

BOOK REVIEW

L. Ann Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). xiv + 149 pp. Pbk. US\$14.00.

Ann Jervis's study on Paul's view of suffering is born of painful experience, a fact evident from beginning to end. In her prologue, she summarizes for her readers the forms of personal anguish she knew while writing the book, and reminds them of the universally felt effects of living in a world scarred by 9/11 and other traumatic international events. In her conclusion, she insists that 'sin's goal is to separate humanity from God's love by causing the sufferer to question God's character. When a sufferer allows her trust in God to be defeated by the terrifying power of suffering, sin has had its way' (pp. 131-32). Jervis's own trust has clearly been tested, but remains intact as the source of her book's integrity, introspection, and compassion. Her own questions about the salvific value of suffering in Paul's thought are self-validating, for the scriptural and experiential answers she has found are provided for her readers' benefit. Her responses do not constitute a finished product, but a part of a hermeneutical process: the readers must evaluate the author's selection and application of texts, her measurement of Paul's developing approach to suffering, and the implicit atonement theories at work in her writing, almost certainly generating their own counter-questions for further investigation.

Though her narrowly limited corpus—1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Romans—belongs to biblical studies and theology, Jervis locates parts of her study within philosopher-theologian Arthur C. McGill's category of 'problematic theology': Paul's letters are read in terms of universal and believer-specific forms of suffering. Theodicy, whether etiological or dynamic, is not the goal here; perhaps too neatly, Jervis circumvents the issue by arguing that Christian inquiry into suffering can be phrased as a *statement* admitting sin's presence and effect in the world, rather than as an unanswered *question* of why suffering occurs.

Throughout, she argues that a sympathetic hermeneutic allows modern audiences access to Paul's transformative resources, despite the historical and cultural distance involved. Each of the three main chapters, then, follows Paul's thought through its corresponding epistle, before asking how that letter can be used to talk about suffering.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul makes his case for productive suffering: relatively early in his ministry and writing career, the apostle is still struggling to accept affliction's company (as in 1 Thess. 3.4-6) and to explain its shape to others. Consonant with apocalyptic portions of the Gospels, Paul sees afflictions as birth pangs, required to unleash the eschaton. Faith, hope, and love are to be exhibited as part of God's rescue strategy, in that these qualities should govern believers' attitude and activity toward unbelievers. Paul's Christians must avoid behaviour that will provoke persecution and further suffering, though his own provocative co-option of imperial terminology comes dangerously close—closer even than Jervis, dialoguing with Karl Donfried here, will admit—to breaking this rule. Paul's struggle to accept the painful aspects of his calling is mirrored in our own 'appointment' to suffering (p. 34), as we strive to make Paul's costly challenge (and his response to nonbelievers) our own. As the *value* of suffering will occupy Jervis's attention (and Paul's!) through Philippians, the language she uses to gauge the necessity of Christian suffering is noteworthy: Jesus' followers are 'pledged' the cost of extending God's healing reign, noted in the Gospels during Jervis's introduction. Here in 1 Thessalonians, the suffering of believers is 'caused, as was Christ's, by acting for God's deliverance of God's creation from all that denies the love of God'; this is understood to mean that 'release from suffering requires suffering' (p. 24). The distinction Jervis does not always make clear is in what way suffering is 'required': in Christ's case it is salvific, while, for Paul and his converts, affliction remains *sequentially but not salvifically* necessary. Ushering in God's deliverance, the Thessalonians' suffering is productive, but I am not convinced that it is strictly causative.

Paul's later and more developed perspective produces an apology for suffering, addressing the mutuality of affliction and the assurance possible even amid torment. Philippians shows Paul in both physical and mental anguish, knowing in his imprisonment that 'Christ and suffering go hand in hand' (p. 41). As opposed to the approach in 1 Thessalonians, Paul's own suffering is foregrounded now, bracketing the sufferings of Christ. He affirms his suffering as surprisingly consistent

with his ministry of proclaiming the resurrection; his hardship should not be misused as grounds to discredit him, nor should Christ's cross be neglected in favour of the resurrection. It is suffering itself, not victimization, that Paul endorses: he learned to accept affliction in 1 Thessalonians, and resolves to value it here. The reversal evident in the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2 reflects the reversed power dynamic Paul is working out, with his captivity shaped by the gospel of Christ, rather than his jailers—an argument voiced independently by Peter Oakes. Life in Christ, identification with Christ, offers a capacity to suffer, to participate in Christ's drama. Among the options she reviews in responding to Paul, Jervis commends a cruciform life (cf. Michael Gorman's concept of 'cruciformity'). Suffering is a given in following the pattern of Christ's life and death, but taking up this challenge does not equate to submitting to injustice: it means seeking and hoping for deliverance.

The previous two sections establish a sequence from *accepting* suffering to determining its *value*, a progression that Jervis uses to great effect. Though I could find no explicit completion of this series, the section entitled 'Romans: We Too Groan' implies that the final step in Paul's thought among these three letters is one of *anticipation*, both of the suffering entailed in his impending death and of the joy of life thereafter. The distinction between forms of suffering for believers and nonbelievers is ambiguous in Romans, but the reason for the groaning shared by humanity and all creation is never more clear: sin still roams the world. Defeated at the cross, sin's 'muscle' is seen to be deteriorating but still daunting in its power. The history of slavery to sin, the continuing captivity for many, and the ongoing captivation for those who have escaped, are problems that can only be alleviated by trusting in God's righteousness. This reading of Paul permits Jervis to develop her considerable skill with metaphor. She repeatedly portrays sin as a willful entity with desires, goals, tentacles, an alliance with death, and an almost physical presence. Jervis briefly supplements her picture with her own previous postcolonial analysis to show the difficulty of the task Paul undertakes for himself and his readers: reframing individual and communal identity apart from sin's mastery requires constant resistance to old patterns of servitude. With the continuing partnership of sin and death still dictating the structure of human life, suffering can still be expected, especially for those who perpetrate or perpetuate horrors upon others (Rom. 2; p. 97), and for those who strive in and with Christ

against the causes and consequences of suffering (Rom. 8.32, p. 127), following God's model of sacrificial, delivering love.

As a student of Christian atonement theory, I find Jervis's imagery fascinating. A number of different but related atonement motifs appear as she writes; the question is whether these same motifs are apparent as *Paul* writes. To place such emphasis on a typology of suffering *in* Christ and *with* Christ is to forward a concept of solidarity; to speak of overcoming sin's horrific effects is to adopt a description of Christ as defeater of horrors, as Marilyn McCord Adams has done in systematic theology. When Jervis claims that in Christ 'the light of God has broken into the black prison of the world's pain', she hints at a motif of ransom or release of prisoners, yet even this pain is shared in order to be defeated (p. 135). But in phrasing resistance to sin as a battle with apocalyptic undertones, decisively won by Christ but entailing further participation from his followers (Rom. 5.8-10; 7.9-24; 8.35-37; pp. 113-14), Jervis also brings elements of the *Christus Victor* view to bear. None of these atonement portrayals is necessarily out of step with Pauline thought; their symbols occupy a close, consistent semantic range, and certain nuances, such as the complex personification of sin as suffering's 'author and director' (p. 137), seem poetically faithful to Paul. Nor does Jervis's foray into 'problematic theology' require her to state definitively her views on Paul's conceptualization of the atonement. Still, a discussion of the points of contact between suffering and atonement, already implicit here, would have enhanced the value of this brief and powerful book.

My second major area of concern comes with Jervis's selection and treatment of biblical texts. The corpus she considers is carefully and wisely chosen, showing Paul at three different points as his ministry and perspective on affliction develop apace. Even these three shorter epistles provide a substantial array of texts, and Jervis exploits this range brilliantly, moving well beyond it to import supporting Pauline sources: the apocalyptic framework, in which everything working in opposition to God is subjected to Christ, can be glimpsed in Philippians and Romans but is at least as prominent in Galatians and 1 Corinthians. With such a range to draw upon, why does Jervis stretch some of her texts to make them mean more than they say? Few readers would quibble with her assertion that 'Paul cares intensely that all the world become accountable to the one who holds the key to a world healed' (pp. 93-94), but Rom. 3.19 and its immediate context speak of account-

ability and judgment, not healing. Similarly, Rom. 6.11 and 13 adequately illustrate the changed context, perhaps even the separate *domain*, of suffering in Christ, but to interpret these struggles as sufferings that ‘take place under the dome of God’s life’ requires an ample dose of poetic license.

On the same score, Jervis chooses to stay away from 2 Corinthians entirely, on the grounds that the letter has been (and continues to be) thoroughly explored in terms of suffering. But one reason for the scholarly and pastoral concentration on Paul’s second letter to Corinth is its power to unpack the tightly compressed thoughts the apostle voices elsewhere. Second Corinthians 1.6-7, for instance, addresses both the mutuality of suffering that Jervis discovers in Philippians and the necessity she argues for in 1 Thessalonians. Jervis sees in Paul an invitation to embrace suffering and consolation, and within the confines of her three-epistle corpus, she broadens this invitation to include applications of active resistance and hope for deliverance. But again, her work can only be read as one brief part of a wider hermeneutical conversation, together offering resources to readers well acquainted with suffering and to those struggling with their first encounter.

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