



# GOD AND SUFFERING IN THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

By Gloria L. Schaab

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**T**he Christian tradition asserts that the life and ministry, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ have irrevocably altered the human relationship with and perception of God. In the words of Robin Ryan, Christianity believes that the “ministry and the destiny of Jesus shine new light on the relationship of God to the human family.” Moreover, “This revelation illumines the way Christians think about the presence of God in the midst of suffering and death.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, scholars who ponder the theme of God and suffering in the Christian Scriptures seek out how Jesus understood the suffering of people he encountered, his own suffering, and his disciples’ suffering for the sake of the gospel.

Nonetheless, because the scripture of most early Christians was the Hebrew Bible, the first believers interpreted the meaning of suffering in the light of that revelation. Therefore, one cannot grasp the meaning of God and suffering in the Christian Scriptures without recognizing that, along with his followers, Jesus was a devout Jew, steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures and schooled in the language, beliefs, and traditions of Jewish culture and religion. He believed in one God, studied the Torah, recited the Shema, celebrated the Sabbath and the Passover, sang the psalms, heeded the prophets, preached like a rabbi, and taught his disciples the Great Commandments of the law: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5) and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). The Servant Songs of the prophet Isaiah resonated through his life and teaching:

**Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;**

**I have put my spirit upon him; he will  
bring forth justice to the nations. He  
will not cry or lift up his voice, or make  
it heard in the street;**

**a bruised reed he will not break, and a  
dimly burning wick he will not quench . . .**

**I have given you as a covenant to the  
people, a light to the nations, to open  
the eyes that are blind,**

**to bring out the prisoners from the  
dungeon,**

**from the prison those who  
sit in darkness.**

**(ISA. 42:1-3,6-7)**

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As Isaiah proclaims, the servant's mission is to alleviate the suffering of the people by promoting justice in the nations. As a sign of God's covenantal love for the people (v. 6), the servant is a compassionate presence (v. 3) who liberates people from all that confines them physically and spiritually (v. 7).

This teaching nonetheless contrasts with a key interpretation of God and suffering that permeates the Hebrew Scriptures: the law of retribution. Intimately connected to the covenant between God and the chosen people of Israel, this law is best articulated as the belief that God rewards the righteous for fidelity and punishes the wicked for infidelity. Because of this, any form of suffering signaled the disfavor of God. While it is only one among a number of approaches to the mystery of God and suffering in the Hebrew Scriptures,<sup>2</sup> the law of retribution was prominent and powerful in the minds of many people of Jesus' time. It shaped their understanding of God as well as the meaning of their own and others' suffering.

While God was often seen as the source of Israel's suffering, prophet after prophet also bore witness to the pain and anguish of God in response to the sufferings that befall the chosen people as a result of injustice and infidelity. This divine anguish "is never the wailing sympathy of an uninvolved onlooker, but the genuine pain of one who is directly



affected, the suffering of a comrade, who takes upon himself a part of the burden.”<sup>3</sup> As Terence Fretheim points out in his book, *The Suffering of God*, the God of Israel suffers because of the people's rejection, with the people who are suffering, and for the people themselves.<sup>4</sup>

**“By bearing the sins of the people over a period of time, God suffers in some sense on their behalf.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, such divine participation in the suffering of Israel was deemed salvific for them—  
“he became their savior in all their distress. . . It was . . . his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them” (ISA. 63:9).**



As a result of belief in both divine retribution and divine suffering, interpreting the God of Israel within the Hebrew Scriptures sometimes produced conflicting perceptions of God that provoked many questions in relation to suffering. One scholar suggests the question that looms largest “is that of God’s own character, of who God is, especially in light of who we, in pain, think we want God to be.”<sup>6</sup> This question is the backdrop against which the Christian Scriptures engage the mystery of God and suffering.

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Gloria L. Schaab, SSJ, is professor of theology, chair of the department of theology and philosophy, and associate dean for general education at Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida.

1. Robin Ryan, *God and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2011), 51.
2. See Daniel J. Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer? A Scriptural Approach to the Human Condition* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2000), 1-86.
3. Erhard Gerstenberger and Wolfgang Schrage, *Suffering*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 99.
4. Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 108, emphasis added.
5. *Ibid.*, 140.
6. Jason A. Mahn, “Between Presence and Explanation: Thinking through Suffering with Thomas Long,” *Theology Today* 69 (July 2012): 229.

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