

Syriac Apocalyptic Writing and the Questioning of Theodicy

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What is the meaning of suffering? In the Christian theological tradition, the exploration of theodicy has tended to remain at the level of the universal, dealing with abstract questions about the nature of God and the presence of evil in the world. By keeping the question of theodicy at the level of a logic puzzle, we attempt to find absolute “global answers to a global dilemma.”¹ While Christian theologians have offered insightful commentary on suffering, we are far from defining a single explanation for its reality. What is required, then, is a new way of engaging the problem of suffering. One such approach is *theodicy at the margins*. By moving from the universal to the specific, this approach to theodicy concerns itself with belief in God within a specific instance of suffering and oppression.² Thus the intention of *theodicy at the margins* is not to remove the universal or the abstract from traditional approaches to theodicy, but to supplement them through the application of the local and the finite.³ While *theodicy at the margins* is employed as a means of engaging contemporary instances of oppression and relating them to the problem of evil, I would suggest that it can also be an important tool in exploring texts from the past.

During the first decades following the Muslim expansion into territory formally controlled by the Byzantine and Persian

¹ Mark Stephen Murray Scott, “Theodicy at the Margins: New Trajectories for the Problem of Evil,” *Theology Today* 68, no. 2 (2011): 149.

² Scott, “Theodicy at the Margins,” 150.

³ Scott, “Theodicy at the Margins,” 152.

Empires,⁴ Eastern Christians produced a body of theological works that attempted to make sense of their suffering and oppression. In what manner ought we to read these texts today? An apt parallel example is the proper interpretation of Scripture when employing a biblical passage as the basis for theological understanding of an event. Scriptural interpretation is especially important in the use of passages that are bound by their original place and time. If a contextually-dependent passage is used as if it were universally true, the resulting theological assumptions could minimize or ignore contradicting passages, and may lead to a “deficient or warped theological position.”⁵ Because they are equally capable of reflecting universal and contextually-dependent truths, religious writings other than Scripture ought also to come under this type of scrutiny.

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, the ‘early period of Muslim expansion’ refers to the period of the mid-seventh century, which brought significant Eastern Christian populations under Muslim rule, but before the intentional policies of Islamization were enacted in the late seventh century. For a more detailed discussion of this period and its effects on Eastern Christian culture, see Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger, “Introduction,” in *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World, 700–1700: An Anthology of Sources* (DeKalb, IL: NIU Press, 2014), 3–39.

⁵ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “How a Hermeneutical Virus can Corrupt Theological Systems,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166, no. 659 (July-September 2009): 259. Discerning the difference between contextually-dependent and non-contextually dependent passages can be a difficult part of exegesis. As Chisholm explains, there are four broad categories of generalizations regarding God’s nature present in the Old Testament: those bound to a particular time and place; those arising from a particular context, but applicable in other situations, which share a structural framework; those relating to God’s Kingship; and those which are universally true and unbound by context. The particular exegetical danger arises when generalizations from the first two categories are treated as if they belong in the last. For example, Chisholm presents the promise of God to deliver the Israelites and to bring judgement on Babylon (Is. 45:7). Understanding God as the source of deliverance and of judgement *does* transcend contextual boundaries. However, the specific acts which bring about deliverance and judgement must be understood within a theocratic system. In this way, God as deliverer and judge is a universal generalization, but not every disaster can properly be understood as a divine act of judgement. Before attempting to apply any biblical passage to a contemporary issue, it must first be understood within its own context so that its relevance to the question at hand may be properly discerned. Chisholm, “Hermeneutical Virus,” 266–269.

However, to simply dismiss contextually-dependent works because they don't "fit" with contemporary theology is to disrespect and to suppress the authentic reflection of the Other. What is required is a means of honoring the authentic reflections contained in these works in such a way that we can bring new understandings to our own suffering. To explore how such a hermeneutic may function, I will consider John bar Penkāyē's *Book of Main Points*⁶ and the anonymous *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*⁷, two texts written by Eastern Christians during the early Muslim expansion. Both are Syrian in origin, written within a decade of each other at the end of the seventh century, and draw on similar contexts and experiences.⁸ Furthermore, both authors employ a specifically theological approach to understanding the Islamic conquest. John bar Penkāyē details six centuries of Christian history as a cycle of sinfulness, repentance, and closeness with God, thus constructing a pattern of God's pedagogical relationship with humanity as marked by conquest.⁹ Similarly, the author of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* applies the eschatological prophecy of the Book of Daniel to Christian history, ironically forcing an understanding of the Muslim conquest as an addition to the four kingdoms predicted in the prophecy.¹⁰

An initial theme common to these two works is the insistence that the Muslim invasion is a direct result of the sinful-

⁶ John bar Penkāyē, "Book of Main Points," trans. Michael Phillip Penn, in *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam*, ed. Michael Phillip Penn (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 88–107.

⁷ Charles Tieszen, trans., "Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius," in *A Textual History of Christian-Muslim Relations: Seventh – Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Charles Tieszen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 12–15; and Michael Phillip Penn, trans., "Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius," in *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam*, ed. Michael Phillip Penn (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 116–129.

⁸ Penn, introductory commentary for "Book of Main Points," 85–88; and Tieszen, introductory commentary for "Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius," 11–12.

⁹ Penn, introductory commentary for "Book of Main Points," 86–87.

¹⁰ Tieszen, introductory commentary for "Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius," 12.

ness of the Christian communities of the Near East. Interpreted in this light, the suffering of the Christians is a punishment brought about by God. The *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* begins from the assumption that a Christian kingdom which remains faithful can never be defeated: “there is no people or kingdom under heaven that can overpower the kingdom of the Christian as long as it possesses a place of refuge in the life-giving Cross.... Also the bars of Hell which are the tyrants of impiety ... cannot prevail over this kingdom of the Christians.”¹¹ Thus, if a Christian kingdom is overthrown, it must be as a result of the loss of faith among its population.

In *Book of Main Points*, John bar Penkāyē also interprets the Muslim invasion as a punishment for the sinfulness of the Christian people, but through a negative view of a Christian kingdom. While the Church was under the persecution of pagan rulers, orthodoxy became a type of resistance to pagan influences and the faithful were without sin. It was only after the empire converted to Christianity that heterodoxy and corruption gained ground within the Church.¹²

Therefore, when [God] observed that there was no reform, he summoned a barbaric kingdom against us.... When they had flourished and did the will of him who had summoned them, they reigned and ruled over all the world’s kingdoms. They enslaved all peoples to harsh slavery and led their sons and daughters into bitter servitude.... Then our Lord was appeased, consoled, and willing to have mercy upon his people.¹³

While the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* seems to follow the reasoning that a truly Christian nation cannot be over-

¹¹ Tieszen, trans., “Apocalypse of Pseudo- Methodius,” 12.

¹² John bar Penkāyē, “Book of Main Points,” 90.

¹³ John bar Penkāyē, “Book of Main Points,” 91. The “barbaric kingdom” referred to here is the expanding Muslim Empire. In the roughly 65 years preceding the composition of the *Book of Main Points*, the Muslims had grown from a small community located in Medina to a military power which had already conquered the Byzantine provinces of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt (see Noble and Treiger, *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World*, 13).

thrown, and that the invasion of a Christian kingdom thus indicates sinfulness among its population, the *Book of Main Points* understands the Muslim invasion as the inevitable consequence of particular historical actions on the part of the Christian nation as a whole. Whatever the meaning of a Christian kingdom and its relationship to God, its eventual defeat is understood as a direct result of human sin.

In Syrian Christian writings of the seventh century, the equation of the oppression of an entire populace with punishment for sin was not limited to apocalyptic writings. The *Khuzistan Chronicle*,¹⁴ another anonymous Syrian text from the mid-seventh century, gives a detailed ecclesiastical history of the region of Khuzistan (a region in southwest Iran) from the late-sixth to early-seventh century. The final section gives a detailed description of the Islamic conquests, making the document an important source for reconstructing seventh-century military history of the area.¹⁵ The *Khuzistan Chronicle* attributes the Muslim conquest of both the Persian and Byzantine Empires to the will of God.

Then God brought against [the Persians] the Sons of Ishmael, [who were as numerous] as sand upon the seashore. Their leader was Muhammad. Neither walls nor gates nor armor nor shield withstood them.... They also went to the Roman Empire. They plundered and destroyed all the lands of Syria.¹⁶

Likewise, Jacob of Edessa's *Scholia*¹⁷ provides another example of a Christian theologian reflecting on the experience of being conquered. A biblical scholar and exegete, Jacob of

¹⁴ Michael Phillip Penn, trans., "Khuzistan Chronicle," in *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam*, ed. Michael Phillip Penn (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 49–53.

¹⁵ Penn, introductory commentary for "Khuzistan Chronicle," 47–49.

¹⁶ Penn, trans., "Khuzistan Chronicle," 49.

¹⁷ Jacob of Edessa, "Scholia," trans. Michael Phillip Penn, in *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam*, ed. Michael Phillip Penn (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 181–184.

Edessa included his reflection within his commentary on 1 Kings 14:21–28, providing an important example of the use of a Scriptural lens in order to make sense of the Muslim conquest.¹⁸ Because of this exegetical perspective, Jacob of Edessa interprets the fall of Byzantium in light of the destruction of Judah following the sins of Rehoboam. “Therefore, because of the evil of Rehoboam and of Judah, God brought upon them Shishak, the reigning king of Egypt.... So also we, because of our sins and many iniquities, Christ handed us over and enslaved us under the harsh yoke of the Arabians.”¹⁹ Understanding political and social destruction as an act of a vengeful God was logical at the time these works were written, no matter how jarring some readers may find it today. In fact, contemporary readers ought to ask whether there is an underlying human experience which can be explored through these texts.

Attempts at assigning a meaning to suffering are a normal step in the process of suffering itself. In describing a person’s attempt to live with the experience of suffering, Viktor Frankl presents the idea that suffering loses its oppressive character if we are able to find some higher purpose in the experience.²⁰ What becomes important, then, is the attitude we take towards the suffering and how we interpret it in the context of our lives. In moments of crisis, people tend to interpret suffering as a punishment from a wrathful God.²¹ In the Eastern Christian

¹⁸ Michael Philip Penn, introductory commentary for “Scholia,” in *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam*, ed. Michael Phillip Penn (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 180–181.

¹⁹ Jacob of Edessa, “Scholia,” 183.

²⁰ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1965), 115.

²¹ T. Johannes van Bavel, “The Meaninglessness of Suffering and Attempts at Interpretation,” in *God and Human Suffering*, ed. Jan Lambrecht and Raymond F. Collins (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990), 130. See also R.S. Sugirtharajah, “Tsunami, Text and Trauma: Hermeneutics after the Asian Tsunami,” *Biblical Interpretation* 15, no. 2 (2007): 125. Sugirtharajah explores how Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist religious leaders all interpreted the Boxing Day 2004 Tsunami as a message of vengeance and punishment from their respective deities. (125–126) The tendency to attribute suffering

writings examined above, the image of a loving God who Himself suffered on the Cross is obscured by images of a wrathful and vengeful God, not because of any new revelation which supports this shift but because the image of a wrathful God allows these seventh-century Christians to create order out of chaos, to give meaning to their suffering.

Such a theological conclusion is not without negative consequences. First, by assuming that suffering occurs because of sinful actions, the experience of suffering can be compounded by feelings of false guilt.²² The quest for meaning then becomes a search to assign blame. Western thought assumes a model in which the universe began with a perfect harmony which was lost through humanity's own sinful actions. As a result, suffering tends to be interpreted as a consequence of this initial fault, or of subsequent sin.²³ Aside from the negative effects of false guilt on the suffering person, the incorrect assumption of a moral cause can misdirect any theological inquiry into the suffering; yet recognizing false guilt is difficult because the guilt appears to be justified.

The *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* states very plainly that the Christians of Syria were conquered, not only because of their sin, but because of their *unprecedented* sinfulness.

For through Moses, [God] said to the Sons of Israel, "It is not because the Lord your God loves you that he brings you into the land of the gentiles to inherit it, rather on account of the iniquity of its inhabitants".... So too [concerning] these Sons of Ishmael, it was not because God loves them that he allowed them to enter and take control of the Christians' kingdom, rather on account of the iniquity and sin done by the Christians, the like of which was not done by any previous generation.²⁴

to a wrathful deity does not appear to be uniquely Christian, then, but arises from the human psyche.

²² van Bavel, "The Meaninglessness of Suffering," 126.

²³ van Bavel, "The Meaninglessness of Suffering," 30.

²⁴ Penn, trans., "Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius," 118–119.

Similarly, the *Book of Main Points* not only sees the Muslim conquest as a divine punishment, but goes to great lengths to assign blame in explicit and damning terms. In fact, John bar Penkāyē sees such self-blaming as a moral imperative within the work. “Therefore, I am compelled to lay all sufficiently bare for us to know that everything that happened to us happened to us as a just judgement. We have been punished as we deserve and in accord with what we have done.”²⁵ What follows in Penkāyē’s account is a detailed description of the sins committed by numerous groups within Christian society – bishops, priests and deacons, prefects and rulers, judges, and the Christian people – punctuated with laments that he grows tired of naming evils but must do so in order that they may all be known.²⁶ Beyond this understanding of the Muslim invasion as God’s intervention in human activity, the addition of false guilt reinforces the identity of the people, not only as having sinned, but as being sinners. Thus the interpretation of suffering shifts from being a punishment because of the Christians’ action to being a consequence of their very nature.

A second consequence of seeing suffering as just punishment is the effect on the characterization of the relationship between God and the faithful. By casting the Christians as such absolute sinners and God as the righteous judge, these Syrian writers proposed a teaching which essentially cuts the faithful off from God. What emerges instead is an image of God as one who can and does turn His back on His people. The extent to which this relationship is broken varies within the various writings, but remains a common trope. The *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* takes a slightly less pessimistic approach.

Why would God avert his gaze from helping the faithful and they endure these afflictions except that they might be tested and the faithful be separated from the unfaithful, the tares from the chosen wheat? For that age is a testing furnace. God will remain patient while

²⁵ John bar Penkāyē, “Book of Main Points,” 93.

²⁶ John bar Penkāyē, “Book of Main Points,” 93–97.

his worshipers are persecuted so that through chastisement the sons might become known.²⁷

In this interpretation, the suffering of Christians because of the Islamic conquests serves God's purpose of separating the faithful from the unfaithful, and so can again be understood as an act of divine will. Yet we are also confronted with the image of a God who willfully averts His gaze from suffering, and waits patiently while the presumably innocent faithful suffer along with the unfaithful. Such an unmerciful characterization originates within the human imagination and is only then grafted onto the Divine Person.

An even more violent rupture is evidenced in the *Book of Main Points*. Having lost all hope for reconciliation or rescue, John bar Penkāyē states that God has completely withdrawn His help and care from the world,²⁸ an idea which is out of step with Christian theology, even at the time of these writings.

Because in the time of our relief we did not pay attention to the fear of God, in the time of our affliction God did not remember his mercy. He had neither compassion nor pity, just as we did not have pity upon the afflictions and torments of our brethren. On the day of his fierce anger, *he did not remember his holy name*. Rather, he handed us over to our sins and averted his face from us. Most of all, he became our enemy. He fought us, and, in his fierce anger, he slayed and had no pity.²⁹

If we consider God revealing His name to Moses as one of the foundational moments in the covenant with Israel (Ex. 3:13–15), a covenant which Christians believe continues to a certain extent through the Church, then the fact that God is thought to *forget* His name signals a complete breakdown in the relationship. Not only does God reject the covenant relationship, but bar Penkāyē seems to suggest that He destroys its foundational

²⁷ Penn, trans., "Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius," 124.

²⁸ John bar Penkāyē, "Book of Main Points," 106.

²⁹ John bar Penkāyē, "Book of Main Points," 105. Present author's emphasis.

moment. If God will no longer answer those who call on his Name, how are the afflicted to cry out to Him?

These passages demonstrate the danger of accepting as universally true writings which are contextually bound. There are numerous passages in these texts which are not only at odds with some contemporary theology, but even break with the tradition from which they grew. To continue to base theological reflections on these texts as they are would be to promote a God who is vengeful, wrathful, cruel, and capable of breaking covenantal promises. Even as examples of theodicy, these works as they stand provide few helpful insights into the meaning of suffering, or solutions to the apparent dichotomy of a benevolent God and the existence of evil. Rather, their truth lies in their unvarnished portrayal of the experience of suffering, the desperate cry of the soul longing to make sense of the insensible.

The model of *theodicy at the margins* advocates rooting reflections on suffering in the experience of oppression in a given place and time rather than in the universal and timeless.³⁰ By focusing on the local, what quickly moves to the foreground is how individuals are left to experience the process of suffering not only as it may or may not conflict with their faith but as it directly impacts their own understanding of themselves and of their spiritual growth. Pain is something which happens to all living things, an inescapable consequence of being alive.³¹ Altering our perspective to see suffering as a part within a greater whole provides the opportunity – though not the guarantee – of spiritual growth through reflection on the *experience* of suffering rather than the determination of its origin.³² The question of theodicy, when considered thus, is not an explanation of the existence of evil but a transformation of suffering in the life of the individual person living in relationship with God.

Theodicy, therefore, ought to include some exploration of suffering effectively transformed and transcended. A final

³⁰ Scott, "Theodicy at the Margins," 149.

³¹ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 77–78.

³² van Bavel, "The Meaninglessness of Suffering," 132–135.

example of Eastern Christian writing from the time of the Muslim expansion may present just such an example. In his position as a bishop, Jacob of Edessa wrote various letters³³ in answer to pastoral concerns which arose during the Muslim occupation.³⁴ While the genre of the texts discourages the same apocalyptic reflection employed in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* and the *Book of Main Points*, there are still signs that Jacob of Edessa internalized the experience of suffering in a different way. God is characterized as “the knower and perceiver of all” who hands out “righteous, impartial judgement,”³⁵ on those who transgress the laws and canons.³⁶ And yet, unlike the God of the apocalyptic writings – including those by Jacob of Edessa himself – who has already passed judgement on the sinful, this understanding of God includes a possibility of present and continuing mercy.³⁷ In the case of a Christian who had converted to Islam and then wanted to return to the Christian Church, for example, Jacob states that the man should be welcomed again. Furthermore, he argues, it should not be assumed that the convert had lost God’s grace.

Concerning those things whose giver is God, it is not ours to say whether they are taken away, or indeed stripped, from whoever received them. But it is God’s alone [to decide]. He looks for their return and penitence because he does not want the death of a sinner.³⁸

In contrast with the writings discussed above, it is striking that Jacob of Edessa not only avoids the application of false guilt,

³³ Jacob of Edessa, “Letters,” translated by Michael Phillip Penn, in *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam*, edited by Michael Phillip Penn (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 162–174.

³⁴ Michael Phillip Penn, introductory commentary on “Letters,” in *When Christian First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 160–162.

³⁵ Jacob of Edessa, “Letters,” 167.

³⁶ Jacob of Edessa, “Letters,” 163.

³⁷ Jacob of Edessa, “Letters,” 163.

³⁸ Jacob of Edessa, “Letters,” 168–169.

but maintains the inherent goodness of God and the continuation of the relationship between God and the faithful.

The difficulty with trying to discern a single meaning for suffering is that it relies too much on the power of the human intellect and its ability to find truth through systematic investigation. The danger, latent in the writings of Eastern Christians from the early Muslim expansion, is that attempts at such investigation can lead us away from the Truth if that exploration is not guided by the proper questions. Insistence on defining a cause of the suffering, for example, may not only lead to assigning blame improperly but also to creating a distorted understanding of the nature of both humans and of God. Because they record the authentic reflections of a suffering people, these early Christian writings cannot be discarded entirely. At the same time, they must be approached carefully and with regard for their contextual nature – not only their historical context, but their genesis in the lived reality of suffering. To appropriate the truth of these works, we must allow them to shed light on our own experiences of suffering. Like the authors of these works, we too are tempted to confine theodicy to the questions of why evil exists rather than the ways in which we may be transformed by our relationship with God in the midst of suffering. These early Eastern Christian theologians are a guide, not to the correct answer, but to the correct question.