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# THE CONCEPT OF DIVINE SUFFERING AND ITS IMPACT ON CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Kate Wong

*This article explores the biblical and theological implications for the modern movement towards divine passibility, the idea that suffering is integral to God's being.*

## The Road to Divine Passibility as a Modern Orthodoxy

Since the time of Christ, theologians have worked to reconcile the seemingly paradoxical reality of the passible Son and impassible nature of God. Early theologians inherited the axiom of divine impassibility from Greek philosophy.<sup>1</sup> For the Greeks, God's impassibility was imperative because God cannot be weak and is instead "absolutely self-sufficient, self-determining, and independent."<sup>2</sup> Weakness was defined as being moved or affected by something else—thus God cannot be moved by emotions or 'suffer' (*paschein*).<sup>3</sup> They viewed emotion as an agent of change. Thus, anger, hate, and envy are incongruous with God, but so are love, compassion, and mercy.<sup>4</sup> Greek metaphysics greatly influenced early theologians to accept divine impassibility without hesitation.<sup>5</sup> Ngien notes that for both Ignatius and Irenaeus, "God could not suffer except in Christ."<sup>6</sup> They were both in line with Greek philosophy—that emotions

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bauckham, "'Only the Suffering God Can Help.' Divine Passibility in Modern Theology," *Them* 9.3 (1984): 7. Gavriyuk contrarily states that this is a "widespread misconception" of the Hellenistic world, Paul Gavriyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 172.

<sup>2</sup> Bauckham, "Divine Passibility," 7. "Christianity's embrace of impassibility stemmed from two Greek metaphysical concepts: apathy (*apatheia*) and sufficiency (*Autarkeia*)" Dennis Ngien, *The Suffering of God According to Martin Luther's 'Theologia Crucis'* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 7, referencing Jung Young Lee, *God Suffers for Us; A Systematic Inquiry into a Concept of Divine Passibility* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Bauckham, "Divine Passibility," 7.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 268.

<sup>5</sup> For further reading, see Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 8, and his footnotes.

<sup>6</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 8.

are improper for a deity—hence, suffering cannot be included in the divine nature.<sup>7</sup>

Early theologians strove to distinguish Christianity from paganism and mythology, but they quickly realised that the paradoxical nature of Christ's incarnation was “a scandal to philosophical piety and an offence against the best metaphysical proposals of the Hellenistic age.”<sup>8</sup> These early church Fathers understood that they had to answer the same critical questions they once posed to other organised belief systems concerning divine passibility. This resulted in many early theologians failing to interact adequately with the tension between Christ's divine and human natures.<sup>9</sup> Gavriilyuk discusses three ways they reduced the incarnation to remedy their discomfort: the Docetists denied the reality of Christ's humanity, the Arians gave up Christ's divinity, and the Nestorians attributed the divine actions and human experiences to different subjects.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to Nestorianism, Monophysites argued that Christ had only one nature (divine or a fusion of divine and human) after the incarnation.<sup>11</sup> The outcome of their doctrinal position was an affirmation of divine passibility. Thus “the Theopaschite movement was born out of the Monophysite emphasis on the one person of Jesus Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

During the sixth-century Theopaschite controversy, divine passibility was explicitly rejected “precisely because the impassibility of God was a basic presupposition of all Christological doctrine.”<sup>13</sup> The classical tradition of divine impassibility was further supported by Hilary of Poitiers, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin, and various scholastic theologians.<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, however, was an exception. His doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum* upheld “complete reciprocity between the

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<sup>7</sup> Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 48, highlights that Christians were “not the only ones who understood the impropriety of ascribing human, all too human, characteristics to gods. Many philosophically minded pagans and Jews shared the same sensibility.”

<sup>8</sup> Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 51–62.

<sup>10</sup> Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 173; a greater explanation can be read: Docetism chapter 3, Arianism chapter 4; Nestorianism chapter 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 14 referencing Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University Press, 1971–84), 270–271.

<sup>14</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 14–17.

divine and human natures and the mutual sharing of attributes.”<sup>15</sup> If Christ suffered, God also suffered.<sup>16</sup> Luther did not define the incarnation by starting with an assumption of divine *apatheia*, as so many of his predecessors and contemporaries had done. Instead, his cornerstone was the unity of the person of Jesus Christ, the “God-man, *in toto*.”<sup>17</sup>

A contemporary theologian who continues to uphold divine impassibility is Thomas Weinandy. He views the Son’s suffering as exclusive to the Son’s human nature. Weinandy argues that this exclusivity is necessary to authenticate the Son’s experience of human suffering.<sup>18</sup> If the Son’s divine nature suffered then it would be “God suffering as God *in a man*.”<sup>19</sup> The incarnation, according to Weinandy, requires the Son to “suffer as a man” and not simply dwell in a man.<sup>20</sup> He also states that God does not experience any emotion in his inner being. God only experiences grief and sorrow as he sympathises with the human condition.<sup>21</sup> This remains an external experience as God is only moved to embrace humans in love. He is not moved in his inner being by experiencing “some injury or the loss of some good.”<sup>22</sup> Weinandy states that because God does not suffer, he remains other. This preserves “the full reality of his wholly-other love, and it does so not solely for his own sake, but also for the sake of the created order, particularly and especially for the sake of human beings.”<sup>23</sup> God’s impassibility then allows him to love “wholly and completely” because his love “fully and freely embraces those who suffer.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 14, referencing J. K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge: University Press, 1926), 121.

<sup>16</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 204. “But until the Son of God actually became man and existed as a man, God, who is impassible in himself, never experienced and knew suffering and death as man *in a human manner*” (Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 206).

<sup>19</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 204.

<sup>20</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 204.

<sup>21</sup> Sympathy refers to feeling compassion, sorry, or pity, for another’s situation. Empathy, on the other hand, refers to one’s ability to put oneself in the shoes of another. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Heb 4:15, NIV).

<sup>22</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 169.

<sup>23</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 168.

<sup>24</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 168.

Most modern theologians<sup>25</sup> who affirm divine passibility also recognise some elements of truth in divine impassibility.<sup>26</sup> The impetus for asserting divine passibility in the English theological tradition was the First World War.<sup>27</sup> The “age-old dogma that God is impassible and immutable, incapable of suffering, is for many no longer tenable. The ancient Theopaschite heresy that God suffers has, in fact, become the new orthodoxy.”<sup>28</sup> Traditionally, theologians understood God’s love as a one-way relationship in that he is benevolent; and yet, unaffected by the objects of his love.<sup>29</sup> This understanding has given way to a more intimate picture of a “personal, passionate, jealous, concerned and suffering God.”<sup>30</sup> Bauckham correlates this shift with humanity now viewing relational ‘love’ (including analogies of God’s love) in which one party remains unaffected by the beloved as less-than love.<sup>31</sup>

## Defining the Situation

Complicating the debate of divine (im)passibility is the challenge of accurately defining the terms impassible and passible. It is useful to develop these terms and to come to a workable definition instead of assuming that each person uses the same terms synonymously.

Attempting to define divine impassibility or divine *apatheia* often results in convoluted definitions which exacerbate the debate. Aristotle characterised God as being immaterial and pure reason; therefore, God

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<sup>25</sup> “A list of modern theopaschite thinkers would include Barth, Berdyaev, Bonhoeffer, Brunner, Cobb, Cone and liberation theologians generally, Küng, Moltmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Pannenberg, Ruether and feminist theologians generally, Temple, Teilhard and Unamuno,” Ronald Goetz, “The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy,” *ChrCent* 103.13 (1986): 385.

<sup>26</sup> Further reading in Moltmann, *Crucified*, 269–270; cf. Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 8, e.g., “God’s love is ‘apathetic’ in the sense that it is free, generous, and self-giving, not a ‘need-love’ dominated by self-seeking desires and anxieties.”

<sup>27</sup> Bauckham states that Moltmann’s theology is influenced by his experience as a prisoner of war war (at the end of the Second World War) and that “a context of human suffering cannot itself sufficiently account for a doctrine of divine suffering,” Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 9.

<sup>28</sup> Goetz, “The Suffering God,” 1.

<sup>29</sup> Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 10; Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 51–60 is an excellent examination of divine anger.

<sup>30</sup> Goetz, “The Suffering God,” 22.

<sup>31</sup> Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 10.

must be apathetic.<sup>32</sup> Many theologians thought that although an outside force could not affect God unwillingly, that does not mean God is incapable of “relating to the world nor of showing love.”<sup>33</sup> They defined divine impassibility as a transcendent God who can relate to his creation.<sup>34</sup>

Divine impassibility has commonly been oversimplified to mean “incapable of suffering.”<sup>35</sup> The English translation of *apatheia* derives from the Latin *impassibilitas* or “incapable of being acted upon by an outside or inside force.”<sup>36</sup> Sarot argues that this meaning can be easily lead to “impassible” and “immutable” being used synonymously and offers an alternative definition of divine impassibility: “immutability with regard to one’s feelings, or the quality of one’s inner life.”<sup>37</sup> Ancient writers used *apatheia* in favourable terms to provide hope to believers—not to elicit thoughts of a detached, unapproachable God.<sup>38</sup>

There appears to be a smaller range of definitions for divine passibility. Ngien simply states that ‘passibility’ means capable of experiencing pain or suffering;<sup>39</sup> however, this leaves the meaning of God’s ability to experience pain or suffering open to interpretation. Sarot states that as God is sufficient, he can only be influenced in a “personal way” and not a “causal way.”<sup>40</sup> Human conduct does not necessitate a divine

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<sup>32</sup> “For Aristotle, immateriality and pure reason (*nous*) characterize God’s nature; moreover, an immaterial God of pure reason experiences neither passion nor feeling. God’s experiencing passion would imply being acted upon from without. For these reasons, Aristotle attributes apathy to God’s nature. So divine apathy undergirds the Christian rejection of external possibility within God’s nature,” John Russell, “Impassibility and Pathos in Barth’s Idea of God,” *AThR* 70.3 (1988): 223.

<sup>33</sup> Daniel Castelo, *The Apathetic God: Exploring the Contemporary Relevance of Divine Impassibility* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2009), 16–17.

<sup>34</sup> Castelo, *Apathetic God*, 16–17.

<sup>35</sup> Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 7.

<sup>36</sup> Marcel Sarot, “Patricianism, Theopaschitism, and the Suffering of God: Some Historical and Systematic Considerations,” *RelS* 26 (1990): 369.

<sup>37</sup> Sarot, “Patricianism,” 369, defines feeling as “comprising emotions, suffering, (un)happiness, affections and the like” and says that all theologians believe that God’s inner life has quality.

<sup>38</sup> Castelo, *Apathetic God*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Sarot, “Patricianism,” 369.

reaction—it only occasions divine *pathos*<sup>41</sup> according to Heschel.<sup>42</sup> Here he differentiates between man's effects on God's *pathos* as secondary to God's divine freedom. Barth's relatively fluid use of these terms makes it difficult to be certain, but he appears to believe that God can change his divine emotions from within—affirming an internal passibility.<sup>43</sup>

## The Issue of Language and Divine Suffering

Historically, God's (im)passibility was often debated alongside the classical divine attribute of immutability.<sup>44</sup> The resulting logic was that immutability necessitated impassibility. Recently, Moltmann and others began to challenge this correlation. Moltmann argues that although God and creatures are distinct, this does not require God's intrinsic unchangeableness in every respect.<sup>45</sup> "God is under no constraint from that which is not God."<sup>46</sup> Theologians experienced much tension as they attempted to integrate the immutability and impassibility of God with the real incarnation of Christ and his real sufferings.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Bauckham, "Divine Passibility," 7. "*Pathos*, which the divine *apatheia* excludes, means both 'suffering', in our sense of pain or calamity, and also 'passion', in the sense of emotion, whether pleasurable or painful." Heschel "used the word *pathos* to describe God's concern for and involvement in the world," (Bauckham, "Divine Passibility," 9).

<sup>42</sup> Sarot, "Patripassianism," 369.

<sup>43</sup> Russell, "Impassibility and Pathos," 228. This internal passibility comes with the belief that God is *constant* instead of *immutable*; cf. his definition on page 223.

<sup>44</sup> Gilles Emery, "The Immutability of the God of Love and the Problem of Language Concerning the 'Suffering of God,'" in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 27.

<sup>45</sup> "The Old Testament itself recognizes that God is not to be compared with humanity (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Isa 40:18; 55:8–9), but this does not mean that language about divine emotions is mere anthropopathism, not to be taken seriously. Rather, it means that, in Heschel's adaptation of Isa 55:8–9: 'My pathos is not your pathos.... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My pathos than your pathos.'" A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York/Evanston: Harper & Row, 1962), 276, as referenced in Bauckham, "Divine Passibility," 10.

<sup>46</sup> "If God is not passively changeable by other things like other creatures, this does not mean that he is not free to change himself, or even free to allow himself to be changed by others of his own free will.... Thus the relative definition of his unchangeableness does not lead to the assertion of his absolute and intrinsic unchangeableness," Moltmann, *Crucified*, 229.

<sup>47</sup> Bauckham, "Divine Passibility," 8.

Suffering can be defined as infringing on one's will and results in a passive victim; thus, divine suffering would imply that God is suffering passively against his will.<sup>48</sup> Some theologians think this is incomprehensible for God, but he could potentially undergo voluntary suffering for soteriological reasons.<sup>49</sup> If God cannot suffer and remains unaffected, then neither can God love.<sup>50</sup> Yet, God is love (1 John 4:8).

Moltmann describes the limitations of early theologians' definitions stating that they only saw one alternative to suffering—*apatheia*—when in reality “there is unwilling suffering, there is accepted suffering and there is the suffering of love.”<sup>51</sup> He views divine suffering as intertwined with the incarnation, the cross, and the trinitarian nature of God.<sup>52</sup> Moltmann argues that theologians should only speak of God's suffering using trinitarian language.<sup>53</sup> Historically, early theologians only recognised two modes of divine suffering (both of which they negated): 1. “essential incapacity for suffering” or 2. “fateful subjection to suffering.”<sup>54</sup> Moltmann states there is a third form of suffering which the incarnation attests, namely, “the suffering of passionate love.”<sup>55</sup>

Luther's understanding of the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity leads Christ's suffering to reach beyond the “temporal state of the incarnation into the eternal being of God.”<sup>56</sup> Others state that as Christ is a compound of divinity and humanity, “God suffered in the flesh, but never that his divinity suffered in the flesh or that God suffered through the flesh.”<sup>57</sup> Weinandy states that “the fact God does not lose his wholly transcendent impassible otherness in so suffering enhances to the extreme the import of the suffering, for it means that the Son who is incapable of

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<sup>48</sup> Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 7.

<sup>49</sup> Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 8.

<sup>50</sup> Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 10; cf. Moltmann, *Crucified*, 222.

<sup>51</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified*, 230.

<sup>52</sup> Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 7.

<sup>53</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 25.

<sup>54</sup> Moltmann, *Trinity*, 30.

<sup>55</sup> Moltmann, *Trinity*, 30. “Moltmann's suffering God is also preoccupied with himself. He creates the world out of need for an ‘other’ and then, through the world, finds deliverance from his own suffering.” Michael Dodds, “Aquinas, Human Suffering and the Unchanging God of Love,” *TS* 52.2 (1991): 332.

<sup>56</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> St. John Damascene, *De Fide Orth.* III, 26, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 9 (Oxford: James Parker, 1899), quoted in Emery, “Immutability,” 33.



suffering as the wholly other God is precisely the same one who is actually suffering as man.”<sup>58</sup>

For Moltmann, Kitamori, and others in the tradition of Luther’s *theologia crucis*, divine suffering is not confined to the cross.<sup>59</sup> Empathy is stronger than sympathy for a suffering person. Jesus who is like us ‘in all things but sin’ also suffers as we do, yet Jesus is God.<sup>60</sup> In fact, Jesus says that our suffering is similar to his suffering—the suffering of God.<sup>61</sup> Historically, the cross of Christ has been understood as a lover sharing in the hell of the beloved’s suffering.<sup>62</sup>

### Implications of Passibility as a Divine Attribute

Considering the movement away from divine impassibility in modern theology, it is necessary to examine what, if any, doctrinal changes result. Surprisingly, Goetz observes that despite the recent Theopaschite<sup>63</sup> revolution, there has not been a resultant “general refocusing of every theological utterance,”<sup>64</sup> as might be expected. If God is a passible God who suffers outside of the temporal suffering of the cross, this necessarily shapes a few of God’s characteristics. Specifically, it impacts God’s covenantal and relational attributes, his control over his divine *pathos*, and his hiddenness in the cross of Christ.

<sup>58</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 203.

<sup>59</sup> Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 11.

<sup>60</sup> Dodds, “Aquinas,” 135; cf. Heb 4:15.

<sup>61</sup> Matt. 25:35–36, 40; cf. Dodds, “Aquinas,” 336. “One suffers not so much ‘with’ the other through a kind of sympathetic response as ‘in’ the other by a sort of empathetic union,” Dodds, “Aquinas,” 339.

<sup>62</sup> Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 10. Contrarily, “we might first ask whether it is possible for a fellow sufferer to be a truly loving God and whether a God who merely suffers *with* us is not already too remote from us to be the revealed God of the Christian tradition” (Dodds, “Aquinas,” 332). Weinandy believes that the impassible God loves in a way that is “absolutely free in its expression and supremely pure in its purpose. If God did suffer, it would mean that God would need not only to alleviate the suffering of others, but also his own suffering, and thus there would be an inbuilt self-interest in God’s love and consolation” (Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 160).

<sup>63</sup> “This term should be used only to denote the theological position according to which the incarnate Logos suffered,” (Sarot, “Patripassianism,” 380). König also defines Theopaschitism as the belief that “God has suffered in Christ,” Adrio König “The Idea of ‘The Crucified God’: Some Systematic Questions,” *JTSA* 39 (1982): 55.

<sup>64</sup> Goetz, “The Suffering God,” 386.

### God's Covenantal and Relational Attributes in Light of Divine Passibility

Castelo writes that it is counterintuitive to try to assign (im)passibility to God based on his patterns of speaking throughout the Old Testament. The Bible does not contain neat categories. He asserts that the God of the Old Testament should always be viewed in light of his covenantal relationship with his people.<sup>65</sup> It is within God's covenantal relationship that the *pathos* of God is visible.<sup>66</sup> God's effective *pathos* is distinct from the Ancient Near East's myths and sagas—it is the “*pathos* of his free relationship to creation, to the people and to history.”<sup>67</sup>

According to Heschel, the concept of divine impassibility would be an alien thought to ancient Israel.<sup>68</sup> God's relationship to man is so real that he allows himself to suffer and to become jealous and angry over Israel.<sup>69</sup> Richter describes God's covenant with Abraham beautifully: God passed between the “torn and bloodied parts of the sacrificed animals” to announce “may what has happened to these animals happen to me if I fail to keep my oath.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed it was necessary that Christ's flesh was torn and bloodied to honour the broken stipulations of the covenant that Israel repeatedly failed to uphold. More than Christ's flesh suffered from the broken covenant—God himself is injured by Israel's disobedience<sup>71</sup> and her suffering.<sup>72</sup> God's *pathos* and suffering are not from any external constraints or limitations of his power. Any limitations are self-imposed.

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<sup>65</sup> Castelo, *Apathetic God*, 36.

<sup>66</sup> Castelo, *Apathetic God*, 37; though “every act of God's divine disclosure has an accompanying facet of closure or hiddenness involved,” (Castelo, *Apathetic God*, 36).

<sup>67</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified*, 270 speaking of Abraham Heschel's viewpoint.

<sup>68</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified*, 271, speaking of Heschel's views.

<sup>69</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified*, 271.

<sup>70</sup> Sandra Richter, *The Epic of Eden, A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press: 2008), 79, referring to Gen 15:18.

<sup>71</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified*, 271–272; cf. “God is, in other words, a God of pathos, afflicted by humans going astray.” Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 145. God is “disappointed and distressed by his people's faithlessness; he is pained and offended by their lack of response to his love; he grieves over his people even when he must be angry with them (Jer 31:30; Hos 11:8–9); and because of his concern for them he himself suffers with them in their sufferings (Isa 63:9),” (Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 9).

<sup>72</sup> “Heschel does point out that God is pained not only by Israel's waywardness, but also by its sufferings... [in regards to the book of Jeremiah]. With Israel's distress came the affliction of God, his displacement, his homelessness in the land, in the world,” (Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 146); “In all their affliction He was afflicted,” (Isa 63:9, ESV).

God chooses to enter into a covenantal relationship with humanity; he chooses to “need human partners and to respect human agency.”<sup>73</sup> Moltmann describes the cross as God being love himself—“with all his being.”<sup>74</sup>

### God’s Control over His Divine Pathos in Light of Divine Passibility

Early theologians did not doubt that God loved his creation, but they characterised this love by his “benevolent attitude and activity, not a feeling, and not a relationship in which he can be *affected* by what he loves.”<sup>75</sup> If God is passible and capable of suffering, this rightly challenged the early church’s understanding of God’s love. The divine *pathos* of God’s mutuality and engagement in his covenant with Israel implies God cannot be completely Other.<sup>76</sup> Instead divine *pathos* is, “like a bridge over the abyss that separates man from God. It implies that the relationship between God and man is not dialectic, characterised by opposition and tension. Man in his essence is not the antithesis of the divine.”<sup>77</sup> God relates to humanity. God’s relationship to humanity is the authentic relatedness of a personal being—not an Other being indiscriminately outpouring blessings and wrath.<sup>78</sup> Most striking is that God chooses to communicate himself by means of a father-son relationship. One of the acutest pains imaginable is that of a parent watching their child suffer and die. Through this relationship and the cross, God reveals to us that he suffers pain.<sup>79</sup> The theme of God’s relationship (oneness) with his people is

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<sup>73</sup> Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 146; God is “not a removed entity who willfully chooses to remain hidden from Israel but rather an agent who is very much involved in the midst of Israel’s life. In other words, God is ‘personally self-invested’ in the fate of the Hebrews as a people; therefore, when Israel fails in its covenant obligations, God is moved by this set of circumstances,” (Castelo, *Apathetic God*, 37).

<sup>74</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified*, 205. “The platonic axiom of the essential *apatheia* of God sets up an intellectual barrier against the recognition of the suffering of Christ, for a God who is subject to suffering like all other beings cannot be God,” (Moltmann, *Crucified*, 228).

<sup>75</sup> Bauckham, “Divine Passibility,” 8.

<sup>76</sup> Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 151.

<sup>77</sup> Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 151. “Between human beings and God there is the most perfect sort of love, the most intimate kind of unity. We call this love ‘friendship’ ... implies compassion—Luke 6:36,” (Dodds, “Aquinas,” 337–338).

<sup>78</sup> Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 148.

<sup>79</sup> Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock: 1965), 47–48.

developed throughout the New Testament using the imagery of the Body of Christ.<sup>80</sup>

God's emotions<sup>81</sup> (*pathos*) remain under control even though God is passible and capable of suffering. According to Held, the cardinal divine emotion is love.<sup>82</sup> There are moments of real anger, disappointment, and other emotions, but underneath those is always love.<sup>83</sup> There is a distinction between *passion* and *pathos* according to Heschel. *Passion* happens to a limited God who is powerless.<sup>84</sup> *Pathos* is a "free reaction of the Lord to the conduct of man."<sup>85</sup> Considering divine anger, Irenaeus and Tertullian did not view it as weakness, but saw its intimate relationship to divine justice.<sup>86</sup> The debate as to how God experiences divine anger ranged from: "God does not feel angry, only his subjects experience punishment *as if* he were angry",<sup>87</sup> to "God experiences anger" in a "carefully qualified sense."<sup>88</sup> God's love and anger reciprocally function with anger emerging from the very heart of love.<sup>89</sup> At no time can God act contrary to his cardinal character of love; therefore, he is free, but cannot be overcome by capricious passions.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Dodds, "Aquinas," 340. Also see Eph 1:23; 4:12; 5:29–32; Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 12:12–27; Col 1:18, 24. By God's relationship with humanity through mediation, God knows human suffering. "The intercession model suggests that God maintains his freedom and holiness even as he gets in touch with human suffering," Timothy Wjarda, "Divine Passibility in Light of Two Pictures of Intercession," *SJT* 66.2 (2013): 168.

<sup>81</sup> Scrutton offers a definition for *emotions* as a middle-ground for the (im) passibility debate: "A model of the divine 'emotional life' that includes affections but excludes direct experience of passions," Anastasia Scrutton "Emotion in Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas: A Way Forward for the Im/passibility Debate?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7.2 (2005): 177.

<sup>82</sup> Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 147.

<sup>83</sup> Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 147; consider Hos 11:1.

<sup>84</sup> Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 147.

<sup>85</sup> Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 147.

<sup>86</sup> Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 53.

<sup>87</sup> This belief was held by the Alexandrians, Clement, and Origen (Gavriilyuk, 56).

<sup>88</sup> This belief was held by Tertullian, Lactantius, Novatian, and Cyril of Alexandria (Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 58). Here Tertullian and Novatian both argue that God can experience emotions without being corrupted, thus defining impassibility synonymously with incorruptibility/immutability.

<sup>89</sup> Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 148.

<sup>90</sup> "God is, in other words, utterly free, but also devoid of caprice," Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 147.

### God's Hiddenness in the Cross in Light of Divine Passibility

If God is possible, this should shape humanity's understanding of God's decision to be hidden in the suffering and humiliation of the cross of Christ. The degradation of the cross is where God is most divine.<sup>91</sup> The cross does not change God into a helpless victim of evil; instead, it is his hidden weapon to utterly defeat evil.<sup>92</sup> In Luther's theology, Jesus' humiliation cannot and should not be distinct from his divinity.<sup>93</sup> The Father does not suffer in the exact same way as the Son, but suffers communally in the "Spirit of love."<sup>94</sup> The concept of divine *apatheia* must be rejected in light of God's choice to identify with the crucified Jesus, "this human and crucified God."<sup>95</sup>

### Conclusion

Dodds rightly says that "to speak of the God of power and love in the face of suffering is inevitably to speak of a mystery."<sup>96</sup> Too often theologians reduce this mystery by "making God less good, less powerful, less divine or less present to us than God has revealed himself to be,"<sup>97</sup> which has the danger of leading one into heresy. The movement from an assumption of divine impassibility to a recognition of biblical divine passibility is still in its early stages. The richness of divine passibility and its potential implications on classical doctrine are inspiring. Though it seems that the (im)passibility debate will continue, it is useful to contemplate what the ramifications of a belief in divine passibility might be for traditional Christian theology.

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<sup>91</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 168.

<sup>92</sup> Bauckham, "Divine Passibility," 11. See also 1 Cor 1:25 "the weakness of God is stronger than men."

<sup>93</sup> "That the only suffering was that of Jesus in His humanity is therefore, according to Luther, not a satisfactory answer since it was the one Lord Jesus in the totality of His being (God-man *in toto*) and work who suffered and died on the cross," Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 168.

<sup>94</sup> Made possible by Luther's assumption of Augustine's understanding of "the love of the Father for the Son, according to which the Father is said to suffer in compassion with the Son, sharing the fate of the Son. The passion and death of Jesus Christ is thus the revelation of God, i.e., the revelation of the immanent Trinity," Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 171. "Because Jesus is God, we can say that Jesus' suffering is God's own," Dodds, "Aquinas," 334.

<sup>95</sup> Ngien, *Suffering of God*, 168.

<sup>96</sup> Dodds, "Aquinas," 330.

<sup>97</sup> Dodds, "Aquinas," 330.