Suffering God and Sovereign God in Exodus:  
A Collision of Images

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A survey of Exodus studies from the perspective of their God-talk reveals a predominant use of sovereignty metaphors. It is a sovereignty commonly defined in a certain way. God is not only king, lord, and judge, but also one who stands outside of the world and speaks and acts on the creation with absolute authority. Or, God is presented not only as one who takes the initiative, articulates a purpose and sets the agenda, but also as one who is in total control of nature and history, who brooks no opposition and bends every power in heaven and earth to fulfill the divine word and will. I would contend that sovereignty cannot be so defined and still be true to the texts; it needs some correction in view of other metaphors for God in Exodus. Moreover, it is not common for such studies to be mindful of the range of suffering images for God to be found in Exodus, that is, those metaphors that reflect a divine entry into the sphere of the created such that God and God’s ways with the world are genuinely affected thereby. A few scholars have lifted up the role of Moses, and Jon Levenson has worked in helpful ways with divine and human interrelationships in the Sinai texts. But, a sustained look at the God of the book of Exodus, especially taking into account the suffering metaphors, remains to be undertaken.

Out of an interest in content issues, I will be all too brief in outlining my approach. My look at some pertinent Exodus texts proceeds on the basis of the final form of the text. The interpreter is therein faced with a composite text addressed to an unknown historical setting. At the least, however, this redaction is not socially or theologically disinterested; something is at stake for the redactor, but what is at stake is uncertain at the present level of inquiry. This theological study may help get at that; an initial probe suggests an exilic provenance, in which captive Israel finds itself in straits similar to its forebears in Egypt and in the aftermath of the golden calf apostasy. Israel in exile stands in need of both deliverance and forgiveness.
While this layered text shows linguistic and rhetorical signs of attempts to unify the material, it has not been at the expense of flattening it out into a narrative that is theologically tension-free. One is faced with some jarring theological juxtapositions—often recognized by source critics. For example, the pyrotechnical theophany of chap. 19 in which God is unapproachable, even dangerous, is set alongside the quiet theophany of chap. 24, in which God is quite approachable and no special precautions need be taken.

The relationship between theology and narrative continues to be a problem of some consequence.\textsuperscript{6} We learn from a number of Old Testament texts that story and generalization do not stand opposed to one another; in fact, they may be integrated (e.g., Exod 34:6-7). While not many statements about God move within a more abstract sphere, the fact that they exist at all indicates that the God who is the subject of sentences in the narrative has a significance in some way related to those abstractions. In other words, we have an inner-Old Testament warrant to engage in more general reflections about the God who is rendered in the story. That there is a certain deliberateness regarding the God who is so rendered can be seen, for example, in the virtual absence of God-talk in some Exodus narratives (e.g., 1:1-2:22; 5:4-21).

One way to look at such theological matters is to probe the God-talk in the various narrative units in terms of the metaphoric semantic fields represented and then explore possible interrelationships. I here single out suffering and sovereignty.\textsuperscript{7} I believe this probe will show how common understandings of sovereignty in Exodus (and elsewhere) are subverted by suffering metaphors and an understanding of sovereignty more congruent with the text can emerge.

I have come away from my study of Exodus with two primary theological convictions: (I) A theology of creation shapes the book of Exodus in a fundamental way; (II) The God of Exodus is both sovereign and suffering. We will take a brief look at the first in order to set the stage for the second. The way in which God is perceived to be related to the world will shape what is impossible in terms of talk of God’s sovereignty and suffering.