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Some Reflections on Jesus-Traditions and Paul

Mohr Siebeck

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For Brigitte

Foreword

Both the questions of how far Jesus anticipated his death and how he then interpreted it, as well as the question how his followers and above all the apostle Paul then interpreted it afterwards have been amply studied. Although the present work will inevitably have to touch on these subjects, the motivation for this study lies elsewhere: how can we today make sense of what happened, and do the New Testament accounts offer us any resources for a better understanding of what to make of this event? In saying that, I am aware that I am stepping over the boundary that separates purely exegetical and historical work into the realm of questions of philosophy and systematic theology. For some, it is true, the historical and exegetical answers are at the same time the philosophical and theological answers, and our role today is simply to repeat what the New Testament texts say (if one can assume that in the last analysis they all say the same thing). For others, myself included, the two sets of questions and answers need to be brought into some sort of relationship, although it is to be feared that this happens less often than it should. I can recall a volume of collected essays on the death of Jesus, mostly exegetical, but a couple supplied by systematic theologians, and the regret expressed by a reviewer, himself an exegete, that the systematic theologians had not made more efforts to enter into dialogue with the exegetical contributions. That is hardly an isolated or exceptional case, for many systematic theologians seem happier to take the church's creeds and confessions and the formulations of later theologians as their starting-point rather than the diverse and often seemingly discordant statements of the Christian scriptures. As a result one tends to find that systematic theologians will handle this subject within the framework of the traditional discourse of their discipline, whereas there must surely be some attempt to relate this discourse to our experience of the world outside of this discourse. And in the case of a historically based faith such as Christianity that will involve grappling with the traces of the past that we have and asking how well the claims of that discourse measure up to those traces.[1] On the other hand, one could doubtless cite countless examples where exegetes have contented themselves with exegesis without thought for the theological and philosophical questions that their exegesis raises.

[1] On the 'traces' of the past and the methods and assumptions involved in handling them cf. Wedderburn, *Jesus*, esp. ch. 4.

It is true that a historical approach will seldom be in a position to show the statements of systematic theology to be false, but nevertheless it may well open up the way to alternative assessments that can claim as great a plausibility or perhaps an even greater one. Of course, one may well end up with an account that leaves far more open and contains far too many loose ends for the tastes of a systematic theologian, but, on the other hand, a too neat and tidy account is surely suspect. Indeed one could often think that one can detect something of hubris in such accounts. Has enough scope been left in such cases for the mystery and inscrutability of God? At any rate, a certain untidiness and a bunch of loose ends may be a small and indeed appropriate price to pay for a greater sense of reality and a responsible handling of the data of history and of our experience. For systematic theologians often seem to me to run the risk of reading far more into the New Testament accounts than the latter really warrant, and do so without, as far as I can see, substantially increasing the intelligibility of those accounts. Often I have the impression of something alien being superimposed on the New Testament accounts that in some cases sits very awkwardly upon them. There are, on the other hand, it is true, also many who bravely attempt to step outside the traditional systematic framework and to plough a fresh furrow, but in many cases the death of Jesus does not seem to find a sufficiently salient position within their work. And as an exegete I must admit to feeling often a sense of sceptical and bewildered amazement and of unreality when confronted with the contributions of dogmatic or philosophical theologians. Few have succeeded in bringing these two theological worlds together, although there have been notable exceptions, like Rudolf Bultmann and some of his pupils such as Ernst Käsemann; their attempts have been, however, more than a little controversial and explosive, and that may explain why so many have been content to stay in their own world, the exegete in the exegetical, the dogmatic or philosophical theologian in the world of systematics and philosophy. Or there is the danger that, in venturing out of the one world into the other, one exposes oneself as ignorant or foolish and, despite what Paul said about the folly of the preaching of the cross (1 Cor 1.18–25), that may be too much of a loss of intellectual respectability. And yet one is left with a feeling of incompleteness if one has only described what various New Testament writers have said about this theme, in all its seeming strangeness and unfamiliarity, without asking the question 'What, if anything, does this all mean for me and my contemporaries?', as opposed to what the New Testament authors meant when they spoke of Jesus' death.

This question of the meaning and the interpretation of Jesus' death today is, at any rate, a question that has exercised me for a long time and that still awaits an answer. For it was my dissatisfaction with the christological and soteriological answers offered by my dogmatics teacher in my undergraduate days that first led me on to doctoral work on the then fashionable gnostic explanation of Paul's corporate christology and then later to the study of the mysteries as the postu-

lated background to Paul's talk of dying and rising with Christ. In both instances my conclusions were negative: Paul's thought differed in important ways from those of later gnostic mythology and from the beliefs reflected in the rituals of the mysteries, and Jewish analogies lay nearer to hand. Yet those analogies were and are in many respects equally mysterious and foreign to our ways of thinking, and only if one were content simply to appropriate and endorse the ways of thought of first-century hellenistic Jews would this analysis of the rationale of Paul's thought provide any satisfaction. Thus I concluded that, if one felt oneself unable to make these ways of thought one's own, then Paul's thinking would remain an enigma; thus 'it is the task of the Christian interpreter to try to make him less enigmatic to her or his contemporaries, to try to bridge the gap of centuries, and to awaken an understanding of what he was trying to express'.[2]

A later study of the traditions concerning the resurrection of Jesus then brought me face to face with the question of the nature of the God who is held to have raised Jesus from the dead. For, quite apart from the exegetical, historical and philosophical problems of the resurrection accounts, the claims made by these accounts often contained a triumphalistic way of thinking with which I could not feel comfortable. In them surfaces the idea of an all-powerful God who raises Jesus and will raise his followers from the dead in a mighty act comparable to that of creation, and that all too human way of thinking and speaking of God that draws upon the human analogy of human potentates and upon the logic of what we think that a supreme being should be and do is one that I find questionable. For had not Jesus seemingly contrasted the way that he and his followers should tread with the behaviour of worldly rulers (Mark 10.42–4 parr.)? And I argued then that 'the God who is known through Jesus, the God who seems to be reflected in the life of Jesus, seems rather to refuse to exercise power, to be prepared to suffer instead and to be thwarted'.[3] It is true that Jesus apparently did not extend this to God's behaviour, but I suggested that we should not be afraid to go further than Jesus did, conditioned as he still was by so many of the conventions and traditional ways of thought of his day.[4] If the ways of earthly rulers are no fitting model for the ways of Jesus and his followers, is it right that they should guide us in our thinking about God's ways? Now it is true that in Jesus' death, if we isolate it from the belief in his resurrection, there is little scope for triumphalist ways of speaking, yet there too, in the attempts of Christians then and now to explain what was happening in that death and its bearing upon ourselves in relation to God, human analogies of judges and rulers again lie near at hand and risk distorting our view. For time and again we can see that traditional accounts of the rationale of this event introduce ideas and categories

[2] Wedderburn, *Baptism*, 396.
[3] Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection*, 208.
[4] Cf. Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection*, 178.

which are not only foreign to us, but in many cases repugnant. Notions of blood sacrifice or the appeasing of a wrathful God surface constantly in the history of the interpretation of this event, but many will find them hardly satisfactory, let alone appropriate, in this day and age. And in dealing with the accounts of Jesus' resurrection we are confronted, not only with discrepancies in the accounts, but also with problems in their later interpretation. For I argued that philosophical difficulties arose there with regard to the identity of the human person and also, for instance, in the logic of Paul's exposition of the nature of resurrection. In the latter case I argued that some aspects of the apostle's exposition must be discarded as flawed, but that other aspects of his and the Fourth Gospel's theology offered, on the other hand, pointers in a more helpful and fruitful direction. And similar questions to those that arose with regard to resurrection, especially with regard to the nature of God and also with regard to the human predicament, are raised even more acutely by Christian theology's attempts to explain the purpose and rationale of the death of Jesus. What, for instance, is the nature of this human predicament that it can supposedly be dealt with by the death of one individual? And what is the nature of the God who requires that it be dealt with in this way (if God does in fact require it)?

Finally, my study of *Jesus and the Historians* concluded with a chapter on the claims of Jesus for himself and his work and the self-understanding implicit in these. I was struck with the strand of thought that has been labelled a 'messianic collective' (Gerd Theissen) or the 'democratization' of messianic ideas and figures in the Old Testament (Theissen and Christopher Tuckett).[5] Such a strand of thought is, I argued, likely to represent an authentic part of Jesus' teaching, in that it runs counter to the tendency of Jesus' followers subsequently to stress his unique relationship to his God, a tendency that finds its climax in the New Testament in the Fourth Gospel, but forms the basis of later christological formulations. I concluded that 'this strand of Jesus' teaching seems to suggest that Jesus himself might well have been horrified had he known what his followers would make of him and would have repudiated the very suggestion of talking of him as God incarnate, a unique being',[6] always allowing for the possibility that his followers might have rightly discerned something that remained hidden from Jesus himself and alien to his thinking. And yet many theories and explanations of the significance of Jesus' death rest, as we shall see, on the assumption that he was indeed such a unique God-man and even that in his death we see the 'crucified God' (Jürgen Moltmann).[7] What would an account of the meaning of that death look like without that undergirding?

[5] Theissen, *Followers*; 'Gruppenmessianismus'; *Jesusbewegung*; Tuckett, 'Son of Man' (2001 and 2003).

[6] Wedderburn, *Jesus*, 320.

[7] Moltmann, *God*.

Unfortunately, the eye-problems that had dogged the proof-reading of *Jesus and the Historians*, having eased for a time, returned in far greater severity, so that further reading became practically impossible. Added to that, increasing immobility made even getting to, let alone using, libraries difficult. As a consequence, the cross-checking and cross-referencing to which I had hitherto become accustomed had largely to cease, and what I could still write, greatly enlarged on the screen, had largely to suffice (where works are cited that do not appear in the bibliography, I have here had to take on trust the works of colleagues that are referred to as having cited or quoted these sources). As a result this work inevitably shows a regrettable unevenness and incompleteness, but I nevertheless hope that the soundings and suggestions that it contains may yet be of some value, and perhaps may even serve to set a somewhat unorthodox cat loose among some theological pigeons. It is indeed a ragged and rather incomplete 'swansong', but those familiar with what counts in reality as 'song' amongst the swans will not expect anything aesthetically particularly pleasing from this old bird.

I am, once again, very much in my debt to my former colleague, Jörg Frey, and to the very helpful and highly competent staff of Mohr Siebeck for their readiness to accept such a work and one in such a state for the WUNT series. Especial thanks are also due to my former student, Dr Manuél Ceglarek, who undertook the tasks of proof-reading and indexing that I could no longer perform. Finally, I have once before dedicated a work to my wife, Brigitte, but now, after more than forty years of loving companionship, and especially in the light of the added pains and strains that she too has had to bear in the last months, it seemed more than fitting once more thus to acknowledge with deep gratitude the part she has played in my life and work.

München, April 2012 A. J. M. Wedderburn

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Abbreviations

Monographs and articles are mostly identified in the text and notes with an abbreviated title, commentaries with the name of the biblical work in question; full details will be found below. For the most part abbreviations listed by the Anchor Bible Dictionary, the Oxford Classical Dictionary (3rd ed.) or Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (4th ed.) have been used, and for Philo's works those of The Philo Index (ed. P. Borgen et al.; Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company/Leiden, etc.: Brill, 2000). The following have also been used in addition to those mentioned in the Bibliography under § 2 'Reference Works' below:

ET	English translation
FS	*Festschrift*
Ger.	German version/translation
JSHJ	*Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
REB	Revised English Bible
SCBO	Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis
UTB	Uni-Taschenbücher

1. Introduction

From the very first Jesus' death was a puzzle for his followers, and to this day it has remained a puzzle. That is perhaps hardly surprising. For, despite the predictions of his coming fate, often outlined in considerable detail, set on Jesus' lips by the evangelists, the course of events in Jerusalem during that fateful Passover visit seems in fact to have taken his disciples fully by surprise.[1] As events unfold in Gethsemane they run away (Mark 14.50 par.) – a flight that Jörg Frey describes as 'an event that is historically hardly open to question' –,[2] then deny him (Mark 14.66–72 parr.). It is one from outside the number of the disciples closest to him, and perhaps in reality not even a disciple at all,[3] who must take on the responsibility for his burial (Mark 15.43). In their fear of the Jewish authorities those disciples meet behind closed doors (John 20.19). They react with sceptical incredulity to the first reports of resurrection appearances (Luke 24.11; John 20.25). And, despite the experiences described in John 20, in the following chapter some of the disciples take up their previous work as fishermen (John 21.3); it is as if they were trying to forget about Jesus as a painful, but now past episode in their lives or as if nothing had happened, and as if they had never received the gift of the Spirit or been commissioned by Jesus (John 20.21–3). Some of this may be a literary device to heighten the drama of the miraculous, but there is little in the gospel accounts to suggest a more positive response to Jesus' death.[4]

Now this has implications for the disciples' understanding of Jesus' death as well as for the question whether they were then predisposed to claim that he had been raised from the dead. For this reaction hardly suggests that they had been taught that this death was part of God's plan and would be for their salvation. And, as Ingolf Dalferth remarks, 'the cross is soteriologically dumb',[5] so that the event itself could have offered no enlightenment if they had not been instructed beforehand. Had they expected that, one might surely have expected a very different response, despite the danger to themselves, such as they reportedly

[1] That is denied by some (cf. Berger, *Auferstehung*; Pesch, 'Entstehung' [1973], but contrast Pesch, 'Entstehung' [1983]); cf. Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection*, 39–41.

[2] Frey, 'Probleme', 44.

[3] Cf. Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection*, 62 and 262 n. 153.

[4] Cf. Moltmann, *God*, 132: the flight of the disciples is to be regarded as historical 'because it conflicts with any kind of veneration for a hero and forbear'.

[5] Dalferth, *Der auferweckte Gekreuzigte*, 44.

manifested after their experiences of the risen Jesus.[6] More plausible, then, is Wolgang Schrage's verdict, that 'Jesus' crucifixion must have from the very first shattered the traditional expectations and concepts of believers and challenged them to decide whether one wanted to measure God's eschatological salvation by the criterion of religious tradition or was ready to recognize God's free and entirely different action'.[7]

The subsequent experiences that Jesus' followers then interpreted as God's raising him from the dead did not in themselves solve the problem of why Jesus had to suffer this fate, even if they suggested that the problem must in principle be soluble: Jesus' death was not just simply a human failure and tragedy, but in his life and in his end God must somehow have been at work and have had some purpose in this turn of events. We shall see some of the various attempts to explain what this purpose was, over and above the simple assertion that it was necessary (δεῖ/ἔδει) that God's messiah should die (e.g. Mark 8.31 parr.; Luke 17.25;24.7, 26; John 3.14; 12.34; Acts 17.3), when we come to Paul's letters and the various traditions of which he made use in speaking of Jesus' death.

However, Rudolf Bultmann found all such traditional interpretations and explanations of the purpose of Christ's death unintelligible. Death we cannot understand as a punishment for sin, for even before incurring guilt we were already exposed to death. 'Nor can we understand that in consequence of the guilt of our ancestors we should be condemned to the death of a natural being, because we know of guilt only as a responsible act and therefore regard original sin, in the sense of a quasi-natural hereditary illness, as a submoral and impossible concept.' That makes the doctrine of Christ's death as substitutionary atonement unintelligible. Could the death of someone guiltless atone for my guilt? He asks what 'primitive concepts of guilt and righteousness' and of God lie behind such a notion. And if this death is to be understood in terms of sacrifice what sort of 'primitive mythology' is this in which a divine being that has become human atones with his blood for humanity's sin? Or if legal categories are invoked, and 'in the transactions between God and human beings God's demands are satisfied by the death of Christ', then sin is seen only as outward transgression of a divine command and ethical standards are ignored. And if Christ were God's Son and a preexistent divine being, what would dying mean for him – particularly if he knew he was due shortly to be raised again?[8]

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[6] Cf., e.g., Acts 4.13–20.

[7] Schrage, 'Verständnis', 58–9.

[8] Bultmann, 'New Testament', 6–7; cf. 33–4 (tr. Ogden).

More recently traditional interpretations of the rationale for Christ's death have also come under heavy and sustained attack from feminist theologians, who, for instance, see in it a case of 'divine child abuse' (a somewhat tendentious expression, since Jesus at the time of his death would not normally be described as a 'child') or 'sadism'. A survey of this criticism can be found in the articles on 'Kreuz' in the two editions of the *Wörterbuch der feministischen Theologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1991, 2nd ed. 2002), in the first L. Schottroff, 'Feminis-

The Catholic theologian Otto Knoch has also contributed a brief and succinct statement of the difficulties that the traditional doctrine of the atonement presents today.[9] After outlining our experience of the world today and our resultant world-view, he details aspects of this doctrine that are to regarded as unsuitable and incompatible with the nature and dignity of God on the one hand and with the nature and dignity of human beings on the other. God does not require a just punishment for us nor an appropriate atonement for the desolate condition of the world. Nor does God need a divine-human mediator to fulfil the divine will in the world and to rescue humanity from the power of Satan and sin. Nor is it fitting that Jesus' coming, dying and rising unfolded according to a divine plan that reduces Jesus and his contemporaries to the role of spectators. Nor is it appropriate that human beings should be fitted according to this plan into a pre-ordained setting which dooms us to be in the wrong and makes our freedom illusory. Nor should everyone need another person to come and die if their lives are to succeed. Nor should it be only the death of Christ that gives any meaning and worth to human values and achievements. Nor is it fitting that we cannot order our lives and our world freely and responsibly and work for the improvement of both, as if we and the world were subject to the power of evil and perdition but for Christ's death. One need not accept all Knoch's strictures, of course. Several decades later, for instance, his optimism with regard to our ability to mould ourselves and our world for the better seems to be wearing a bit thin, as we struggle in the face of a rising crescendo of ecological and economic. Nonetheless, enough of his objections still have sufficient weight to make us pause and consider whether our views on 'atonement' do not need a fairly drastic revision.

If these two sets of criticisms came from exegetes, John Hick has also subjected traditional views of the atonement to scrutiny from the perspective of a philosopher of religion.[10] Distinguishing 'atonement' in the narrower sense of 'making up' for human sin and in the broader sense of salvation or 'entering into a right relationship with God', he finds that the latter has been more prevalent in Eastern, Greek Christianity, the former in Western, Latin Christian traditions. The former, one might think, in the forms of 'Anselm's doctrine of a satisfaction to cancel the insult to God's majesty caused by creaturely disobedience, or the

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tische Kritik an Kreuzestheologie', 226–31, in the latter R. Strobel, 'Feministisch-theologische Kritik', 347–50. Strobel's analysis divides theologies of the cross into those seeing Jesus' crucifixion as according to God's will and those treating it as expressing God's solidarity with the tortured, and argues that even the latter approach encourages the acceptance of violence (349). Cf. also, e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, ch. 4 (the accusation of 'divine child abuse' comes from Brown and Parker in J. Carlson Brown, Parker and Bohn, *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*). More restrained is her own argument, e.g. in *In Memory of Her*, 135, that 'the Sophia-God of Jesus does not need atonement or sacrifice. Jesus' death is not willed by God but is the result of his all-inclusive praxis as Sophia's prophet.'

[9] In Schnackenburg, 'Gedanke', 211–14.

[10] Hick, *Metaphor*, esp. 112–27.

penal-substitutionary idea of an imputed justification won by Christ's taking upon himself the punishment due for human sin', 'had largely died out among thoughtful Christians', although he notes a revival of such ideas among 'some Christian philosophers who, unlike most contemporary theologians, tend to see church doctrine as a set of immutable truths'.[11] Before such views as those of Anselm or of penal substitution were introduced, however, 'the earliest attempt to conceptualize the Christian experience of liberation and new life fastened upon the Markan saying of Jesus, that "the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom (*lutron*) for many" (Mark 10.45)' (114). Yet, as soon as one sought to develop this striking image, one came up against the question of the recipient of the payment of this ransom and it was assumed that it was the devil who was tricked by God into accepting this payment. 'Such imagery is only embarrassing today.' And the traditional doctrine of original sin that undergirds such imagery is also to be set aside, 'except as a mythological way of referring to the fact of universal human imperfection' (115). Similarly, it is today 'virtually impossible to share Anselm's medieval sense of wrongdoing as a slight upon God's honour which requires a satisfaction to assuage the divine dignity before even the truly penitent can receive forgiveness' (118). And when, later, the Reformers focussed upon the Pauline doctrine of justification, they reflected the view of law current in their day, just as Anselm had reflected that of his time; whereas law had been an expression of the ruler's will, now both ruler and ruled were subject to an objective justice whose demands could not be set aside even by the ruler.[12] Yet

> the idea that guilt can be removed from a wrongdoer by someone else being punished instead is morally grotesque. And if we put it in what might at first sight seem a more favourable light by suggesting that God punished Godself, in the person of God the Son, in order to be able justly to forgive sinners, we are still dealing with the religious absurdity of a moral law which God can and must satisfy by punishing the innocent in place of the guilty (119).

[11] Hick, *Metaphor*, 113. The second part of Hick's ch. 11 contains a detailed critique of Richard Swinburne's argument, an attempt to 'retrieve a transactional conception' of the atonement, in *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). *Inter alia* Swinburne grants that 'God could have chosen to accept one supererogatory act of an ordinary man as adequate for the sins of the world. Or he could have chosen to accept some angel's act for this purpose' (160). Rightly Hick calls this 'a deeply damaging admission, rendering it truly extraordinary that God should require the agonizing death of God's Son'; it would mean that 'there was no necessity for the cross, such as was provided in their own way by the satisfaction and penal-substitutionary theories' (Hick, *Metaphor*, 123). And, if Swinburne can grant that the value of Jesus' death need not have been commensurate with the evil of human sin (154), then, Hick askes (125), 'if a merciful God can properly "let men off the rest" without a full punishment having been inflicted or a full satisfaction exacted, why may not God freely forgive sinners who come in genuine penitence and a radically changed mind?'

[12] Cf. Den Heyer, *Jesus*, 132: 'In the classical doctrine of the atonement God seems to be his own prisoner.'

Hick also raises the question of Jesus' own view of his death, contrasting the opinions on this point of Sanders and Jeremias, whose standpoint amounts, according to Sanders, to the belief that Jesus 'conceived in advance the doctrine of atonement'.[13] Hick notes that 'even conservative New Testament scholarship today does not suggest that Jesus thought of himself as God, or God the Son, second person of a divine Trinity, incarnate', and we should not attribute to him a view of his death which presupposes that. He considers it likelier, 'as a maximal possibility that Jesus saw himself as the final prophet precipitating the coming of God's rule on earth, than that he saw it in anything like the terms developed by the church's later atonement theories' (125). Even more modern theories that focus on human remorse at humanity's killing God's Son, leading to repentance and thus forgiveness, depend on the belief that it was the second person of the trinity that was thus put to death.[14]

Yet, when systematic theologians today turn to the subject of soteriology, one finds that inter-trinitarian relationships play a very great part in their exposition of their theme. If that was not part of Jesus' thinking and probably not found, either, in the embryonic reflections on the reason for Jesus' death found in the New Testament, with what justification can this or should this framework of thought be invoked to explain what was happening in this event?

1.1 A 'Crucified God' or a Suffering God?

Although the doctrine of the impassibility of God long seemed to rule out any talk of God's suffering, let alone God's death or even crucifixion, and for some still does exclude any such language,[15] many systematic theologians are now prepared to talk in these terms. There was, indeed, a brief period in the twentieth century when the 'death of God' was very much in vogue, with its precursors in the writings of Hegel and Nietzsche. Whereas speaking of God's suffering with humanity or with an individual human being may be saying essentially no more than when we speak of one person sharing in the suffering of another person, especially a much loved person, to speak of God's dying in any literal sense, let alone being crucified, in the death of another seems to imply a far more far-reaching identification of God with the one dying or being crucified.

The phrase 'the crucified God' that Moltmann took as the title of one of his books, taking it over from Luther, with all its drastic claims of precisely such an identification with the crucified Jesus, is one that Moltmann himself describes

[13] Sanders, *Jesus*, 332.

[14] Hick, *Metaphor*, 129, taking as an example of this approach Auguste Sabatier, *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1904).

[15] Cf. Sölle, *Leiden*, 56–61.

as 'monstrous'.[16] And well he might, for the notion that God might be such a being as could be crucified is truly mind-boggling and seems to contradict and to do violence to any notions of the divine nature that we may have. Yet it is by no means clear that Moltmann is prepared to hold fast to this monstrosity in all its provocative offensiveness, for he often gives the impression that he wishes to water down this stark claim.[17]

For, although at times Moltmann picks up the language of God's being crucified or dying and although his stress on the helplessness of God (195, *Ohnmacht*) makes a welcome and refreshing change to a *theologia gloriae*,[18] he opposes talk of the 'death of God' understood in 'theopaschite terms' (243). Nor is Jesus' death to be understood '"as the death of God", but only as death *in* God'.[19] Yet Moltmann also speaks of death coming upon the Father in the death of the Son (192). Nor is Moltmann content to say that God suffered and to leave it at that.[20] God for him does not suffer as the Son did: 'The suffering and dying of the Son, forsaken by the Father, is a different kind of suffering from the suffering of the Father in the death of the Son' (243; cf. 203). As Fiddes points out, Moltmann here distinguishes between 'death' (*Tod*) and 'dying' (*Sterben*); Jesus suffers the

[16] Moltmann, *God*, 47, quoting Luther, W*A* 1, 614, 17. Jüngel, *Gott*, 85–6 n. 26, points out that the phrase is found as early as Tertullian (*Marc.* 2.27); cf. also Athanasius, *Ep. Epict.* 10 (MPG 26, 1065).

[17] It is with some misgiving, then, that one reads Weder's acceptance as a basic premise that 'Christian faith originated in the claim that God became identical with the crucified Jesus' (*Kreuz*, 32). Does one not need to define more exactly what one means by 'identical' and above all to make clear that one who identifies himself or herself with another is not thereby 'identical' with that other?

[18] Earlier Moltmann had mentioned (*God*, 47) Kazoh Kitamori's *Theology of the Pain of God* as well as Bonhoeffer's talk of the weak and powerless suffering God (*Letters*, 360–1).

[19] Moltmann, *God*, 207, his italics. (The use of the preposition 'in' may reflect his espousal of a 'panentheistic' way of thought: 277.) This formulation at any rate seems to distance him from Luther's contention that the divine person suffers and dies in the suffering and death of Christ (WA 39 II 93ff: *Iste homo creavit mundum et Deus iste est passus, mortuus, sepultus* …), as he goes on to cite the 'critical counter-question of the Reformed tradition … whether a third being, a monster with fleshly Godhead and divinized flesh, has not taken the place of God and man and their personal unity in Christ' (233).

[20] Fiddes, *Suffering*, 4, 6, interprets Moltmann as saying that God's suffering begins with the cross of Christ, but that is perhaps to read too much, perhaps under the influence of the ET, into the 'wird' in one sentence in Moltmann, *Gott*, 255 (Ger. 241): 'Das trinitarische Gottesgeschehen am Kreuz wird für den eschatologischen Glauben zur zukunftsoffenen und zukunftseröffnenden Gottesgeschichte, …'; the 'becoming' involved here could well be that of faith's discovery and perception of this 'history of God', i.e. an epistemological 'beginning'. Fiddes' interpretation is perhaps on surer ground when he picks up Moltmann's talk (244) of God's 'constituting the divine existence 'in the event of his love'. Fiddes' temporal reading would then mean, as he himself notes (7), that Moltmann rejected Heschel's account of the Old Testament prophets' *sympatheia* with the *pathos* of God (see below), for that suffering would not yet have begun, and, as he adds, would conflict with Moltmann's later tracing back the suffering of God to the act of creation.

latter, his Father the former.[21] What Moltmann here seems to be thinking of is the 'active suffering … of love' (230), the suffering of grief:

> The Son suffers in his love being forsaken by the Father as he dies. The Father suffers in his love the grief of the death of the Son (245).

Again, the (self-)surrender of the Father is not the same as that of the Son: 'In the surrender of the Son the Father also surrenders himself, though not in the same way.'[22] Yet, despite all this stress on God's suffering, a stress that sees it as weakened by the 'theological system' in which it must find its place, Dorothee Sölle deplores Moltmann's fascination with the brutality of his God as he speaks of the first person of the trinity rejecting and destroying the second person.[23]

We have just seen how Moltmann distances himself from at least one way of talking of the 'death of God', the 'theopaschite' way, but it is important to recognize, as Paul Fiddes notes,[24] in how many different ways philosophers and theologians have in fact spoken of the 'death of God'; they 'meant a variety of things' by this phrase (177).[25] Very often it is a matter of the '"thinkability" of God and the world as belonging together';[26] as a result of this, 'The "death of God" theologians … concluded that since God is not necessary to make sense of the world as it is, there is no point in thinking of God's relationship to the world at all' (175–6). Or the phrase could merely mean that 'a certain concept of God was now dead', even if those usually designated as representatives of the 'death of God' movement went further and maintained that all concepts of God were dead, 'or at least all concepts of God as having objective existence over against mankind' (177). Friedrich Nietzsche is for Fiddes an example of this latter possibility when he replaces belief in God 'with belief in the human value of the will to power' (178),[27] and so, too, is Alistair Kee when he 'escalates' the reality represented by God to the '"infinite qualitative difference" from mankind, but ceases to refer this any longer

[21] Fiddes, *Suffering*, 195. This is a distinction that he then goes on to criticize (195–8): if 'God' means for Moltmann 'the whole event in which a Father gives up a son and the son is given up (or forsaken)' then 'God' must be in the son's dying just as much as in the Father's experience of death (as bereavement).

[22] Moltmann, *God*, 243; cf. *Way*, 173.

[23] Sölle, *Leiden*, 37–8. Yet what she has just quoted is in fact almost entirely a quotation by Moltmann (*God*, 241), though with no note of dissent, from Wiard Popkes, *Christus*, 286–7, with its reference to the first person of the trinity casting out and annihilating the second. Cf. also Johnson, *Quest*, 62–3.

[24] Fiddes, *Suffering*, 174–206, esp. 174–93.

[25] Cf. Altizer/Hamilton, *Theology*, 14–15, who briefly list ten possible meanings of the phrase.

[26] Fiddes, *Suffering*, 175, taking over Jüngel's term 'Denkbarkeit' (*Gott*, esp. 138–306).

[27] Cf. Jüngel, *Gott*, 199, 202–3. But cf. Kee's perceptive chapter on Nietzsche's 'holy, noble God', 'beyond the categories of good and evil': *Nietzsche*, 160–75. Yet if Nietzsche approved in principle of this God as opposed to the moral values attributed to that God by Christians, would we really wish to follow him? (And Kee is not persuaded that Nietzsche did not believe in the existence of this God either: 169–70.)

to a personal God' (179).[28] Paul van Buren is presumably to be taken as typifying the first of these possibilities, the critique of all concepts of God, when he claims that the very word 'God' is dead, in that 'he did not know how the word "God" was being used'.[29] Neither of these approaches comes to terms adequately with the 'image of a suffering God' in Fiddes's eyes, 'while at the same time actually opening the way to it with their critique of a monarchian God as the destroyer of human freedom' (180).[30] It is another matter with certain theologians who referred with the phrase 'the death of God' to the absence of God, meaning that 'no experience of God was possible at the moment, and that no concepts were at present available to talk about him' (185). For such theologians often speak of this 'absence' in terms of God's suffering. So for Dorothee Sölle God suffers because God has withdrawn, leaving human beings as representatives,[31] and for Thomas Altizer God 'has completely immersed himself into the world to liberate mankind from an alien deity' and 'annihilates himself as an objective deity' (188).[32] Yet Fiddes retorts that 'Suffering is a mode of God's presence, and cannot be used as a symbol for his absence' (191). Fiddes also reminds us, however, that no lesser than G. W. F. Hegel had paved the way in speaking of the 'death of God' in that God as 'Absolute Spirit' 'becomes truly himself by going out of himself, exposing himself to the nothingness of death by entering into a situation which is completely opposite to him, finite nature' (188). God had 'died' metaphorically 'in that people have lost awareness of him'; yet 'God is the kind of God who actually opens himself to the assault of death, and it is precisely this that makes him the living God' (189).

In the light of both the ambiguity of the phrase 'the death of God' and of the way in which Moltmann seems to qualify the talk of God's being crucified or even suffering as Jesus suffered, one can see the wisdom of Fiddes's focus upon the idea of the suffering of God rather than God's death or crucifixion.[33] This is, for a start, an idea that is also found in Jewish theology. For Moltmann writes appreciatively of the Jewish prophets' 'pathetic theology' as described by Abraham Heschel. In this 'God is affected by events and human actions and suffering

[28] Cf. Kee, *Way*, e.g. 225, 229, 231–2.

[29] Cf. Buren, *Meaning*, 103. (Cf. also the discussion in Kee, *Way*, 174–85.)

[30] Nietzsche, Fiddes notes (*Suffering*, 181), rejected the story of the cross because such a 'story of the weakness of God in the cross challenges the human value of the will to power'. He finds in Don Cupitt's *Taking Leave of God* a similar inability to find a worthy symbol in a suffering God, for 'only the traditional image of an impassible God can symbolize the aspects of the religious requirement which judge our natural lives and summon us to victory over them' (183).

[31] Cf. Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, e.g. 160, 171, 180.

[32] Fiddes, *Suffering*, 188, quoting Altizer's earlier *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (London: Collins, 1967); Kee, *Way*, 81–99, compares the views found in this work with those in Altizer/Hamilton, *Theology*.

[33] When Lampe, *God*, 21, speaks of God always being 'incarnate' in human beings and therefore always being 'crucified', it is hard to understand this 'crucifixion' as other than a metaphor for all kinds of suffering, a suffering that he sees as being inherent in the creativity of God.