

# Bridging the Divide between Bible and Practical Theology



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Edited by

Denise Dombkowski Hopkins  
and Michael S. Koppel

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## FOREWORD

As the Dean of a theological school for many years, I knew that one of the constant challenges in preparing both lay and clergy students for leadership in the life of the church was the difficult task of integrating the many disciplines of the theological curriculum into the actual practices of ministry in the church. Can deepened knowledge of the Bible and church history really make a difference in meeting the day to day challenges of pastors and lay leaders in a congregation? Can the ability to read and engage the thought and ideas of systematic theology move out of the academic and actually assist in meeting the spiritual and moral needs of believers?

Anyone with experience in theological education knows how naturally a divide can develop between the so-called classical disciplines of the curriculum and the disciplines focused on the practices of ministry. Such a divide is often unintentional. Colleagues respect each other as scholar-teachers and cooperate in the institutional life of institutions. But individual classes and departments remain isolated from lack of occasions to cross disciplinary lines and engage in conversations that explore the interconnections of our disciplines and how those disciplines are expected to come together in the life and practice of those we prepare for ministry.

As a Dean I have come to the strong conviction that one of the best means for discovering and developing these interconnections is through interdisciplinary team teaching. My conviction was grounded in an early experience in my own career when I started team teaching with my colleague Larry Rasmussen. Thus began a conversation between my discipline of Bible and his of Christian ethics, a conversation that resulted in the publishing of our co-written volumes. Our collaboration also altered the shape of a major part of my teaching career and scholarly interests to focus on the Church's need to bring its biblical convictions and its moral commitments together.

In my role as Dean I challenged my faculty to work a team-teaching opportunity into the teaching schedule at least once in a three-year-cycle of course offerings. I felt strongly that this should not be artificially mandated by a formal curriculum plan but grow out of discovered mutual interests between colleagues. As colleagues found areas of common concern or conviction, method or content, then I felt they should be

encouraged to explore those connections and do so in dialogue with students who will need to make those connections in ministry.

Among the first to respond to my challenge were Denise Dombkowski Hopkins and Michael Koppel. I was not at all surprised. Almost as soon as Denise joined our faculty in Hebrew Bible she was taking an extended unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at a local hospital to explore how the Psalms might be effectively used as a pastoral tool. And when Michael joined our faculty in pastoral care he came with that characteristic Presbyterian conviction that every aspect of ministry must be solidly grounded in biblical understandings. Unlike the Methodists, whose territory he was entering, he even had to take Hebrew to be ordained. Denise as a layperson and Michael as clergy encompassed and embodied a conviction about ministry as the work of the whole people of God. When they told me of their conversations out of which had come a desire to team teach a course in the Hebrew Bible and Pastoral Care Practices, I immediately encouraged them to do so. The course became a student favorite, and I have listened in on more than a few excited student conversations stimulated by their teaching.

Now their collaboration has borne fruit in a variety of ways. They have co-authored a very well-received book entitled *Grounded in the Living Word: The Old Testament and Pastoral Care Practices*. They have gathered other colleagues with similar interests and established a section at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting on the Bible and Practical Theology. And now, this volume, *Bridging the Divide between Bible and Practical Theology*, is the tangible product of that widened conversation they have been instrumental in fostering.

This volume offers clear evidence that the practical concerns of ministry can be illumined and made more effective by deepened biblical understanding that exposes the diverse voices and complex perspectives of the canon. Dombkowski Hopkins and Koppel have assembled a distinguished cast of scholar-teachers to guide the reader in fruitful exploration of interdisciplinary waters. The journey into these waters is hugely rewarding.

**BRUCE C. BIRCH**

Dean, Wesley Theological Seminary  
Washington, DC



## INTRODUCTION: BRIDGING DIVIDES

DENISE DOMBKOWSKI HOPKINS  
MICHAEL S. KOPPEL

This collection of essays presents some of the fruits of a collaboration that began more than a decade ago when one of us said to the other: “We ought to teach a class together someday.” As colleagues at Wesley Theological Seminary (Michael in Pastoral Theology and Denise in Hebrew Bible), we partnered to teach a course on the Hebrew Bible and Pastoral Care Practices, supported by a Theological Renewal Award from the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. During that class we ventured together into topics and texts that heretofore we had only explored as solo academics and teachers. We sensed our ideas and practices could be beneficially shaped through something more than ‘going it alone’. Encouraged by the spirit of our home institution, and especially the leadership of then Dean Bruce Birch, we embarked on a journey of discovery. We considered ideas, challenged assumptions, posed questions, and interacted around conundrums through our similar yet different personalities, teaching styles, and academic disciplines. Students loved it when we disagreed with one another in class as we modeled for them learning by doing, mutual listening, and remaining open.

We enjoyed the experience of partnered teaching so much that we sought to expand our conversation to include colleagues in Bible and pastoral care across the country. With the support of a Wabash Center Large Project Grant, sponsored by the Lilly Endowment, ten of us met at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico to discuss the promises and pitfalls of partnered teaching across our disciplines and to create syllabi to embody our collaboration. Several of those present at our Ghost Ranch retreat have written for this volume out of their subsequent work. Out of these beginnings in New Mexico, a group emerged that eventually became the Bible and Practical Theology section in SBL that is still going strong today. Several of the papers given in that Section appear in revised form in this volume, strengthened by the structure of the Section that ensures time for lively discussions after each paper.

We sought out SBL and AAR colleagues who were also interested in the search for interdisciplinary intersections between biblical texts and their interpretations and areas of practical theology, colleagues who wanted to break out of the academic silos that too often separate us. The title of this volume, *Bridging the Divide between Bible and Practical Theology*, signals our desire to contribute to the closing of this unfortunate divide that still exists today between the so-called ‘practical’ and ‘classical’ disciplines in Seminary curricula. This collection of essays aims to build a bridge across a chasm that should not exist. We encourage and the chapters reflect ‘working on the bridge’ through a collegial model of sustained conversation out of our different disciplines in Bible and practical theology. Often we do not model integration for our students because compartmentalized seminary curricula make mutual exchange across disciplines difficult. Teaching in silos often leaves seminary students unable to integrate their curricular work and engage in effective ministry. Fragmented learning can all too easily lead to fragmented ministry in a world that desperately needs to hear a coherent, inclusive voice.

Institutional policy can also unwittingly impede partnered teaching and learning. We believe it is advantageous to frame curricular and faculty teaching discussions with a clear rationale: students studying for the ministry need to experience integrative practices in the classroom as a means to prepare them for leadership. Considered in this way, partnered teaching becomes a necessary and indispensable method for achieving integration as a desired outcome of the curriculum. We emphasize that partnered teaching and learning differs substantially from team teaching. Team teaching can mean two or more instructors involved in the classroom. However, when the faculty members simply rotate responsibility for teaching, the instruction becomes sequential rather than integrative. Partnered teaching requires leadership from each faculty member in every class session in order to model collegial leadership for our students.

We believe that partnered scholarship, whether involving co-authors from different disciplines or a single author drawing from different disciplines, follows a similar pattern. Biblical interpretation should always be relational and integrative, and should invite us to see how our individual stories intersect with the biblical stories and with the stories of others in community. Similarly, stories shared in the pastoral care encounter offer opportunities for self-reflection and understanding in the telling and the listening. Sharing stories, whether biblical, personal, or communal, invites and even demands our pastoral caring of one another.

Such sharing also demands our imaginative engagement and tolerance for surprise.

We have divided the book into two sections, **I: Theoretical Frameworks**, in which the authors invite us to look more broadly at issues of method, context, geography, and culture as we bring biblical texts and practical theology into dialogue, and **II: Reading Biblical Texts**, in which the authors invite us into individual biblical books or texts while wearing the lenses of practical theology to mine the intersections and complexities of the encounter across disciplines.

Whether singly or jointly authored, these essays model a dynamic, interactive reading of human situations and biblical texts in order to reveal the multivalent complexities of both, whether in pastoral, liturgical, communal, intercultural, educational, social, or clinical contexts.

We begin Part I with a challenge in Chapter One from **Nancy Bowen** and **James Higginbotham** to read the Bible canonically in order to avoid simplistic biblical responses to suffering. They call for the identification of the potential and the limits of any one view of God's role in human suffering. Using a hermeneutics of appropriation, suspicion, and liberation, they guide students to pay attention to the contexts shaping ancient biblical texts and whether or not they are relevant to contemporary situations of suffering. Paying special attention to the healing stories in the Bible, they caution that these stories may say more about theology and Christology than God's intervention in human suffering.

In Chapter Two, **Randall Furushima** sketches a postcolonial hermeneutical framework for practical theology informed by traditional native Hawaiian perspectives. This alternative conceptual model complements Eurocentric modes of interpretation. The Pacific Rim hermeneutic he presents is geographically-rooted, context-based, culturally-sensitive, people-centered, liberation-focused, and faith-driven. Furushima argues biblical exegesis must be done in relation to the language, voice, and history of the Hawaiian people in order for the gospel to come alive. In place of a rational critical approach to the interpretation of scripture and its use in pastoral care, he proposes a 'metaphoric poetic approach' which stands in alignment with epistemology of the peoples who inhabit the Pacific Rim. This knowledge base is informed by the Hawaiian principles of *pono* (way of living) and *ho'oponopona* (ways of healing to make things right again).

**Paul Kim** and **Fulgence Nyengele** explore in Chapter Three a western psychological view of 'happiness' in critical relationship with biblical and intercultural understandings of this notion. The authors draw on Martin Seligman's PERMA, an acronym that encapsulates his positive

psychology research on what constitutes individual happiness. They place Seligman's theoretical framework in critical conversation with the individual/communal interpretation of happiness in Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), the African concept *ubuntu*, and the Korean understanding of *jeong*. The African and Korean terms describe how human compassion and connection are intrinsically communal and interrelational. These cultural understandings describe what it means to be human and what constitutes living well in community. Rightly used, the term 'happiness' must include the welfare of others, not just the individual self alone. Their rich suggestive analysis identifies crucial components of the practice of intercultural pastoral care and counseling.

In Chapter Four, **Deborah Appler** and **Sharon Brown** chart their experience co-teaching a course for seminarians on social justice, pastoral care, and intercultural competency. They focus on the insidious nature of microaggressions and how these intentional and unintentional acts harm the health and wellbeing of marginalized persons and communities. Faith leaders, the authors argue, need to develop consciousness about these ruptures to social relationships and the need to repair them. They suggest Leviticus 5:14-6:7, with its guilt ('*asham*') ritual, can address the harm of microaggressions. The liturgical act in Leviticus addresses in a practical way the seriousness of both unintentional (5:14-19) and intentional sins (6:1-7) that threaten the integrity of the community and transgress God's commandments (5:17) by providing restitution to those harmed. In a creative interdisciplinary synthesis, Appler and Brown outline a modified guilt ritual as a practical means for living into covenant community that could be beneficial for educational institutions as well as social service agencies, churches, and civic groups.

Engaging in a close textual reading of 1 Corinthians 11 in Chapter Five, **Lance Pape** explores the apostle Paul's pastoral theological imagination. Pape shows us Paul as a practical theologian, skilled in negotiating the intersections between God's self-disclosure in Christ and the practices of early Christian communities, drawing on tradition in order to shape practices for new contexts that the church was facing. Pape focuses on one such negotiation: the apostle Paul's response to the practice of the Lord's Supper in Corinth (1 Cor 11:17-34). The chapter begins with textual analysis of the Corinthian church to illumine the context Paul addressed, and to help modern readers see his method of discerning and articulating the intersection of human and divine *praxis*. Pastoral leaders and preachers will discover in this valuable chapter a paradigm to help them with the task of preaching in their own context of ministry.

Part II of the book continues with the reading and intersections of biblical texts and practical theology. Using feminist and liberative pedagogical strategies to interpret the book of Job with high school students, **Jennifer Williams** in Chapter Six challenges both conventional interpretations of Job and conventional teaching strategies. She suggests that Job is the victim of bullying at the hands of both his friends and God. Her resistant readings of Job attempt to open new dialog about the nature of bullying and how to deal with it, especially for LGBT students who often experience it. By asking disciplined questions of the text in order to de-center authority so that the youth can claim their own interpretive voices, Williams seeks to create a space to address the issue of bullying in a pastoral way. Taking cues from the book of Job, the students identify helpful responses to bullying, especially the necessity of speaking up.

Exploring the “poetics of care” in the Psalms, **Denise Dombkowski Hopkins** and **Michael Koppel** in Chapter Seven identify the rich possibilities Psalm metaphors open for relational care practices in the midst of suffering. The poetics of care invites pastors, chaplains, counselors, and other care providers to engage intuition, sense perception, and aesthetic appreciation in a slow, rather than a quick-fix way of ‘being present’ in their encounter with sufferers. The frequent use of body part metaphors, which are often personified in the Psalms, opens up a reflective space for the sufferer to deal with the reality of trauma that has taken language away. This enables the psalmist, and those appropriating the psalm today, to name their experience of body/mind/spirit to God, themselves, and one another. The use of metaphorical psalm language in the holding environment of worship can overcome the isolation of trauma (which can lead to the “conflicted choice” of suicide) and allow for the working through of pain. They caution against reading psalm metaphors literally and ignoring the cultural contexts in which metaphorical language is received.

In Chapter Eight **Deborah Appler** deftly guides us through the story of King David’s last days in 1 Kings 1-2 to open up a dialogue about the “dirty little secret” of elder abuse in the United States, a problem that is increasing in intensity and frequency as the aging population multiplies rapidly. Seeing more than a story about Solomon’s succession to his father’s throne, Appler digs deeper and analyzes how family members and friends around David (Bathsheba, Joab, Adonijah, and Nathan) seem to manipulate him for their own benefit. Faith communities can use David’s story as a victim of elder abuse in a therapeutic way to cultivate awareness of the different aspects of elder abuse, give the abused a voice, and create

safe sanctuaries within which discussion of the complexities of elder care can take place.

In her provocative essay in Chapter Nine, **Stephanie Wyatt** interprets the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4:8-35 as a powerful “textual resource for grappling with the relationship between human suffering and divine absence.” Responding to the woman’s repeated hospitality during his travels, the prophet Elisha provides her with an unasked-for son who later dies and is revived by the prophet at the woman’s insistence. Drawing upon post-Shoah hermeneutics and using feminist and literary lenses, Wyatt suggests that this text offers an antitheodicy that insists upon God’s ethical responsibility in human suffering. This approach challenges traditional theodicy that explains or justifies human suffering in relation to God. Wyatt’s “ruptured” interpretation of the text gives voice to questions that honor the pain of those who suffer, pain all too often ignored at the expense of theodicies that insist upon the redemptive nature of suffering, no matter what the cost.

In the closing Chapter Ten, **Amy Beth Jones** and **Stephanie Day Powell** offer a fitting dramatic capstone to this volume by using the ancient form of *midrash* to fill in the ‘gaps’ of the text of 2 Samuel 21:1-14. They invite us to enter into the story of Rizpah, the concubine of King Saul, who holds a vigil over her two murdered sons caught in the crossfire of King David’s dealings with the Gibeonites after Saul’s slaughter of them. Rizpah refuses to leave her sons unburied to be devoured by beasts of prey. With her dogged determination, we are drawn into her pain and courage in the face of abusive power as an example for any age.

We believe that this collection of essays models critical appropriation of biblical texts for engagement with practical contexts within diverse communities today. In this volume, theory and practice come together to enrich our common life both inside and outside the church. We invite clergy, laity, professors, and church professionals to join us in this continuing conversation.

**DENISE DOMBKOWSKI HOPKINS AND MICHAEL S. KOPPEL**

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September, 2017

**PART I:**  
**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

## CHAPTER ONE

# HEBREW BIBLE AND SUFFERING: UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING ABOUT VIEWS OF GOD AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

NANCY R. BOWEN  
JAMES HIGGINBOTHAM

The Hebrew Bible includes many narratives and poetic depictions of God's role in illness and suffering, which can serve as touchstones for an interdisciplinary, practical dialogue between biblical interpretation and pastoral theology. We advocate for a canonical or “thick” reading of the Hebrew Bible, which reveals multiple and disparate understandings of God’s role in suffering. We argue that these disparate views are both complementary and in tension with one other, requiring attention to historical-critical, narrative, and liberative hermeneutical methods, the latter because the voice of those who suffer most must be heard. Pastoral theology and its psychosocial resources supply benchmarks for theological anthropologies and ministries that balance the multiple, ambiguous dimensions of the human condition. By helping persons apprehend the multifaceted biblical perspectives of God in the face of distress and trauma, as well as construct faithful theological and pastoral responses to similar real-life events, this dialogue can offer valuable tools for interpreters of text and life situations.

A primary reason for suffering’s usefulness in the intersection of the Bible and pastoral care cannot be underestimated: it is a constituent aspect of human existence, which is typically problematic for faith communities. Suffering challenges facile explanations for God’s role in human life and forces believers to make sense of the nature of creation and its Creator. As will be illustrated, the Bible contains many texts in which those ancient communities wrestled with the nature of suffering and what are possible faithful responses to it.



Admittedly, since suffering is an inescapable, core problem of human existence, ambiguity abounds. This complexity parallels the Bible's multivalence. Thus, suffering is a two-edged sword offering many opportunities for insights into ancient and contemporary pastoral theologies, as well as revealing paradoxes, contradictions, and ironies that confuse students and other interpreters. The use of the Bible in pastoral care is particularly problematic when the care giver and also the sufferer assume the Bible has *one* view of suffering. But any view of suffering, in its ability to offer meaning or explanation, has its limits.

To assume that the Bible offers only one answer that is applicable to all situations is, by definition, a "thin" reading of the text. What Dombkowski Hopkins and Koppel call "platitudes" is a thin reading and thin application of the biblical text: we are in agreement that a slogan in pastoral theological paradigm should be "Pitch the Platitudes" (2010, 23). Part of reading canonically is identifying the limits of any one view. A pedagogical and pastoral component of using the Bible in pastoral care is learning to accept that *every* theology has its limits and to thus consider where a theology has both potential and limitations in pastoral care situations.

To help our students apprehend this component, we preselect a number of texts that contain some of the typical platitudes, such as Isaiah 40:31; Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 8:28; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Philippians 4:13; James 5:15-16. Students are required to exegete the text in its historical and literary context and analyze its potential for pastoral theology, as well as its limits. Students must consider what the text says about God and the human condition and relate their understanding of the passage to a specific instance of suffering.

Where sufferers often have a theological crisis is when the one answer they have been taught as the answer to all suffering does not seem to fit their situation. This is precisely Job's conundrum. The thin theological answer to his suffering was that it was divine judgment for his sin. Job refused to accept this platitude because it did not cohere with his own experience. A thick or canonical approach recognizes the Bible consists of multiple theological voices that may be in tension with, or even contradict, each other. From the biblical studies side, one step in developing a biblical pastoral theology is to develop an understanding of the multiplicity of ways the Bible answers these questions: What is the source or cause of suffering? What meaning or significance is given to the suffering? What role does God play (if any)? How should the sufferer respond? What does healing look like? This is primarily a descriptive task. For the pastoral care giver, this understanding should be as comprehensive as possible. The

advantage of doing so is that it provides both the care giver and the sufferer options that may be used to reframe the meaning of the situation.

## Scriptural Views of Suffering

Due to space limitations we will not provide a comprehensive accounting of Scripture's views of suffering, but instead provide several prominent perspectives to illustrate the complexity of those views.

- *Divine punishment*: The dominant biblical view is the reward/punishment paradigm. In Torah and Prophets that view is embedded in the Mosaic covenant, which makes reward/punishment the divine response to Israel's obedience/disobedience to the covenant. The wisdom tradition of Proverbs maintains this theological view but disconnects it from Torah and makes it individualistic. The Proverbs version can be summarized as: "you reap what you sow."

Traditionally this dominant view is known as retributive theology and expresses a cause/effect understanding of suffering: wrong behavior precipitates the suffering, whether that is the national suffering of the destruction of Israel and Judah, or the individual suffering of a person with an illness. That God judges righteously underlies this paradigm: "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen 18:25; all quotations in this essay are from the New Revised Standard Version).

It is impossible to know the extent to which this dominant view is intentionally taught in religious communities or how much it is simply a part of human nature to believe that life should be "fair." What we do know is that in situations of suffering the initial reflex is almost always to ask, "What did I do to *deserve* this?" Pastorally there is some advantage to this question because if a cause can be identified then remediation can commence in order to reduce or eliminate the suffering.

Here is an example from Psalms. Italics and underline are added to indicate the causal relationship between sin and suffering.

There is no soundness in my flesh  
because of your indignation;  
there is no health in my bones  
*because of my sin.*

For my iniquities have gone over my head;  
they weigh like a burden too heavy for me. (Ps 38:3-4)

The psalmist understands she is sick because she has sinned. If the cause of illness is sin, then the cure is confession.

I confess my iniquity;  
 I am sorry for my sin.  
 Do not forsake me, O LORD;  
 O my God, do not be far from me;  
 make haste to help me,  
 O Lord, my salvation. (Ps 38:18, 21-22)

- *Sins of the parents*: This viewpoint is most clearly expressed in Exodus 34:6-7; Numbers 14:18. “The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.” The sins of the parents is used in Kings and Jeremiah to explain the exile: Josiah's reforms were insufficient to overcome the sins of Manasseh (2 Kgs 23:26; 24:3; Jer 15:4). A variation would be collateral damage, where others suffer as a part of someone else's punishment, such as the death of David and Bathsheba's first son (2 Sam 12:14).

- *Testing*: There is a tradition of persons being “tested” by God, where the test involves an element of suffering. Abraham was tested by God and told to offer his son as a sacrifice (Gen 22:1). The purpose of the test is not always clear but generally seems to be “to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments” (Deut 8:2).

- *Human oppression and persecution*: The experience of human induced suffering is found in the stories of Joseph, the exodus, Esther, and Daniel 1-6, among others. In these instances God does not cause the persecution and may or may not be an active agent in liberation.

- *Apocalyptic theology and martyrdom*: This is a later development in the Hebrew Bible, but highly influential in the New Testament. In apocalyptic literature the key issue is that suffering is caused by *righteousness*, not sin! Theologically this is explained as God allowing evil, including the suffering of the righteous, to continue until God intervenes to destroy the oppressors and save the righteous. At the extreme end this perspective develops into theological support for martyrdom. The righteous one endures suffering unto death in exchange for a future reward (e.g., 4 Macc 9:1-9; 17:9-12; Matt 16:24-26; 2 Tim 2:8-13; 1 Pet 2:18-25). Apocalyptic and martyrdom actually preserve the retributive view of suffering, just not in this lifetime but rather at some future time. One of the limits of the dominant retributive theology paradigm in the Hebrew Bible is that it assumed reward/punishment in *this* lifetime. Righteous suffering

poses a theological problem for the retributive perspective, which is (re)solved by postponing the reward/punishment to a future time after this life.

- *Divine absence*: A number of complaint psalms express the *experience* of God's absence and thus the possibility of God's absence as a cause of suffering. The basic issue in these complaints is that God is *supposed* to deliver but God *has not*, which is *why* the psalmist is suffering. Psalmists wonder whether God has abandoned them (Ps 22:1-2), rejected them (Ps 60:1, 10), forgotten them (Pss 10:10-11; 42:9), turned away from them (Ps 27:9), not heard them (Ps 18:41), gone into hiding (Ps 10:1; 13:1; 44:24), or gone to sleep (Ps 44:23).

- *God's ways are not our ways*: Isaiah 55:8 states this clearly. Ecclesiastes suggest this in his opposition to the proverbial understanding of "you reap what you sow." This platitude is utter nonsense when clearly the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper (Eccl 3:16; 4:1). But other than questioning the dominant tradition, Ecclesiastes does not itself offer an alternative understanding of human suffering, except perhaps to make a persuasive case that we cannot always make a direct correlation between human behavior and divine response.

- *Evil beings*: We begin to see in the Second Temple period the attribution of suffering to evil powers in the form of demons who are evil (semi-)divine beings. In the book of Tobit, the demon Asmodeus torments Sarah. In 1 Enoch, Semyaz is the leader of the angels who persuades them to have intercourse with human women, giving birth to giants, and Azazel is responsible for teaching humans all forms of oppression. The Christian tradition attributes some suffering to demons, the devil, or Satan (e.g., Matt 8:16; Mk 7:24-30; Lk 9:37-43; Acts 10:38; 2 Cor 12:7; Rev 2:10). The attribution of suffering to an evil being has often been utilized to address the theodicy questions raised by many of the other explanations of suffering, particularly those attributing it to God.

## **Embedded Theologies**

Despite a multiplicity of authors and communities, ancient responses to suffering are at least generally comprehensible and potentially useful for contemporary contexts. The above explanations for suffering are common, embedded theologies of people of faith today. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has argued, "The biblical writings are pastoral theological responses to the situations and problems of their own times and communities" (1984, 39). These earlier communities were attempting to

offer compassionate, theologically relevant messages for their faithful members.

Given the differences in context, the biblical pastoral theological responses might partially diverge from what is best for the present, but the ancient people have *analogous* experiences with contemporary communities. These analogies of experiences are a treasure trove for students and practitioners of pastoral care.

For instance, understanding suffering as a form of *divine punishment* reinforces the belief that God is in control. This theology is often utilized to create a moral order to the universe, which meets a basic human need. Thus, when a pastoral caregiver hears someone expressing the belief that God is punishing them for their sins, the caregiver might explore how this helps the person make sense of suffering's moral character. The sufferer might not recognize the depth of the retributive theology present in the biblical passages they reference and might begin to examine their embedded theology more deliberately (Doehring, 2014).

A potentially more complex example is Psalm 143, a lament that seems to struggle with both despair and revenge. Even while the poet's spirit "faints" and "fails" and even fears going "down to the Pit," there is a call for God's "steadfast love" to "cut off my enemies, and destroy all my adversaries" (Ps 143:3, 7, 12). Such *internal conflict* is common among victims of violence and others who suffer, but is seldom articulated in such laconic theological language. Here we see how Scripture offers mostly realistic portrayals of the human condition, including suffering. Usually the harsher dimensions of life are not miraculously expunged, at least in this manifestation of existence. While not expunged from Scripture, articulation of internal conflict is frequently absent from Christian worship and theology. Whether used in worship or in offering counsel, the language of the Psalms provides an important entry to the depths of the experience of suffering and the embedded theologies surrounding people's responses.

Therefore, a pastoral theological paradigm of interpretation of the Bible requires clear hermeneutical assumptions to prevent the use of platitudes and to help communities understand the implications of the biblical perspectives they are adapting. To expand on these interpretive principles, making sense of how the ancient communities wrestled with the theological questions raised by suffering must include a historical-critical method that attends to the contextual nature of biblical texts and a broad, canonical approach to interpreting the Bible's portrayal of suffering. Especially in the Hebrew Bible, multiple communities often have shaped the manuscripts based on a variety of contexts. Pastoral

appropriations of the text must attend to these layers: thin hermeneutical methods ignore the complexity of suffering and the process by which the texts were developed. For example, both prophetic texts addressing the suffering of exile and many New Testament texts reflect the experiences of minority communities within a dominant community. When one's own context is radically different—such as privileged twenty-first century Americans—to what extent are the biblical explanations of suffering relevant?

## **Hermeneutical Stance**

Given the authority of the Bible, contemporary communities must develop their own criteria for pastoral-theological interpretations of biblical accounts of suffering. It is important to recognize that these criteria do not negate the legitimacy of previous faith communities' experience. For example, as suggested earlier, the Bible raises profound moral questions in relation to our understanding of God. Is God the cause of suffering? Why does God allow suffering to occur? When a modern concept like process thought is utilized to controvert God's immutability, thus permitting God to suffer with humans, it does not eliminate theological dilemmas faced by biblical writers like that of Job. Contemporary ideas of God's nature and of suffering are in dialogue with ancient views to wrestle with theodicy-like issues raised by suffering.

Most faith communities have already determined that the Bible speaks to them today, so contemporary language and models are essential in this moral conversation. Nearly all such groups also believe that God does not desire that people should suffer, making alleviation and prevention of suffering a critical component of the life of faith, in the past and in the present. Pastoral theology is the process by which one develops these faithful responses to alleviate and prevent suffering. Suffering becomes an evocative topic and conduit for the critical conversation between pastoral theologians and the Bible, ideal for teaching the necessary critical skills for both disciplines.

Additionally, from our own theological commitments, as well as the faith communities to which we belong, we enter that process from a liberative stance. Schüssler Fiorenza states that "all theology, whether knowingly or not, is engaged for or against the oppressed" (1984, 45). That is true for biblical theology and pastoral theology. Thus, we approach the biblical pastoral theological task with not only a hermeneutic of appropriation, but also a hermeneutic of suspicion. That is, we start from a position of the preferential option for the marginalized, privileging those

who suffer more. We continue the process with awareness of overlapping systems of oppression and the need to challenge those systems and hegemonic interpretations of suffering where they exist in the Bible or in our current society.

For example, those who work with victims of domestic violence critique the New Testament household codes that command wives to submit to their husbands (Eph 5:22-24; Col 3:18; 1 Pet 3:1). Historically these passages reflect the Roman patriarchal household, where the husband/father had absolute authority over subordinates, including wife, children, and slaves. Instead of questioning whether those should be the family values of today, these verses are appealed to by a woman's abuser and her pastor to justify theologically a woman's continued abuse.

Contemporary pastoral theology is not simply the reflections of faith communities; the various sciences are also critically correlated with Scripture, tradition, and other religious authorities. At times, present-day scholarly views of important human processes can provide checks against distorted theology rooted in simplistic readings. For example, the views that illness is caused by sin or demonic forces stand at odds with what is known today about the etiology of disease, including infections, bacteria, viruses, and genetic mutations. There needs to be a dialog between ancient and modern views of illness and consideration of how each view might inform and critique the other.

Healings in the Bible present a special challenge for pastoral theology, but their presence is an issue that needs to be addressed in any discussion of suffering. Members of faith communities have preconceived notions about healing in real life and the Bible that need to be explored critically. Examining the texts explicitly has many advantages in attempting to address miracles in general, such as in a pastoral theology class. Many such texts, particularly in the New Testament, are more about Christology or other theological issues than about the possibility of supernatural intervention to remove suffering.

The cleansing or healing of a leprous man, a story common to each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 8:1-4; Mk 1:40-45; Lk 5:12-16), is a good example of the importance and potential value of a thick interpretation. These texts must be understood in relation to the Levitical discussion of the skin conditions referred to as leprosy in which the sufferer's impurity is not necessarily equated with any sinfulness. Rather, the "lepers'" unclean status makes them marginalized people who, in Levitical times, lived outside the camp. The priest is the one who is able to declare the person ritually pure and thus able to return to the camp (Wiener and Hirschmann, 2014). This context fits well with one of the primary themes

in Luke that salvation and participation in the Christian community is available even to the marginalized (McColl and Ascough, 2009).

The pastoral possibilities of this interpretation of the illness and healing are substantial, especially given the manner in which persons who are differently-abled are treated. The healing in Matthew is described as a “testimony” to the priests (Matt 8:4), perhaps of the authority or power of Jesus in his ongoing dispute with the Jewish authorities.

In the healing stories in Mark, the restoration of physical functioning and social relationships acts as a metaphor for the restoration of Israel to its rightful relationship with God. (McColl and Ascough, 3)

The focus of the healing of the leper is not on the modern conception of the miraculous as a supernatural event. Our experience is that studying these healing texts utilizing multiple hermeneutical methods will elicit discussion of how healing is less about miracles and more about the important theological issues faced by earlier and current faith communities.

Social science may also highlight holistic theologies that emerge from a canonical interpretation of the Bible. Psychosocial theories of trauma, memory loss, and violence provide an accessible interpretation of Ezekiel’s often disturbing visions and reveal how journeys from war or slavery to potential rebirth have inherent tensions and moral dilemmas (Bowen, 2010). Similarly, recent trauma theory emphasizes the role of grief in recovering from suffering. This focus on mourning loss reinforces a holistic understanding of the theological cycle of death and rebirth, despair and hope that is present in a thick reading of Scripture’s portrayal of suffering, particularly evident in lament texts (Billman and Migliore, 2010).

## **Visceral Reactions to Suffering**

Of course, the Bible’s signs of hope and promise of rebirth usually are symbolic. They need to be translated into behavioral strategies or interpreted for the contemporary world to be practically useful. The need for safety would appear to be cross-cultural and fits well with many images of hope in the Hebrew Bible (Bowen, 2010). This vision of God as a source of safety is essential for many who have suffered, but might be forgotten in some religious-based responses that emphasize stepping out in faith. This interpretive process of the Bible parallels the same critical skills pastoral caregivers need to empower those who suffer by utilizing their embedded symbolic theologies of hope (Doehring, 2014). So teaching students to critically engage biblical passages, remembering the



communities and contexts from which they arose, helps students in understanding the theologies of the suffering persons they encounter in ministry, who are similarly shaped by context.

As we have indicated, because of its overwhelming power, responses to suffering often are simplistic. Here current views of important human processes provide checks against distorted theology. Modern social sciences have identified several typical reactions to suffering that are usually less than helpful to self and others, including:

- Scapegoating, which assigns blame while denying responsibility
- Dehumanization of another, usually involving good versus evil narratives
- Desire for revenge, often manifested in justified aggression
- Fantasies of healing and redemption, which are frequently eschatological
- Shame, which often leads to the suppression of fear and denial of loss

Since these visceral reactions to suffering often resonate with today's interpreter of the Bible, they are often appropriated *in toto*, without critical reflection. Schüssler Fiorenza (1984) describes these reactions: "where the distance between the subject and the object collapses into the fundamental question: How does the text resonate in us?" (27). These same typical reactions are also found within Scripture, especially in prophetic and apocalyptic texts. In the prophetic husband/wife image (Hos 1-3; Ezek 16, 23), the "wife" (Jerusalem) is scapegoated as being solely responsible for its destruction. Almost all oracles against foreign nations dehumanize that nation and call for God to take revenge for each nation's acts against Israel (e.g., Jer 50-51; Ezek 25-32; Nahum). Apocalyptic also dehumanizes enemies and desires revenge against Greeks (Daniel) or Romans (Revelation). The prophetic visions of restoration (Isa 40, 43; Jer 30-31; Ezek 36-37) and apocalyptic visions of the future rule of the righteous (Dan 7:27; 12:1-3; Rev 20-21) are fantasies in the sense of being unrealistic. It is the real life failure of each vision that leads them to be read eschatologically – *some day*, this will be true. Each of these may in some ways be rooted in the shame that comes from military defeat.

But that does not mean these texts should be understood simply as illustrations of psychosocial conditions and how the community responded to them. Such a hermeneutic ignores differences in contexts and often results in direct, non-critical, and unhelpful application of Scripture to what seem like similar situations. When our suffering is compounded by

shame, we may react in the same kind of ways. To the extent that we critique these responses as less than helpful in situations of suffering today, when those responses are identified in the biblical text, they should be similarly critiqued. Pastoral theology helps the interpreter identify and understand the platitudes, as described above.

Nevertheless, despite the potential for less-critical reflections, suffering also animates the possibility of vulnerability and empathy: two invaluable attitudes towards texts and experiences. Suffering is disorienting, even that which is encountered in manuscripts or persons to whom one is offering pastoral care. This disorientation invites openness to new interpretations and different meanings of the distress or even life in general. We have found in our classes that examining suffering in the Bible often opens the eyes of students to the theological assumptions within the texts. Since suffering often creates liminal space, this openness may lead to empathy; wounded people long to understand one another when faced with the mysteries of the human condition. Empathy for those who are suffering and vulnerability in facing one's own experiences are nascent critical skills, if they can be harnessed well by the teacher(s) who is/are not overwhelmed by these powerful dynamics.

## Conclusion

To summarize, suffering is a valuable topic for helping students explore the dialogue between the Bible and pastoral care. But due to suffering's problematic nature, instructors must repeatedly return to the critical nature of this interdisciplinary engagement. Biblical criticism, with attention to historical-critical, canonical, and liberative hermeneutical methods, offers valuable tools to remind interpreters of text and life situation of the context. This contextual reading of person and text is essential for a holistic hermeneutic. Pastoral theology and its psychosocial conversation partners supply benchmarks for theological anthropologies and ministries that are both in tension with and balance the multiple, ambiguous dimensions of the human condition, which are also reflected in the Bible.

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CHAPTER TWO

A PACIFIC RIM HERMENEUTICS  
FOR PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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*A colony begins as a translation,  
a copy of the original located elsewhere on the map . . .  
No act of translation takes place in an entirely  
neutral space of absolute equality.  
Someone is translating something or someone.  
Someone or something is being translated,  
transformed from a subject to an object.  
(Young 2003, 139-140)*

I want to offer the *Pacific Rim* as a conceptual construction and alternative model for biblical hermeneutics as it impacts pastoral theology by proposing an interpretive framework that “focuses on the dynamics of movement and transformation within the context of a particular geographic formation” (Gillies, Sword, & Yao 2009, 16). Coined in the 1960s as part of a larger discourse to promote economic interests in Japan among the nation-states surrounding and within the Pacific Ocean, the term “Pacific Rim” became popularized by the United States in the 1970s and has been adopted within academic circles, primarily in the social sciences. Even the application of theology to this particular geographic “ring of fire,” in reference to its volcanic circumference, has found its way into theological discourse (Crowley 2005, x).

Specifically, I want to introduce a hermeneutical framework that integrates Eurocentric biblical interpretation with an indigenous postcolonial Pacific Rim framework informed by traditional native Hawaiian perspectives. This framework will be relevant to the praxis of pastoral theology and the biblical assumptions that have informed the discipline’s current methodologies. This alternative framework also challenges the present interpretive structures from cultural critique outside of dominant western influence and inclusive of especially Pacific Islander

perspectives. A new blending will be offered that forms a distinctive “Pacific Rim” framework. The native Hawaiian principles of *pono* (“way of living”), and *ho’oponopono* (“ways of healing to make things right again”) will be considered as part of this cultural tapestry.

Insights from the Second Native Peoples’ Colloquy on Postcolonialism (May 2011), sponsored by the Association of Hawaiian Evangelical Churches of the Hawai’i Conference of the United Church of Christ and Ola’a First Hawaiian Church, will contribute towards this project. These proceedings from the Colloquy, which gathered Native Americans and Native Hawaiians in Kurtistown on the island of Hawai’i, have yet to be published.

Additionally, selected research principles from cross-cultural faith development research in Hawai’i conducted by this writer will contribute to the framework’s structure as well as to its content. As the first completed cross-cultural study in James Fowler’s faith development theory, the liberating power of story and narrative, symbol and metaphor, history and ideology will suggest multivariate approaches toward resourcing the pastoral theologian.

As noted by curriculum theorist William Pinar, Ted Aoki suggests that building bridges across cultural hemispheric divides promotes “conversation” toward “authentic dialogue.” Such conversation “must be guided by an interest in understanding more fully what is not said by going beyond what is said.” It is conversation that is attuned to “true human presence.” Yet it is conversation as jazz, a “new language” based on improvisation (Pinar 2005, 6). I recognize that these thoughts are emergent reflections in a dynamically emerging field of inquiry and discipline within both biblical studies and pastoral theology. My hope is that we will continue to play jazz together as we seek to improvise on present standards.

## **Defining Issues**

The ideas I am proposing acknowledge the dynamics between biblical hermeneutics and theology. Initial research projects in this area across theological persuasions were centered in Asia and elsewhere. Yet, within the Pacific Islander communities, the work has yet to flourish. On scripture and theology, Robert Morgan reminds us that “The Bible is central to Christian theology because its indispensable traditions are involved in whatever accounts of God’s revelation in Christ are elaborated.” Furthermore, “Theology

. . . aims to be both faithful to what the tradition as a whole has been seeking to express and also alert to changing situations which require

constantly new formulations.” (Morgan 1998, 23)

What, then, are the issues defining any new interpretive frame to advance our study of the Bible and pastoral theology in light of these reflections? I will begin by outlining five defining issues: language, voice, history, interpretation, and values. These are the issues that I hope will find resonance within our histories, stories, and imaginations. Let me suggest that the following are intended to prove generative for our common work together.

First, *language* itself is an issue. Language is problematic because of the colonization of Scripture into English, the language of the colonizers. Scholarship reflects differing opinions on this issue. Yale scholar Lamin Sanneh offers the idea that

missionaries had become indigenizers in the best sense of the term, rather than cultural imperialists. Translation thus brought Christian mission into an original congruence with the vernacular paradigm, with a tacit repudiation of Western cultures as the universal norm of the gospel. (See Briggs-Cloud 2011, 1)

Yet, post-colonial literary theorist and professor Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues for the importance of writing in local languages because “language carries culture and culture carries the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (1986, 15-16).

An example of the limiting force of colonial translation in the Maskoke language is found in the translation of the words that mean “the town on high” (*hvlwen tvlofv*), translated by the missionaries as “heaven.” But the term here corresponds colloquially to another word (*etvlwv*) that connotes a village that possesses the most manifested sacred entity, which is the fire at the heart of the ceremonial space. This turns the cosmology of Maskoke society on its head by removing the most sacred space of the people from the village, connected to the land, and placing it in an “intangible and unfathomable dimensional space somewhere up high” (Briggs-Cloud 2011).

The issue of language has become central in part because of the cultural occurrence called the Hawaiian Renaissance. The Hawaiian language became an official language of the state of Hawai'i in 1978. By 1987, immersion schools began in language, history, and culture. The revitalization of traditional Hawaiian music, arts, and dance have found their way into most segments of society, including and even especially faith communities. Momi Kanahale captures the spirit of this revival. She says that “the ancient form of hula experienced a strong revival as the