

The Impassibility of God Reconsidered in Light of Modern Conceptual Metaphor Theory

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Abstract

The Bible writers employ conceptual metaphors that utilise human relationships involving emotions (the source domain) to describe the nature of God (the target domain). Modern conceptual metaphor theory maintains that although such metaphors have a discontinuity in that not all concepts contained in the source domain are transferred to their intended target domain, they nonetheless illustrate a truth. Based on that understanding this paper looks to challenge the classical view of the impassibility of God.

Introduction

At the Carey conference in January Jeff Smith (Pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church, Coconut Creek, Florida) delivered three inspiring messages—but they prompted questions about the impassibility of God at the final Q & A plenary session. Various luminaries on the platform gave answers such as the Bible is using human language, and such is the language of accommodation—much was ‘mere analogy and metaphor’—clearly implying that these linguistic devices cannot bear the weight of the concepts to be conveyed. I was not convinced—and when I came to look at the subject, I realised there has been some pushback in recent years against the received wisdom of impassibility.

The Reformed Understanding of Impassibility

The Westminster Confession states:

There is but one only living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible. WCF 2.1

—the 1689 has a virtually identical wording. Scripture texts that are relied on to establish God’s impassibility include: 1 Sam 15:29, Ps 33:11, Psalm 102:25-27, Prov 19:21, Isaiah 43:10, Malachi 3:6, Rom 1:23, 2 Tim 2:16, Heb 6:17-18, and James 1:17.

It is held that although the incarnate Christ could and did suffer, it is considered that God the Father is without passion—or ‘impassible.’ Gerald Bray comments that this

does not mean that God is, for example, incapable of empathy, but as he expresses the Westminster Confession understanding, “[God] cares for our pain without having to endure it himself.”¹ And Richard Bauckham says the Confession is not saying that God does not have “passions”—it is that, “his love is his benevolent attitude and activity, not a feeling, and not a relationship in which he can be affected by what he loves.”²

Some see that the true origins of this view of impassibility—a view expressed by many church Fathers, came less from Scripture than Greek philosophy, notably Philo;³ but that is not my subject today.

Instead I will point out that modern conceptual metaphor theory appears to challenge the Reformed understanding that when Scripture speaks of, for example, God’s joy, sorrow, or anger—it is rhetoric, or the ‘language of accommodation’ (see for example, John Owen⁴).

The Pushback

It can be readily seen that impassibility is closely connected with the doctrine of immutability—if it is possible for God to be impacted by the actions of the humanity he created he cannot be immutable. Charles Hodge in his 1870 *Systematic Theology* cites

¹ Gerald Bray, *The Faith We Confess: An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (London: The Latimer Trust, 2009), 21

² Richard Bauckham, “Only the Suffering God Can Help: Divine Passibility in Modern Theology,” *Them* 9.3 (April 1984): 7-8. The precise meaning of the WCF/1689 statements on impassibility of God is subject to debate, and it is not the purpose of this paper to debate such. Instead the aim is to address the understanding of it embraced by believers of Reformed persuasion and expressed by scholars such as Bray and Bauckham and others cited in this paper.

³ Bauckham, “Only the Suffering God,” 8

⁴ “For the first, when we speak of the anger of God, his wrath, and his being appeased towards us, we speak after the manner of men; but yet by the allowance of God himself. Not that God is properly angry, and properly altered from that state and appeased, whereby he should properly be mutable and be actually changed—but by the anger of God, which sometimes in Scripture signifieth his justice, from whence punishment proceeds, sometimes the effects of anger, or punishment itself, the obstacles before mentioned on the part of God, from his nature, justice, law, and truth, are intended; and by his being appeased towards us, his being satisfied as to all the bars so laid in the way of receiving us to favor, without the least alteration in him, his nature, will, or justice. And according to the analogy hereof, I desire that whatever is spoken of the anger of God, and his being appeased or altered (which is the language wherein he converses with us and instructs us to wisdom), may be measured and interpreted”: John Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, ch. 29 in *Works* vol 12.

Turretin’s claim that there is no variation in God’s internal acts, and comments: “[this] assumes a knowledge of the nature of God to which man has no legitimate claim.”⁵

In modern times perhaps the most prominent pushback to classic impassibility teaching is Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974; repr., London: SCM, 2001). Moltmann is Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at the University of Tübingen. Moltmann points to the paradox of the Cross for classical theism: “... the sufferings of the God who cannot suffer.”⁶

Moltmann’s challenge is endorsed by Richard Bauckham in his Foreword to the *Crucified God*, and elsewhere. Bauckham is one-time Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of St Andrews and is presently senior scholar at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. He endorses the view that “God is decisively revealed in the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross.” He points out that Moltmann was not happy with the early church’s understanding of the two natures of Christ, which drove a wedge between the impassable divine nature of God the Father and the passible human nature of Jesus.⁷

Moltmann in his later writings pursues the trajectory of a passable God in a way that Richard Bauckham and others (notably Robert Letham) see as ‘hermeneutically irresponsible’—and I will come back to this briefly in my conclusion.⁸

However, Bauckham defends Moltmann’s view that Jesus’s cry of dereliction has an inner-trinitarian significance which points to suffering in God. Moltmann points out that on the cross if God is acting in himself, he is also suffering his own action in himself.⁹ Bauckham goes on to claim: “Father and Son experience a mutual loss—the Son of his Father, the Father of his Son—but differently in that it is the Son who is left by the Father to die.”¹⁰

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology*; New York: Scribner, 1870), 299. Citing Francis Turretin: Locus III. xi. 9, edit. Edinburgh, 1847, vol. i. p. 186

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and The Kingdom of God* (London: SCM, 1981), 22; cited by Bauckham, “In Defence of the Crucified God,” in Cameron, *The Power and Weakness*, 108

⁷ Richard Bauckham, “In Defence of the Crucified God,” in *The Power and Weakness of God* (ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron; Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1990), 94

⁸ See: Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (2d ed.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2019), 362-78; Letham also points out the weakness of Bonhoeffer’s position that, “only a suffering God can help”: Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 368

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation* (London: SCM, 1979), 65

¹⁰ Bauckham, “In Defence of the Crucified God,” in Cameron, *The Power and Weakness*, 102

But again, although this is an interesting subject, it is not within the scope of this paper to address how the concept of God's impassibility has historically impacted the understanding of the Trinity.¹¹

Modern Conceptual Metaphor Theory

George Caird, who at the time of his death in 1984 was Professor of Bible Exegesis at Oxford University, says that: "All, or almost all, of the language used by the Bible to refer to God is metaphor" and that comparison "comprises ... almost all the language of theology."¹² If we accept the widely held definition of a metaphor given by Lakoff and Johnson: "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another"¹³ —even a cursory examination of Scripture would appear to confirm Caird's observation.

A metaphor differs from a simile in that one thing is declared *to be* (not just 'like') another thing. Thus 'A' (the source) is declared to be 'B' (the target) when such is not true—or at least not literally true. An example is found in Psalm 23: "the Lord is my Shepherd." Thus, although not literally true, a conceptual metaphor seeks to convey a truth, often such being left to the reader to surmise.

This is unlike rhetorical or poetic metaphors. Examples of these include: "The trees of the field shall clap their hands" (Isa 55:12); another might be: "I am the rose of Sharon" (Song 2:1). We do not learn much about trees or hands, or about the speaker in Song 2:1—except perhaps what he thinks about himself. So, before we describe a biblical statement as a 'mere metaphor,' we should first be sure what sort of metaphor the Bible writer is employing.

The twentieth century saw a significant new development in metaphor theory with the emergence of structure-mapping concepts. Gerhart and Russell (for example) saw that the pair-wise metaphoric statement illustrates not just one concept but instead creates a

¹¹ Bauckham comments: "The majority of the Fathers, even though constrained by Alexandrian Christology to attribute the sufferings of Jesus to the Logos, can do so only by a paradox ... which usually means that the Logos, though aware of the sufferings of his human nature, is unaffected by them": Bauckham, "Only the Suffering God," : 8

¹² George B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 18, 144

¹³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago, 1980), 5

whole new conceptual domain. Their illustration is of a person in their unlit attic looking for a stored item when a flash of lightning reveals the whereabouts of not just that item, but many other things stored there. You not only see the one thing you were looking for—various other things come into view. It is the same with some metaphors. The initial metaphoric statement becomes what Gerhart and Russell call an “ontological flash;¹⁴ new vistas are opened up. However, rather than adopting the terminology of an “ontological flash” linguists have gone with “root metaphor.”¹⁵

Thus, THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD is a root metaphor—an ‘ontological flash’ —that opens new vistas in both Testaments. In Psalm 23 it is that of a caring God; in John 10 it is that of Jesus standing at the door of a sheepfold.

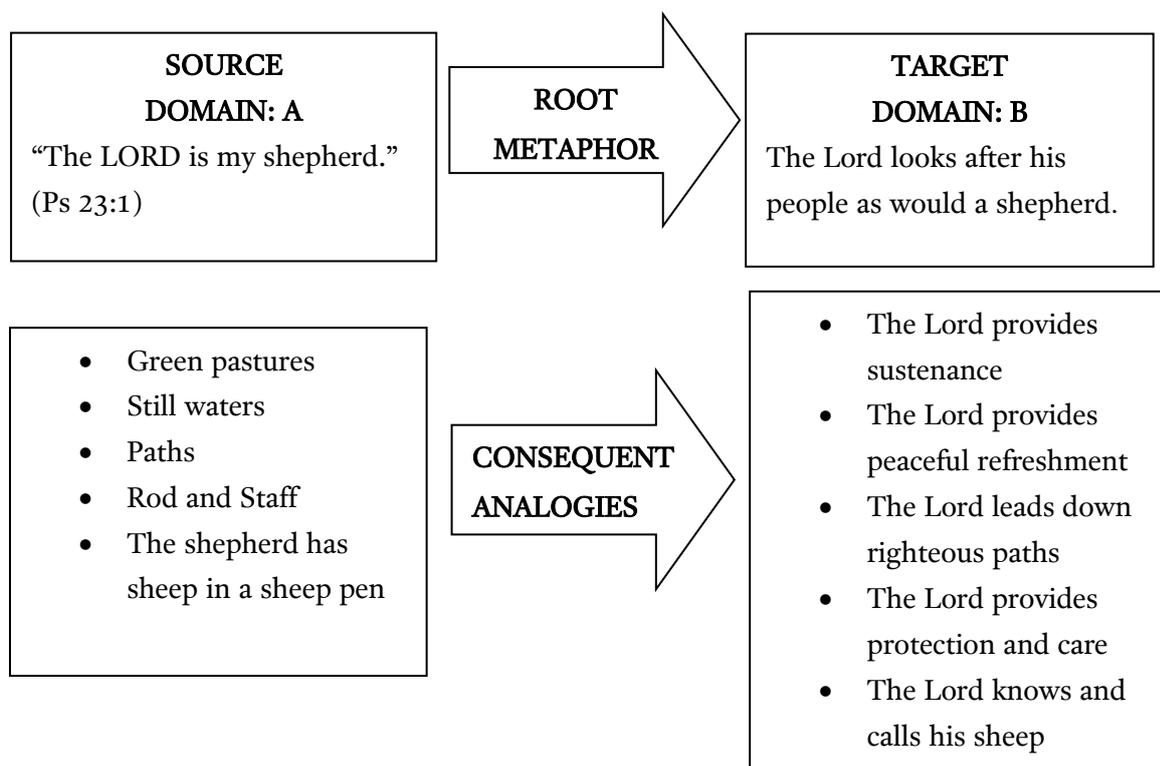
Linguists call these new concepts that flow from the root metaphor—*consequent analogies*. The analogies in Psalm 23 and John 10 are built on the root metaphor that THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD. Another example of a root metaphor is GOD IS OUR FATHER—thus when Hebrews describes Jesus as the obedient son, that is not a separate metaphor, it is an analogy consequent on the metaphoric statement that GOD IS OUR FATHER.

Mapping these consequent analogies is a powerful tool to analyse large-scale conceptual metaphors that has not previously been available to biblical theologians.

¹⁴ Mary Gerhart and Allan Melvin Russell, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1984), 113-14

¹⁵ Ricoeur: “root metaphors ... have the ability to engender conceptual diversity . . . an unlimited number of potential interpretations at a conceptual level ... They are the dominant metaphors capable of both engendering and organizing a network”: Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976), 64

With this new tool, THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD can be mapped like this:



This is a summary map—a detailed map would pick up every analogy with its Scripture text. This transfer of various concepts from one domain to another is based on the original root metaphor—metaphor means to transfer—hence *μεταφέρω* from the Greek ‘to carry over.’

If we believe Scripture is inspired by God, and we have a metaphor such as: THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD —and an analysis of that metaphor reveals extensive cross-mapping—surely we should take seriously the idea that the cross-mapping is intended to reveal to us something of God’s nature? Of course, we must accept that there is some discontinuity in the metaphoric transfer—we are not referring to literal grass or a literal sheep pen—but nonetheless I suggest, and I think many would agree, that the transfers here do mean something?

In this instance, it is surely that God is a caring God who looks after his people.

So, I suggest that in considering whether God is an impassible God, it is useful to look at any relational metaphors employed in the Bible to describe God’s nature and examine

the cross-mapping. And I further suggest that the relational root metaphors that produce the most extensive structure maps are the most significant. On that basis I pick three.

GOD IS KING

First Chronicles 29:11 states: “Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty.” ‘Victory and majesty’ seem to be clear analogies based on the root metaphor that GOD IS KING. Thus 1 Chronicles 29:11 is an analogical cross-mapping of that root metaphor. The website *Knowing Jesus*, although not using this terminology, includes this, and other such verses, and finds 51 such cross-mappings of GOD IS KING in Scripture.¹⁶

GOD IS OUR FATHER

If we take the root metaphor GOD IS OUR FATHER—a consequent analogy is that Israel is his son whom he disciplines (e.g. Deut 8:5). Based on the same criterion as above—that is, counting verses even where the root metaphor is not stated, but rather assumed, the *Knowing Jesus* website suggests that the GOD IS OUR FATHER metaphor is cross-mapped 64 times in the Bible.¹⁷

GOD IS THE HUSBAND OF ISRAEL

The Bible’s marital imagery is based on the root metaphor in the Old Testament: GOD IS THE HUSBAND OF ISRAEL—its New Testament equivalent is—CHRIST IS THE BRIDEGROOM OF THE CHURCH.

The *Knowing Jesus* website lists just five verses when this metaphor appears—choosing to count just one consequent analogy found in Ezekiel 16:8.¹⁸ The consensus of the few scholars that have studied the Bible’s marital imagery is that when Israel’s unfaithfulness to God is described using the Hebrew verbs denoting adultery or prostitution such are consequent analogies—they are a clear allusion to the marital imagery. That is, the text is speaking of Israel’s *marital* unfaithfulness to their God. So, to pick this one example,

¹⁶ “Knowing Jesus: 51 Bibles Verses about Kingship, Divine,” n.p. [cited 06/03/2020]. Online: <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Kingship,-Divine>

¹⁷ “Knowing Jesus: 64 Bible Verses about God, Fatherhood Of,” n.p. [cited 06/03/2020]. Online: <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/God,-Fatherhood-Of>

¹⁸ “Knowing Jesus: 5 Bible Verses about God as Husband,” n.p. [cited 06/03/2020]. Online: <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/God-As-A-Husband>

those Hebrew verbs are directly and specifically cross-mapped in the imagery no fewer than 63 times in the Old Testament alone. And this dominance runs through the New Testament—Jesus declaring himself at the opening of his ministry to be the promised bridegroom, describing his contemporary fellow Jews as an adulterous generation (e.g. Matt 12:39).

If the *Knowing Jesus* website had followed the same methodology as they did for GOD IS KING or GOD IS OUR FATHER—they would have found not five, but hundreds of marital analogies. There are more cross-mappings of the marital imagery root metaphors than all the other biblical metaphors put together—many times over. It is in a league of its own.¹⁹

And it is not just the numerical dominance of the marital imagery cross-mapping that gives the metaphoric marital imagery a unique place in the Bible—the imagery forms a controlling metanarrative in a way no other conceptual metaphor does in Scripture.

Thus, Jeremiah tells us that God *cannot* take Israel back because Pentateuchal law forbids any husband remarrying a divorced first wife (Jer 3:1-8). God's actions are not simply *described* in terms of his marital relationship to Israel, as in the kingship and fatherhood metaphors—his actions are *determined* by his marital relationship to Israel.

Despite this Jesus offers a marriage to all. He invites all, Jew and Gentile, to the wedding supper of the Lamb. He tells us he is going to prepare a place for us—the principal obligation of a Jewish bridegroom—so that where he is going, we can be.

What is the significance of this?

The marital imagery does not employ the language of a king. Prince Charles when he becomes king is not going to invite me to live with him at Buckingham Palace—unlike Jesus, he does not know me. And if I break the speed limit, I will have broken His Majesty's law—that is, King Charles's law—but he will be unmoved by that.

You can be an impassible king—and the impassible Father concept works if you push any passibility into the human nature of an incarnate Son. But in Scripture the kingship, nor the fatherhood metaphors are followed through in the same way as the marital

¹⁹ For detailed analysis see: Hamer, Colin. *Marital Imagery in the Bible: An Exploration of Genesis 2:24 and its Significance for the Understanding of New Testament Divorce and Remarriage Teaching*. London: Apostolos, 2015.

imagery metaphor is. In the jargon, they are not systematically cross-mapped. But the marital metaphor is—from Genesis to Revelation. And an impassible and immutable God, unlike a king, or a Father distanced from the suffering of the incarnate Son, cannot be successfully cross-mapped from a human husband. The Old Testament scholar Raymond Westbrook when discussing the marital imagery commented:

If God's relationship with Israel is to be explained by a metaphor drawing upon the everyday life of the audience then that metaphor, to be effective, must reflect accurately the reality known to the audience ... [otherwise] it would cease to be a valid metaphor.²⁰

In the terminology of modern conceptual metaphor theory, Westbrook is saying the marital cross-mapping must reflect a reality. The reality Westbrook refers to is the relationship between a human husband and his wife. That reality is not one of immutability and impassibility—surely it is just the opposite?

So why has God chosen the marital relationship above all others to portray his own relationship to his people? The answer is surely that the relationship of God to Israel must in some meaningful way reflect the relationship of a human husband and wife. Naturally we must accept discontinuity in the transfer of concepts—including surely all the physical elements of marriage. But if we say the capacity of a husband to react emotionally to his wife is also not transferred in the metaphor—what are we left with? I suggest we are left with no transfer at all—a meaningless metaphor.

Terence Fretheim

Terence Fretheim—emeritus professor of Old Testament at the Luther Seminary in Minnesota—has looked at the impassibility of God in some detail in his book: *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, published in 1984.²¹

He looks briefly at traditional metaphor theory, contrasting rhetorical metaphors with conceptual metaphors, and points to the significance of the latter in Scripture for any understanding of God. He speaks of low and high capacity metaphors—referring, in effect, to the degree of cross-mapping involved, although he does not use that

²⁰ Raymond Westbrook, “Adultery in Ancient Near Eastern Law,” *RB* 97 (1990): 577

²¹ Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering God: An Old Testament Perspective* (OBT; Pa.: Fortress, 1984), 8-9

language.²² He analyses in some detail the Old Testament theophanies calling them, I believe accurately, an “anthropomorphic metaphor.” He points out that rather than dismissing them they should be taken seriously by believers as: “there is always that in the metaphor which is discontinuous [but] ... The metaphor does contain information about God.”²³ He further comments:

The New Testament, far from being the culmination of a progressive spiritualization in the understanding of God, speaks of God unsurpassably enfleshed in the human. Apart from the Christ event, the New Testament continues to speak of God in terms of such metaphors. This continuity is consonant with developments within the Old Testament, where one is struck by the constant use of such language. There are no anti-anthropomorphic tendencies to be discerned; even in dreams or visions or glimpses into heaven God is spoken of in such ways.²⁴

Fretheim sees God as being relational, and that he suffers because his people rejected him.²⁵ “A relationship is at stake not an agreement or a contract or a set of rules.”²⁶ Ironically Fretheim then suggests in regard to Israel’s rejection of God (and I quote) that: “The analogy of a marriage breaking up is one that could be profitably used in this connection.”²⁷ Thus, Fretheim seemingly misses the fact that the marital imagery is employed to the precise end he suggests it could have been. This blind spot regarding the Bible’s pervasive marital imagery is a consistent and remarkable phenomenon in the academy.

The Language of Accommodation

Before I venture to share my conclusion, I want to briefly consider the expression ‘the language of accommodation.’ What it seems we mean by this is that when God communicates with us, he must use the tools available even though, in effect, they are not up to the job. But where did human language come from? In his book *Evolution Still a Theory in Crisis* Michael Denton (an Australian microbiologist who as far as I know is an atheist, or at least an agnostic) points out that Noam Chomsky sees that all human

²² Fretheim, *The Suffering God*, 10

²³ Fretheim, *The Suffering God*, 7, 8

²⁴ Fretheim, *The Suffering God*, 6-7

²⁵ Fretheim, *The Suffering God*, 109

²⁶ Fretheim, *The Suffering God*, 125

²⁷ Fretheim, *The Suffering God*, 125

languages share a deep invariant structure. Which means that any human “can speak the language of the San Bushman or an Australian aborigine, and they in turn can speak English.”²⁸ Denton sees this as an example of a remarkable contradiction of Darwinian evolution theory.

Surely the language of Eden was given by God himself to enable him to speak effectively with Adam? There is no indication in Scripture that on Adam’s expulsion from Eden human language was itself significantly damaged so as not to be able to communicate what God wanted to say—even if it is true that many no longer wanted to hear or obey what he did say. And if Chomsky is correct, that given human language seems to have survived Babel with its basic structures intact. In any case, as evangelicals, surely we can only assume that the Bible writers were communicating something worthwhile with their God-inspired language?

As we have seen, George Caird claims that: “All, or almost all, of the language used by the Bible to refer to God is metaphor”²⁹ —but if they are simply rhetorical figures of speech it would follow that virtually everything Scripture tells us about the nature of God is meaningless.

In other words, if the language employed by the Bible writers with all its metaphoric imagery is merely the ‘language of accommodation’ and cannot convey meaningful concepts about God—what are we left with?

In Conclusion

Is there a harmonisation possible? Can we harmonise the verses that the Westminster and 1689 Confessions cite with modern conceptual metaphor theory? Can the metaphors Scripture employs to speak of a remarkably passible God—subject to emotions and impacted by the human predicament—be reconciled with James 1:17 that tells us that with God “there is no variation or shadow of turning”?

Paul Helm does it this way:

²⁸ Michael Denton, *Evolution: Still A Theory in Crisis* (Seattle: Discovery Institute, 2016), 199-200

²⁹ Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 18, 144

It is conceivable that what are necessarily experienced by human beings as affects are, as a matter of logic, capable of being experienced, or possessed, in non-affective ways.³⁰

Helm, like John Owen (as above), is looking to uphold the concept of an immanent Trinity—a Godhead independent of the material world. But the attempt I suggest is based on logic (as Helm articulates) and philosophy. We are told that the great many passages of Scripture that speak as if God *is* impacted emotionally by his creation are not communicating what they seem to say. If that is the case, it would have been better to have left it unsaid—or at least said differently? Why say God is ‘angry’—if he is not angry in any way that we understand?

At the other extreme I suggest is Moltmann—who is so taken with the concept of an economic Trinity—a Godhead that engages with his material world that he, as Robert Letham comments, “correlates God and creation and collapses the immanent Trinity.”³¹

I would sooner go with Charles Hodge, who when commenting on the Reformed view of God’s immutability said:

It is in vain for us to presume to understand the Almighty to perfection. We know that God is immutable in his being, his perfections, and his purposes; and we know that He is perpetually active. And, therefore, activity and immutability must be compatible; and no explanation of the latter inconsistent with the former ought to be admitted.³²

Richard Feynman, the American physicist, is quoted as saying ‘if you think you understand quantum mechanics, then you don’t.’ Apparently, the way atoms behave defies logic. Albert Einstein rejected quantum theory’s basic principles because of that. He saw that a God of order would not embrace such apparent chaos. But physicists today seem happy to embrace the seemingly contradictory concepts embedded in the theory because they are repeatedly evidenced in scientific experiments.

³⁰ Paul Helm, “The Impossibility of Divine Passibility,” in *The Power and Weakness of God* (ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron; Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1990), 140

³¹ Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 373

³² Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 299

So, I ask, could we not, as theologians, embrace the seeming contradictions of Scripture and take what the text says about God in this matter at face value? When we are told that people saw Jesus weep (John 11:35) and that he subsequently said that “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9) —cannot we accept that God is truly impacted by the human predicament and responds emotionally to it? And at the same time, hold in tension the fact that God also has an impassibility and immutability beyond our comprehension?

Colin Hamer

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