the defense of the oppressed and the hope of a new covenant. The apocalyptic tradition reveals the hope for God's re-formation of people and the whole of creation in accord with God's eschatological promises. The wisdom tradition reveals God's provident activity hidden in God's silence.⁴⁰ According to Sobrino, these traditions form the foundation for Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God. Sobrino writes,

Jesus put forward his own concept of the kingdom, as we shall see shortly. First, however, I should like to reflect briefly on the fact that Jesus came *following a tradition of hope for oppressed history*, that the first impression he made was above all *in continuity* with a hope-filled tradition.⁴¹

Sobrino's recognition of the role Old Testament traditions played in shaping Jesus' notion of the kingdom provides a way for him to contrast Jesus' teaching with that of the Pharisees without the distortions that appear in Moltmann's analysis. Sobrino acknowledges that the Pharisees inherited the same hope filled tradition as Jesus and that their attention to a life of purity, contemplation, and observation of the law was a way of hastening the coming of that promised kingdom.⁴² According to Sobrino, while the Pharisees and Jesus inherited the same tradition they differed in the accent they placed on God's mercy and compassion. For Jesus, mercy and compassion is the basic identity

⁴⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁴¹ Ibid., 74.

⁴² Ibid., 72.

marker for God and this leads Jesus to reach out to those most in need of God's mercy and to confront the causes of oppression.⁴³

While Jesus' notion of God places an accent on God's mercy and compassion, Sobrino emphasizes that Jesus' relationship to God grows out of and is influenced by notions of God drawn from the Old Testament.⁴⁴ Sobrino argues that from the prophetic tradition Jesus came to understand that God takes sides and defends the poor, the weak, and the oppressed, calls people to repentance and to living out their calling from God. From the apocalyptic tradition, Jesus came to understand that God and God alone possesses the power to transform reality into God's absolute future. From the wisdom tradition, Jesus understands God as provident creator looking after everyday needs.⁴⁵ Sobrino recognizes that each of these traditions preserves different understandings of God and claims that Jesus drew his notion of God from weaving together insights from each. Sobrino argues that there is value in the diversity and novelty of each tradition and so the diversity and novelty of each should be preserved.⁴⁶

By recognizing that these traditions shaped Jesus' notion of God, Sobrino acknowledges that Jesus' understanding of the goodness of God was not new; it was born in and came from these Old Testament traditions. Jesus' contemplation of God led him to differ from these traditions not by countering them or by adding complexity to these notions but by a deepening understanding of God's grace. Sobrino writes,

Jesus' way of revealing the truth about God and human beings is through what is least esoteric and most common – love; and if we are looking for

⁴³ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 136-137.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 137.

discontinuity , this is to be found not in the “beyond,” but in this very love a limitless love, valid to the point of the cross.⁴⁷

Jesus’ journey to the cross shapes his revelation of God’s limitless love in two important ways; ways that Sobrino ties to Old Testament theology. First, the cross testifies to the fact that Jesus’ proclamation of God’s love takes place in a world characterized by sin. Second, as Jesus journeys to the cross his understanding of God is influenced by what Sobrino calls the existential tradition of the Old Testament.⁴⁸

Sobrino describes Jesus’ proclamation of God’s love as having two dimensions, a messianic dimension and a prophetic dimension.⁴⁹ Jesus’ messianic activity centers around the positive aspects of God’s coming near. Therefore his messianic activity involves his outreach and ministry to the poor and oppressed, the ones for whom God’s drawing near is good news. By contrast, his prophetic activity centers on judgment and is directed toward those who contribute to the miserable lives of the poor and oppressed. In Jesus’ prophetic activity he “unmasks” the idols that people create in order to gain and maintain power and security. These idols are political, sociological and theological and reveal the power of sin in the world. Sobrino attributes Jesus’ Sabbath controversies, his parables, and his critique of the temple to his prophetic praxis.⁵⁰ This prophetic praxis is essential because it reveals that Jesus doesn’t talk about sin in general terms but attacks it in its specific manifestation in the world. Sobrino argues that Jesus’ prophetic activity reveals the misuse of power as a central component of the shape that sin takes. He ties Jesus’ prophetic role to the Old Testament tradition of the prophets noting that the fact

⁴⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 161.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 160-177.

that Jesus' prophetic activity leads to controversy, persecution and ultimately death is in continuity with that prophetic tradition.⁵¹

Sobrino's use of the Old Testament as a source for understanding Jesus' prophetic activity is influenced and limited by Sobrino's agenda of liberation. When Sobrino discusses God's preferential option for the poor, he focuses on wealth/poverty as a general category and ignores the fact that God's preferential option is expressed in the Old Testament within the particularity of his call to Israel. Israel's identity is to be marked by care for the poor but God's choice of Israel moves beyond a general option for the poor. The option for the poor is one part of a larger mission. When Sobrino discusses Jesus' critique of the temple and his Sabbath controversies, he argues that Jesus is defending the rights of the victims of religious oppression but he ignores the eschatological symbolism of the temple and Sabbath. The eschatological symbolism of the temple and the Sabbath points to the identity of Jesus as the source of controversy. Sobrino begins his discussion of Jesus preaching and mission by claiming that Jesus did not preach about himself but about the kingdom.⁵² This presupposition shapes Sobrino's analysis of Jesus' preaching and teaching so that he understands the controversies of Jesus in general terms revolving around misuse of power rather than seeing that while these controversies contain a critique of the misuse of power they move beyond that critique and point to the larger issues of Jesus' identity and the particularity of God's choice and mission for Israel.

Sobrino discusses a second way that Jesus' journey to the cross influences his notion of God. That is through Jesus' historical experience of God's silence. Sobrino

⁵¹ Ibid., 160-189.

⁵² Ibid., 67.

links Jesus' historical experience of God's silence with the existential tradition of the Old Testament. Sobrino describes that existential tradition as "times when all that can be heard is God's silence."⁵³ He observes that the tradition is preserved only sporadically in the Old Testament appearing in all theodicies and particularly in the books of Lamentations, Jeremiah, Ecclesiastes, and Job.⁵⁴ He notes that the notion of God drawn from the existential tradition is contrary to the God of the kingdom and yet as Jesus lives his historical life, the silence of God increasingly becomes his experience of God. Sobrino describes this as Jesus' conversion. Jesus begins his ministry proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom and the good news of God's drawing near. As it becomes more evident that his mission will end on the cross however, the coming of the kingdom is increasingly cloaked in mystery. Sobrino writes,

There is, then, no doubt that the theological vision presented by Jesus at the end of his life was very different. It still contains the formal elements there at the beginning: God, mission, sin, following, prayer, but their historical embodiment is quite other. His vision is now dominated by the mystery of God and what there is of the mystery in God. The subject matter may be the same, but Jesus has been through a process of embodying it, not only conceptually, but historically. He set out to change history according to the will of God, but history changed him in relation to God.⁵⁵

According to Sobrino, Jesus' historical experience of the silence of God leads him to an increasing awareness that God is a "supremely dialectical reality: absolute intimacy and absolute otherness."⁵⁶ According to Sobrino this dialectic is rooted in the question of theodicy. The question that Jesus asks from the cross is the question that all who trust that God is love ask when confronted by evil and injustice. Theodicies do not cover up

⁵³ Ibid., 137.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 148.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 138.

the scandal of injustice and evil by giving an explanation but neither do they give up hope that evil and injustice are not the last word. Theodicies hold onto the hope that history has meaning. “However, this hope is not drawn from ‘knowledge’ of the mystery, but from ‘faith’ in this particular God with this particular plan.”⁵⁷ As Jesus walks with God through the trials of his life, he increasingly understands God as the one who is both intimate and other and his relationship with God is described by Sobrino as one of trust-availability.⁵⁸ Jesus trusts that God the Father’s transcendence is not a remote transcendence but a transcendence of love and grace. Jesus’ mission of availability to his Father-God leads him to realize that he is called not to eradicate sin but to bear it.

According to Sobrino, the pattern for exploration of the meaning of Jesus’ cross in the New Testament is similar to the pattern followed in Old Testament explorations of the meaning of suffering in the existential traditions. The New Testament will not let the scandal of the cross be the last word but “hopes” that there is meaning to the cross, a meaning hidden in the mystery of God.⁵⁹ In reflecting on the meaning of the mystery of the cross, the New Testament reaches back to Old Testament traditions revolving around the relationship between God and human beings such as: the sacrificial system of Israel, the role of the law, the image of the new covenant and role of the suffering servant. The New Testament writers find in these traditions a way to understand the new relationship between God and human beings that is revealed on the cross of Jesus Christ. Sobrino asserts that the prevalent and most important reflection on the meaning of the cross is that the cross reveals the credibility of God’s love. Jesus testifies throughout his lifetime that God is good and that God is for us. On the cross God’s being for us is revealed to go so

⁵⁷ Ibid., 221.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 135-159.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 221.

far that God is even at our mercy. The notion of God that emerges from the cross is a dialectical notion. God is absolute immanence even to the point of death and at the same time absolute transcendence. The transcendence of God is not understood as a remote transcendence, however, but as a transcendence of love.⁶⁰

In Sobrino's theology, Jesus' notion of God is the basis for the notion of God that emerges from the cross. That notion is rooted in and grows out of Old Testament traditions. Deeper exploration of these Old Testament traditions through the theology of the Old Testament of Walter Brueggemann can lead to a deeper contemplation of the God of Jesus and therefore of the notion of God that emerges from the cross.

Common Themes in the Theology of Brueggemann, Moltmann, and Sobrino

The Old Testament theology of Walter Brueggemann and the theologies of the cross of Jurgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino share some common themes such as:

1. the recognition of the political nature of all theology;
2. the importance of the question of theodicy for shaping theological insights and
3. the dialectical nature of God leading to an exploration of God's power.

A summary analysis of these common themes in the works of Brueggemann, Moltmann, and Sobrino provides a way to bring their theologies into conversation and arrive at deeper theological insights.

The recognition of competing theological claims in the Old Testament provides the framework for Brueggemann's Old Testament theology. His theology is structured around the themes of testimony within the metaphor of a law court because he recognizes that all theological claims are provisional, open-ended, and dialogical. When he divides

⁶⁰ Ibid., 142.

the theological testimonies of the Old Testament into two major categories, which he refers to as the majority voice and the minority voice, he acknowledges that these theological claims are not neutral. Each claim has political and sociological ramifications.⁶¹

In order to provide an example of the political and social ramifications of theology, Brueggemann appeals to creation theology. Creation theology in the Old Testament asserts that there is an ordered quality to life and that this ordered quality is the result of the will and desire of the Creator. Reflection upon this insight leads to a belief in an ordered moral coherence to the world. Recognition of the ordered quality of life and the moral coherence that follows from this insight is an essential component of the “common theology” of Israel that Brueggemann labels the majority voice.⁶²

Brueggemann states that this order and coherence must first be appreciated as a way to access faith and meaning for the people of Israel. This same order and coherence however also becomes the grounds for the political, theological, and sociological structures of Israel. Once the ordered quality of creation and the moral rationality that follows from that order becomes part of the power structures of Israel it is easily co-opted and exploited. He claims,

And so there is a convenient match (often regarded as an ontological match) between God’s order and our order. What starts as a statement about *transcendence* becomes simply *self-justification*, self-justification made characteristically by those who preside over the current order and who benefit from keeping it so.⁶³

⁶¹ Brueggemann’s analysis of the political and sociological ramifications of the majority and minority voices of the Old Testament is articulated most fully in two articles. Walter Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 no. 1 (January, 1985): 28-46; Walter Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 no. 3 (July, 1985): 395-415.

⁶² Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I,” 41-42.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 42.

The exploitation of theological claims by those in power leads to a closed system that is intolerant of challenges. Brueggemann argues that experiences of life in the world, particularly painful experiences, challenge the claims made by the majority voice. Silencing the voices of pain therefore becomes vital for the maintenance of power in a closed system of order and moral rationality.⁶⁴

Brueggemann asserts that it is important to pay attention not only to the meaning of texts but to the way those texts function. When the texts function to silence the voices of pain this leads to illegitimate systems that lack a human face. He writes, “Contractual theology offers a world in which pain need not occur, and where it occurs, pain is a failure to be corrected.”⁶⁵ He argues that what is remarkable about the Old Testament is that while it claims this contractual theology, it at the same time testifies to a crisis in that theology. That crisis is given expression by the minority voice, a voice that embraces pain and through that embrace challenges the common theology of the majority voice.

According to Brueggemann, in the Old Testament there is a tension between the celebration of contractual theology and a sharp critique of that same theology. This tension is essential for faith. It is not an evolutionary tension that is resolved in the testimony of the New Testament or in post-biblical Judaism.⁶⁶ Rather, it is a tension that must be maintained for faith because within this tension God is revealed.

Brueggemann’s analysis of the political nature of theology draws attention to several important points. First, in addition to addressing the meaning of texts, attention must be paid to the way in which texts function. Second, there is a tendency to simplify diverse theological voices into a unified view that can be co-opted and exploited by those

⁶⁴ Ibid., 43-44.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 44.

in power. This tendency can be described as a tendency toward closure. Third, the notion of God that is drawn from theological statements has vital sociological and political ramifications. Fourth, the minority voice, the voice of those in pain, is a vital critical voice. Through this vital theological voice faith remains connected to life in the world and is prevented from dissolving into a triumphant faith that either ignores or condemns the needs and problems of those who are suffering.

The political nature of theology is an important theme in the theologies of the cross of both Moltmann and Sobrino. While their theologies are systematic in nature and therefore move beyond the text, the points that Brueggemann draws attention to in his analysis of the political nature of Old Testament theology are important points in the systematic analyses of Moltmann and Sobrino as well.

Moltmann most directly addresses the function of texts by noting the theological process that shaped the Old Testament text. That process is described as a conflict between theological traditions and new needs, concerns, and questions that arise as a result of life experience. In recognizing this process, Moltmann, like Brueggemann understands the nature of theology to be provisional, open-ended, and dialogical. This understanding of the shaping of the Old Testament text leads to Moltmann's theological method, a method that is able to bring the questions, needs, and concerns of post-World War II Europe into dialogue with traditions in Christian theology.⁶⁷

While Moltmann recognizes the use of this theological method in shaping the Old Testament, and then uses this method for his own theological insights, he does not address this issue in regard to the shaping of New Testament texts. He does not discuss

⁶⁷ Don Schweitzer, "The Consistency of Jürgen Moltmann's Theology," *Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (1993): 197-208.

the Old Testament traditions that lie behind the New Testament text, nor does he acknowledge the function of the New Testament texts in the context of the communities for which they were written.

Sobrino is more attentive to the functioning of New Testament texts than Moltmann is. In *Christology at the Crossroads*, Sobrino draws attention to the methodology of the gospel writers. He points out that the writers of the gospels begin with faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and then reach back into the history of Jesus to understand the meaning of resurrection faith. As the writers explore the meaning of Jesus' life in light of the resurrection, they are also concerned with their audience and the particular faith communities among whom they are living and to whom they are addressing the gospel message. Each writer knows the particular needs, questions and concerns of the community they are addressing and so there is a dialogue between the life experience of the community and the message of the gospel. The questions that arise from the life experience of the community become the foundational questions for exploring the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the gospel message is written to address the needs and concerns of each particular community of faith. Sobrino recognizes the dialogical quality of the New Testament text and like Moltmann allows the process that lies behind the formation of the text to shape his own theological method. He begins with faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and then moves to articulate that faith in light of the needs, questions, and concerns of the poor in Latin America.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1978), 9-14.

Both Moltmann and Sobrino recognize that theology is wed to the political and sociological needs of communities in specific times and places. Both writers therefore allow the political and sociological needs of the communities in which they do their theology to shape their theological inquiry. For Moltmann, the lack of identity and relevancy of Christianity in post-World War II Germany provides that context. For Sobrino it is the poor of Latin America. For both writers, working in very different contexts, the theological questions raised by innocent suffering emerge to form the dominant theological voice of these communities. The theological issues raised by innocent suffering become the lens for exploring the meaning of Christian theology for these communities. In engaging the Christian tradition from the perspective of suffering, both Moltmann and Sobrino become aware of triumphant faith claims that are prevalent in the Christian tradition that ignore and sometimes condemn those who are suffering. They recognize that this triumphant faith is easily co-opted and exploited by those in power and that there is a tendency toward closure in Christian theology that is problematic.

Moltmann focuses on the presupposition that God does not suffer as a form of closure in Christian theology. This presupposition prevents the meaning of the cross of Jesus Christ from being fully integrated into a Christian doctrine of God. Instead the god of theism remains the dominant image of God and the cross is then viewed as a means to reconcile fallen human beings with the unchangeable nature of God rather than the revelation of a Trinitarian God who suffers with human beings to offer them new life.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 200-227.

Sobrino highlights the problem of universalizing an image of Christ and salvation that is detached from the history of Jesus. He claims that universalizing the image of Christ is done by those in power who then focus on the cross as the means to an eternal life detached from life in the world. Only when the cross remains connected to the history of Jesus does it reveal its true meaning, the solidarity of God with the suffering, lowly, oppressed people in the world.⁷⁰

By emphasizing both the revelation of the Trinitarian God on the cross and the connection between the cross and the history of Jesus, Moltmann and Sobrino draw attention to the importance of the political and sociological challenges posed by the historical Jesus. Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin and then before Pilate is understood as a trial that encompasses the political, sociological and theological challenges of Jesus. Jesus is tried as both a blasphemer and a rebel, and at stake is not only his challenge to the religious and political leaders but also the notion of God that those leaders use to secure their power. Moltmann writes,

The history of Jesus which led to his crucifixion was rather a *Theological history* in itself, and was dominated by the conflict between God and the gods; that is, between the God whom Jesus preached as his Father, and the God of the law as he was understood by the guardians of the law, together with the political gods of the Roman occupying power.⁷¹

Similarly, Sobrino writes,

The divinities and their mediations are at war, and so therefore are their mediators. Jesus' trial is the trial of a mediator, but it is held to defend a mediation, and this is done in the name of a god. In other words Jesus' trial is also the trial of his God.⁷²

⁷⁰ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 179-181.

⁷¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 127.

⁷² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 209.

What is it about Jesus' notion of God that is so unnerving, disruptive, and challenging to the Jewish and Roman leadership of his day? Exploring Moltmann and Sobrino's analysis of Jesus' notion of God sheds some light on this issue. Moltmann emphasizes the discontinuity of Jesus' notion of God with that of the Jewish leadership. He claims that this discontinuity lies in Jesus' assertion that God is free to show grace to the unrighteous.⁷³ Sobrino emphasizes the continuity between Jesus' notion of God and notions of God drawn from Old Testament traditions.⁷⁴ While emphasizing continuity, he also notes that Jesus' notion of God is different than those of the Jewish leaders of his day. Sobrino, like Moltmann, argues that this difference lies in a deeper understanding of God's grace expressed in the New Testament's claim that God is love.⁷⁵

Both Moltmann and Sobrino point to Jesus' healing ministry as demonstrative of his notion of God.⁷⁶ His outreach to the sick, the dying, the poor, and sinners is an outreach that demonstrates both God's freedom to show grace and that God's drawing near is good news because it is the drawing near of God's love. Jesus' ministry is therefore characterized as one that is open to hear the voices of those in pain. Through Jesus' ministry, those on the margins of society are healed. This healing involves not only removal of their affliction but inclusion in the family of faith with an accompanying realization of God's love for them and of their value.

A deeper understanding of the political ramifications of Jesus' notion of God emerges when Moltmann and Sobrino's analysis is brought into conversation with Brueggemann's recognition that oppressive systems are characterized by closure and the

⁷³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 127-129.

⁷⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 136-137.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷⁶ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 128-132; Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 144.

inability to hear the voice of the wounded party.⁷⁷ Brueggemann argues that when theological statements are co-opted and exploited by those in power it results in illegitimate political and sociological systems that lack a human face. Not only are the leaders of these illegitimate systems closed to the voice of pain, but they secure power by promoting a notion of God that is a “convenient match” for the ordered system that is the realm of their rule.⁷⁸ While Moltmann emphasizes the closed system of laws of the Jewish leadership and Sobrino emphasizes the oppression of the poor by those who control the temple, both recognize that the Jewish leadership during the time of Jesus is oppressive particularly to those who are on the margins of society.⁷⁹ Jesus’ ministry is characterized by grace and mercy shown particularly to those most oppressed by this same society. Jesus’ ministry challenges the system of the religious leadership of his day by confronting that system with the human faces of those in pain. Brueggemann writes, “Indeed the presence of pain-bearers is a silent refutation of the legitimated structures, and therefore they must be denied legitimacy and visibility. Visible pain-bearers assert that the legitimated structures are not properly functioning.”⁸⁰ Jesus’ ministry not only makes visible the pain-bearers of Israel but these pain-bearers become the locale for the revelation of God’s power. Through Jesus, God’s power is operating for and with the oppressed and therefore against and in judgment of the oppressors. For this reason, the Jewish leadership seeks to silence Jesus and through this action, silence the voices of pain that challenges their system and their notion of God.

⁷⁷ Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I,” 28-46.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-44.

⁷⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 112-187; Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 67.

⁸⁰ Brueggemann, “Shape for Old Testament Theology, I,” 44.

Moltmann and Sobrino do not discuss in detail the gods, or the notion of god in the Roman Empire. Moltmann, however, notes that “in the societies of that time there was no politics without religion, any more than there was a religion without politics.”⁸¹ He calls attention to the fact that the “*Pax Romana* was associated with compulsory recognition of the Roman emperor cult.”⁸² He notes that despite a wide reputation for religious tolerance, the Romans attributed the *Pax Romana* to the state gods of Rome. Both Moltmann and Sobrino draw attention to the fact that Jesus was killed by crucifixion, a punishment reserved for crimes against the state, and that the inscription above the cross read, I.N.R.I. (Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum).⁸³ Both point out and object to the way Jesus’ statement, “My kingdom is not of this world,” is used to support a religion concerned with personal internal dispositions that ignore the political and sociological affects of religion. Moltmann notes that Jesus’ statement, “My kingdom is not of this world,” does not imply that the kingdom is somewhere else but rather that it follows a different pattern than kingdoms of this world. The Roman Empire associated with the state gods of Rome operated through power and domination. Jesus’ ministry of agapic love lived out amongst the poorest of society and patterned after his Father-God challenged the order of Roman society and called into question the state gods of Rome.

Moltmann writes,

For Pilate, the case of Jesus of Nazareth was clearly on the same level as that of Barabbas, who was probably a Zealot; we read of him as a ‘rebel’ captured ‘in the insurrection’ (Mark 15.7). Such an ‘error of justice’ would probably not have been possible on the part of the Romans if the effect of the ministry of Jesus had not created at least the danger of a new popular revolt.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 136.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 136.

⁸³ John 18:36; Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 136; Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 208.

⁸⁴ Moltmann, 138.

The trial and death of Jesus is evidence of the political nature of all theology. Jesus' ministry was not violent and yet it challenged the fabric of both Jewish and Roman societies. Sobrino writes, "And if one asks how a religious man, like Jesus could be so dangerous to the empire, and have so much political influence, the answer is that religion touches and moves the foundations of society in a radical way."⁸⁵

Brueggemann insists that the issue of pain is the touchstone for evaluating political, sociological and theological systems. He writes,

It must be always decided again whether pain is simply a shameful aberration that can be handled by correction, or whether pain is the stuff of humanness, the vehicle for a break with triumphalism, both sociological and theological.⁸⁶

According to Moltmann and Sobrino, Jesus' notion of God and Jesus' ministry patterned after that notion breaks with the triumphalism operating in both the Jewish and the Roman political systems. By silencing Jesus, the Jewish and Roman leadership hoped to calm the challenge to their systems that came when Jesus' ministry allowed the undercurrent of the voices of pain to surface. Before Jesus died, however, one last cry of the wounded party was heard, "My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?"⁸⁷ This cry pierces the heavens and for both Moltmann and Sobrino becomes the basis for all Christian theology. It becomes the permanent critique that guards against triumphant claims of closure in Christian theology. This cry assures the suffering and oppressed of the world that God not only hears their cries but enters into their pain in complete solidarity. This cry shapes the identity of Christians and of Christian theology.

⁸⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 209.

⁸⁶ Brueggemann, "Shape for Old Testament Theology, I," 44.

⁸⁷ Mark 15: 34.

Moltmann and Sobrino's insight that Jesus' cry of abandonment is identity forming for Christians and Christian theology can be challenged and deepened by bringing this insight into conversation with Brueggemann's insistence that the exile is identity forming for Israel.

The Babylonian Exile is a time of profound crisis in Israel's history. The Exile marks the failure of Israel's political, sociological, and theological structures. It is a time when the certainty provided by these structures is lost and Israel is left to question the meaning of their faith in the darkness of doubt and vulnerability. For Brueggemann, the exile is the paradigmatic event in Israel's history.⁸⁸ It is the event of the exile that both inspires much of the writing and determines the final form of the Old Testament text. It shapes Israel's faith and forms the identity of the people of Israel.⁸⁹

Brueggemann points to three characteristic identity marks of Israel's faith that result from the event of the exile. First, the people of Israel understand themselves and their status in the world to be marked by risk and vulnerability.⁹⁰ The radical questioning of triumphant faith claims that was brought about by the exile is not a questioning that remains in Israel's past or gives way to new forms of certainty. Rather, the exile becomes the lens through which they encounter reality. When reality calls into question the certainty of their hope, their experience of God through exile and homecoming becomes the means for assessing the new challenge before them. The people of Israel understand their status in the world to be determined not by their own resourcefulness or

⁸⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 77, 323.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 74-78; *idem*, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 22-23.

⁹⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 22.

by a security that can be counted and measured. Theirs is a journey of risk made possible only through their continual trust in God.

Second, their faith is a practice of counter reality. Israel's lived experience in the world often contradicts their understanding of God and their vision of life lived in communion with God. Rather than allow their circumstances to deny their hope or to become a new form of certainty, Israel articulates their vision of God and of their future with God in the midst of these contradictory circumstances. According to Brueggemann, understanding their faith as a counter reality allows Israel to both fully articulate their pain and at the same time to hold onto the hope that lies in the promises of God.⁹¹

Third, their faith is characterized by waiting. For Israel, God is a God of promises and promises point to the future. As long as reality contradicts those promises, Israel's faith is characterized by waiting. Waiting however, is not simply a space of time, empty of meaning. Rather, waiting is the fertile ground for deeper theological reflection.⁹² Remarkably, as Israel reflects on God and God's promises in the midst of waiting, in the midst of their journey of risk and vulnerability, and in the midst of lived reality that counters their hope, God is revealed as a God who enters into their exile and allows the vulnerability of their suffering to impinge upon God's life.

Brueggemann claims that the exile is not only a crisis for Israel; it is a crisis in the life of God.⁹³ This crisis is brought about by Israel's disobedience, a disobedience that deepens the rift separating the people of Israel from God. Israel's disobedience affects the life of God because while Israel's disobedience of the covenant demands of God leads to separation, accompanying that separation is God's love and fidelity toward Israel and a

⁹¹ Ibid., 68-76.

⁹² Ibid., 169-173.

⁹³ Ibid., 440-442; idem, "A Shattered Transcendence," 172.

longing for renewal of the relationship. According to Brueggemann, God does not remain unchanged by the event of the exile. Because of God's fidelity to Israel, God suffers in solidarity with the people of Israel and this suffering evokes new depths of compassion in God and a new resolve for fidelity. The exilic event reveals God's openness to Israel's history. It reveals that God takes suffering seriously and that Israel's suffering impinges on the life of God.⁹⁴

Risk and vulnerability, faith as counter reality, and waiting, are not only characteristic identity marks for Israel but characterize Christian faith as well. In asserting that the essential question for theological inquiry is the question of theodicy, both Moltmann and Sobrino are attentive to the prominence of these characteristics for Christian faith. Painful experiences of living in the world are primary for any theological inquiry approached through the question of theodicy. For both Moltmann and Sobrino, the resurrection of Jesus Christ makes hope a dominant feature of Christian faith but just as the resurrection cannot be separated from the historical cross, Christian hope cannot be separated from the reality of historical suffering in the world. The question Jesus asks from the cross, a question that springs from suffering and asks how the present evil and injustice can be reconciled with God, remains an open question. If an open question is the source for Christian faith then risk and vulnerability are inevitable features of that faith.

In the preface to *The Crucified God*, Moltmann describes his own journey as one that increasingly led him to contemplate life from the viewpoint of the crucified Christ. Having written *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann increasingly came to realize that the fullness of Christian hope, while springing from the resurrection, is only completed

⁹⁴ Brueggemann, "A Shattered Transcendence," 173; idem, *Theology of Old Testament*, 311.

through remembrance of the cross.⁹⁵ Furthermore, events in history continue to call for a return to the cross. Moltmann points to the impact contemporary history had on his own journey referring to the suffering of friends living under Stalinism in Eastern Europe, and under dictatorships in South Korea and Latin America and to his own “dark night” as he continued to come to terms with the pictures and stories of the horrendous crimes committed in concentration camps during World War II.⁹⁶ As long as suffering continues, as long as historical events call into question the goodness of God, the question Jesus asks from the cross remains an open question. As long as the question Jesus asks, “My God, my God why have you abandoned me?” remains open, certainty is precluded and risk and vulnerability characterize Christian faith. Moltmann writes, “For me, the crucified Christ became more and more ‘the foundation and criticism of Christian theology.’ And for me that meant whatever can stand before the face of the crucified Christ is true Christian theology.”⁹⁷

In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann provides an excerpt from Eli Wiesel’s book, *Night*, a story that he finds paradigmatic for understanding Christian faith as a form of counter reality shaped by risk, vulnerability and waiting. Before re-telling the story, Moltmann draws attention to a study by P. Kuhn focusing on Shekinah theology as it was expressed in the work of the rabbis at the turn of the century.⁹⁸ Moltmann notes that according to Kuhn the rabbis articulated a series of humiliations, sufferings that God voluntarily entered into for the redemption of human beings and for Israel. In Moltmann’s analysis of Kuhn’s work, several important insights emerge. First, God

⁹⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, ix.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, x-xi.

⁹⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, x.

⁹⁸ Moltmann attributes his analysis of Shekinah theology to P. Kuhn, *Gottes Selbsterniedrigung in der Rabbinen*, 1968. *Ibid.*, 272.

accommodates Godself to the limitations of human beings even to the point of suffering with and for them. Second, God's accommodation to the limitations of human beings is not limited to innocent suffering. God also enters into the suffering of the guilty and sinful. Finally, within God's accommodation to the limitations of human beings there is an accompanying anticipation of God's future indwelling of all creation.⁹⁹ In Shekinah theology, risk and vulnerability, faith as counter reality, and waiting characterize Israel because God dwells with them in their suffering and Israel's redemption will be God's redemption. Moltmann writes,

Because his name has been bound up with Israel, Israel is redeemed when God has redeemed himself, that is, has glorified his name; and the suffering of God is the means by which Israel is redeemed. God himself is 'the ransom' for Israel.¹⁰⁰

Moltmann follows this analysis of Shekinah theology with the story from Wiesel.¹⁰¹ In *Night*, Wiesel recounts a hanging he witnessed when he was a prisoner at Buchenwald. Three prisoners were hanged and one of these was a young boy who because he did not weigh enough to cause immediate strangulation, gasped and struggled for breath for a prolonged period of time. As the other prisoners witnessed this torment one called out "Where is God now?" Wiesel hears an answer coming from within himself, "Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows."¹⁰² Read in the context of Wiesel's book, the answer speaks of the death of the God that Wiesel was piously devoted to before his imprisonment. Moltmann re-interprets Wiesel's

⁹⁹ Ibid., 272-273.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 273.

¹⁰¹ Moltmann quotes from Wiesel's book, *Night*, and then reflects on the story from a Christian perspective in *The Crucified God*, 273-274.

¹⁰² Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam books, 1960), 62.

observation that God is hanging on the gallows from a Christian perspective.¹⁰³

Moltmann writes, “Any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment.”¹⁰⁴ Using this story as a paradigm, Moltmann points to the distinctiveness of Christian faith. Linking the story to the suffering of God in Jewish Shekinah theology and to the suffering of God on the cross, Moltmann asserts that Christian theology is valid only if it can be spoken in the presence of the historical reality of this kind of suffering, the senseless suffering of an innocent victim of hate. The Christian response to this suffering is not an answer but a recognition that God suffers with and on behalf of this innocent victim, a recognition grounded in the cross and reaching back to Old Testament testimony. If God suffers with and on behalf of innocent victims, God is at risk and Christian faith is characterized by risk and vulnerability. Finally, Jesus’ cross and resurrection becomes the lens for viewing the suffering of this innocent victim in Buchenwald. Just as Jesus’ entry into human suffering culminating in his historical cross is the ground for new creation so also God’s presence with this suffering innocent victim carries with it the promise and presence of redemption. Recognizing this place of agonizing suffering as the place of God’s presence requires Christian faith to be a practice of counter reality, a counter reality that brings hope to the hopeless filling the emptiness of waiting with anticipation of the fulfillment of God’s promises.¹⁰⁵

Sobrino, like Moltmann, understands the distinctiveness of Christian faith to lie in risk, vulnerability, and the practice of counter-reality. In the first pages of his book,

¹⁰³ Moltmann does not clearly state that he is re-interpreting Wiesel.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁰⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 272-274.

Jesus the Liberator, Sobrino draws attention to the fact that even the title of his book is a practice of counter-reality in Latin America. Sobrino writes,

This book seeks to present the Christ who is Jesus of Nazareth, and so I have called it “Jesus the liberator.” This choice of title was not easy, however, since writing from Latin America and specifically from El Salvador, we tend to speak of “Jesus Christ crucified.” Faith points ineluctably to the first title; history forcefully reminds us of the second.¹⁰⁶

The recognition that history forcefully pushes Christians back to Jesus Christ crucified is shared by both Moltmann and Sobrino. Both theologians are alike in articulating the idea that for Christians, the cross is understood as God’s entry into the risk and vulnerability of human suffering. God’s entry into this place offers both solidarity with human beings in their suffering and hope for future redemption. The contemplation of the cross for Christians then is identity forming in the same way that the exile is identity forming for Israel. The conditions of suffering in the world are not escaped but are viewed through the lens of exile/homecoming, cross/resurrection. For Brueggemann, Moltmann, and Sobrino therefore, the source for knowledge of God does not come from rising above the world but from entering into the risk and vulnerability of its most painful circumstances. Understanding exile and the cross as identity forming for people of faith leads Brueggemann, Moltmann and Sobrino to articulate a dialectical notion of God.

For Brueggemann, Moltmann and Sobrino, the exploration of a dialectical notion of God has two components. The first component is epistemological; all knowledge of God is arrived at dialectically. The second component extends beyond this epistemological principle and arrives at a notion of God that involves suffering and humiliation as revelations of God. While both components of a dialectical notion of God

¹⁰⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 1.

are discussed by all three theologians, the emphasis of each writer differs and is worth exploring.

In the beginning of *TOT*, Brueggemann discusses the history of biblical interpretation noting the impact of Barth's commentary on Romans. In that commentary, Barth challenges nineteenth and early twentieth century biblical interpretations that rooted analysis of the biblical text in the cultural progressivism that dominated the intellectual and religious institutions of that time period. Barth insisted that the Bible spoke on its own terms in polemical, abrasive, bold and daring speech and without appeal to "natural reason."¹⁰⁷ Brueggemann writes,

Thus Barth programmatically reached behind Descartes and appealed to Anselm's notion of "faith seeking understanding." That is, faith is not a conclusion that may or may not result from reflection. It is, rather, a nonnegotiable premise and assumption of all right reading of the Bible and all right faith. Barth understood that over against this claim, the premise of Enlightenment autonomy as expressed in historical criticism is also not a conclusion, but a nonnegotiable premise and assumption. In this enormous epistemological maneuver, Barth placed in question the entire enterprise of modern criticism, which sought to conform the text to the canon of modern reason. At its foundation, the epistemological reference point of nineteenth-century criticism is irreconcilable with Barth's beginning point.¹⁰⁸

Brueggemann argues that while many have easily charged Barth with fideism, the historical criticism that Barth challenged is also "an act of philosophical fideism."¹⁰⁹ Brueggemann admits that biblical interpretation has necessarily moved beyond Barth but the theology Barth began, theology that was called "dialectical," emphasized rhetoric,

¹⁰⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 16-18.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

and recognized that “reality is deeply grounded in speech,” continues to exert a powerful influence on all biblical interpretation.¹¹⁰

Brueggemann’s analysis of Old Testament interpretation concludes by noting that contemporary attempts to write Old Testament theology are dominated by various dialectical schemes. These contemporary theologies are presented as bi-polar schemes that recognize two competing centers of thought in the Old Testament. Brueggemann notes several examples of these bi-polar schemes: C. Westermann on blessing and deliverance, S. Terrien on aesthetic theology and ethics, and P. D. Hanson on cosmic theology and teleological theology.¹¹¹ Each of these bi-polar schemes recognizes the need to move beyond any attempt to find a single center for the Old Testament as “no motif can contain all of the elements.”¹¹² Rather, Israel’s speech about God moves in two directions, one that seeks certainty that rises above the conditions of the world and legitimates truth and another that acknowledges the ambiguity of lived experience. Brueggemann also follows a bi-polar scheme in his Old Testament theology refusing to eliminate the vital tension in the Old Testament between testimony (the majority voice), the voice that seeks certainty above the conditions of the world and legitimates truth, and counter-testimony (the minority voice), the voice that expresses the pain and ambiguity of lived experience.

Brueggemann, like Barth, believes that “reality is deeply grounded in speech.”¹¹³ That there is tension in the speech about God in the Old Testament is evidence of tension in the reality of God. Brueggemann argues that there is a tension in the character of God,

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹¹¹ Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation,” 29.

¹¹² Ibid., 28.

¹¹³ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 18; idem, “A Shattered Transcendence,” 172.

a tension between God's sovereignty and God's compassion to the point of pathos. For Brueggemann, therefore the epistemological route to God is dialectical because God is dialectical. The tension in the rhetoric of Israel is tension that has its basis in the subject of that rhetoric, God.

According to Brueggemann, recognizing tension in God reduces the danger of two forms of denial that negatively impact Christian theology. The first is the denial of the irrationality of the human process and the second is denial of God as a party at risk.¹¹⁴ When the irrationality of the human process is denied, pain is understood to have a rational cause, often tied to morality, which could be eliminated through some form of correction by the victims of suffering. When pain is viewed in this light not only are other causes of suffering such as enemies of God, corrupted structures of power and unexplainable sicknesses ignored, but also expressions of rage and pain are silenced, and the minority voice that provides the Old Testament with the necessary tension for revealing God is eliminated.

Why is tension necessary for revealing God? Tension is necessary because God is relational, dialogical and involved in every cubit of the drama of guilt and forgiveness that lies at the heart of the narrative of the Old Testament.¹¹⁵ Not only does the Old Testament allow for expression of pain but it actually testifies to God's entry into that pain. God not only enters into the irrationality of the pain of innocent victims, but into the irrationality of the pain caused by sinful Israel. Tension arises because God is sovereign and free and the Old Testament testifies to that sovereignty and freedom, but it also testifies to God's entry into risky solidarity with Israel. Brueggemann argues that the

¹¹⁴ Brueggemann, "The Friday Voice of Faith," 15.

¹¹⁵ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 14-15.

metaphor of personhood is used to express the notion of God in the Old Testament.¹¹⁶ That metaphor is used as God responds to both individual and corporate cries of lament with compassion and suffering love. The dialogical and relational notion of God is expressed as the Old Testament narrative testifies to a deepening of God's compassion and God's willingness to suffer on behalf of Israel in, and through the drama of the guilt and forgiveness of exile/homecoming.¹¹⁷ Israel testifies that God enters into exile with Israel. Without that risky solidarity, God would not be open to history, nor would God's power be that of love.

Moltmann's notion of God is influenced by the theology of Abraham Heschel. Heschel, like Brueggemann, recognizes that the speech about God in the Old Testament is bi-polar. For Heschel, this means that God is both transcendent and immanent. Rather than divide the relational qualities of God between sovereignty and compassion to the point of pathos as Brueggemann does, Heschel emphasizes that God is sovereign and compassionate in both God's transcendence and immanence. While Brueggemann divides the relational qualities of God, Heschel understands these relational qualities to be in the service of love. Heschel also insists that God remains transcendent in his immanence and related in his transcendence.¹¹⁸ For Heschel, the transcendence of God precedes immanence and while human beings know God through God's immanence, transcendence remains ever more than that immanence and therefore knowledge of God is partial and the mystery of God is protected.¹¹⁹ The mystery of God is not abstract,

¹¹⁶ Brueggemann, *A Shattered Transcendence*, 172.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 180; idem, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 311.

¹¹⁸ Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2, 266.

¹¹⁹ In *Energies of the Spirit: Trinitarian Models in Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Theology*, Duncan Reid points out that Heschel becomes a source for discussing the relationship between act and being in our experience of God. Reid argues that act and being are not separate in our experience of God but God is

however, but relational and according to Heschel the prophets understood the gulf that separates human beings from God to be crossed by God's pathos.¹²⁰ Heschel's notion of God centers on the pathos of God. God is in search of man and seeks a relationship with human beings even though this relationship causes pain to God, even though it involves risk and vulnerability for God. For Heschel, God is at risk because the world is not fully redeemed. Until redemption, God is grieved and suffers with the plight of the oppressed; God is pained by disobedience that results in injustice. In an article, "Abraham Joshua Heschel: the Pathos of God," John Merkle describes Heschel's understanding of the cause of God's suffering, "God experiences need and suffering not because God is imperfect but because God is not the only one with a role to play in the drama of redemption."¹²¹

Moltmann follows Heschel by also insisting on the primacy of love in any notion of God and in recognizing that God's suffering is a necessary and profound aspect of God's love because the world is not yet fully redeemed. Moltmann insists that a Christian understanding of God must move beyond a bi-polar conception of God to a trinitarian conception of God. For Moltmann, a trinitarian conception of God deepens the dialectical nature of God because the notion of God as trinity begins with the revelation of God on the cross of Jesus Christ, an event in which God is against God.¹²²

also more than we experience. Duncan Reid, *Energies of the Spirit: Trinitarian Models in Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Theology* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), 97-99

¹²⁰ Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2, 8.

¹²¹ John C. Merkle, "Abraham Joshua Heschel: the Pathos of God," *Christianity and Crisis* 45 no. 20 (December 9, 1985), 494.

¹²² Moltmann, "The Crucified God: Perspectives on a Theology of the Cross for Today," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 9 (December, 1974): 22.

The break between the Father and the Son on the cross, results in the sending of the Spirit, the opening of the Trinity to history, and points to an eschatological future in which God will be all in all.¹²³

Moltmann, however, draws his notion of God largely from one event, the revelation of God on the cross of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, that event is viewed almost exclusively through the lens of innocent suffering. As a result, his notion of God neglects the narrative of guilt and forgiveness between God and Israel that culminates in the event of the cross and he therefore fails to maintain the tension between God's transcendence and immanence that is found in Heschel's work. Moltmann also collapses the tension between God's sovereignty and compassion to the point of pathos that is articulated by Brueggemann. Brueggemann writes of Moltmann's discernment of the character of God revealed on the cross,

If Moltmann's rendering of the issue is correct, as I take it to be, then Christian theology is pushed into issues that are as difficult for Christians as for these witnesses in the Old Testament. We are left with solidarity that is short of sovereignty...except for Easter.¹²⁴

Brueggemann's assessment of Moltmann expressed in this quote is accurate, but is Moltmann correct? While Moltmann is led to his focus on innocent suffering by a concern with contemporary history and his belief that God is revealed in history, his neglect of the drama of guilt and forgiveness that lies at the heart of the narrative of God's relationship with human beings is a neglect of history. This neglect results in collapsing the dialectical tension between God's sovereignty and compassion so that God's sovereignty is pushed off into an eschatological future with little evidence of its transformative power at work in the world today.

¹²³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 206-207.

¹²⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 312.

Brueggemann insists on maintaining a dialectical tension in the notion of God because this tension reduces the risk of two forms of denial in Christian theology: denial of the irrationality of pain, and denial of God as a party at risk. Moltmann's notion of God avoids one of these forms of denial; he does not attempt to provide a rational answer to the problem of pain and therefore does not deny the irrationality of pain. Moltmann does, however, deny that God is a party at risk. While Moltmann insists that God is open to history, his panentheistic understanding of the trinity ultimately denies that God is vulnerable or at risk. God may for a time enter into risk and vulnerability but that risk is already resolved in the eschatological future of God's indwelling of all of creation.

The differences between Moltmann and Brueggemann's dialectical notion of God become evident when comparing their use of the word dialectical in expressing the epistemological route to knowledge of God. Brueggemann articulates a dialectical epistemology in which speech about God is divided between the testimony of the majority voice and the minority voice, a tension between testimony to God's freedom, sovereignty and power, and testimony to God's mercy and compassion in the face of painful life experiences. Brueggemann insists that this tension cannot be resolved because God exceeds our human concepts and the destabilization that occurs when this tension is taken seriously is necessary for a true encounter with God.¹²⁵

Moltmann's analysis of human speech about God moves beyond the text of the bible as he explores the difference between analogical and dialectical knowledge of God. Moltmann notes that in analogy, God is known by like whereas in dialectic, God is "only revealed as 'God' in his opposite: godlessness and abandonment by God."¹²⁶ Moltmann

¹²⁵ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 45.

¹²⁶ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 27.

argues that in Christian theology all knowledge of God must be dialectical knowledge. According to Moltmann, this does not eliminate analogy but means that analogy must proceed from dialectic.¹²⁷ Insisting that dialectic precede analogy eliminates the tension in speech about God that Brueggemann finds essential. While Moltmann does not deny analogy as a means to knowledge of God, he preserves the use of analogy for descriptions of eschatological hope while insisting that in this world God is known only through dialectical knowledge. He argues that the Trinitarian event of the cross is an event of kenosis that dissolves “the old dialectic of Godhead and manhood.” Moltmann writes,

Humiliation to the point of death on the cross corresponds to God’s nature in the contradiction of abandonment. When the crucified Jesus is called the “image of the invisible God,” the meaning is that *this* is God, and God is like *this*. God is not greater than he is in self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity. The nucleus of everything that Christian theology says about “God” is to be found in this Christ event. The Christ event on the cross is a God event.¹²⁸

Moltmann’s attempt to express the connection between God and suffering leads him to make statements that collapse the tension between God’s transcendence and immanence.¹²⁹ Sobrino notes that Moltmann’s approach to the relationship between God and suffering, an approach that does not look to God as a solution to suffering and instead allows suffering to be a means to knowledge of God, is preferable to theologies that separate God from suffering. Sobrino argues, however, that in seeking to articulate God’s relationship to suffering, Moltmann is guilty of conceptual extremism, especially

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 205.

¹²⁹ Moltmann’s rejection of the definition of divine nature in patristic Christology contributes to the problems revealed in these statements. An important discussion of the implications of Moltmann’s critique of patristic theology can be found in Bauckham, *The Theology of the Jürgen Moltmann*, 60-65.

in his articulation of the separation between the Father and Son on the cross.¹³⁰

Moltmann approaches Jesus' abandonment from a trinitarian perspective and emphasizes in Jesus' abandonment a break between the Father and the Son. The suffering of the Father is different from the Son but both suffer from the loss of the beloved. The break between the Father and the Son results in the sending of the spirit and the opening of the trinity to the suffering of history.¹³¹

Sobrino, like Moltmann, approaches the cross from a trinitarian perspective but he does not speak of a break between Father and Son. Instead he discusses the surrender of the Father and the surrender of the Son out of love for the sake of human beings.¹³² The Son surrenders in the darkness of faith to the Father in order to fulfill his mission undertaken out of love for human beings and the Father surrenders what is most important to him, the Son, to the world out of love for human beings. The Son suffers abandonment and the Father suffers by being Jesus' "non-active and silent witness."¹³³ Sobrino's statements about God's silence and inactivity given freely in love maintain the tension between God's transcendence and immanence in a way that Moltmann's statements involving the revelation of God in humiliation and helplessness do not.¹³⁴ In addition, while both Moltmann and Sobrino are in agreement that the kenotic love of God is revealed on the cross of Jesus Christ, Sobrino emphasizes Jesus' connection to his mission more fully than Moltmann resulting in a dialectical notion of God that is more connected to history and to the drama of guilt and forgiveness.

¹³⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 246.

¹³¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 206-207.

¹³² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 231.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 231-232.

¹³⁴ See quote on page 205 above.

Sobrino's discussion of the "anti-kingdom" leads to a fuller articulation of the problem of sin than Moltmann.¹³⁵ Sobrino's emphasizes that Jesus' identity is rooted in his relationship to God the Father and to his mission to bring about the kingdom.¹³⁶ Jesus' relational identity is at risk, however, because he is trying to live out his relationship to God the Father and to the kingdom in the face of the "anti-kingdom." It is the force of the anti-kingdom that leads to Jesus' existential experience of the silence of God culminating in his experience of abandonment on the cross.¹³⁷ God's surrender of the son to this experience of darkness is a surrender that is necessary in order for God to be in solidarity with the victim's of the anti-kingdom. By stressing the role of the anti-kingdom, Sobrino's dialectical notion of God does not remain conceptual but is related to the painful experiences of life in the world.

Sobrino's connection to the painful experiences of life in the world is evident in his discussion of epistemology. Sobrino, like Moltmann, argues that knowledge of God drawn from the cross is dialectical knowledge. He notes that while knowledge of God always presupposes relating God to something positive, God is revealed on the cross through abandonment, silence, and inactivity.¹³⁸ This raises serious questions about God's power in relation to sin. On the cross, sin seems to have more power than God.¹³⁹ Sobrino notes that the testimony of the New Testament is that what is revealed on the cross is God's love.¹⁴⁰ Sobrino argues that the revelation of God on the cross is the result of God's original choice of incarnation. That choice of incarnation was a choice to side

¹³⁵ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 50-61.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹³⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 240-246.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 239-240.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

with humanity. The cross is the culmination of that choice and therefore reveals the extent to which God is on the side of suffering humanity. God's love extends to the point that God will be a "God at our mercy." Sobrino equates the title "the Crucified God" with "God of Solidarity," and claims that what is transcendent about God is what is least esoteric and most common, God's love.¹⁴¹

Sobrino's claim that on the cross God is revealed as "God at our mercy," and the "God of solidarity," leads to two insights regarding the epistemological route to knowledge of God. First, contemplation of God on the cross of Jesus Christ is contemplation of God's mercy and love revealed in the suffering of God. Contemplating this suffering leads one to sorrow. This sorrow opens the human heart to the suffering that continues in the world and continues to cause pain to God. Therefore, it is sorrow rather than wonder or sorrow as "a highly qualified sort of wonder" that is the means to access to God.¹⁴²

Secondly, contemplation of God on the cross of Jesus Christ is contemplation of the God of Solidarity. God entered into risky solidarity to fight to liberate the oppressed, the poor and the marginalized. Contemplation of God on the cross not only arouses the attitude of sorrow but also calls the followers of Christ to work to alleviate suffering, to work toward liberation, to fight against the anti-kingdom. In joining Jesus in working toward liberation, disciples of Jesus come to knowledge of God.¹⁴³

Sobrino therefore does not mean the same thing as Moltmann when he argues that knowledge of God is dialectical. Moltmann argues that God is known in weakness, in

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 232.

¹⁴² Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 199.

¹⁴³ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 275; Alfred T. Hennely, S.J. "Theological Method: The Southern Exposure," *Theological Studies* 38 (1977): 721.

suffering, and in helplessness, but Sobrino claims that God is known when weakness, suffering and helplessness meet the power of God, the power of suffering love, a power that is transformative and results in a changed world. Furthermore, Sobrino guards against the conceptual extremism expressed by Moltmann in two important ways. First, sorrow as a highly qualified sort of wonder does not eliminate analogy or push analogy off to an eschatological frontier. Rather sorrow is an expression of God's love revealed in the midst of suffering that leads those who contemplate it to love of God and love of neighbor. Second, while Sobrino points to the cross as a central revelation of God for Christians, he recognizes that it is one revelatory event amongst others. Sobrino insists that the revelation of God on the cross of Jesus Christ should be held in tension with other revelatory events such as creation and exodus.¹⁴⁴

Sobrino's dialectical notion of God is not drawn from the singular event of the cross. Rather, it is informed by exploration of the risk and vulnerability of Jesus' relational identity and recognition of different theological voices in the biblical text. While Sobrino's approach to the meaning of the cross is through the lens of theodicy, because he articulates more fully than Moltmann the role of sin, he stays more connected to the drama of guilt and forgiveness at the heart of the biblical narrative and therefore more connected to history. Sobrino does not attempt to conceptualize God apart from the drama. His attention to sin is attention to both the sin of the oppressors and the sin of the oppressed. For this reason his dialectical notion of God maintains the tension between God's sovereignty and God's compassion to the point of pathos that Brueggemann finds essential in an Old Testament theology of God.

¹⁴⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 247.

Brueggemann, Moltmann, and Sobrino approach their theological projects with acute attentiveness to the voices of the marginalized, drawing upon these voices to articulate a theology of God. All three theologians wrestle with the tension caused by recognizing the importance of triumphant faith claims while at the same time understanding that these important claims can result in a misuse of power, a simplification of the causes of pain, and a notion of God detached from suffering. Moltmann and Sobrino are especially sensitive to reshaping notions of God's power as the power of suffering love. In reshaping notions of God as the power of suffering love, however, there is a risk of reducing the tension between God's sovereignty and God's compassion to the point of pathos. Brueggemann's theology of God drawn from the Old Testament insists that maintaining this tension is necessary for faith and for right speech about God. Without that tension, the notion of God is reduced from the overwhelming, destabilizing presence that the Old Testament describes to a notion that fits within our rational systems of thought.¹⁴⁵ Once a notion of God is reduced to a closed system of thought, there is a danger that the reduced notion of God will be manipulated and expressions of pain that challenge that notion will be eliminated. For this reason, Brueggemann, Moltmann, and Sobrino insist that the voices of pain provide the vital, life giving questions for theological inquiry. Until the world is fully redeemed, the questions raised in suffering are the questions that keep theological inquiry open to a meeting with the overwhelming, destabilizing, suffering love of God.

¹⁴⁵ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 45.

Chapter Five

Conclusions and Implications for Christian Theology and Practice

In his book, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Raymond Brown draws attention to the fact that many speeches and sermons in the book of Acts begin by recounting Old Testament stories.¹ The book of Acts provides evidence that the Old Testament was an important source for preaching in the early Christian church. Despite this evidence however, there have been times in history when the Old Testament has been neglected as a source for preaching. Brown writes,

By way of particular example, for centuries the OT (except for verses from the Psalms) was never read in Roman Catholic churches on Sundays, a neglect that left people unfamiliar with what was taught so well there. In the aftermath of Vatican II that defect has been corrected, and yet it is disappointing how seldom the OT readings are the subject of the homily. Preachers turn too easily and quickly to the Gospel reading for their topic, even when the very thing that might most challenge their audience is the OT passage!²

Despite this neglect, Brown argues that recalling the Old Testament story is vital for Christianity. Brown writes,

Long centuries after God first called the Hebrew slaves and made them the people of Israel, their self-understanding would be tested as to whether anything had really changed because of that calling, especially when they lost the Promised Land and were carried off into exile. In other words, they lived through beforehand what has often been the Christian experience in the centuries after Jesus. Both Jews and Christians have needed faith in order to see God's realities in and through a long history where at times God seems to be absent. The New Testament alone covers too short a period of time and is too filled with success to give Christians such lessons.³

Brown observes that because the Old Testament covers a longer period of history than the New Testament, it contains within it lessons for living through times when

¹ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *An Introduction to The New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 328.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

evidence of God's presence is difficult to find. Systematic theologies focused on the cross of Jesus Christ view the cross as both the point of deepest insight into the experience of God's silence and the deepest revelation of God's identity. Without denying that the cross provides the deepest insight into the experience of God's silence, the faith lessons learned by the people of Israel as they lived through long periods of history when God's silence dominated, can provide insights that both challenge and deepen Christian contemplation of God's revelation on the cross of Jesus Christ. The root of those insights lies in recognizing both the importance and complexity of the speech about God in the Old Testament.

This concluding chapter will explore the implications of the conversation between the Old Testament theology of Walter Brueggemann and the theologies of the cross of Jürgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino for Christian theology and practice. The focus will be on the insights gained for a theology of the cross through the incorporation of Old Testament theology's discernment of God in silence, absence, hiddenness, and suffering. Attention will be given to Christian theology's response to the theodicy question, the role and significance of history in Christian theology, the role and freedom of the human partner in the relationship between God and human beings, and the role of lament in Christian theology and practice.

Conclusions and Implications of this Study for Christian Theology

While the theologies of Moltmann and Sobrino center on God's revelation on the cross of Jesus Christ, both recognize that God's relationship to Israel in the Old Testament is foundational for interpreting the meaning and significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Both these theologians, in different ways, draw attention to the

significance of history as the mode of God's revelation. Moltmann understands that the unfolding revelation of God in the Old Testament is tied to historical events that create tension when the lived experience of Israel calls into question both the promises of God and the traditions of Israel formed to remember and celebrate those promises. As Israel lives through difficult historical times, their struggle with the questions evoked by their lived experience yields deeper insights into the promises of God and as a result, the traditions of Israel are re-shaped and re-used often with an accompanying deepening of faith.⁴

Sobrino emphasizes God's relationship to history by noting five Old Testament traditions that differ from one another precisely in the way God's relationship to history is described. The five Old Testament traditions Sobrino points to are: exodus, the prophets, apocalyptic texts, wisdom and existential elements.⁵ Sobrino notes that each tradition emphasizes different aspects of the biblical revelation of God. So for example, the exodus tradition emphasizes God's saving action while the wisdom tradition emphasizes God's provident activity hidden in God's silence. While the primary focus of Sobrino's theology is the revelation of God on the cross, he maintains that this revelation must be held in tension with other revelatory events in the Old Testament.⁶

For both Moltmann and Sobrino the revelation of God in the Old Testament is significant particularly as a basis for understanding the relationship between God and history. For Sobrino, the Old Testament is also a source for understanding the roots of

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 95-127; Don Schweitzer, "The Consistency of Jürgen Moltmann's Theology," *Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (1993): 198-199.

⁵ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

Jesus' notion of God. Brueggemann's thorough study of the theology of God in the Old Testament provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between God and history drawn from the Old Testament text. This more nuanced understanding emphasizes the relationship between God and suffering in the Old Testament. Recognizing the relationship between God and suffering in the Old Testament provides a foundation for contemplating the relationship between God and suffering revealed on the cross of Jesus Christ that is at the heart of the theologies of the cross of both Moltmann and Sobrino.

Brueggemann's theology allows the complexity of the theology of God in the Old Testament to surface by insisting that in Israel, speech about God moved in two directions. First, Israel testified to God as an active, powerful agent who creates, promises, delivers, commands, and leads. This testimony to God's transformative action is labeled the "majority voice" by Brueggemann and emphasizes the covenantal relationship between God and Israel as well as the sovereignty, holiness, and transcendence of God.⁷ A second voice, referred to as the "minority voice" testified to the often painful reality of living in the world. This voice spoke honestly about experiencing life in the world with little if any evidence of God's transformative involvement and testified to pain that was not healed, was not redeemed, and that often ended in destruction, despair and death.⁸ While less prominent than the majority voice,

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 398-399.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 no. 3 (July, 1985): 398-399.

the minority voice nevertheless exerted a vital influence on Old Testament theology of God.⁹

The inclusion of the minority voice in the canon of the Old Testament reveals that Israel's faith in God was open-ended and provisional. The faith of Israel was not based in a closed system of certainty. Rather, the questions, disruptions, and challenges of the minority voice are woven in and throughout Israel's testimony. The minority voice challenges all settled notions of God and will not allow a closed system of thought to deny or repress the reality of lived experience.¹⁰ The inclusion of the often disputatious minority voice shows that at the heart of Israel's testimony was a God who was relational, dialogical, and involved in "every cubit of the drama of guilt and forgiveness" described in the biblical narrative.¹¹

Despite the lack of evidence of God's transformative action through long periods of Israel's history, the minority voice reveals that faith continued through these trying times. The minority voice may be a voice of despair and pain but it remains a faithful voice included in the faithful testimony of Israel. Furthermore, Brueggemann insists that the minority voice was not simply a way for Israel to release pent up emotions caused by difficult circumstances but a means of transforming the situation by calling upon God.¹² The minority voice calls upon God to be involved in the plight of Israel and God's actions in the biblical narrative are often a response to the cries of the minority voice.¹³ The voice of pain is not silenced in Israel but rather the questions, arguments, laments

⁹ Ibid., 414; Idem, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 322-323.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 323-332.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 15.

¹² Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II," 398.

¹³ Exodus 2: 23-25.

and truth telling of the minority voice became a vital life giving source for theological reflection leading to a deeper more profound understanding of God's involvement with Israel.

Brueggemann's attempt to organize the theology of the Old Testament through the law court metaphor using testimony (the majority voice) and counter testimony (the minority voice) highlights the importance of a dialectical notion of God in the Old Testament. A dialectical notion of God emerges because God is transcendent, sovereign and free and at the same time relational, dialogical, and involved in the ambiguities of life in the world. What is significant about Brueggemann's theological project is that it shows that the minority voice is not separated out appearing only at certain points in Israel's history, but rather throughout all biblical literature there is interplay of testimony and counter-testimony, of certainty and ambiguity. The questions raised by life circumstances are the constant source for deeper theological reflection and theological reflection in the midst of painful life circumstances leads to profound revelation of God.

Brueggemann provides examples of the interweaving of the majority and minority voice in Israel's testimony. As an example of this interweaving he points to creation texts that emerge during the exile.¹⁴ The exile was a time of crises in Israel raising the deepest theological questions, questions concerning God's power, God's relationship to Israel and the other nations, Israel's status as a nation and a people, and how to worship God in a foreign land. Yet despite collapse and uncertainty in the theological, sociological and political structures of Israel, Israel's theological reflection during this time yielded the creation texts of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Genesis. These creation texts

¹⁴ The texts Brueggemann discusses are Isaiah 45: 12-13; 40: 28-31; 43:1-44:2; Jer 10:1-16; Amos 4:13; Gen 1:1-2:4; *Theology of the Old Testament*, 150-154.

testify to Yahweh's transcendence, holiness, and sovereignty over the whole world, to life as given and ordered by Yahweh, to the responsibility of Israel to live according to Yahweh's purposes and to worship Yahweh as the source and summit of their lives. This example shows that Israel's speech about God forms a counter-reality. It is testimony in contrast with their lived experience.¹⁵ Israel's most profound theological reflection of God as creator of the world and the world as purposely ordered by God did not arise from contemplation of the world's goodness in peaceful, idyllic circumstances. Rather, this reflection took place dialectically in the midst of life circumstances that could lead to very different conclusions.

The creation texts that emerge during the exile demonstrate that a dialectical notion of God is rooted very deeply in the theological testimony of Israel. These texts challenge the notion that Old Testament speech about God can be easily divided between traditions that testify to God's active transformative presence in the world and times when God's activity is difficult to discern. It shows that the centrality of the theodicy question does not begin in Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross but is formative throughout the shaping and discernment of God's relationship with Israel.

The theodicy question arises and is central to the shaping and discernment of God in Israel precisely because of Israel's notion of God. If Israel understood God to be impersonal, non-relational and existing in perfected transcendence independent of the lived experience of human beings there would be no reason to raise questions from painful life experiences. These experiences would simply be accepted as the consequence of an impersonal fate. It is because Israel understands God to be dialogical,

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 68.

personal, and able and willing to act on their behalf that the theodicy question emerges and becomes a vital transformative voice.¹⁶

The theodicy question protects two vital insights in Israel's speech about God. First, Israel understands that God is good and life ordered according to God's purposes should be good. Second, when life is not good, God has the power to transform the situation. In Israel's testimony, however, these two insights come into tension with history when that history is dominated by suffering that moves beyond any rational explanation or theological system. Remarkably, while Israel experiences times of suffering that move beyond rational explanation, the testimony of Israel preserves the tension. Israel maintains hope in the goodness and power of God despite evidence to the contrary and at the same time will not repress the truth of their experience in order to maintain a theological ideal.¹⁷ Rather their suffering reinforces their hope and their hope is more deeply understood in the midst of their suffering. When the people of Israel experience pain, that pain becomes the source for communion with God. Communion with God arising from painful life circumstances often takes the form of challenging, pleading, lamenting and intense wrestling rather than peaceful contemplation but it is precisely these forms of communion that point most clearly to the revelation of God as dialogical and open to history.

Brueggemann points to the lament tradition of Israel as an indication of the dialogical, open, provisional nature of God revealed in Old Testament theology. He argues that through the lament tradition, Israel avoids closure in their theological

¹⁶ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 55.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 323-332.

system.¹⁸ Noting that all theological systems have a tendency toward closure, he draws attention to two prevalent forms of closure operating in contemporary Christian theology: the denial of the irrationality of the human process and the denial of God as a party at risk.¹⁹ Moltmann and Sobrino do not explicitly discuss these two forms of denial and yet in their theologies of the cross they emphasize both innocent suffering and God's participation in suffering, an emphasis that implicitly aims at overcoming the forms of denial discussed by Brueggemann. Study of the dialogical structure of Israel's speech about God provides fertile ground for overcoming these two forms of closure in Christian theology.

Brueggemann argues that by denying the irrationality of the human process and denying that God is at risk, Christian theology is tempted toward reduction of the biblical drama of guilt and forgiveness in two directions. On the one hand, there is a temptation toward a system of retributive justice with its clear cut categories of right and wrong, of blessing and curse. On the other hand, there is a temptation toward ignoring all categories of right and wrong through an understanding of grace that too cleanly and easily wipes away all guilt through God's sacrificial, forgiving love.²⁰ Both temptations miss the complexity of guilt and forgiveness as it is revealed in the biblical narrative and most importantly God's involvement in the pain caused by that drama of guilt and forgiveness.

According to Brueggemann, the lament tradition shows the openness of Old Testament theology to the irrationality of the human process. The laments of Israel

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, (1986): 61; idem, "Friday Voice of Faith," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36, no. 1 (April 2001): 12.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, "Friday Voice of Faith," 15.

²⁰ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 14-15.

reveal that Israel did not attribute all pain to sin, nor was God addressed as if God were completely innocent of blame. Rather, many factors contributing to the painful circumstances of people in pain were articulated in the laments of Israel. Those factors included not only sin but also enemies of Israel, enemies of God, sickness and chaos.²¹ The inclusion of these factors shows that Israel's faith relationship with God was open-ended and provisional. All the complexity of life in the world, experiences that were clearly understood as well as experiences that moved beyond rational explanation were included in Israel's theological reflection and more importantly in their interaction with God. Furthermore, the lament tradition shows that Israel did not reduce the relationship between God and human beings to the issue of sin and forgiveness or to the problem of death as the cessation of life.²² Rather all pain and suffering, the pain and suffering caused by sin as well as the pain and suffering that could not be explained, was included as important in Israel's relationship with God.

Israel understood that their life was dependent on their relationship with God. Life was given to them as both gift and task. This life given to them did not consist of mere survival, however. Life lived as gift and task in relationship with God was to be abundant and full, a life of blessing. The belief that life lived with God should be good and abundant is the foundation of the lament tradition in Israel. In the lament tradition, Israel expresses either to God against neighbor, or to God against God the truth that their lived experience falls short of the life of blessing promised by God.²³ The importance of

²¹ Brueggemann, "Shrill Voice of the Wounded Party," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 21 (June 1999): 9, 15.

²² Claus Westermann, "The Role of Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 28 (1974): 34.

²³ Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," 62.

the lament tradition is not limited to expression of this pain, however. In Old Testament theology, laments are linked to God's salvific action.²⁴

Brueggemann points out that the exodus tradition of Israel begins with a lament. Israel cries out to God from bondage and the result is God's saving action on their behalf.²⁵ Throughout the Old Testament, God's active transformative presence is tied to dialogue with human beings. Abraham and Moses are exemplary figures in Israel. Both are boldly challenging in their conversations with God and God responds to their challenges. God saves Lot in response to Abraham's challenge concerning the relationship between God's justice and the plight of the innocent and God continues to be present with Israel after the golden calf incident because of Moses' mediation on their behalf.²⁶ Brueggemann notes that in the Old Testament, the challenges directed to God that arises from painful life experiences drive the drama between God and Israel. He writes,

The sequence of lament-response from God evidences that the sovereign presence of Yahweh would be neither visible nor effective unless Israel sounded its voice of protest and hurt. If Israel had remained mute in submission and passive in pain, then Yahweh's sovereignty would not be enacted.²⁷

In the above quotation, Brueggemann claims that Yahweh's sovereignty is enacted through the bold laments of Israel. Through analysis of the interactionism between God and Israel during the exile he claims that not only is Yahweh's sovereignty enacted, but the character of Yahweh is impinged upon by that interaction.²⁸

Brueggemann asserts that in the event of the exile, God is at risk. God is at risk because

²⁴ Westermann, "Role of Lament," 21.

²⁵ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 55.

²⁶ Gen 18:16-33; Gen 19: 29; Ex: 32: 30-34; 33: 12-17; Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 54.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁸ Brueggemann, "A Shattered Transcendence," 173.

God freely chooses to be connected in a covenant relationship with Israel and is therefore not unaffected by Israel's response toward God. Israel's sin is a problem for God and God suffers with Israel during the exile. God is open to Israel's history and God is involved in Israel's suffering.²⁹

Brueggemann notes two movements of God toward Israel during the exile. The first movement is characterized by distance. God abandons Israel in response to Israel's sin. Brueggemann notes that while the extent of that abandonment is impossible to ascertain, there are Old Testament texts that testify to a clear break between God and Israel.³⁰ The second movement is toward reconciliation that comes as a result of God's compassion toward Israel. The compassion of God, however, is deepened as a result of the event of the exile. Brueggemann claims that the exile evokes new depths of compassion in God and a new resolve for fidelity toward Israel.³¹

Importantly, Brueggemann's analysis of the book of Job reveals that while God is dialogical, responds to Israel's cries of lament and is open to Israel's history and therefore at risk, at the same time God remains transcendent, sovereign and free. Brueggemann points out that God's response to Job is not one of accommodation or saving action. Rather, God's speeches to Job emphasize God's transcendence and freedom, a transcendence and freedom that move beyond the rational human systems of theological reflection that are the subject of the speeches of Job's friends.³² Despite God's lack of concession to Job's demands for explanation, Job is transformed by the sheer power of the presence of God. While drawing attention to God's endorsement of

²⁹ Ibid. 173-180.

³⁰ Ibid., 173.

³¹ Ibid., 180; idem, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 311.

³² Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 62.

Job's honest speech, Brueggemann notes that the emphasis of the dialogue between God and Job is on the freedom of God to be God.³³

A significant contribution of Brueggemann's theology of the Old Testament is his insistence upon the freedom of God to be God even to the point of putting the stability of God as risk.³⁴ By insisting on the freedom of God to be God, Brueggemann's theology of God maintains a dialectical tension between God's freedom from the ambiguities of the world and God's compassion to the point of pathos.³⁵ At the same time, his theology emphasizes that the deepest revelation of God often arises in the midst of life's most painful circumstances.³⁶ Why does the deepest revelation of God arise in the midst of life's most painful circumstances? One possible answer is that suffering calls all forms of certainty into question. Suffering forces confrontation with the realities of life that move beyond human control. The God who is revealed in the midst of life's most painful circumstances is not subject to rational systems but comes as sheer gift in transformative freedom.

Brueggemann's theology of God emphasizing the relationship between God and suffering in the Old Testament highlights the centrality and purpose of the theodicy question for revealing God, the dialectical nature of revelation leading to a dialectical notion of God and the importance of avoiding closure in theology. Brueggemann specifically focuses on closure that is the result of two forms denial, denial of the irrationality of the human process and denial of God as a party at risk. The insights that arise from Brueggemann's study have meaning for Christian theology and when used as a

³³ Ibid.; idem, "Friday Voice of Faith," 21.

³⁴ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 45; idem, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 303.

³⁵ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 268-272.

³⁶ Ibid., 68.

lens for viewing the theologies of the cross of Moltmann and Sobrino contribute to a deeper understanding of God's revelation on the cross of Jesus Christ.

It was stated above that the theodicy question is interwoven throughout the testimony of the Old Testament text and is rooted in Israel's understanding of God. The theodicy question in the Old Testament prevented the articulation of the experience of suffering from being repressed by a system that claimed to be able to explain its cause. It also prevented suffering from being accepted as a new form of certainty. Jon Sobrino acknowledges the importance of the theodicy question in the Old Testament and claims that the New Testament's interpretation of the meaning of the cross of Jesus Christ is shaped by the Old Testament's approach to the theodicy question.³⁷ Even before this explicit reference to the importance of the theodicy question however, the revelation of God preserved by the theodicy question in the Old Testament exerts influence on Sobrino's description of Jesus' mission.

Sobrino relies on the gospel of Mark for his analysis of Jesus' mission and divides Jesus' mission into two movements separated by the Galilean crises.³⁸ In the first movement, Jesus proclaims the coming of God's kingdom and actively brings God's power to bear on the world through teaching, preaching, healing, casting out demons, and forgiving sins. Sobrino argues that Jesus' notion of God during this period of his mission is drawn from and in continuity with the exodus, prophetic, apocalyptic and wisdom traditions of the Old Testament.³⁹ The second movement in Jesus' life is characterized by failure. Jesus realizes that he will not overcome the power of the anti-kingdom and

³⁷ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 221.

³⁸ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1978), 93.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

that his inevitable future is suffering and death. Sobrino claims that Jesus' notion of God in this second movement of his life is drawn from his own existential experience of God's silence. While Jesus' existential experience is similar to existential traditions in the Old Testament, Sobrino claims that Jesus' notion of God during this trial of his life moves beyond the testimony of the Old Testament and is unique to Jesus.⁴⁰

The strength of Sobrino's analysis of Jesus' notion of God is that by dividing Jesus' life into two movements, he maintains a dialectical tension between Jesus' notion of God in the first part of his mission, a time characterized by God drawing near and his experience of suffering in the second part of his mission, a time dominated by God's silence. By describing Jesus' mission in this way, Sobrino protects the two vital insights that are also protected by the theodicy question in Israel's speech about God. One that God is good and life ordered according to God's purposes should be good. Two, when life is not good, God has the power to transform the situation. The first half of Jesus' mission testifies to God's goodness and the hope for God's blessing that should characterize the life of the faithful. The evident message of Jesus' mission in the first half of Mark's gospel is that it is good news for God to draw near. This belief in God's goodness is contrasted in Jesus' own history however in the second half of his mission. Jesus' suffering and death on the cross experienced in the midst of God's silence calls into question both the goodness of God and God's power to transform the situation. Jesus continues to trust and hope in the goodness and power of God but this goodness and power is not evident.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁴¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 239-240.

Sobrino describes Jesus' relationship to God throughout his lifetime as one of trust-availability.⁴² In the first half of his mission, that trust-availability results in Jesus' acts of power. In the second half of Jesus' mission however, the anti-kingdom seems to have more power than God and therefore trust-availability is characterized not by acts of power but by surrender. Sobrino describes that surrender as "letting God be God."⁴³ Jesus' movement from actively bringing God's transformative presence to bear on the world to surrender to God as mystery is not described as smooth and seamless by the New Testament writers. Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane is characterized by anguish and a request to "take this cup away from me."⁴⁴ The last words of Jesus recorded in the gospels of Mark and Matthew are words of dereliction taken from an Old Testament lament.⁴⁵ The theodicy question lies at the heart of Jesus' history.

Bringing Brueggemann's Old Testament theology of God into conversation with Sobrino's analysis of Jesus' mission leads to deeper insights into the theodicy question at the heart of Jesus' life. The theodicy question is central for revelation of God in both Jesus' ministry and in the Old Testament. Life in the world is characterized by ambiguity and forces that move beyond a rational system. Faith in God therefore consists of communion with God throughout all of life's experiences. At times that communion might result in God's transformative power working through the faithful. At other times, however that communion will either consist of arguing, lamenting, and wrestling with God or surrender to God in the midst of the mystery of God's silence. The recognition of

⁴² Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 87-108; idem, *Jesus the Liberator*, 141-159.

⁴³ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 154.

⁴⁴ Mk 14:35-36; Mt 26:39; Lk 22:41; Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 155.

⁴⁵ Mt 26:46; Mk 15: 34; Ps 22:2.

different forms of communion with God places emphasis on the relational, dialogical nature of God. Because God is relational and dialogical, God is involved in suffering.

God's relationship to suffering is central to Old Testament speech about God and forms the backdrop for understanding God's relationship to suffering as it is revealed on the cross of Jesus Christ. Suffering, particularly the suffering of the innocent, strips away attempts to fit God into a system, to tame God by reducing the mystery, or to deny the irrationality of the human experience, the power of sin or that God is a party at risk.

Sobrino argues that Jesus' death on the cross is the consequence of incarnation. In the incarnation, God chooses to draw near to human beings in love. Incarnation involves risk for God because entering into the human situation means entering into the vulnerability of human life, which is subject to the powers of sin, chaos, and death. Sobrino argues that the incarnation reveals the extent to which God is on our side. God is on our side to the point of being a God "at our mercy."⁴⁶

In exploring God's relationship to suffering, Moltmann discusses Shekinah theology as background for understanding the relationship between God and suffering revealed on the cross. The Shekinah theology of the rabbis' focuses on God's involvement with human suffering and concludes that God suffered with and on behalf of Israel to the point of entering into exile with them. Moltmann notes that according to this theology, God suffers not only on behalf of the innocent but also on behalf of the guilty.⁴⁷

Sobrino appeals to incarnation and Moltmann appeals to Shekinah theology in order to emphasize that God's relationship to history is marked by risk and vulnerability, a risk and vulnerability that involves suffering. Moltmann and Sobrino draw attention to

⁴⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 232.

⁴⁷ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 272.

the fact that God freely chooses to enter into this risk and vulnerability for the sake of human beings and this choice highlights God's mercy.⁴⁸ In contemplating the relationship between God and suffering, God's mercy is revealed.

Both Moltmann and Sobrino indicate that Jesus' notion of God differs from his contemporaries specifically in the accent Jesus places on God's freedom to show grace through compassionate love.⁴⁹ God's freedom to show grace through compassionate love is most clearly seen in God's mercy. Jesus' contemplation of the mercy of God is foundational for Jesus' ministry to the marginal members of society and leads him to understand the need to eradicate sin by bearing it.⁵⁰ Most importantly however, Jesus' ministry and his death and resurrection reveal that God's mercy is not without power.⁵¹

Mercy is a power that opposes and is opposed to the world's vision of power. In the world's vision of power, power is associated with control over others while mercy is associated with giving up or not exercising power over others. Mercy is not an authoritative power that controls and manipulates people from the outside. Rather it is a form of power that meets people in the midst of their pain, embraces them and renews them through liberation. The issue of the use and misuse of power is significant in the theologies of Brueggemann, Moltmann and Sobrino as each of these theologians recognizes the connection between notions of God and political systems.

Brueggemann argues that there is a correlation between closed and authoritative political, sociological and theological systems and the abuse of power. The more abusive a system is the more closed it is to hearing the undercurrent of the voices of pain in that

⁴⁸ Ibid., 127-129; Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 90.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 94.

⁵¹ Ibid., 261.

society. Visible pain bearers are a problem for an abusive system because the suffering of the pain bearers challenges the certainty that is necessary for maintaining authoritative power.⁵² Jesus' acts of power in bringing the kingdom of God to bear on the world were directed in large part to people on the margins of Israelite society: the sick, the poor, the mentally ill, women and sinners. Jesus, grounded in God's mercy, actively reaches out to these people and by doing so makes both the pain bearers and God's transformative mercy visible. Mercy has power in Jesus ministry, life giving transformative power. God is the source of that power. Because of Jesus' relationship of trust-availability to God, God's life giving transformative power is visible through acts of mercy often directed to those with very little power in the world. The force of the power of mercy in Jesus' ministry is seen in the determinative effort to silence Jesus. Jesus' preaching, teaching and healing ministry while peaceful nevertheless raised tremendous opposition from both the Jewish leadership of Israel and the leaders of the Roman Empire.⁵³

Jesus' contemplation of God's mercy leads him to the cross and the cross is the event that most definitively reveals God's mercy. Both Moltmann and Sobrino recognize the cross as the revelation of God's active participation in suffering for the sake of and in solidarity with human beings. The New Testament states that what is revealed on the cross is God's love, a love that is characterized as self-emptying and merciful. The resurrection of Jesus confirms that this love has power but it is a form of power not easily recognized or understood. Elizabeth Johnson writes,

We seek an understanding that does not divide power and compassionate love in a dualistic framework that identifies love with a resignation of power and the exercise of power with a denial of love. Rather, we seek to

⁵² Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology I: Structure Legitimation," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (July 1985): 41-42.

⁵³ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 127; Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 209.

integrate these two, seeing love as the shape in which divine power appears.⁵⁴

Recognizing that in Jesus' ministry the accent is on God's freedom to show grace through compassionate love and understanding that this love is characterized as self-emptying and merciful is both challenge and threat to the world's vision of power and authority. If "love is the shape in which divine power appears" then that power cannot be controlled or manipulated by either the political or religious leadership. Instead, it comes as sheer gift in freedom.

The difficulty in understanding this form of power is seen in the temptation toward a theology of glory that represses or denies the theology of the cross. The notion of God drawn from the cross is a notion that emphasizes God's real participation in suffering. Jesus' question from the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"⁵⁵ is in continuity with all the faithful who have experienced the impotence and inexplicability of suffering that cannot be reconciled with the goodness and promises of God. Yet in this same cry is also seen the participation of God in the suffering of the world. Biblical notions of God emerge from and remain connected to the ambiguities of life in the world. Because God is dialogical, provisional, open-ended and most importantly a God of compassionate love, God participates in suffering and through that participation redeems it. The notion of God drawn from the cross has important implications for Christian practice.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 269.

⁵⁵ Mk 15: 34; Mt 26:46.

Conclusions and Implications of this Study for Christian Practice

Moltmann claims that the crucified Christ is the central revelation of God for Christians and therefore the foundation for both seeing and experiencing God in the world. Moltmann points to a question that emerges from this claim; “Which God motivates my faith: the crucified God or the gods of religion, race and class?”⁵⁶ The issue at stake in this question is the shape in which divine power appears.⁵⁷

Moltmann argues that the revelation of God on the cross of Jesus Christ leads to a revolution in the notion of God.⁵⁸ The cross challenges what Moltmann refers to as the god of theism. The god of theism is a notion of God linked to questions that arise from the transitory and vulnerable nature of human existence in the world.⁵⁹ Human beings seek security and control over all the uncontrollable elements that dominate their lives and look to God as a solution. The problem is that as they look to God as a solution to their suffering, they project onto God the same type of power that is used as a tool of domination in the world. Moltmann claims that looking to God for this type of power results in a God that looks like Caesar. The consequence of a notion of God that looks like Caesar is that the only proper relationship for human beings with this type of God is one characterized by obedience and reverence.⁶⁰

Sobrino states that the notion of God drawn from the cross of Jesus Christ is a notion that unmask idols. He describes an idol as a false notion of God and argues that the most common reason for a person to invest in a false notion of God is in order to

⁵⁶ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 201.

⁵⁷ Johnson, 269.

⁵⁸ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 201.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 250.

justify and maintain entitlement to power, control and security.⁶¹ Sobrino defines sin as handing everything over to God except what secures oneself.⁶² Idols are created by projecting the need for power, security and control onto a transcendent source that confirms and affirms the status quo. Idols assure people that things do not need to change and that the power structures that operate in the world are accepted and even supported by a false God that is made in their image.⁶³

Moltmann and Sobrino recognize that political, sociological and theological systems are interwoven and receive legitimacy through association with a particular notion of God. Systems that abuse power appeal to a notion of God that supports the power structures of the system.⁶⁴ Likewise, both Moltmann and Sobrino argue that the notion of God drawn from the cross of Jesus Christ is a challenge to the notion of God that is tied to dominating, authoritative and closed systems. The notion of God drawn from the cross cannot be coerced and used to support unjust power structures. Rather the notion of God drawn from the cross points to self-emptying, merciful love given and received in freedom. If the crucified God motivates faith than a very different conception of the proper relationship between faithful people and God emerges.

Before discussing the implications for Christian practice that emerge when the crucified God motivates faith, it is helpful to discuss the problems that have been created for Christian practice when faith is not motivated by the crucified God. Problems have been created for Christian practice by appealing to a notion of God that is not drawn from the cross but instead fits the cross into a theological system that protects a theistic notion

⁶¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberators*, 180-189.

⁶² Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 52.

⁶³ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberators*, 180-189.

⁶⁴ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 136-138; Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 209.

of God. When the cross is fit into a theological system that protects a theistic notion of God then the cross is viewed less as a revelation of God and more as an event in which God forgives sin. Viewing the cross as an event in which God forgives sin rather than as a revelation of God leads to two problems in Christian theology that impact Christian practice. First, the drama of grace and forgiveness in the biblical narrative, a drama that emphasizes the dialogical, open, provisional nature of God and the responsibility of human beings is reduced on both sides. Emphasis is placed on God's forgiveness of sins without an accompanying attention to God's participation in suffering and likewise, emphasis is placed on human liberation from sin through grace without an accompanying attention to human responsibility. A trajectory begins toward a universalized understanding of Christ that ignores Jesus' history and toward eternal life as the goal of Christian faith.⁶⁵ As this trajectory is followed the emphasis in Christian practice moves toward an individualistic personal piety and away from a faith that confronts unjust political and sociological systems and is engaged in alleviating suffering in the world.⁶⁶

Secondly, viewing the cross as an event in which God forgives sins reduces complexity by narrowing the many issues that affect the relationship between God and human beings down to the one issue of sin and guilt. The result is that the many emotions arising from painful life experiences, emotions of doubt, fear, sadness, anguish, and anger are narrowed to the one emotion that is acceptable for human beings to have in relationship with a theistic notion of God, guilt.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 181.

⁶⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 6.

⁶⁷ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 44-48.

Furthermore, the individualistic personal piety that develops out of the effort to maintain a theistic notion of God is one that emphasizes obedience and reverence.⁶⁸ God is seen as the solution to the problems and suffering caused by the transitory and vulnerable nature of existence. Prayers directed to God revolve around issues of power and control. The fortunate people in the world who have the most power and control over their own lives consider their wealth and happiness a blessing from God. On the other hand, when suffering impinges on their lives, people pray to God to fix and change their situation but expect that change to break into and upon their lives. The expectation is that God's power is exercised externally upon people. God is not expected to act with or from within them. God's power to change the situation is the substance of faith and a changed situation is evidence of God's blessing. Communion with God becomes limited to praise and petition and becomes associated with times of life when evidence of God can be found in blessing and transformation. The hard stretches of life in which evidence of God's presence is difficult to find either become repressed, accepted as part of God's plan or associated with sin and guilt. Faith associated with this notion of God results in keeping people childlike in their relationship with God.⁶⁹ God is the divine father and adult responsibility is yielded over to God. Confession of sin and repentance become the only means for dealing with the overwhelming issues caused by chaos, disorder, pain, injustice and suffering.⁷⁰

The problems for contemporary Christianity that arise when a theistic notion of God is maintained are similar to the problems Brueggemann points to when discussing the loss of lament in Christian worship. Brueggemann claims that the loss of lament in

⁶⁸ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 250.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 44-48.

contemporary Christianity is essentially the loss of the theology of the cross.⁷¹ He argues that the lament tradition of Israel emphasized interactionism as essential in the relationship between God and human beings and insured engagement with God through all of life's experiences.⁷² The loss of lament results in reduced forms of communion with God. Without lament, issues that arise from chaos, disorder, pain, injustice and suffering are repressed, denied or covered up.⁷³ This has serious implications for Christian practice.

Brueggemann observes two possible directions that people take in responding to reduced forms of communion with God that are the result of the loss of lament in Christian worship. The first possibility is that a person who is confronted by the forces of chaos, disorder, injustice, or suffering and is unable to express or confront God with the raw, unpleasant emotions that arise from painful life experiences will eventually find the relationship with God unimportant. Unwilling to repress or deny the reality of their lived experience and finding no place in the Christian community to express their pain they will simply leave the community. This response causes isolation and results in loneliness and anxiety.⁷⁴

A second possibility is that while God remains very important, in order to protect Gods' sovereignty feelings of doubt, fear, sadness, rage and anguish at unjust or irrational suffering will be converted to feelings of guilt. Accompanying the conversion of feelings to guilt is a yielding of responsibility to God. Brueggemann argues that this response

⁷¹ Brueggemann, "Friday Voice of Faith," 13.

⁷² Brueggemann, "Friday Voice of Faith," 16.

⁷³ Brueggemann, "Shrill Voice of the Wounded Party," 13-15.

⁷⁴ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 44-48.

results in internalized emotions that are eventually expressed as violence either toward the self or toward others.⁷⁵

Brueggemann suggests that the loss of lament in Christian worship results in the loss of honesty about the pain of lived experience. He argues that in many churches while God is being praised in the sanctuary, pastoral care is taking place in the basement.⁷⁶ This separation of praise and pain results in people praying to God but not honestly engaging God.⁷⁷ In addition, Brueggemann argues that when protest over injustice is disallowed at the altar it is perceived as unacceptable in other public arenas as well. The spill over effect of repressing the expression of pain in public worship is that in all public places the injustice of innocent suffering is not given voice and the necessary challenge to authorities that misuse power is effectively silenced.⁷⁸

Brueggemann's analysis of the loss of lament focuses on problems created for Christian practice when there is a division between the emotions and issues raised by painful life experiences and engagement with God. This division leads to apathy in Christian practice. Either God becomes unimportant to people and a practical atheism results or a theistic notion of God dominates and human responsibility for engagement in the issues of the world that cause and lead to suffering is neglected. What the practice of lament and a notion of God drawn from the cross have in common is that they affirm that the questions raised from the midst of painful life experiences are vital and life giving for the Christian community. These questions are vital and life giving because they are

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Brueggemann, "Friday Voice of Faith," 16.

⁷⁷ Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," 61-62.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 64.

directed to the crucified God, who through self emptying merciful love freely chooses to enter into, participate and redeem all forms of suffering in the world.

Because the crucified God chooses to enter into, participate and redeem all forms of suffering, dialogue with God through all of life's experiences is essential for Christian practice. The engagement between faithful people, experience in the world and God is an engagement that at times may be peaceful but at other times may be filled with anguish. Dialogue with God is not limited to praise and petition but includes arguing, lamenting, and wrestling with God as well as surrender to God as mystery. For genuine dialogue to occur, speech must be honest, the possibility of redistribution of power must be present, and the freedom of both partners in the dialogue is essential. Jesus provides Christians with a model for dialogue with God. Like Jesus, the Christian response to God is not one of mere obedience and reverence but one that can be described as trust-availability. Trust-availability requires whole adult responsible selves who through discernment are able to recognize when to yield to God and when to take initiative and adopt a posture of assertion directed toward God. Like Jesus, a response of trust-availability to God involves risk.

When continuity between Old Testament theology and the theology of the cross is maintained then Jesus' lament from the cross is informed by the lament tradition in the Old Testament. The lament tradition in the Old Testament is tied to the issue of theodicy.⁷⁹ The theodicy question protects the insight that God is good and life ordered according to God's purposes is good and yet recognizes that the realities of life challenge that insight. Faith is confronting that challenge with hope and trust-availability knowing that while God can and will work through the faithful with power it is a power not easily

⁷⁹ Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," 62.

recognized by the world. Sobrino claims that in Jesus' journey to the cross he remains faithful to God in a world that really wanted a very different kind of God.⁸⁰ The power of merciful compassionate love opposes and is opposed by the world's vision of power.

The engagement between faithful people, the experience of life in the world and the crucified God is a faith without certainty. Openness to the world means openness to the theodicy question and if the theodicy question is a central component of Christian faith then that faith is open-ended and provisional. The open-ended provisional nature of faith is rooted in God's openness to history. God's openness to history is marked by God's free entry into the risk and vulnerability of life in the world, a risk and vulnerability that leads to the cross. Contemplating the cross opens the heart to sorrow.⁸¹ The Christian heart is open to both the suffering in the world and to God's participation in that suffering. Openness to suffering in the world and God's participation in that suffering leads to active engagement in working to alleviate suffering by bringing God's merciful love to bear on the world.⁸² Engagement in, with and for the suffering in the world is essential for Christian practice. That engagement is marked by compassionate love and hope. For Christians, sorrow does not lead to despair. Rather, as Christians enter fully into the risk and vulnerability of life in the world, they find that not only is hope deepened through encounter with suffering but also new life emerges through this encounter. New life is forged where suffering and hope meet because it is in the midst of the risk and vulnerability of life in the world that one is drawn into and encounters the life giving transformative presence of the crucified God.

⁸⁰ Sobrino, *Christology of the Crossroads*, 208.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁸² Rady Roldán-Figueroa, "The Christologies of Luther and Sobrino and Pastoral Care," *Apuntes* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 27.

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