
God of All Comfort: A Trinitarian Response to the Horrors of This World, by Scott Harrower. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019. 255 pp + xiv. \$21.99. Paperback.

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Working from the conviction that Christian theology has deep resources for those who have experienced trauma, this volume explores “how God the Trinity engages with horrors and trauma, and what people can hope for in light of this” (1). Scott Harrower, as a theologian with a lively interest in the systematic coherence of Christian doctrine, brings some new resources to the developing conversation between trauma studies and Christian thought. Leading figures in the field of trauma theology have already done deep dives into important doctrines; in particular Shelly Rambo has done masterful work on grace, pneumatology, and most recently resurrection. Harrower is conversant enough with the literature of trauma-informed theology that his book can serve as a well-footnoted introductory survey of the field, especially for evangelical readers who are new to it. But he also expands the systematic scope of the field by surveying an ambitiously broad range of doctrines together at once.

The word “trinitarian” in the subtitle signals this breadth. The word does not, readers should note, indicate that this is a book mainly on the doctrine of God proper: It is not. Instead, the word “trinitarian” is a marker displaying Harrower’s intent to bring the full scope of the Christian message to bear on the problem of horrors. A trinitarian response to trauma mobilizes all the theological resources of the faith, in all their density, complexity, interdependence, and comprehensiveness. Certainly God’s character stands behind this, and Harrower appeals to God’s triunity several times; for example, when he argues that “God has access to two forms of empathy”

toward sufferers because of “the double effect of the incarnation of the Son and the indwelling of the Spirit” (172). But the real work in the book is done by the background notion of a deeply personal, living God, who exists in harmonious communion and seeks living communion with created persons. “The tripersonal nature of God and his qualities is the basis of the person-centric shalom he created” (12).

The momentum of the argument comes from Harrower’s redescription of the Christian story (creation, fall, redemption) in the language of trauma. An original state of person-centric shalom gives way to “the devastation” (a term Harrower adopts from Paul Griffiths), which is a primal event introducing insecurity and incompleteness not merely at a psychological level, but also with cosmic implications. The result is the world in which we live, containing horrors of various kinds, from objective to subjective, from gross to commonplace. Their existence generates trauma responses, downgrades our imaging of God, prevents the full realization of personhood, and renders life meaningless.

God has intervened decisively in Christ and the Spirit, but for practical reasons, Harrower does not focus on this accomplished salvation. Instead, he attends to the way God makes healing present to us here and now through Scripture. Harrower considers scripture as a set of inspired texts and narratives through which God engages with people from their own perspectives in order to bring them into personal fellowship.

The heart of the book is a three-chapter movement in which Harrower first sets up, and then carries out, two contrasting readings of the Jesus story, taking Matthew’s Gospel as his text. The first reading is deliberately horror-attuned, a paranoid and skeptical reading that expects to find violence and does so. Harrower walks the reader through twenty pages of relentless trauma, from Abhumanity to Zombies, with everything from exile, the massacre of the innocents, and institutionalized injustice in between. The formal plot line of gothic horror comes into play here, a literary convention in which evil is uncovered, confirmed, and confronted. This trauma reading is occasionally forced, as when Harrower describes the role of Joseph as something more grim and desperate than Matthew seems to warrant. But the danger that a paranoid reading might be a misreading is part of Harrower’s point: the traumatized reader projects threat even where it does not belong, turning every text into a mirror of their own horror. Elements of the story which most readers would consider obvious and central (the resurrection, chiefly) have to be suppressed or elided in order to make this reading work. What is more surprising, though, is that for all its limitations, this deliberately horror-attuned reading turns out to be a sensitive interpretive approach that successfully identifies in Matthew a reservoir of darkness and weirdness that really is part of this Gospel’s raw material.

Subjected to a trauma reading, Matthew turns out to be the story of a still-unimaginable reversal in which despair becomes hope (Harrower alludes to the literary genre of magical realism). This is a deep insight: a Gospel is mostly a pre-resurrection story told from a post-resurrection vantage point. The literary

structure of the good news, therefore, arises from the Father, Son, and Spirit persuading the disciples to believe in Jesus against all odds. To read a Gospel rightly, then, is to read it as a guide out of horror. As Harrower turns to what he calls a blessed reading of Matthew, he traces the ways that God leads the disciples to faith. Matthew's turning point is Peter's confession and Christ's response to it (Matt. 16:17). Harrower shows how the three key phrases of this exchange all reveal a pivoting from a trauma orientation to one of blessing: God is the living God (desiring a relationship with us); Peter is blessed (not cursed or abandoned); and he was not led to this truth by mere "flesh and blood" (that is, divine power made a way out of trauma when no way was evident). To read Matthew right is not just to get the correct interpretation of a text, but to be led through it, by the Spirit, out of a traumatized interpretation of life and of God, and into the truth.

In her influential work on trauma theology, Serene Jones identified the field's key question in these terms: "How do people, whose hearts and minds have been wounded by violence, come to feel and know the redeeming power of God's grace?" It has become conventional in some circles to treat this question as practically unanswerable, because of a pervasive fear that any answer will be a cheap answer that fails to register the radical character of trauma. Harrower certainly intends to do full justice to horrors and their effects. But he also intends to offer an answer, or a host of answers, to the question, and to direct readers to feel and know the redeeming power of grace. The final three chapters of the book deliver "a counterhorror, posttrauma, and nonskeptical manner of interpretation that takes each of these seriously but is not overwhelmed by them" (133).

God of All Comfort turns explicitly toward soul care in its later chapters, focusing on the practices that reestablish hope. Having acknowledged the reality of horrors, Harrower appeals to the concrete reality of the resurrection of Jesus as the event that "provides a new, coherent narrative in which to reframe experiences of horror." The expectation of a "last day of horrors" combats memories of past events that eclipsed the state of shalom. God's providential care, once it is understood through a blessed reading of life itself, establishes a context in which victims can once again cultivate a sense of safety in the midst of a troubled world. That context is largely shaped by the Christian community as it shapes its common life together under the care of God. The final chapters are filled with counsel and advice about the therapeutic value of the church's ministry. In fact, they are in some danger of being so overstuffed that their coherence as an argument begins to fray. But Harrower brings the whole argument together at last against the horizon of the kingdom of God (a pervasive Matthean theme), and ends where Matthew ends, with the strong name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. An ambitious introduction to trauma theology and its implications for spiritual formation, *God of All Comfort* is a stimulating and timely work.
