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SUB CRUCE REVELATA: THE CROSS AS A MARK OF THE CHURCH — AN EXEGETICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Roberto E. Bustamante

How do the Scriptures answer the tough questions when it comes to the topic of suffering?

Introduction

O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, “With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth?” (Ex. 32:11–12)

Alas, O Lord God, why have you brought this people over the Jordan at all, to give us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us? (Joshua 7:7)

Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? (Job 3:11–12)

O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? (Psalm 74:1)

Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? (Hab.1:3)

Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani? (Matt. 27:46)

SUFFERING ALWAYS RETAINS its scandalous side. It always demands an answer to its intrinsic “why?” Ancient polytheists solved the problem by dividing their pantheon into good and evil gods. The problem of theodicy becomes a serious one, when Gottfried Leibniz’s four premises meet one another: where (1) there is just one God (2) who represents goodness and justice, and where (3) God’s power in this world and (4) suffering are taken to be real.¹ The picture can get even worse: how to answer the theodician questions (i.e., Why? How is it possible?), when the ones who suffer are those who have already entered the eschatological sphere of salvation (i.e., the Church)?

The theme of our convention moves around what Martin Luther did with this problem in his 1539 writing *Von den Consiliis und Kirchen* (On the Councils and the Church[es]).¹ Luther not only accepts the Church’s suffering as a possibility or a fact, but he even lifts it up to the constitutive category of “mark of the Church” (*nota ecclesiae*), that is to say: suffering, persecution and martyrdom, together with the other six previous marks, allow the “poor confused person”² to know “what, who, and where the Church is.”³ Is that not too much?

[The Scriptures] provide perspective on our suffering within the context of our participation in Christ’s own storied-with-suffering body.

Let’s examine the question of the suffering of the Church from a biblical perspective. Even though — as it will become evident in my treatment of the topic — I consider the Old Testament canon to be foundational in this regard, I will reduce my approach to the New Testament canon, and this, to be honest, is due to my scholarly limitations. Another narrowing down of my focus relates to the not-always-recognized difference

between the apostles’ suffering (*qua* apostles) and the Church’s suffering. Though certainly related, these are different aspects of suffering not to be confused. The apostles stand in *persona Christi vis-à-vis* the Church, even with respect to their sufferings that, as with the Church, constitute their own distinctive marks. This will leave outside the scope of our work cherished texts such as 2 Cor. 1:3–7; 11:21–12:21; Phil. 3:10–11; or Col. 1:24–29; and other texts in which Paul deals with his apostolic

¹ Martin Luther. “On the Councils and the Church(es)” in: *Luther’s Works, Vol. 41: Church and Ministry*, eds. Eric W. Gritsch and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1966), 9–178.

² *Ibid*, 41, 148.

³ *Ibid*, 41, 143.

status and experience. After this Marcion-like mutilating use of the knife, I better begin to use my pen, lest I fall under Tertullian's accusation.⁴

This commentary considers three narratives into which the New Testament authors frame their account of the Church's suffering (sections 2–4). Far from exhausting the topic, we open three of the several doors that give us an entrance into the multifaceted drama that frames our suffering within the context of salvation. This, I hope, will help us to have at least a provisional grasp of how Scriptures handle our hard theodician questions while providing perspective on Luther's understanding of how the holy cross coheres with the New Testament account (section 5).

Suffering as Participation in Christ's Own Story

¹⁸ If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you (*εἰ ὁ κόσμος ὑμᾶς μισεῖ, γινώσχετε ὅτι ἐμὲ πρῶτον ὑμῶν μεμίσηκεν*).¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you (*εἰ ἐμὲ ἐδίωξαν, καὶ ὑμᾶς διώξουσιν*). If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. (John 15:18–21)

The final arrival of Jesus' "hour" (John 13:1), long expected throughout the narrative of the Fourth Gospel, inaugurates a new focus of attention in Jesus' discourse. Now, for the first time, it is the experience of the disciples during and after "the hour" that constitutes the content of Jesus' extended speech, acts and prayer.⁵ In line with the wisdom tradition in which it is rooted, our farewell discourse anchors prophetic announcements and exhortations in connection with both mediate and immediate future experience upon the solid ground of a set of reaf-

firmations of Jesus' identity and the disciples' intimacy with him. Now, what Jesus announces here is not a mere possibility but a certain fact, for the simple reason the disciples' experience of opposition is nothing else than their insertion into an already well-established cosmic confrontation between Jesus and the world on account of the world's ignorance and rejection of the sending Father.⁶ This defines the Church's suffering not only within a Christological matrix (*διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου* — v. 21), just as St. Augustine articulates it: "They will hate me in you, they will persecute me in you, and your word, just because it is mine,"⁷ but also in the Trinitarian conflict with the world (*ὅτι οὐκ οἶδασιν τὸν πέμψαντά με* — v. 21), just as John Chrysostom puts it: "The Father also is insulted together with them."⁸

Another paradigmatic text that locates the suffering of the Church within the narrative plot of Jesus' own suffering is the Synoptic discourse on "the cost of the discipleship:"

³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, He said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (*εἴ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν, ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι*).³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it (*ὅς γὰρ ἐὰν θέλῃ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ σῶσαι ἀπολέσει αὐτήν· ὃς δ' ἂν ἀπολέσει τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ καὶ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου σώσει αὐτήν*).³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul?³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (Mark 8:34–38)

Here, the Church's suffering as participation in Christ's story is set into the frame of this absolutely

⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons. "Against Heresies," in: *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885) 4:38, 1:521. Tertullian. "The Five Books Against Marcion," in: *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3*, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885) Bk. 4, Ch. 12, 3:363.

⁵ Gail R. O'Day. "The Gospel of John" in: *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 9* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 762.

⁶ Ramsey J. Michaels. "1 Peter" in: *World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 49* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 2010), 821.

⁷ Saint Augustine of Hippo. "Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John," in: *St. Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series, Vol. 7*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb and James Innes (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), Tractate 88, Ch. 2, 7:356.

⁸ Saint John Chrysostom. "Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John and the Epistle to the Hebrews," in: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 14* (Peabody Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 283.

radical and inescapable demand. Nobody is left aside (προσκαλεσάμενος τὸν ὄχλον σὺν τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ — v. 34; ὅς ἐάν/ἂν — vv. 35, 38), and nothing is left aside, since one's whole existence is at stake (τί γὰρ ὠφελεῖ ἄνθρωπον κερδῆσαι τὸν κόσμον ὅλον καὶ ζημιωθῆναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ; — v. 36). The cross that the multitude is summoned to take up (ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ — v. 34), far from being a mere metaphor for common daily-life problems, has the concrete entailment of the actual wooden machine with which the Roman Empire publicly eliminated and warned against political and social problems.⁹ That is to say, following Him (εἰ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν — v. 34) is of one piece with the concrete and deadly consequences of bearing witness of Him and His words in the midst of this adulterous and sinful

suffers and dies like John, but also inaugurates a further chapter of the story that goes even beyond death (μετὰ τὸ ἐγερθῆναι με προάξω ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν — Mark 14:28; 16:7).

Our sharing in this story cannot take place through a mere obedient imitation,¹¹ not even through the dynamic correlation between the penultimate gift of *conformatio Christi* and the still ultimate category of *Imitatio Christi*.¹² Our sharing in this story can only come to us as a gift (als ehn gabe und geschenck). Only then, “when you have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, give yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you.”¹³

But, how is it that the Church has a share in some-

	Mk. 1:1–13	Mk 1:14–5:43	Mk 6–10	Mk 11–15	Mk 16
John the Baptist	Preaching	Persecution (arrest)	Death		
Jesus		Preaching	Persecution (arrest)	Death	Resurrection
Disciples			Preaching	Persecution (announced)	Time to face death?

one else's historical events (i.e., Jesus' sufferings)? The ghosts of a medieval Christomysticism and a Romanticist/Idealist “empathy” with Christ lurk around for our

world (ἀπολέσει τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ καὶ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου — v. 35).

Now, the fact that our text (Mark 8:34–38) is still part of the Christological confrontation between Jesus and Peter (Mark 8:31–33) — notice that it is Jesus who makes this unmediated shift from messiahship to discipleship — preventing us from reducing Mark's account of the suffering of the Church to a mere moralistic trajectory, in line with Thomas à Kempis' *Imitatio Christi* or Peter Abelard's “subjective atonement.”¹⁰ The grave summons to suffer can only be uttered within the bigger picture of the gratuitous insertion of the disciples as the third link in a chain that does not and cannot belong to them by their own right, but that is given just by divine initiative. I'm referring to the pattern that moves the Markan narrative ahead by linking Jesus' destiny to that of John the Baptist (the one who is sent πρὸ προσώπου σου — Mark 1:2), and the disciples' destiny to that of Jesus, who not only

modern-shaped way of doing exegesis, in which the only possibilities remaining are the human factors either of the rebellious world's obstinacy in mistreating us, just as they did Christ, or of the Church's masochistic obsession with reproducing Christ's stigmata. The New Testament has a different answer to that question. The Church participates in Christ's storied-with-suffering body through sacramental mediation. For it is the water and blood that sprang out of the Crucified's side (καὶ ἐξῆλθεν εὐθὺς αἷμα καὶ ὕδωρ — John 19:34) at the precise moment when the Church was being founded (John 19:26–27)¹⁴ with which we are baptized into His death and resurrection (εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ ἐβαπτίσθημεν — Rom. 6:3–4), into that storied-with-suffering body (ἡμεῖς πάντες εἰς ἓν σῶμα ἐβαπτίσθημεν — 1 Cor. 12:13), as we are given a share in that one suffering and risen body, in spite of us being

⁹ Eugene M. Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (London: The New Testament Library, Westminster, John Knox Press, 2006), 244.

¹⁰ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (New York: Macmillan, 1951). David B. Capes, “Imitatio Christi and the Gospel Genre,” in: *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 13/1:1–19, 2003. Jason B. Hood, “The Cross in the New Testament: Two Thesis in Conversation with Recent Literature” in: *Westminster Theological Journal* Vol. 71, 2009, 281–295.

¹¹ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1989). Michaels, 262.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 44.

¹³ Martin Luther, “A Brief Instruction On What To Look For And Expect In The Gospels” in: *Luther's Works, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament*, eds. E. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 120.

¹⁴ R. Aland Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 134.

many (κοινωνία τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ — 1 Cor. 10:16–17).

Suffering as παιδείας κυρίου

⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord (παιδείας κυρίου), nor be weary when reproved by him (ὕπ’ αὐτοῦ ἐλεγχόμενος).

⁶ For the Lord disciplines (παιδεύει) the one he loves, and chastises (μαστιγοῖ) every son whom he receives.” ⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure (εἰς παιδείαν ὑπομένετε). *God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline (παιδεύει)?* ⁸ If you are left without discipline (παιδείας), in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined (παιδευτὰς) us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live (καὶ ζήσομεν)? ¹⁰ For they disciplined (ἐπαίδευσαν) us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness (εἰς τὸ μεταλαβεῖν τῆς ἀγιότητος αὐτοῦ). ¹¹ For the moment all discipline (παιδεία) seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (καρπὸν εἰρηλικὸν τοῖς δι’ αὐτῆς γυμνασμένοις ἀποδίδωσιν δικαιοσύνης) (Heb. 12:4–11).

There is a second type of narrative that we want to consider here, with which the New Testament frames the suffering of the Church, and that moves along the lines of Jewish wisdom tradition. Wisdom tradition, already highly-developed during the time of the Old Testament, became a critical element during the exile in redefining Israel’s religion, now without its temple and its rituals.¹⁵ A particular characteristic of wisdom tradition is its down-to-earth understanding of reality, especially in terms of its epistemology and its moral pragmatism.¹⁶ Though the pious or righteous life is undoubtedly understood as

coram deo, the main quest is how to live out this life in the world.¹⁷ In spite of the current revision of the traditional compartmentalization of categories,¹⁸ this makes an important distinction between the sage and the apocalyptic prophet, when dealing with the problem of suffering. To use James Voelz’ models, the sage will tend to approach the topic from a Newtonian perspective (coherent with everyday life), while the apocalypticist will do this from an Einsteinian perspective (beyond phenomenological perception).¹⁹

Elaborating on the Greek text of Prov. 3:11–12, our text (Heb. 12:3–11) rehearses the suffering story of the readers precisely in these sapiential terms. Our suffering is not a sign of dishonor²⁰ nor of having been abandoned by our God.²¹ The opposite is precisely the truth: God is acting with us as a loving father who disciplines his sons out of sheer love (ὄν γὰρ ἀγαπᾷ κύριος παιδεύει — v. 6), to train us in our proper relation with him as a father (εἰς παιδείαν ὑπομένετε, ὡς υἱοῖς ὑμῖν προσφέρεται ὁ θεός — v. 7), and to shape us so we can live out the heavenly inheritance that was already won by our High Priest, Jesus Christ (εἰς τὸ μεταλαβεῖν τῆς ἀγιότητος αὐτοῦ — v. 10; καρπὸν εἰρηλικὸν τοῖς δι’ αὐτῆς γυμνασμένοις ἀποδίδωσιν δικαιοσύνης — v. 11).

Particularly since the groundbreaking work of Charles Talbert and N. Clayton Croy,²² there is a strong scholarly consensus regarding the non-punitive character our text ascribes to the suffering of the readers. Rather than being a correcting or chastising “law” (notice that the punitive verbs in Proverbs, ἐλέγχω and μαστιγῶ, are left untouched)²³, the readers are to “read” their sufferings as the evangelical “indicative” with which their father

¹⁵ James L. Crenshaw. *Education In Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 52. Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O’Dowd. *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, Nottingham: Apollos, 2011), 24–28.

¹⁶ Benjamin G. Wright III and Lawrence M. Wills. *Conflicted Boundaries in Wisdom and Apocalypticism*, SBL Symposium Series (Atlanta GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

¹⁷ James Voelz. “Reading Scripture as Lutherans in the Post-Modern Era,” in: *Lutheran Quarterly* Vol. 14, 2000, 309–326.

²⁰ David A. DeSilva. *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 447–450.

²¹ Chrysostom, 499–500.

²² Charles Talbert (1991) and N. Clayton Croy (1998). *Learning Through Suffering: The Educational Value of Suffering on the New Testament and in Its Milieu* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998).

²³ Gareth L. Cockerill. *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 617.

¹⁵ R.E. Clements. “Wisdom and Old Testament Theology” in: *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 273–281.

¹⁶ Gerhard Von Rad. *Wisdom in Israel* (London/Valley Forge: SCM Press Ltd/Trinity Press International, 1972), 69–79.

affirms and establishes them as his sons.²⁴ This, however, is not always the case. Notice, for instance, 1 Cor. 11:27–31 (κρινόμενοι δὲ ὑπὸ [τοῦ] κυρίου παιδευόμεθα, ἵνα μὴ σὺν τῷ κόσμῳ κατακριθῶμεν — v. 32) and Rev. 3:19 (ὄσους ἐὰν φιλῶ ἐλέγχω καὶ παιδεύω· ζήλευε οὖν καὶ μετανόησον) use the same kind of wisdom approach to the Church's suffering precisely due to the necessity of repentance of sin.

Suffering as Messianic Woes

Jewish apocalypticists came to learn from the prophets and their own experience that this present eon is not all there is. Another era will be opened when Yahweh will finally manifest His justice, vindicating His “suffering righteous” (the people of Israel), and condemning “the sinners” (the wicked nations and those in Israel that did not remain pure).²⁵ One particular feature of this apocalyptic understanding of reality is the so-called “Messianic Woes” (חישם לש ולבח).²⁶ The story under this motif goes like this: In the very last days, there will be a great tribulation upon the earth: “sickness, and downfall ... and fever, and chills, and stupor, and famine, and death, and sword, and captivity, and all plagues, and suffering” (Jubilees 23:13). For some apocalypticists, only the pagans will suffer; for others, both the nations (as the beginning of their final suffering) and Israel will (as a way to purge and test her).²⁷ In this last case, however, Yahweh provides some kind of special protection for His people.²⁸ In any case, the main function of the woes will be to mark and anticipate the imminent appearance of the Messiah, thus the labels “Messianic woes” or “birth pangs of the Messiah.”²⁹

This is the milieu in which Christianity was born.³⁰ Together with several other features, Jesus and the apos-

bles reshaped the apocalyptic motif of the Messianic Woes to fit into their account of the eschatological sufferings of the Church. A major shift in the Christian version of the Messianic Woes, as immediately will be seen, is that it is Jesus, the very Messiah, who inaugurates and becomes the primordial object of the eschatological sufferings. The Church will certainly suffer together with the sinful world, but her end-time experience will be patterned after the paradigmatic suffering of Golgotha. This, I think, makes our third narrative a particular (apocalyptic) form of the first narrative, i.e. “suffering as participation in Christ's own story.”

Let us consider three New Testament accounts of the suffering of the Church shaped as Messianic Woes.

⁴ “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?” ⁵ And Jesus began to say to them, “See that no one leads you astray (βλέπετε μὴ τις ὑμᾶς πλανήσῃ).” ⁶ Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁷ And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet (οὐπω τὸ τέλος). ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains (ἀρχὴ ὠδίνων ταῦτα).⁹ But be on your guard (Βλέπετε δὲ ὑμεῖς ἑαυτούς). For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. ¹⁰ And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. ¹¹ And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. ¹² And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. ¹³ And you will be hated by all for my name's sake (καὶ ἔσεσθε μισούμενοι ὑπὸ πάντων διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου). But the one who endures to the end will be saved (ὁ δὲ ὑπομείνας εἰς τέλος οὗτος σωθήσεται).

¹⁸ Pray that it may not happen in winter. ¹⁹ For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning (θλίψις οἷα οὐ γέγονεν τοιαύτη ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς) of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. ²⁰ And if the Lord

²⁴ Ibid, 623.

²⁵ David E. Aune. “Revelation 6–16” in *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 52b* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), pp. 227–231. Charles K. Barrett. *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989), 317–344.

²⁶ Mark Dubis. “Messianic Woes in First Peter: Suffering and Eschatology in 1 Peter 4:12–19,” in *Studies in Biblical Literature, Vol. 33* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 6–13.

²⁷ Dale C. Allison, Dale C. *The End of the Ages Has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 19–22.

²⁸ Dubis, 170–71.

²⁹ Géza Vermès. *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1997), 259.

³⁰ Frederick J. Murphy. *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 227.

had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days (*διὰ τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς οὓς ἐξελέξατο ἐκολόβωσεν τὰς ἡμέρας*).

²⁴ But in those days, after that tribulation (*μετὰ τὴν θλίψιν ἐκείνην*), the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ And then they will see the Son of Man coming (*καὶ τότε ὄψονται τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐρχόμενον*) in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect (*καὶ ἐπισυνάξει τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς [αὐτοῦ]*) from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. (Mark 13:4–13, 19–20, 24–27)

The Synoptic Jesus pronounces this eschatological discourse as a response to his disciples' questions (*πότε* and *τί τὸ σημεῖον* — v. 4). But more than that, this discourse works as a strong warning (*βλέπετε* — vv. 5, 9, 23, 33; *ἀγρυπνεῖτε* — v. 33; *γρηγορεῖτε* — vv. 35, 36) and promise to them (*μὴ θροεῖσθε* — v. 7; *μὴ προμεριμνάτε* — v. 11; *διὰ τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς ἐκολόβωσεν τὰς ἡμέρας* — v. 20; *ἐπισυνάξει τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς αὐτοῦ* — v. 27).

A striking feature in the text is its Christological matrix. In line with any apocalyptic discourse, Jesus does articulate a timetable in response the *πότε*-question (v. 4), though not to nurture their speculation, but rather to excise it (*οὐκ οἴδατε πότε* — vv. 33, 35), so that they may do what they must — watch! (*ἀγρυπνεῖτε* — v. 33; *γρηγορεῖτε* — vv. 35, 36). Eugene Boring points out that the same four Roman watches of the night (*ἢ ὄψῃ ἢ μεσονύκτιον ἢ ἀλεκτοροφωνίας ἢ πρωῒ* — v. 35) that structure Jesus' apocalyptic understanding of history are the time-markers of the passion narrative in Mark.³¹ This is not — it is clear — a mere coincidence, but it bespeaks that the remaining history of the world will be a deployment of the Paschal event. Now, what is more significant for our purpose here, is that not only the structure of world's history will have this Christological pattern, but

notably the Church's suffering will:³² as anointed with the same Baptism, they also will have to bear witness in the power of the Spirit and will be rejected, betrayed, handed over by friends and family, and hated to the point of death (vv. 9–13). What this deployment (*exitus*) of the Gospel narrative in the Church's experience of suffering will yearn for is the final "Eucharistic" recollection (*reditus*) of the elects into the coming Messiah (*καὶ τότε ἐπισυνάξει τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν τεσσάρων ἀνέμων ἀπ' ἄκρου γῆς ἕως ἄκρου οὐρανοῦ* v. 27).

Our second text is 1 Peter 4:12–19:

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial (*τῆ ἐν ὑμῖν πυρώσει*) when it comes upon you to test you (*πρὸς πειρασμὸν ὑμῖν*), as though some-

thing strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings (*ἀλλὰ καθὼ κοινωνεῖτε τοῖς τοῦ Χριστοῦ παθήμασιν χαίρετε*), that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed (*ἵνα καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀποκαλύψει τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ χαρῆτε ἀγαλλιώμενοι*). ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed (*μακάριοι*), because the Spirit of glory and of

God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.

¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God (*ὅτι [ὁ] καιρὸς τοῦ ἄρξασθαι τὸ κρίμα ἀπὸ τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ θεοῦ*); and if it begins with us (*εἰ δὲ πρῶτον ἀφ' ἡμῶν*), what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (*τί τὸ τέλος τῶν ἀπειθούντων τῷ τοῦ θεοῦ εὐαγγελίῳ*;) ¹⁸ And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" ¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. (1 Peter 4:12–19)

The Church will certainly suffer together with the sinful world, but her end-time experience will be patterned after the paradigmatic suffering of Golgotha.

³¹ Boring, 377.

³² C. Clifton Black. *Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), p. 274. Boring, 365.

Rather recently, Abson P. Joseph³³ rejected Mark Dubis' understanding³⁴ of our particular text, under the motif of the Messianic Woes, as an "overstatement." Joseph proposes, instead, to read it simply as an apostolic exhortation to imitate Christ. I think that Dubis' approach makes better sense not only of the Church's participation in Christ's sufferings (κοινωνεῖν τοῖς τοῦ Χριστοῦ παθήμασιν — v. 13), but notably of the fact that the readers are supposed to expect these sufferings to come, and finally of the particular dynamic with which Peter chains the Church's suffering with the final judgment that will fall upon those who do not obey the Gospel (vv. 17–18).³⁵

The Church's suffering under this apocalyptic perspective is not only a "must," but is also the evangelical way our definite and end-time relation to each of the Trinitarian person is forged in anticipation, and this in terms of refinement (πυρώσει πρὸς πειρασμὸν — v. 12); joyful participation in his glory (χαίρετε, ἵνα καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀποκαλύψει τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ χαρήτε ἀγαλλιώμενοι — v. 13); empowerment with the Spirit of the Messiah; proper worship to our God (δοξαζέτω δὲ τὸν θεὸν — v. 16); and trust in the Creator's power and faithfulness (κτίσθη παρατιθέσθωσαν τὰς ψυχὰς — v. 19).

The last text to consider is the combat drama of Revelation 12.³⁶ Again, we will reproduce just part of the text, following David Aune's narrative structure:³⁷

INTRODUCTION OF THE DRAMATIS PERSONAE: THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON

¹And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ²She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth (καὶ κράζει ὠδίνουσα καὶ βασανιζομένη τεκεῖν). ³And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.

FIRST STAGE CONFLICT: BIRTH AND ESCAPE

^{4b}And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it (ἵνα ὅταν τέκη τὸ τέκνον

αὐτῆς καταφάγη). ⁵She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up (ἠρπάσθη) to God and to his throne, ⁶and the woman fled into the wilderness (ἔφυγεν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον), where she has a place prepared by God (ἡτοιμασμένον ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ), in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

SECOND STAGE CONFLICT: DEFEAT AND EXPULSION

⁷Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹And the great dragon was thrown down ... to the earth (ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν γῆν), and his angels were thrown down with him.

INTERPRETATIVE HYMN: REJOICE AND WOE!

¹⁰And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God ... ¹²Therefore, rejoice (εὐφραίνεσθε), O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you (οὐαὶ), O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short (κατέβη ὁ διάβολος πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἔχων θυμὸν μέγαν, εἰδὼς ὅτι ὀλίγον καιρὸν ἔχει)!"

THIRD STAGE CONFLICT: FINAL ATTACK

¹³And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth (ὅτε εἶδεν ὁ δράκων ὅτι ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν γῆν), he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child (ἐδίωξεν τὴν γυναῖκα ἣτις ἔτεκεν τὸν ἄρσενά). ¹⁴But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. ¹⁵The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. ¹⁶But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. ¹⁷Then the dragon became furious with the woman (καὶ ὠργίσθη ὁ δράκων ἐπὶ τῇ γυναικί) and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring (καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ποιῆσαι πόλεμον μετὰ τῶν λοιπῶν τοῦ σπέρματος αὐτῆς), on those who keep the commandments of

³³ Abson P. Joseph. *A Narratological Reading of 1 Peter* (Library of New Testament Studies, London: T & T Clark International, 2012), 115–117.

³⁴ Dubis.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 142–162.

³⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins. *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976).

³⁷ Aune, 657–661.

God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

The identity of the woman has been a subject of contention throughout the centuries: Is she Eve, Mary, the true Israel, or the Church? That she is the one who begets the Messiah (v. 5) and that she condenses clear elements of the primordial stories of Paradise (vv. 1–2, 14–15, 17) and Exodus (vv. 6, 14–16) are uncontested facts. Now, though the continuity among these figures should not be broken, there is a common consensus that, at least after the Messiah's birth and "rapture" (v. 5), the woman who suffers the Dragon's attack is the Church.³⁸

Adela Yarbro Collins rightly points out that John combines here two combat dramas: the heavenly one, between Michael and the Dragon (vv. 7–9), and the earthly one, between the Dragon and the woman, as presented in stages 1 (vv. 4b–6) and 3 (vv. 13–17).³⁹ Yarbro Collins, however, misses the point regarding the dramatic effect the insertion of the heavenly combat has on the whole narrative.⁴⁰ The Dragon's renewed attack on the woman (stage 3) is not a mere literary device to introduce Chapter 13. In the third stage conflict, the seer precisely interprets the readers' present sufferings in terms of the eschatological attack of the Dragon upon the Church. Of special interest is how the narrative elaborates on the reasons for this attack. Three reasons are mentioned: (1) the Dragon's awareness of his recent and crucial defeat (ὅτε εἶδεν ὁ δράκων ὅτι ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν γῆν — v. 13); (2) the Dragon's awareness of his impending final and definitive defeat (εἰδὼς ὅτι ὀλίγον καιρὸν ἔχει — v. 13); and (3) the Dragon's wrath for his continual failures (κατέβη ὁ διάβολος πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἔχων θυμὸν μέγαν — v. 12; καὶ ὠργίσθη ὁ δράκων ἐπὶ τῇ γυναικί — v. 17). Therefore, the intensity of the eschatological sufferings of the Church signals the shortage of the devil's time (ὀλίγον καιρὸν ἔχει — v. 12) and, it is clear, the imminence of God's final vindication of his people. The Church is to be aware of the coming hardship (οὐαὶ — v. 12b), while also facing her suffering in joyful celebration for the victory that the Lamb already obtained over our accuser (ἄρτι ἐγένετο ἡ σωτηρία — v. 10; διὰ τοῦτο εὐφραίνεσθε — v. 12a), in expectancy for the impending end (ὀλίγον καιρὸν — v. 12b), in confidence in God's miraculous protection (τόπον ἡτοιμασμένον ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ — v. 6; ἐδόθησαν τῇ

³⁸ Aune, p. 707. Louis A. Brighton. *Revelation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), p. 327. Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*. (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 24.

³⁹ Yarbro Collins, 101–155.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 143–144.

γυναικὶ αἱ δύο πτέρυγες τοῦ ἀετοῦ τοῦ μεγάλου — v. 14; ἐβόηθησεν ἡ γῆ τῇ γυναικί — v. 16), and in courageous holding to the testimony of Jesus (τηρεῖν τὰς ἐντολάς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἔχειν τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ — v. 17).

Conclusions

We have considered three narratives the New Testament uses to tell the story of the Church's suffering. They provide perspective on our suffering within the context of our participation in Christ's own storied-with-suffering body, the Father's assuming us as His children in the act of disciplining us, and the Church's expectant Messianic Woes.

What do these narratives stand for? What is their intended pragmatic effect upon the Church in the midst of her stories of sorrow and fragility? John Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts will help us to understand this in terms of speech-act theory.⁴¹

(1) Inasmuch as assertive acts, the suffering narratives shape/inform *the Church's understanding* of reality. In telling the stories, the divine storytellers illuminate the faith's view of the suffering Church that now can realize all that is in, with, and under her shameful weakness, her painful absences, her deathful aporias. Though here we attend to God's silencing *our* reason, we do have God uttering *his* reasons, calling "good" what in fact is "good."⁴² And this makes our narratives inasmuch assertive acts theodicies. What kind of theodicies are these? Using Antti Laato and Johannes Moor's typology of theodicy, even though all the New Testament narratives we have considered fall under the category of *deferred theodicy* ("the human mind is unable to fathom the mysterious working of the divine mind"), I consider they roughly correspond to the three following categories respectively: *communion theodicy* ("suffering can bring human beings closer to God"), *educative theodicy* ("the sufferer gains a better understanding of his life through his personal suffering"), and *eschatological theodicy* ("later developments would prove that human suffering had not been in vain").⁴³

(2) Inasmuch as directive acts, the suffering narratives

⁴¹ John R. Searle. "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts," in: *Language, Mind and Knowledge: Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Keith Gunderson (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 12–20.

⁴² Martin Luther. "Heidelberg Disputation" in: *Luther's Works, Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer*, eds. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1957), 53.

⁴³ Antti Laato and Johannes C. de Moor. "Introduction," in: *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, (Leiden/Boston Mass: Brill, 2003) vii–liv.

shape/direct *the Church's performance* within reality. In telling the stories, the divine storytellers instruct the suffering Church how to react, behave, and position herself toward the painful facts and the Triune persons that stand behind those facts. That is to say, the narratives guide the Church to relate to her reality and her God in terms of — to mention just some features — humility, repentance, trust, hope, joy, obedience, endurance, and witness.

(3) Inasmuch as declarative acts, the suffering narratives shape/direct *the Church's very reality*. In telling the stories, the Divine Storyteller creates what He says. Since God Himself is the one who tells the story, the very utterance of these narratives incorporates us in each plot as participants in Christ's destiny, as adopted children of our loving Father who shapes us as His heirs, as the eschatological people of God who experience in their own bodies the imminence of the final deliverance. The Jesuit John O'Donnell proposes that the merit of Hans Urs von Balthasar's trinitarian theology is that he roots every narrative of suffering in "the eternal dramatic action within God himself."⁴⁴ If this is so, and I believe it is, all three narratives find their ultimate ground in that eternal "meta-narrative" in which the Father gives himself to the Son and the Son back to the Father in the eternal bond of love of the Spirit. It is this unsurpassable reality that opens itself to us in our daily experience of pain and sorrow.

Finally, how does all this cohere with Luther's understanding of the cross as one of the marks of the Church? Even a cursory comparison of our conclusions with Luther's account of the seven marks of the Church will expose a clear consistency.⁴⁵ Framing his understanding of the holy cross within the Third Article of the "Children's Creed," Luther holds to the same three pragmatic forces that we have just articulated. The Third Article story transforms the ineffable scandal of the cross into the evangelical indicative that exposes who these poor wretched people are: the *una et sancta et catholica ecclesia* (assertive act). Through the cross, the Holy Spirit "mortifies the old Adam and teaches him patience, humility, gentleness, praise and thanks, and good cheer in suffering," training him in the *tres virtutes theologicas* that correspond to our new life in Christ: "to believe in God (and) trust him, to love him, and to place our hope in

him."⁴⁶ Finally, and more fundamentally, the cross is a constitutive part of that activity with which the Holy Trinity not only creates the *eschatological* reality of the Church *per redemptionem et vivificationem et sanctificationem*,⁴⁷ but also "God has revealed Himself and opened the deepest abyss of His fatherly heart and His pure, inexpressible love ... In addition to giving and imparting to us everything in heaven and upon earth, He has even given to us His Son and his Holy Spirit, who brings us to Himself."⁴⁸

This is the Church we believe to be a great reality in the world, although our eyes cannot see it. For as the body of Christ in the sacrament is hidden to our eyes, so the mystical body is hidden to any earthly eye: "*Abscondita est ecclesia, latent sancti*," as Luther puts it. And yet in either case what is hidden to our perception is a great reality: This is my body.⁴⁹

The Rev. Roberto E. Bustamante is a pastor in the Argentina Evangelical Lutheran Church and professor at Seminario Concordia in Buenos Aires.

⁴⁴ John J. O'Donnell. *The Mystery of the Triune God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

⁴⁵ Luther, 41, 143–166.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 165.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 144.

⁴⁸ The Large Catechism (1529), in: *The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, eds. Paul T. McCain, Robert C. Baker, Gene E. Veith and Edward A. Engelbrecht (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 432.

⁴⁹ Hermann Sasse. *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 392.