

Where Is God? Matthew's Passion Narrative and the Triune God

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What does Matthew's passion narrative say about God? Where is God in the dynamics of the story: in the plot, in the actions, among the characters? Given the betrayals, the opponents, the agony of the mode of execution of God's Christ (Matt. 16: 16-20), what is the meaning of Jesus' suffering for God's self? What is taking place between the dying Jesus and his God?

Even to begin to wrestle with these questions, we need to grasp Matthew's understanding of scripture fulfillment and the dynamics of the situation when Jesus quotes scripture from the cross, something that Jesus had already done before during the temptation in Matt. 4 and on occasions during his ministry in Matt. 9:13 and 12:7. It is ironic that the latter two passages cite the same Old Testament text from Hosea that desires mercy, not sacrifice.

For Matthew, Jesus' whole life, including the passion, is comprehended and made intelligible by the Old Testament scripture. Nothing happens that catches God off guard. Any notion of historical contingency is excised. But what does it mean to say that "all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by..." (Matt. 1:22), or "so it is written by the prophet" (Matt. 2:5)? I suspect that we often read Matthew anachronistically as if he were like a twentieth century fundamentalist who holds that once the Old Testament text is fulfilled it loses its value and is unable to voice anything more about God and God's action. The process of fulfillment is mechanical with a transcendent God in heaven orchestrating the events and characters below in a tightly woven web of relationships (all the world's a stage and we are but the actors). The image of God that emerges is one who pressures and arranges so that there is nothing new under the sun. The end result of such a process of understanding is to arrive at the conclusion that because God has already "seen" it all, any pain that occurs is already comprehended. The danger is that this trivializes the agony of Jesus' passion, and God in good Greek fashion remains unaffected. Then we are not far from the position that patripassionism is heretical. Thus, dare we say that in this context Jesus' quotation of scripture from the cross means "I thank you, O God, that even this is comprehended"? Then it is easy to see that the cry from the cross is not one of despair but of faith.

Matthew, I think, sees more deeply and more profoundly, when he casts his work as that of a scribe (Matt. 13:52) who interprets ancient texts as revealing the purposive activity of God continuously in God's creation. For these texts speak of a God who is involved, who is characterized by verbs of action. These texts speak of a constancy in God who guides the process and the minds and hearts of human beings, but they also speak of a God who adapts to existing conditions, conditions generated as a result of attitudes adopted by and situations created by human beings. The Hebrew people learned this in many ways, superbly in the Exodus where God hears, sees, is moved, comes down, acts. Far from muting these ancient texts, Matthew hears in them the eloquence of this acting God and sees in and through them this divine activity. Matthew reads the gospel in the context of the Old Testament God. The same God is

at work now, now in a crescendo of newness that is at the same time a profound oldness.

In Jesus' cry from the cross there is no statement of scripture fulfillment, but there is the quotation of a text from scripture, a quotation of a psalm already alluded to at least three times before in Matthew's passion narrative. But this is a particular type of psalm—a lament (the work of Claus Westermann, Walter Brueggemann, Patrick Miller, and others has recovered the powerful impact and profound depth of this form for the faith of Israel).¹ There were countless times in the life of Israel that the divine plan was hardly self-evident, that the God of the verbs was not experienced. There were poignant times when the pain of life, deserved or undeserved, was crushing and debilitating. A lament gave voice to all of that anguish. A lament knows that there is no way to live in this world without experiencing pain. Startlingly, a lament also knows that there is no way for God to be God without experiencing pain. Matthew encourages us to understand the dynamics of the relationship between God and Jesus in the context of this ancient lament. I would not want to suggest that we cannot understand the psalm in the light of Jesus, but I know that we do that already and easily. What I am suggesting is that we follow Matthew's lead and the fruitful insights it may suggest.

But we need to explore the dynamics of a lament. A lament is the expression of pain in a time of darkness, blindness, silence, abandonment, and lostness. This is articulated within the full range of rhetorical techniques and devices. To what end? A lament reaches beyond for new answers, hoping that the present condition is not a final one, or God's final intention. It asks whether what looks like a final situation is indeed so, and it asks that question out of a sense of enveloping total abandonment. But to speak a lament calls for a listener, another listener beyond the narrowing total focus on the agony which is threatening, even more at a deeper level, which is consuming all reality other than its own painful one. A lament is desperate and yet hopeful. It is a crying out, desperate to be heard, and the addressee is God.

Matthew intensifies Jesus' lament when he takes Mark's translation of the cry into Greek *ho theos mou, ho theos mou* (a simple nominative singular) and changes it to a vocative which generates the plaintive: *thee mou, thee mou* (draw the *ee* of *thee* out: *th..e..e..e*). But for Jesus to voice his pain through a lament even though he is calling for God to be faithful, in no way lessens the intensity or depth of the pain. If anything, it intensifies it. Does Jesus know that God is there? No, he does not. But he is reaching beyond. God is being addressed. Who God is, is at stake.

The issues at stake are absolute. Here is the consummate truster, innocent, brutalized, dying; where is the one trusted? That is the agony beyond our ability to grasp. The pain is voiced. God is addressed.

Who voices this agony? Now we must reflect back on the richness and diversity of Matthew's Christology. The "who" is the servant, chosen, bonded in love with God and God's people (12:15-21); the "who" is the Wisdom of God, filled with insight, understanding, and active in creation (12:41-42; 23:34; 11:19, 28-30); the "who" is the bearer of the Shekinah, the mediator of the presence of God (7:1-9); the "who" is the Son in intimate, personal relationship with the Father and who identifies us as children of God (11:27; 6:32); the "who" is the teacher of Israel and the church (5-7). This is who is at stake! *Theeee mou, thee mou*; who am I now? We are now beyond human ability to grasp this agony; the lament is now translated onto a vastly higher plane that transcends and shatters the form itself. This is the lament to end all laments and lamenting.

What is at stake? The impact of a ministry of parables, miracles, debates, encounters, of visions of the satan falling from heaven, of blessed sight when what prophets and kings longed to see the disciples had seen. What is at stake? The kingdom reality experienced then and there, and the glorious, seen but not yet consummated, kingdom of heaven. *Thee mou, thee mou*; where is all of that; is it lost?

A lament bespeaks another listener—God. Is the lament heard? The Exodus story answers yes: “we cried out, and God heard” (Ex. 2:23-25; 3:7,8), as does Ps 22:24, “For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hid his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him.” And this God will hear in the future (Ex. 22:27b). The Old Testament characterizes God as one who receives and takes seriously the cry of human pain. The godness of God is defined in part as a hearing, listening compassion. God possesses a direct knowledge of the suffering of another. Knowledge means here an authentic, immediate, personal receiving. But such an act of receiving also calls to remembrance and touches the receiver’s own pain. The receiver has lived it too in the receiver’s own experience. This means that God also has a direct experience of suffering, as the Exodus narrative demonstrates, a suffering of which texts such as Hosea 11:1-9 and Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 speak.

Thus, characterizing the lamenter and the one who hears, we begin to sense the awesomeness of the pain in Matt. 27:46. Where is God? All of Matthew’s scribal exposure of newness and oldness from the treasure of scripture answers the question. God is there hearing, the God who remembers God’s pain, and who now hears the lamenting pain of the Son, receiving and remembering. Matthew invokes all this richness of expression in his concept of scripture being fulfilled. Here is scripture, for you and me the Old Testament, interpreting experience.

In Matt. 26:64 at the hearing before the high priest, Jesus knows where God is: “you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power.” He knows more: he knows God is with him. By the cross that knowing is gone. But he is known, and his lament is heard, credited, taken seriously, embraced, in the most powerful sense of scripture that testifies, “we cried out, and God heard.”

But experiencing pain, feeling pain with another is not enough, especially in the context of a lament. For it is a call to action. To be heard, there must be resolution with attention to the persons and structures that define and cause the pain. A lament finally expresses relentless hope, the reaching trust which insists that no situation falls outside God’s capacity to transform it. It bears, believes, hopes, and endures, reaching desperately toward healing.²

Pain-generating institutions and persons, the pain-filled reality human beings have made, cannot long survive voiced, heard pain in the world of the lament, for the vision of an alternative future moves beyond promise to reality. This is the key to understanding Matthew’s expansion of his Marcan source in 27:52-54. The Power to which Jesus testified before the high priest acts in yet another way: the temple’s capacity to function is shattered with the rending of the veil implying the exposing of the divine self for all to see. The creation is shaken and wounded; the resurrected saints demonstrate the power of the cross to redeem; and even if the episode is an anachronism, it is a glorious one, and the gentile centurion follows in the train of the magi at the beginning of the story voicing the true confession. The final resolution of the lament waits for the first Easter morning and that appearance on the mountain.

And the Spirit? Where is the Spirit? The Spirit is in the power of the lament to

create a new reality while embracing the pain caused by the old. The Spirit is the interpretative power of the treasure of scripture from which comes things both old and new. The Spirit vouches for the truth of the passion, which is from the human perspective in danger of being consumed by a poignant, painful not-knowing. The Jesus who speaks the finest Christological confession in the gospel before the high priest utters his final human words in a lament reaching for God, waiting for God's response. The Spirit is in both. And when Jesus speaks again, it is on the mountain in the full power of the Spirit.

So what is Matt. 27:46? Is it a cry of despair or is it a cry of faith? It is neither; it is far more. It is the final lament of human reality by the grace of the triune God.

Notes

¹ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981). Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 22-66. Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried To the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

² Karen Lebacqz, "Bridging the Gap, Pain and Compassion," in *The Future of Prophetic Christianity: Essays in Honor of Robert McAfee Brown*, ed. Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993). Johann-Baptist Metz and Jurgen Moltmann, *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 3-16, 89-99.