“GODHEAD HERE IN HIDING”
INCARNATION AND
THE HISTORY OF HUMAN SUFFERING

EDITED BY
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GOD’S PARTICIPATION IN HUMAN SUFFERING
IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF MARTYRDOM

He who believes that God was born and suffered (Qui natum passumque Deum … credit) and sought again his Father’s throne, and that he will come again from the skies, that on his return he may judge the living and the dead, sees, if he follows the rewards of Christ, that the inner court of heaven lies open to the holy martyrs.¹

Does God suffer? Does it make sense to speak of God as suffering outside of the temporary confines of the incarnation? If so, then how precisely does God participate in human suffering? In modern times these questions were first systematically addressed by the German and British kenoticists of the nineteenth century. The horrors of the world wars of the past century have raised theodicy to a new existential level and stimulated further theological explorations. Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) famously remarked that in the face of unbearable human suffering God is best seen as a “fellow-sufferer who understands.”² Theologians as different as K. Barth, D. Bonhoeffer, S. Bulgakov, J. Moltmann, and W. Pannenberg, to mention just a few well-known examples, have for a variety of reasons embraced the claim that God suffers. The modern tendency to render questionable the assertion of classical theism that God is impassible led Ronald Goetz to speak of a “theopaschite revolution”³ in contemporary theology.

It has become a commonplace for many contemporary writers on the subject to treat patristic reflections on the issue of God’s participation in suffering dismissively, as having fallen prey to the alien Greek philosophical presupposition of divine apatheia and thereby abandoning the God of the Bible who is capable of emotions and suffering. I have argued elsewhere that such a dichotomy is a misrepresentation of patristic theology.⁴ In this paper I will focus on the material that is

entirely neglected in modern treatments of the topic in question, namely on the experience and theology of early Christian martyrdom. I will approach this material with two central questions in mind: (i) Do the ancient martyr-acts offer an argument from religious experience for Christ’s suffering as in some sense continuing outside the framework of the incarnation? (ii) How does the experience of union with Christ transform the nature and teleology of a martyr’s suffering and death?

I

The early Christian confessors and martyrs were universally seen as imitators of their Lord. The patterning of the martyr’s passion and death upon those of Christ occurs, as it is well known, already in the New Testament. For example, the author of Acts is quite deliberate in making the dying wish of the protomartyr Stephen echo that of Christ in his gospel. Thus Stephen follows his Lord in forgiving the crime of his killers and in commending his spirit into the hands of Christ, just as Christ did into the hands of his Father (Acts 7:59, 60; cf. Luke 23:34, 46). The ancient writers were quite aware of the rhetorical potential of the last words of a dying hero: think, for instance, of Plato’s Socrates in Phaedo calmly considering arguments for the immortality of the soul cognizant of the fact that he will die in just a few hours. The behavior of a tragic hero in the face of inevitable death and the words that he utters become defining points of his whole life. For the first Christian martyr Stephen death is a supreme occasion to become Christ-like and to participate in his Savior’s experience of death and resurrection.

Similarly, Paul speaks in Galatians of bearing the stigmata of Christ branded on his body (Gal 6:17). Writing to the Colossians the apostle to the Gentiles (or perhaps one of his disciples) observes that by enduring persecution he is “completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24). These words (which I admit, allow for no easy interpretation) remind one of the unusual way in which the glorified Christ addresses his future apostle on the road to Damascus: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me” (Acts 9:4), speaking in this way of Saul’s zealous attempts to destroy the church. Thus the afflicted church becomes in a very real sense the suffering body of Christ. A similar point is echoed by The Acts of Peter in the famous Quo Vadis story. The risen Christ appears to Peter, who is fleeing Rome, to tell his apostle that he is headed for Rome to be cruci-
fied again. Peter takes the words of the Lord as a prophecy about his own martyrdom, since his death will become a co-crucifixion with Christ.5

A generation later, Ignatius of Antioch explains his craving for a martyr’s death as his desire “to imitate the sufferings of [his] God.”6 This is the earliest surviving theopaschite statement. It is noteworthy that it was made by a future martyr reflecting upon the meaning of his impending death. Ignatius’s self-description as theophoros emphasizes the idea that it is in suffering for Christ that he becomes most fully a God-bearer.

The patterning of the last days of a martyr’s life upon the passion narrative receives a fuller development in the martyr-acts. For example, the author of the Martyrdom of Polycarp chooses to dwell upon those details in the account of the Smyrnean bishop’s last days that find parallels in the passion narrative. Like Jesus, Polycarp predicts his death, prays for a long time before his arrest, enters the city of his martyrdom on a donkey, does not seek to justify himself before the authorities, and offers himself as a voluntary sacrifice to God. The identification of the dying Polycarp with his Savior is so complete that the pagans begin to worry that Christians would abandon the cult of the crucified and start worshipping Polycarp instead. The author feels the need to correct this view by pointing out that worship belongs to the Son of God alone, whereas martyrs are loved for being Christ’s disciples and imitators.7

Given its public character, the martyrs’ path towards their death became a mimesis of their Lord’s passion, akin to the ritual reenactment of the divine pathos by the officiants of the mystery cults and also not unlike the representation of divine passions by the tragic actors in Roman theatre.8 Since much has been written on martyrs’ imitation of Christ, I will not belabor this point any further.9 I will instead give a more focused consideration to a related claim, made in a number of martyr-acts, that Christ in some sense shares in the experience of the martyrs by suffering with them.

5. Acts of Peter, 35.
7. Martyrium Polycarpi 17.3.
II

In *The Letter of the Martyrs of Vienne and Lyons* to the churches of Asia Minor, preserved in Eusebius’s *Church History*, there is an account of horrendous torture to which a young deacon named Sanctus was subjected. We are told that the body of the martyr was stretched and distorted to such an extent that it became, in author’s words, “all one bruise and one wound.” Despite these atrocities, Sanctus remained unbending in his faith. Admiring the remarkable resilience of his hero, the author attributes it to the action of Christ, who “suffering in him achieved great glory, overwhelming the Adversary, and showing as an example to all the others that nothing is to be feared where the Father’s love is, nothing painful where we find Christ’s glory.”10 Christ vicariously takes upon himself the suffering of the martyr and transforms his pain into victory over the Devil, his humiliation into the glory of eternal life.

The same point is reinforced in the author’s description of the death of Blandina, a female slave:

Blandina was hung on a post and exposed to the wild animals that were let loose on her. She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross, and by her fervent prayers she aroused intense enthusiasm in those who were undergoing their ordeal, for in their torment with their physical eyes they saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them, that he might convince all who believe in him that all who suffer for Christ’s glory will have eternal fellowship in the living God.11

Blandina’s *koinonia* with the suffering Christ is so complete that, in the eyes of the believers, she is mystically transformed into Christ. The same point is developed in the Latin recension of *The Acts of Carpus, Pamfilus and Agathonicē*. When the Roman proconsul threatens Pamfilus with torture, the bishop replies: “[t]hese torments are nothing. I feel no pain because I have someone to comfort me; one whom you do not see suffers within me (\textit{patitur in me, quem te videre non poteris}).”12 It should be noted that this line is absent from the Greek original of *The Acts*. Clearly the third-century Latin editor of *The Acts* was concerned to emphasize the idea of Christ’s mystical suffering in the martyr, since he elsewhere abridges, rather than elaborates upon the Greek text.

The idea that Christ suffers in, with and even in place of the martyr is present in another well-known martyr-act, _The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas_. The story begins as a prison diary of Vibia Perpetua, a young Christian woman who is arrested along with some of her friends. Among them is Felicitas, who is pregnant and delivers a baby prematurely right in the prison. The guard, watching Felicitas’s birth-pangs, points out to her that when she is thrown to the wild beasts in the arena, her pain will be far greater than the one she undergoes now and that she won’t be able to bear it. Felicitas replies: “What I am suffering now, I suffer by myself. But then another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him (Modo ego patior quod patior; illic autem alius erit in me qui patietur pro me, quia et ego pro illo passura sum).”

For Felicitas, clearly there is a difference between one’s suffering for Christ and any other type of suffering. Christ is present first and foremost in the suffering of those who endure their cross for him. Melito of Sardis elaborates on this point in his paschal homily, written most probably in the sixties of the second century. For Melito, the divine Logos, long before his suffering in the incarnation, was present in the tribulations of the Old Testament prophets and righteous:

> It is he [the Logos] who in many endured many things: it is he that was murdered in Abel, and bound in Isaac, and exiled in Jacob, and sold in Joseph, and exposed in Moses, and slain in the lamb, and persecuted in David, and dishonoured in the prophets. It is he that was enfleshed in a virgin, that was hanged on a tree, that was buried in the earth, that was raised from the dead, that was taken up to the heights of the heavens.

While for the martyrs the suffering of Christ in some sense continues in the present history of the persecuted church, for Melito it also extends into the past of salvation history. Melito’s liturgical poetry stands out with its boldly theopaschite expressions, like “the impassible suffered,” or “the immortal died,” and so on. The second century bishop is not afraid of describing crucifixion as the murder of God. Although this


16. _Peri Pascha_ 96.
subject is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that there is a tradition of what could be called liturgical theopaschitism that stems from Melito and continues through such patristic authors as Apollinaris of Hierapolis (second half of the second century), Hippolytus of Rome (170-236), Alexander of Alexandria († 328), Ephrem the Syrian (306-373), Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386), Amphilochius of Iconium (340-395), Asterius of Amasea († 410), Proclus of Constantinople († 446), Peter Chrysologus of Ravenna (c. 400-450), and finds its culmination in the Byzantine Lenten Triodion. The liturgical theopaschitism of the Fathers, which is especially pronounced in Lenten hymnography of both East and West, is another area that deserves a lot more attention than it has hitherto received from systematic theologians and historians of doctrine.

III

The selected second and third century martyr-acts that were briefly considered above speak of Christ’s suffering as in some sense continuing beyond the temporary confines of the incarnation and extending into the experience of the martyrs. In the christological controversies of the fourth and later centuries, this particular point did not continue to be emphasized, since most theologians were more concerned with distinguishing between the unique personal involvement of the Logos in the suffering of Christ and the comforting presence of God’s grace in the martyrs. Thus, for example, Athanasius of Alexandria took pains to correct certain unidentified heretics in his letter to Epictetus written ca. 371:

It is no good venture of theirs to say that the Word of God came into a certain holy man; for this was true of each of the prophets and of the other saints, and on that assumption he [i.e., the Word] would clearly be born and die in the case of each one of them. But this is not so, far be the thought.17

On the surface, Athanasius’s point contradicts Melito’s theopaschite statements about the Logos suffering in the prophets and righteous, quoted earlier. However, if one looks more closely at the context of Athanasius’s letter, it becomes clear that the bishop of Alexandria aimed primarily at protecting the full divinity of the Logos. Athanasius did not intend to downplay the value of the martyrs’ participation in Christ’s

death. The concern to uphold the uniqueness of the Godman contributed to the fact that the martyrs’ mystical identification with Christ in suffering remained a somewhat underdeveloped and isolated theologoumenon in early patristic literature.

Moving from historical material into the realm of constructive theology, one could now ask a question, does the material of martyr-acts contribute anything to our contemporary understanding of God’s participation in human suffering? More specifically, what is the purpose and impact of Christ’s suffering in and with the martyrs?

It is striking that the question of why God does not intervene to rescue the martyrs from death is never raised by believers in the literature under investigation. Only the pagans mockingly point out, as did those witnessing Jesus’ own crucifixion, that Christ’s seeming absence indicates that the Christian God is powerless. The believers, by contrast, see martyrdom as first of all a privilege, and only secondarily as a tragic event. The martyrs are very rarely depicted as agonizing over their death, as Jesus did in Gethsemane; they never ask a question such as: ‘why, O Lord, do you not intervene to put an end to my suffering?’ It is striking that although the martyrs on one level are innocent victims of the state authorities who are blinded by satanic evil, theodicy never becomes an issue in these accounts.

Of course, it should not be forgotten that the martyr-acts is a genre closer to hagiography than it is to biography as understood in modern times. I would insist, however, that this literature cannot be dismissed as a tale glorifying pain and suffering which has little to do with an underlying reality. The martyrs are quite aware of the fact that God is silent, just as God remained silent in Gethsemane and at the hour of Jesus’ crucifixion. Yet, it is precisely by being seemingly hidden and silent that God reveals his will and redemptive purpose.

In suffering with and for the martyrs Christ gives comfort and strength to them. As we saw earlier the endurance of deacon Sanctus was attributed to Christ’s suffering in him. Felicitas could attest to the same experience. Other martyrs simply confess: “I have a God who gives me strength.”18 Far from increasing the martyr’s torture, Christ’s co-suffering paradoxically becomes a source of healing and strength.

In addition, Christ’s silent and invisible presence in the martyrs transforms the experience of suffering in a profound way. The martyr-acts are written from the standpoint of their death as fait accompli.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the world-view of the martyrs is intensely eschatological: the reality of heaven and of the last judgment dominates their imagination. “As I find you [at the hour of death], so shall I judge you,” ran a popular agraphon. The martyrs face human judgment, yet their eyes are fixed on the judgment of God; they are condemned by human law, but justified by the divine law; they are ordered to sacrifice to the gods, and they offer the ultimate sacrifice to God by refusing to sacrifice. Socially the martyrs are being reduced to nothing, but in the church they are counted among the great; they are mocked and despised by pagan society, yet they are honored and venerated by Christians; although they offer no physical resistance to the unjust social order, they are seen as soldiers of Christ engaged in a spiritual warfare; their very death, despite its cruelty, is seen as a manifestation of resurrection. Clearly, then, Christ’s co-suffering brings about a profound transformation: what started as an experience of dehumanization ends up being the experience of deification. Divine suffering becomes the means by which all suffering is ultimately overcome and transformed. Christ’s continuing kenosis becomes the martyr’s theosis.

Unlike some contemporary theologians, the authors of the martyr-acts do not claim that God’s suffering is eternal. Indeed, it makes no sense to say that having passed from this life the martyrs continue to share God’s suffering for all eternity. On the contrary, the martyrs enjoy God’s freedom from suffering, his impassibility. More importantly, the God who suffers in the martyrs is not merely a Whiteheadian “fellow-sufferer who understands.” The picture of God who does nothing but helplessly commiserate with the suffering humanity is totally foreign to this literature. According to patristic authors, God both transcends the experience of human suffering by virtue of his impassibility and at the same time enters this experience most intimately in the incarnation. God suffers impassibly in the sense that his suffering is always transformative, voluntary, and

19. Quoted in Justin, Dialogus cum Triphone 47.5; The Testament of the Forty Holy and Glorious Martyrs of Christ who died at Sebaste 2.2. Other sources attribute this agraphon not to Christ, but to the prophet Ezekiel. See John Climacus, Scala paradisi, gradus 7 (PG 88: 813D).

20. Passio Sanctis Felicis Episcopi 16-17; Passio Sanctae Crispinae 1.6; The Testament of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste 2.4; Passio Iuli Veterani 3.3; Tertullian, Ad martyras ii.

redemptive. The God who suffers in the martyrs is the one who is capable of profoundly transforming their experience of brutal torture by bestowing the power of his resurrection.

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