

## **Project plan ‘God's vulnerability?’**

### *Overarching questions*

In the research unit BEST (Biblical Exegesis and Systematic Theology), Bible scholars and systematic theologians from TUA and TUU work together. This collaboration seeks to connect the disciplines; it has proven to be stimulating and fruitful in recent years. For the period 2024-2029, the research theme is ‘Crucial Commitment’. Questions related to the doctrine of God, which we encountered in our previous programme ‘Discriminating Love’, are included in the new research period. With the theme ‘crucial commitment’, we focus on God's commitment, which takes shape in Christ and in the Holy Spirit, and which is cruciform. Surprisingly, God's commitment means that He makes Himself vulnerable and, according to the gospel, is thus precisely a source of hope for vulnerable people and makes human commitment possible. The following central research question was formulated: ‘How can God's persistent and demanding commitment be a source of hope in view of the challenges of the 21st century?’

TUU researchers contribute to research around TUU's theme of ‘Vulnerability and Hope’ through this research project. We do so partly by asking the question of God's vulnerability in this joined project.

With the new research theme, we want to further strengthen the connection between BE and ST, among others by having PhD students from both disciplines work on the same theme. In that context, we are looking for two researchers:

## **a PhD student in Old Testament**

and

## **a PhD student in Systematic Theology**

## **Joint project ‘God's vulnerability?’**

### *Theme and central question*

In this joint project, we focus the questions from ‘Crucial Commitment’ (partly in light of previous BEST research and the TUU theme of ‘vulnerability and hope’) on the doctrine of God, in particular on God's vulnerability. Does God's commitment to his creation, to human beings and to his people Israel make him vulnerable, and what does it mean to talk about God's vulnerability? The theme of vulnerability plays no role in the theological tradition but is highly valued in our present context. This new theme resonates with all kinds of texts and topics from the Bible and the tradition, and calls for new reflection of old questions. We understand vulnerability (in a general sense) as the possibility and reality that someone is affected in a

negative sense (e.g. in honour, reputation, opportunities, existence). The central question which both studies will aim to address is:

In what way is it sound from a biblical-theological perspective, meaningful from a systematic perspective, and hopeful in the present context to speak of 'God's vulnerability'?

To answer this question, we can investigate biblical passages in which God appears to be vulnerable, the doctrine of God, and the divine nature of Jesus Christ. In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, we encounter passages in which God's commitment to Israel seems to make Him vulnerable. In the New Testament, we find passages on the incarnation of the Word to which the same applies. It is possible to exegete these texts from a presumed invulnerability of God and to defend that the position Jesus Christ did not suffer according to His divine nature. Conversely, it is possible to conclude from the suffering of Jesus Christ and from biblical passages that God must be vulnerable. Both options have been defended, and the question is which of the two possibilities is most justified, meaningful, and hopeful.

In this research project, PhD students in OT and ST are working on the same question from different perspectives. The starting point for the OT student is a selection of passages that seem to involve God's vulnerability. The starting point of the ST student is the question of what the suffering of Jesus Christ means for God's possible vulnerability.

### *Old Testament*

In Old Testament theology, God's commitment is usually elaborated with the notions of God's covenant with Israel, His faithfulness, and His power that He deploys for the benefit of the covenant partner and against enemies. The other side of this devotion is that it seems to make God vulnerable. When the LORD's name is joined to Israel, it entails risks and these risks turn out to be not imaginary. The covenant people belongs to the LORD and proclaims his praise, but it can also profane his name and hurt his love. The Old Testament describes how that indeed happens and what this means, including for God himself. What happens when God is dishonoured and hurt, and when He has to punish Israel, but cannot do so because of His own faithfulness, because of His reputation among the nations and the gods, and because His own heart resists it? There seems to be a tension between the LORD's sovereignty and His faithfulness, His commitment to His people and to creation. Emotional terms are used to describe how this touches God, and there seems to be an inner struggle within God himself.

To date, the vulnerability of God has not received much attention in Old Testament theology. It is discussed, under the description of God's 'impotence', by W. Dietrich and Chr. Link, and by J. Jeremias, under the heading of God's self-limitation.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the tension in God between sovereignty and loyalty is clearly a theme in Walter Brueggemann's theology.

The OT project explores how primarily in the Old (and possibly New) Testament God's commitment leads to vulnerability and inner struggle in God himself. The intention is to develop this theme through an exegetical and theological in-depth examination of some key passages. These might include Exodus 32-34 (where the LORD makes his name known and that name is at stake), Deuteronomy 32 (where the LORD, in his response to Israel's apostasy, reckons with his

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Dietrich & Christian Link, *Die dunklen Seiten Gottes. Band 2: Allmacht und Ohnmacht* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener 2004<sup>2</sup>), m.n. 175-194; Jörg Jeremias, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, GAT 6 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2017), 212-222, 485-495.

reputation among the other nations and their gods) and Hosea 11 (where God's own heart recoils within him when he should punish his people).

This project thus focuses on the theological theme of God's vulnerability, in the context of His commitment to creation and to His people. Related themes are God's repentance, envy and patience, and God's suffering on account of his people. These themes can be included in the study, as well as a comparison with similar themes elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

Depending on the candidate's interest and qualifications, there is room to include (passages from) the New Testament in the study as well and thus conduct a more holistic biblical-theological study.

In the OT project, the primary focus is on God's vulnerability in the Old Testament. At the same time, it is important for the researcher to be aware of the relationship between biblical scholarship and systematic theology. The conversation between these disciplines and collaboration with the ST researcher is an important part of this project.

### *Systematic theology*

Whereas in classical theology no room existed to talk about God's vulnerability, this has changed in the twentieth century. Around the defining attributes of classical doctrine of God (*impassibilitas, simplicitas, aseitas*), a consensus seemed to grow in the twentieth century that speaks in trinitarian way about God, that makes the economic trinity (and thus also Christology) the starting point of reflections on God's attributes, and that speaks of (a form of) divine suffering given the suffering of Christ. In that line of thinking, room has been created to speak about God's vulnerability, such as Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*.<sup>2</sup> Examples within BEST include Kamphuis, 'Divine suffering in Dietrich Bonhoeffer',<sup>3</sup> as well as Eric Peels' OT contributions on the doctrine of God.

In recent years, however, more and more publications are appearing that present a contrasting voice. The unity of God is being reemphasised (Katherine Sonderegger). The importance of the classical doctrine of God and its relevance for Reformed theology is being defended, including the classical attributes (in a more or less modified form). This approach emphasises that there is knowledge of God even before and outside Christ, thus creating distance from a purely Christocentric approach in the doctrine of God. Accordingly, Maarten Wisse argues against epistemological Christocentrism (God is known exclusively in the history of Jesus Christ), and certainly against ontological Christocentrism (God's being is determined by the history of Jesus Christ).<sup>4</sup> For Christology, this does not imply that the classical doctrine of God is criticised from the point of view of Christ's suffering, but rather, that the two nature doctrine of Chalcedon is retained given the classical doctrine of God, denying that Christ suffered according to his divine nature (Steven Duby).<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, publications continue to appear such as Bruce McCormack's, *The Humility of the Eternal Son*, which, on the contrary, does want to rethink the doctrine of God

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<sup>2</sup> William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Barend Kamphuis, 'Goddelijk lijden bij Dietrich Bonhoeffer', *Theologia Reformata* 58 (2015) 2, 167-185.

<sup>4</sup> Maarten Wisse, *Reinventing Christian Doctrine. Retrieving the Law-Gospel Distinction*. London: T&T Clark 2023, 48-51.

<sup>5</sup> Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2022.

from the point of view of the Son's incarnation and suffering, and focuses on the doctrine of the two natures and the trinity.<sup>6</sup>

Reformed theology has mostly acknowledged a form of general revelation, and, in addition, has held that there was also knowledge of God in the Old Testament, i.e. before Christ. That is not at issue in this project. Still, the question remains regarding what this means for God's vulnerability. Two options emerge:

- a. Viewed from the perspective of the Old Testament and classical theism, no room exists to speak of God's vulnerability, and so the classical doctrine of God is maintained along with a two nature doctrine that excludes a suffering of Christ according to his divine nature.
- b. Based on the Old Testament and Christology, it is argued that God is vulnerable to some extent, and so the classical doctrine of God must be adjusted to make room in the two nature doctrine for suffering of Christ according to his deity.

In this project, the question of God's vulnerability is explored from the perspective of Christology. The project's aim is to arrive at a well-argued position in this theological field, based on an analysis of some theologians, and an evaluation of the various options.

In the ST project, the primary focus will be on the most obvious position concerning God's vulnerability from the point of view of Christology. Answering this question starts with the two natures doctrine. How the divine nature of Christ is viewed here is linked to the doctrine of God. At the same time, it is important for the researcher to be aware of broader biblical-theological connections, and of the question of what is hopeful. Collaboration with the OT researcher is therefore important.

### *Phasing*

Both sub-projects fall into three phases, which are as similar in terms of planning in time as possible. Therefore, it is important that both PhD's start at the same time, so that they can work on this dual project together.

	OT	ST
Phase 1: exploration	Explorative reading and choosing passages to be studied	Explorative reading and choosing two or three authors
Phase 2: description and analysis	Exegesis and biblical-theological interpretation	Description and analysis of the two nature doctrine and relationship with doctrine of God in these authors
Phase 3: defining position	Formulating conclusions based on the OT research and where possible in conjunction with the ST research	Formulating conclusions based on the ST research and where possible in conjunction with the OT research

### *Cooperation and supervision*

Both PhD-students work together in a team with their supervisors. It is important that both PhD-students are in regular contact, keep each other informed of their progress, discuss problems

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon*. Current Issues in Theology. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

they encounter, and jointly publish one or more articles. The OT PhD is primarily supervised by Prof. Dr A. (Arie) Versluis (TUA) and will be employed by TUA, the ST PhD by Prof. Dr J.M. (Hans) Burger and will be employed by TUU. Regular consultations will also take place with both PhD students and their supervisors.