

Impassibility: What's in a Name?

By [Dr. Rob Lister](#)

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. "Where is God? Where is he?" someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice in myself answer: "Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows."¹

So began a powerful plea for belief in a suffering God in the wake of the twentieth century's icon of injustice and wickedness. The prose is riveting. The historical referent of the Holocaust is haunting. And insofar as it bears on the specific concerns of this study, the theology informing this famous quotation represents a seismic shift in the modern theological appraisal of the doctrine of divine impassibility.

The Issue

Interestingly, in this quotation of Jürgen Moltmann, in which he is adapting an account from Elie Wiesel's *Night*, it appears that Moltmann may well have departed from Wiesel's original sentiments.² What is quite clear, though, is that

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 273-74. Moltmann follows the quote with this commentary: "Any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference." *Ibid.*, 274.

² A few interesting factual inconsistencies about Moltmann's use of this citation should be observed. First, according to Marcel Sarrot: "While suggesting that he quotes Wiesel, Moltmann gives a summary in his own words of Wiesel's story: Besides, Moltmann suggests that the event that is related happened at Auschwitz, whereas in fact it happened at Buna. Far worse, however, is the fact that Moltmann suggests that Wiesel in the story of the youth on the gallows relates a religious experience of the suffering God.... Moltmann presents Wiesel as a victim of Auschwitz who was comforted by the consciousness that God was sufferingly present in Auschwitz..... This is a gross caricature of Wiesel's account in *Night*, which loses all probability as an interpretation of what Wiesel meant as soon as one reads not only Moltmann's summary of this one story, but the entire book." Following several lengthy quotations of Wiesel clearly indicating his own rebellion against—not comfort in God, Sarrot concludes: "In Buna Wiesel was not comforted by the presence of a suffering God; in Buna Wiesel rebelled against God because he could no longer believe in His justice. For Wiesel, it was not God who died on the gallows... but his faith in God." Marcel Sarrot, "Auschwitz, Morality and the Suffering of God," *Modern Theology* 7 (1991): 137, 138. These

Moltmann himself commends to his readers the theology of a suffering God. Though we will parse out the details more precisely as we progress, it suffices for now to say that in the world of academic theology, an affirmation of divine suffering is typically known as a belief in divine passibility. Divine passibility in turn is quite obviously the antithesis of divine impassibility the view that, *in some important senses at least*, God transcends (i.e., cannot be afflicted with) suffering.

The shift in thinking on this matter in modern theology truly has been seismic. Whereas up to the modern era the church could be widely characterized as affirming some notion of divine impassibility, modern theology has broadly rejected the former consensus and championed divine passibility in its place. As a consequence, we have, in the words of Ronald Goetz, witnessed "the rise of a new orthodoxy."³

Part of the reason for this dramatic doctrinal overhaul in modern theology is that many contemporary passibilists have (mistakenly, I will argue) taken divine impassibility to mean that God has no emotional capacity and no interest in his creation.⁴ Hastings Rashdall, for example, criticizes the Patristic and scholastic affirmations of impassibility as being endorsements of a God who is "cold, passionless, and loveless."⁵ Perhaps even more starkly, Vincent Tymms claims that the God of impassibilism is nothing more than an "infinite iceberg of metaphysics."⁶

As it is fleshed out in theological argument, contemporary passibilists have advanced a number of reasons for abandoning the impassibilism of earlier centuries. As they see it, impassibilism is to be chided for (1) dismissing the straightforward readings of numerous biblical texts that powerfully display divine passion, (2) failing to take the love of God and, thus we are told, the possibility of meaningful relationship with God seriously, (3) failing to take the incarnation and cross seriously, and (4) failing to take the problem of evil and suffering seriously. Broadly speaking, then, passibilism is inclined to see impassibilism as failing to

findings, of course, lead us to question the validity of Moltmann's use of the story, and yet it is precisely his use of the story that is of interest to this study: In note 5 of the same article, for instance, Sarot points out that—at the time of his article well over thirty volumes referenced the Wiesel story, many of which merely quote the Moltmann summary (misplaced locations and all).

³ Ronald Goetz, "The Suffering of God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," *The Christian Century* 103 (1986): 385-89.

⁴ With minor exceptions, the historical study to follow will demonstrate the general falsity of the allegation equating the classical view of divine impassibility with divine indifference.

⁵ Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1925), 452.

⁶ T. Vincent Tymms, *The Christian Idea of Atonement* (New York: Macmillan, 1904), 312. See also Clark H. Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 1994), 103.

uphold the proper balance of divine transcendence and immanence, in that it overemphasizes the former to the neglect of the latter.⁷

Though impassibilists may find themselves in a minority position in more recent history, they nevertheless have attempted to defend their own views and the views of their tradition with what they believe to be suitable responses. Thus, impassibilists have countered the passibilist charges with claims that

- (1) the theological method undergirding much passibilist exegesis is simplistic and
- (2) in their attempt to take the love of God, relationship with God, the incarnation and cross of Christ, and the problem of evil seriously, passibilists are often either reductionistic or extrabiblical themselves. In a broad sense, then, impassibilism is inclined to see passibilism as failing to uphold the proper balance of divine transcendence and immanence, in that it overemphasizes the latter to the neglect of the former.⁸

My purpose in this book is to address this seeming theological impasse. Upon concluding the historical and biblical investigations, I will offer my own explanation as to how both divine impassibility and divine impassioned-ness, when rightly understood, can and must go together. As we will see, this conclusion aligns, in principle, with the best of the impassibility tradition in terms of this juxtaposition of themes, even as I attempt to develop and expand a bit upon this foundation.⁹ Before proceeding any further, however, we should give some attention to the important matter of the terminology involved in this debate.

Definitional Factors Related to Impassibility

While the basis for the definition of impassibility will have to be demonstrated in the chapters providing historical analysis, it bears frontloading this project with some preliminary definitional comments in order to provide the basic framework necessary to enter the discussion.

⁷ To be sure, not every passibilist subscribes to all of these arguments, and some passibilists invoke other arguments. The attempt to provide a more detailed explanation of passibilist argumentation will occur in chap. 5.

⁸ Of course, impassibilists have also offered positive arguments, for example, the argument from aseity and the argument from immutability. A more detailed investigation into the history of impassibilist thought will occur in chaps. 3 and 4.

⁹ I must confess that this finding was initially a little surprising to me. As with many others, my initial exposure to the debates over divine impassibility came from the perspective of the numerous modern critics of the doctrine. Naturally, therefore, I was initially suspicious about the Patristic doctrine of divine impassibility. It was not until I read the Fathers themselves that I came to realize how markedly different their views seemed to be in comparison to the interpretations of their views by their modern critics.

Impassibility in Early Christian Thought

We may begin our remarks by expanding a bit on the observation that when compared with the early church, many modern theologians reflect a deep divergence with the tradition, not only in their evaluation of divine impassibility, but also in their basic understanding of what divine impassibility is thought to mean in the first place. Marc Steen has captured the force of this point nicely:

"Apathy" as it used to be understood, is not necessarily identical to what is understood by it now. In the first systematic text treating our topic, namely, in the Gregory Thaumaturgus third-century treatise addressed to Theopompus, we are informed that a loving God must be "impassible." Nowadays the reverse reasoning is in vogue: if God is love, then He must be "passible." A misunderstanding of this conceptual difference leads to a veritable tower of Babel. Fighting traditional theism at the present time as if it introduced the notion of an "apathic," that is a cool and indifferent God, often seems to be a battle like Don Quixote's. It is, in any case, necessary to recognize that the term "(im)passibility" does not always and everywhere have one and the same connotation.¹⁰

It is hard to overstate the importance of this point. To put it bluntly, both ancient advocates and contemporary critics of divine impassibility use the same terminology, but they often mean quite different things when they explain what it means for God to be impassible.¹¹

Whereas we have already seen that contemporary passibilists have frequently asserted that the doctrine of divine impassibility conveys God's absence of emotion, the most representative statements of the classical tradition do not, in fact, assert God's indifference to and aloofness from creation, nor do they claim that God was devoid of vibrant affection. Rather, in the main, the classical tradition simply sought to preserve the notion that, as the self-determined sovereign, God is not subject to emotional affects that are involuntarily or unexpectedly wrung from him by his creatures.¹² As we will see further on, this dimension of God's self-determination was nearly always held in tandem with an affirmation of God's meaningful emotional experience by the major proponents of the classical impassibility model.

¹⁰ Marc Steen, "The Theme of the Suffering' God: An Exploration," in *God and Human Suffering*, ed. Jan Lambrecht and Raymond F. Collins (Louvain, Belgium: Peters, 1990), 86-87.

¹¹ Given this situation, then, it must be judged an unacceptable procedure to try to establish, for instance, the Patristic view of divine impassibility simply on the basis of appeal to etymological arguments pertaining to the Hellenistic thought-world. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.

¹² See, c.g., G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952), 6-7. Furthermore, the classical adherence to divine impassibility was not discarded in the case of the incarnation. Neither, however, did the classical theologians dismiss lightly the sufferings of the incarnate Christ. How and why these thinkers deemed it important to affirm both divine impassibility and the full reality of the incarnate Christ's sufferings will receive consideration in chaps. 3 and 4.

J. I. Packer clearly expresses this classical sentiment about God when he asserts that impassibility is

not impassivity, unconcern, and impersonal detachment in the face of creation; not insensitivity and indifference to the distresses of a fallen world; not inability or unwillingness to empathize with human pain and grief; but simply that God's experiences do not come upon him as ours come upon us, for his are foreknown, willed and chosen by himself, and are not involuntary surprises forced on him from outside, apart from his own decision, in the way that ours regularly are.¹³

As we look toward the fuller historical investigation, these statements can count as something of a provisional definition of the classical view of divine impassibility.

Impassibility, Patripassianism, and Theopaschitism

Having said all that, it is also necessary to distinguish impassibility from two related theological terms that were part of the landscape in the doctrine of the early church: patripasianism and theopaschitism. *Patripassianism* is another name for the Trinitarian heresy of modalistic monarchianism or Sabellianism.¹⁴ In the contemporary discussion, passibilist theologians are sometimes charged with advocating patripassianism.¹⁵ In actual fact, though, this is an imprecise charge, because it misses a nuanced distinction between passibility and patripassianism. We might put it this way: it is possible- as with most of the leading contemporary passibilists to deny patripassianism and still affirm passibility. That is, both concepts get at the suffering of God, but they do so in different ways. Patripassianism affirms that the Father suffers on the cross because of a modalistic understanding. Most contemporary passibilists, on the other hand, allow the Trinitarian distinction of persons and yet maintain that the Father also

¹³ J.I. Packer, "Theism for Our Time," in *God Who Is Rich in Mercy*, ed. Peter T. O'Brien and David G. Peterson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 17. See also his statement that impassibility means, not that God is impassive and unfeeling (a frequent misunderstanding), but that no created beings can inflict pain, suffering and distress on him at their own will. In so far as God enters into suffering and grief (which Scripture's many anthropopathisms, plus the fact of the cross, show that he does), it is by his own deliberate decision; he is never his creatures' hapless victim. The Christian mainstream has construed impassibility as meaning not that God is a stranger to joy and delight, but rather that his joy is permanent, clouded by no involuntary pain." J. I. Packer, "God," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J.J. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity 1988), 277. For yet another valuable statement by Packer see *Knowing God*, 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 121.

¹⁴ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978), 119-23.

¹⁵ While acknowledging that only one of six would accept the patripassianist label, Warren McWilliams concludes that Jürgen Moltmann, James Cone, Geddes MacGregor, Kazoh Kitamori, Daniel Day Williams, and Jung Young Lee might all be called, "without too much distortion, the new patripassianists." Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God: Divine Suffering in Contemporary Protestant Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 21.

suffered at the cross, albeit distinctively.¹⁶ In seeking maximum precision, then, we should acknowledge this important distinction between passibility and patripassianism and not strictly equate the two.

Theopaschitism focuses more properly on the christological issue. In its early history, the theopaschite formula was sometimes defended by mono-physites, and as such was condemned on several occasions. In 553, at the Second Council of Constantinople, however, the formula was approved. Presumably no longer linked with monophysitism, the tenth anathema of the council reads, "If anyone does not confess that our Lord Jesus Christ who was *crucified in the flesh* is true God and the Lord of Glory and one of the Holy Trinity; let him be anathema."¹⁷ In this mature formulation, then, all that was explicitly affirmed was the fact that the incarnate Christ suffered in the flesh. The formula did not offer a specific claim about how or whether Christ's divine nature was implicated in the experience of Jesus's incarnate sufferings.¹⁸ Once again, it appears that *theopaschitism* as with *patripassianism*—is sufficiently distinct from passibility that, for the sake of clarity, we should try to avoid overlapping usage.

Passibility in Modern Christian Thought

In contrast with their ancient counterparts, when contemporary theologians affirm that God is passible, it seems that they most often intend to assert that God suffers, and they usually understand this suffering in a predominantly psychological sense, insofar as they retain a belief in God's incorporeality.¹⁹ As Thomas Weinandy has observed, with respect to the contemporary milieu, "the question of God's passibility focused primarily and, at times almost exclusively, upon the issue of whether God could suffer. The catalyst for affirming the passibility of God, one that is still intensely operative, is human suffering. ... Succinctly," the passibilists have concluded, "God is passible because God must suffer."²⁰ Thus, we are again reminded that not only do passibilists and impassibilists draw different conclusions about the nature of divine emotion, but they also often operate with different definitions from the outset.

¹⁶ We find explicit denials of patripassianism, for example, in the writings of these noteworthy passibilists: Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 243; Jung Young Lee, *God Suffers for Us: A Systematic Inquiry into a Concept of Divine Passibility* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 74; and Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God*, 5th ed. (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1965), 15.

¹⁷ *The Anathemas of the Second Council of Constantinople*, in *Creeds of the Churches*, ed. John H. Leith, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox, 1982), 50, emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Alister McGrath comments: "The formula can be interpreted in a perfectly orthodox sense... However, it was regarded as potentially misleading and confusing ... and the formula fell into disuse," Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 278.

¹⁹ Not all passibilists, however, have retained an affirmation of divine incorporeality. See, e.g., Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992).

²⁰ Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 2.

Impassibility and the Vocabulary of "Emotion"

Adding yet another layer of complexity to this challenging topic is the fact that while, popularly speaking, there is a great deal of conceptual overlap in the contemporary vocabulary of "emotion," there is, nevertheless, a place for technical precision and nuance when one uses such vocabulary in certain fields of specialization. Hence, I acknowledge at the outset that while I am interested, for instance, in what modern psychology and philosophy have to say about the definition of various terms in the vocabulary of emotion, I do not write on this topic as a specialist in the psychology or philosophy of emotion. In the main, then, throughout this study, I intend to make use of the major terms of the vocabulary of emotion (e.g., emotion, passion, affection, feelings) with a degree of layman-like interchangeability.²¹ There will be exceptions, however, where for some particular historical or theological purposes I discriminate among these terms with more specificity and precision. Those exceptions to my more normal practice will be clear from the context.

Impassible *and* Impassioned

In terms of my own formulation, my central focus is in the domain of theology proper, though I do not neglect to pair this formulation with the vitally intertwined incarnational component of the debate over divine impassibility. Respecting theology proper, my primary thesis is that, when appropriately understood, a holistic reading of Scripture itself compels the conclusion that proper senses of both impassibility *and* impassionedness are true of God.²² To expand a bit, I take it that God is impassible in the sense that he cannot be manipulated, overwhelmed, or surprised into an emotional interaction that he does not desire to have or allow to happen. But this is not at all the same thing as saying that God is devoid of emotion, nor is it the equivalent of saying that he is not affected

²¹ It is in this nontechnical sense, for example, that I use the term impassioned in the title of this book. James Beck and Bruce Demarest point out the semantic overlap, in contemporary understanding, of English terms such as "affections, passions, appetites, temperament, and sentiments" and the "umbrella" capacity of at least these three terms: feeling, affect, and emotion. James R. Beck and Bruce Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 284. Conversely, in more technical discourse on emotion prior to the mid-nineteenth century; the terms passion and affection, for instance, were strongly distinctive, Thomas Dixon, "Theology, Anti-Theology and Atheology: From Christian Passions to Secular Emotions," *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 302. It is also interesting to note the historical argument, proposed by Dixon, that the shift from "passions and affections" to "emotions" represents a clear secularizing of the dominant understanding of emotion. The full form of that argument can be found in Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²² It bears repeating that such a commitment stands me in self-conscious continuity with the fundamental insight of the mainstream classical model of divine impassibility. However much the contemporary literature may attempt to portray the classical model as lifeless and static, the juxtaposition of impassibility and passion comes, as we will see, from the mainstream classical model, and not in spite of it.

by his creatures. To the contrary, God is impassioned (i.e, perfectly vibrant in his affections), and he may be affected by his creatures, but as God, he is so in ways that accord rather than conflict with his will to be so affected by those whom, in love, he has made. The development of this thesis will require an integrated examination of the overlapping methodological, hermeneutical, and theological dimensions invoked by the endeavor to provide a holistic reading of Scripture as it pertains to this topic.

Of course, we should not be surprised at the biblically required duality here, for many participants in this discussion immediately recognize that in view of both the Creator/creature distinction and the human status as *imago Dei*, there must be both similarity and dissimilarity in how the same emotional terminology applies to God and men. Consequently, one of the undergirding methodological components of this proposal is the interpretive guidance of what is sometimes known as Reformed theological method.²³ This method of interpretation, which I argue comes to us ultimately from the framework of Scripture, helps us to navigate the analogical balance between divine and human passion as we examine relevant biblical texts. Additionally, expounding this duality theologically will require that we develop this model of impassibility in the light of insights that come to us from other larger theological structures in the doctrine of God (e.g., transcendence and immanence), as well as companion attributes (e.g., omniscience, immutability, and divine love).

With respect to the christological implications of my thesis, I contend-against passibilist intuitions— that the incarnation and the atonement do not dash the key commitments of divine impassibility. Rather, the incarnation furnishes us with the supreme example of the dual biblical affirmation of divine self-sufficiency and gracious condescension (e.g., Phil. 2:5-8). Accord-ingly, we see that the second person of the Trinity had to become incarnate in order to overcome natural divine impassibility (i.e., the impassibility of the divine nature), and thereby accomplish the redemptively necessary goal of humanly experiencing suffering and death on behalf of sinners. This account of the incarnation and atonement is important, because it reminds us that the purpose of the Son's incarnational mission was to save sinners and not to manifest God's eternal suffering, as some have argued.

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²³ I will expand upon this methodological approach when I lay out my own proposal. A brief but helpful summary of this approach may be found in Michael S. Horton, "Hellenistic or Hebrew? Open Theism and Reformed Theological Method," in *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 204-12.

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