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Must a Loving God be Passible? A Theological Exploration

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The paper offers a synthesis of the current positions on divine impassibility, exploring the question of whether God's love implies that he must suffer. This vital discussion touches on the nature of God, Christology and the atonement.

Is God passible? Even though many theologians have written and still write on this topic, the question seems to remain unsettled. The traditional view of *divine impassibility,* presenting a God who remains unmoved by creaturely passions and emotions and who does not change because of his steadfast character, his love and his complete otherness has come under strong fire. Opponents argue that this view would present an impassible divine being, a remotely self-satisfied eternal God, untouched and unmoved by anything of what humans endure, possibly not *really* loving his creatures. Many contemporary theologians argue that God is rather a loving, suffering, very compassionate God, co-enduring the suffering of his creatures and experiencing some of the hardships they endure *because of his all-encompassing love*. This paper will examine both lines of argumentation and weight them against each other. As should become clear from the arguments, much of the argumentation of the "revisionists"[1] relies on unsure premises. Whereas God remains impassible *in his essence*, it is possible to affirm that he is passible in *his relationship to mankind,* because he engages willingly in the relationship and thus accepts the consequences of it. The traditional orthodox view, that an impassible God is only conceivable if one is not to confuse human comprehension and divine revelation, can still be held without diminishing many of the core concerns of modern passibilists.

The (Im)passibility of God: Introducing the Question

A first clarification is needed. As the introductory paragraph has already inferred, the question of divine passibility and impassibility is very closely related to the question of the *suffering* of God. Can God be said to suffer,

[1] To retain the catch-all label proposed for convenience by McCall, see Thomas H. McCall, *Forsaken: The Trinity and the Cross, and Why It Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 65.

and if so in what way? Because mankind encounters suffering here below and is said to be created after the *imago Dei*, human beings ask whether their experience can be rooted in God or to what extent there is a relation between their own experience and God's experience. Therefore if God can suffer, does this mean that is he passible or not?[2]

The problem of divine (im)passibility is a question of dynamics: is God really *apathetic*, thus not moved by any of the human movements?[3] Relaying the twentieth-century theologians, Hart states, "who could imagine time only as a prison and eternity only as absolute stillness?"[4] For centuries, it has been seen as suited for God to be unmoved, without passions and "with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jn 1:17, NASB), and further best defined as the "unmoved mover" of Aristotle. However, since especially the postwar era of the last century, dynamic is often the predicate of someone/something valuable.[5] McWilliams summarises the contemporary state of the question, underlining the fact "that the biblical view of God as a living, dynamic agent in history necessitates a suffering response to human misery."[6] People are not prepared anymore to accept an idea of God which would not be in line with their concerns for action *hic et nunc*.[7]

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[2] It would largely blow the boundaries of the scope of the present paper to examine the whole concept of *Imago Dei*. Furthermore and for the sake of greater convenience, the categories of the "suffering of God" and of the "passibility of God" shall be used interchangeably, unless otherwise specified.

[3] Hart aptly defines this: "The Christian God is possessed of impassibility, or *apatheia* (to employ the proper Greek term), that he is impervious to any force—any pathos or affect—external to his nature and is incapable of experiencing shifting emotions within himself." David Bentley Hart, "No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility," *ProEccl* 11, no. 2 (2002): 185.

[4] Hart, "No Shadow," 188.

[5] "The epithet 'static,' which suits Being, has become distinctly pejorative. Dynamically to be on the move now holds supreme value." Henri Blocher, "Divine Immutability," in *The Power and Weakness of God: Impassibility and Orthodoxy*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron, Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology Special Study 4 (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990), 1.

[6] Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God: Divine Suffering in Contemporary Protestant Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 7. See also Hart, "No Shadow," 185; McCall, *Forsaken*, 65.

[7] It is probably important to see these developments in their contexts: the postwar era was characterised by revolutionary concerns and actions, fights against dictators, colonialism, imperialism and also a strong anti-patriarchal stance, thus the aspirations for change in many areas, philosophical as well as pragmatic ones.

The duration of the unsettled debate shows that no real consensus has been reached, even amongst Bible-believing theologians. The problem is the amount of speculation which is required in order to make up one's mind.[8] Despite this, the "suffering of God" in the predicate formulation has become what Goetz calls a "new orthodoxy" and he has identified several historical factors for the arising of the passibilist position.[9]

In most cases, the starting point from a biblical theological perspective[10] is the Old Testament, which reveals God *as he really is* before the Incarnation. However, this revelation does not contradict the Incarnation and one has to account for the many passages attesting for emotions in God, already before Christ displayed them. Either one dismisses them as pure anthropomorphisms or interprets them as fully revelatory of God's essence.[11] As Fretheim puts it, "God is not indifferent to what has happened to the people. God does not view Israel's fate with kind of detached objectivity. God is not an executioner who can walk away from the judgment exacted, thinking: 'I only did my duty.'"[12]

Consequently, most of the passibilist literature ascribes the alleged disappearing of the passibilist option to the Church Fathers.[13] According

[8] "One emphasis … is the Calvinist nervousness about any metaphysical 'speculation' that takes us beyond what is clearly stated in Scripture." Richard J. Mouw, *The Suffering and Victorious Christ: Toward a More Compassionate Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 46.

[9] "They are (1) the decline of Christendom; (2) the rise of democratic aspirations; (3) the problem of suffering and evil, both as it relates to the scientific understanding of natural history and as it relates to the peculiar impact of suffering and evil on the modern consciousness; and (4) the scholarly critical reappraisal of the Bible in the light of all of the above." Ronald Goetz, "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," *The Christian Century* 103 no. 13 (1986): 386.

[10] As opposed to more philosophical theological.

[11] The debate is vast as the following exemplary quote shows: "To speak of God in anthropomorphic terms, as *the Bible* does, is to speak of him correctly and reliably." Adrio König, "The Idea of 'The Crucified God': Some Systematic Questions," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 39 (1982): 57.

[12] Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 136. Weinandy, who makes a strong case for divine impassibility wilfully concedes this: "God revealed himself in the Old Testament as a living personal God who acted in time and history, and thus a God who can be experienced by human beings. he was intimately involved in the affairs of the Hebrew people." Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?: The Mystery of God's Love* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 6.

[13] Gavrilyuk summarizes as follows: "The allegedly biblical vision of an emotional and suffering God is then taken as a norm by which the whole development of patristic theology is judged." Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible*

to those theologians, the Greek Fathers had been heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and thus corrupted the biblical God into an apathetic, unmoved and impassible God. Despite the widespread character of this approach, other theologians, especially Gavrilyuk aptly demonstrate how "extremely misleading"[14] such a reading of the patristic sources is. It would largely exceed the scope of this present paper to present Gavrilyuk's reading in detail. Two arguments will be mentioned however. First, there is the fact that Greek philosophers showed a great diversity in their conceptions of gods.[15] It would therefore be irresponsible to assert a commonly held view of distant and uninvolved gods in the ancient pantheon.[16] Second, there is the strong emphasis in the patristic writings of the Incarnation, which was problematic for nearly all Greek philosophers. That is why the Fathers had to provide a strong argument for the Incarnation *against* commonly held conceptions of the gods.[17] Consequently, "[t]he Theory of Theology's Fall into Hellenistic Philosophy must be once and for all buried

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God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21. See also his broad review of the main theological writers holding these views, Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 176–179.

[14] Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 35.

[15] Although very diverse, they nevertheless were often in heavy contrasts with the God of the Hebrew people. As König puts it, "In fact, the Greek philosophers' violent rejection of any anthropomorphic references to God stems partly from the objectionable way in which the Greek myths anthropomorphised the gods. They portrayed the gods as *sinful* men who lied, stole, indulged in immorality, battles, murder, etc. One cannot speak of God in such terms." König, "The Idea of 'the Crucified God,'" 57. Many nuances could be made regarding the different branches of Greek philosophy but those remarks should suffice for the scope of this paper.

[16] Gavrilyuk, who appears to be a rare theologian having studied thoroughly the patristic sources with a view of asserting their appraisal of the Greek philosophy shifts the perspectives and transfers the burden of proof to the critiques of the Fathers: "As a minimum, the Fathers' adoption of impassibility involved a choice between these and several other options including the overly passionate gods of the Homeric pantheon and mystery cults. More importantly, the passibilist critic needs to establish that the Christian theologians borrowed impassibility from the pagan philosophers without quite baptising it." Paul L. Gavrilyuk, "God's Impassable Suffering in the Flesh: The Promise of Christology," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 136. Hart also mentions the diversity of conceptions around *apatheia* amongst the Greeks, see Hart, "No Shadow," 186.

[17] "The very fact that the Fathers quite self-consciously understood their argument for the God-befitting character of the incarnation to be directed against Hellenistic philosophers puts into question the assumption that the Fathers asserted divine impassibility simply as a result of their uncritical acceptance of the conceptuality

with honours, as one of the most enduring and illuminating mistakes among the interpretations of the development of Christian doctrine."[18] Despite this, as the current state of the discourse shows, the "theory" Gavrilyuk attempted to falsify remains robust, because it is true that some patristic writers indeed had difficulties dealing with Bible passages displaying passible traits of God. This is due, according to Castelo, not to the fathers' adoption of Greek philosophical patterns but to the translators of the Septuagint, who "flattened" the translation because of their preconceptions.[19] These preferences—or prejudices, according to passibilists—are often ascribed to the influence of Philo, who becomes the alleged flag-bearer of the textual and thus theological corruption of the biblical understanding.[20] Consequently, most of the theologians arguing for divine passibility assume the premise of the "theory" Gavrilyuk so aptly deconstructed as a starting point. This does not undermine all their argumentation, but from a purely historical point of view, weakens it.

God Is Essentially Passible Because of Love

For passibilists, love is the key to understanding the passibility and thus the suffering of God. Because God is a God of love, he literally "must" suffer in order to be trustworthy. In particular, the influential German theologian Jürgen Moltmann deduces his opinion that God must suffer essentially—that is, in his essence—because of his love and affirms the impossibility for God *not* to suffer: "A God who cannot suffer cannot love either. A God who cannot love is a dead God. he is poorer than any

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of Hellenistic theological thought." Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* 18.

[18] Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 46.

[19] "In looking at the way the Septuagint went about translating certain theopathic passages, a clear corruption took place …. The translators of the LXX could not accommodate this important part of the biblical testimony because they had decided *a priori* that God could not be described or understood in certain ways." Daniel Castelo, "A Crisis in God-Talk? The Bible and Theopathy," *Theology* 110 (2007): 411.

[20] While disagreeing with the most common assessment of the fathers' positions, Gavrilyuk nevertheless agrees to ascribe responsibilities to Philo as well: "Philo's approach is in harmony with the general tendency of the Greek translators towards the mitigation and elimination of anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms in the Hebrew text of the Bible." Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 46.

man or woman."[21] Strongly embedded in the "theology after Auschwitz," Moltmann argues that the deepest of human suffering encountered especially in the concentration camps has to account for a suffering God by arguing that "[t]o 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."[22] Consequently, Moltmann "comprend … l'identification de Dieu avec la victime. La réponse est pour lui la prédication du Dieu qui souffre avec nous (*sympatheticus*), ce qui est déjà le sens de son incarnation. Il s'agit de rejeter l'image classique, dénoncée comme « grecque », du Dieu immuable, impassible et tout-puissant."[23] As Blocher deduces from Moltmann, if God does not suffer, it would be hardly possible for him to be really incarnate and compassionate, unless the Incarnation loses all significance. Pollard takes the same stand, underlining that "To say that the Son of God, as divine, is impassible is to assert that the divine in Christ was unaffected by the human; and therefore that there is no real Incarnation, or if there is an Incarnation, it is meaningless."[24] Furthermore, it would be impossible to worship a god who would not suffer alongside suffering human beings and even more, assuming that God would not suffer somehow willingly would signify his incapacity to handle, eliminating his omnipotence.[25] However, it is exactly the notion of the omnipotence of God which is at stake in

[21] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 38.

[22] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 274. It must be noticed that Moltmann's dreadful introductory story of the hanging of a boy in Auschwitz relies on a twisted treatment of the actual facts: the story told did not happen in Auschwitz, neither did E. Wiesel make any statement about the suffering of God. Wiesel much more accounted for his personal loss of faith in a loving God on that very day. See especially Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 3; and also Henri Blocher, "Approches théologiques de la Shoah," *Théologie Évangélique* 6, no. 3 (2007): 177.

[23] Blocher, "Approches théologiques de la Shoah," 177. ET: "[Moltmann] understands … the identification of God with the sufferer. For him, the answer is to preach that God suffers along with us (*sympatheticus*), which is the whole point of his incarnation. Moltmann rejects the classical image of an immutable, impassible and all-powerful God, which he criticises as 'Greek.'"

[24] T.E. Pollard, "The Impassibility of God," *SJT* 8 (1955): 363.

[25] He thus states very violently: "The suffering of a single innocent child is an irrefutable rebuttal of the notion of the almighty and kindly God in heaven. For a God who lets the innocent suffer and who permits senseless death is not worthy to be called God at all." Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 47.

Moltmann's view. Humans could not relate to an almighty omnipotent God who would not endure suffering, because such a God could only be feared and not loved.[26]

Moltmann further articulates his reflections on the nature of God's love. If it is not a distant, *apathic* love, it is a self-giving love. God chooses deliberately to be touched by the suffering of his creatures, having decided to be somewhat influenced in his own being.[27] This mainly occurs in what Moltmann calls "the event of the Cross," that is, in the crucifixion, where God "has acted in himself and has gone on to suffer in himself. Here he himself is love with all his being."[28] Moltmann is not the only one to have articulated this. From the revelation of God in Christ, Sarot deduces the essential character of God's passibility in a succinct manner: "Now if Christ is the ultimate revelation of God, and his life was a life of suffering, what is more natural than to conclude that God's life is a life of suffering, and that this is one of the things Christ has revealed to us?"[29]

For Fretheim, the fact that God suffers has to be linked with his strong identification with his prophets. Since God speaks through them—in this case, in the Old Testament—and they were often rejected, God would have "internalized the people's rejection"[30] and suffered accordingly, because he so loves his people.

Further, Sarot eloquently argues that because of the fact that Jesus' suffering is widely demonstrated in the Gospels—provided one does not

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[26] Moltmann's strong assessment deserves a lengthy quotation here: "Finally, a God who is only omnipotent is in himself an incomplete being, for he cannot experience helplessness and powerlessness. Omnipotence can indeed be longed for and worshipped by helpless men, but omnipotence is never loved; it is only feared. What sort of being, then, would be a God who was only 'almighty'? he would be a being without experience, a being without destiny and a being who is loved by no one." Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 223. The political coloration of this reasoning is obvious, see 7 above.

[27] Moltmann again needs to be quoted at length for this point: "But there are other forms of suffering between unwilling suffering as a result of an alien cause and being essentially unable to suffer, namely active suffering, the suffering of love, in which one voluntarily opens himself to the possibility of being affected by another. There is unwilling suffering, there is accepted suffering and there is the suffering of love. Were God incapable of suffering in any respect, and therefore in an absolute sense, then he would also be incapable of love." Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 230.

[28] Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 205.

[29] Marcel Sarot, "Suffering of Christ, Suffering of God?," *Theology* 95 (1992): 116. Stott also shares this opinion, see John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 331.

[30] Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 143.

read them from a docetist stand—theologians have to account for the suffering of the Logos incarnate. Consequently, Jesus being not only God's anointed messenger but God himself,[31] his suffering *a fortiori* would occasion God's suffering.[32] However, at least one question remains unsettled: how far does it make sense for God to suffer in himself "only" because humans also suffer? What would be the benefits for people to know their God also suffers but without any purpose?

Moving onwards from what precedes, it is relatively straightforward to explain what happens on the cross as follows: because Christ is *both* divine and human, since he obviously suffered on the cross, one can affirm that the Father suffers also.[33] In fact, it is exactly what *theopaschitism* affirms after the fifth council of 553.[34] Consequently, "it allows us to say that the human nature of Jesus suffered, that the Second Person of the Trinity suffered, that the Logos incarnate suffered, but *not* that the divine nature of Jesus suffered."[35] To avoid a separation of the Trinity and thus of the essence of the divinity, the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* was formulated as follows: "According to this doctrine the hypostatical union of the human and the divine nature in the Person of Christ is such that the attributes of both natures can be truly ascribed to this one Person."[36] Proponents of the passibilist option therefore argue

[31] In this construction, God is characterised as being ontologically passible: "[T]he divine pathos expressed is constitutive to the 'divine self'—the marker of the construction of God's character." Barbara M. Leung Lai, "Hearing God's Bitter Cries (Hosea 11:1–9): Reading, Emotive-Experiencing, Appropriation," *HBT* 26, no. 1 (2004): 40. The incarnate Son therefore has to be.

[32] Cf. the argument for the Old Testament prophets: "Because of the close relationship of prophet and God, God suffers the effects of such an action. In any case, the reference is almost certainly to divine suffering in some sense." Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 146.

[33] "[I]f we opt for accepting the conclusion that the Father is passible, we therewith leave behind us the problem of how the impassible Logos may have suffered during the incarnation." Sarot, "Suffering of Christ, Suffering of God?": 118. Weinandy also accounts for this trend of reasoning—although not agreeing with it: "God must be passible for he must not only be in the midst of human suffering, but he himself must also share in and partake of human suffering. Succinctly, God is passible because God must suffer." Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 2. In what way would the Father suffer the event of the Cross in relationship with the Son is a complex issue treated at length by Moltmann in several of his works, see for example Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* and also; Moltmann, *The Crucified God*.

[34] Cf. Sarot, "Suffering of Christ, Suffering of God?," 114.

[35] Sarot, "Suffering of Christ, Suffering of God?," 114.

[36] Sarot, "Suffering of Christ, Suffering of God?," 114.

that the case is settled and that what can be "observed" and predicated of the Son is consequently also predicated of the Father.

God is Essentially Impassible Because of his Holy Love

The next position which shall be examined, however, argues that this reasoning is too simplistic and that if one is to retain wholly God's otherness, it must be stated that God indeed suffers, but his passibility is "located" in the *ordo relationis*, in relation to mankind.

One important clarification has to be made here: there is no need in the Godhead to change in any way. If one wants to stick to the orthodox view of the perfection of God, it must be assumed that a change in the Godhead could only be an experiential adding and by no means the filling of any essential lack.[37] Despite the fact suffering can teach humans, it cannot do the same for God, as Weinandy notices:[38] "The Christological tradition, inherited from the Fathers and the Scholastics, held that the Son of God did suffer, but *as man and not as God*. As God, the Son remained impassible, but as man he was passible."[39]

The problem posed by the application of the *communicatio idiomatum* which has been mentioned above is that it was not traditionally understood as applying from the concrete humanity of Christ to the abstraction of the divinity.[40] Therefore, because the Son is both human and divine, "The

[37] "The Incarnation does not involve the changing, mixing, or confusing of natures (as in the soul-body model), but rather the person of the Word taking on a new mode or manner of existence, that is, as man. There is a change or newness in the mode of the existence of the Son, though not a change or newness within the natures. The Son now newly exists as man." Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 197.

[38] Brasnett summarizes it very aptly: "We must draw a very clear distinction between the significance of suffering for God and its significance for man. For God himself suffering can accomplish nothing; he is perfection, he cannot be improved, or disciplined or strengthened by suffering. Pain for God himself must always be an insensate stupid thing, effecting nothing and meaning nothing. It is in its utter lack of significance for the divine character that the irrational quality of pain is most clearly seen." Bertrand R. Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*. (London: SPCK, 1928), 77. Quoted in Kenneth J. Woollcombe, "The Pain of God," *SJT* 20 (1967): 140.

[39] Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 15.

[40] "The divine *nature* does not share in the attributes of the human nature, and vice versa, and one cannot say that the divine *nature* has suffered. In other words, the flesh of Christ is the *medium passionis:* it is only by his union with the flesh that the divine Logos, though his nature remains impassible, can suffer." Sarot, "Suffering of Christ, Suffering of God?," 115.

cross is the *locus* where we witness God's deepest humiliation in his Son, where we see God's "suffering" love in which God is most Godlike."[41] The suffering, which is proper to humanity[42] is now communicated to the divinity.[43] He participates in what is alien to himself, though this participation is assumed and not essential.[44] One has to answer the question however: why would God suffer if it is alien to him and he does not need to add anything to his own experience?

If God is willing to suffer, it is because of the depth of his love for his creatures, as a predicate of his salvific relationship to mankind and not as an essential part of himself;[45] and this salvific relationship is best displayed

[41] Dennis Ngien, *The Suffering of God according to Martin Luther's "Theologia Crucis"* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2005), 111.

[42] This is essentially true. However, for the sake of precision, it must be added that even the most passionate passibilists do not argue for any kind of physical suffering of the Father: "Physical suffering, therefore, is out of the question when we are thinking of God …. It is when the moral nature of God is considered that differences of opinion arise." Edward Burnley, "The Impassibility of God," *ExpTim* 67, no. 3 (1955): 91.

[43] "[T]he attributes were predicated not of the natures, but of the person, for the Incarnation is not the compositional union of natures but the person of the Son taking on a new manner or mode of existence." Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 200.

[44] "God's capacity to become incarnate is not the ability to realize or fulfill himself or his nature, to replicate, extend, or enact what he already is or has decided to be, but just the opposite: the capacity—the power—to accept as his own what is contrary to his nature and does not belong to him as God." Bruce D. Marshall, "The Dereliction of Christ and The Impassibility of God," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 298.

[45] In this respect, Luther's explanations as summarised by Ngien deserve a lengthy quotation: "Christ is the gift of God's love, and in this God gives himself in order to redeem us. Deity is revealed in the greatest lowliness and humility. The key to the divine nature is to be recognized precisely in Christ's obedience unto death, the atonement which he achieved for us through the 'happy exchange' *(admirabile commercium)* in which Christ, our 'lover,' wilfully 'took upon himself our sinful person and gave unto us his innocent and victorious person, wherewith we being clothed, are free from the cruse of the law.' The story of Jesus Christ is the story of how deeply God himself is implicated in our world. God in Christ has entered the sphere of his counterpart, our humanity, and therefore has entered the area of God-forsakenness, condemnation, contradiction, suffering and death. By so doing, God reveals his real nature, his true deity as self-giving. 'God is most himself' in the lowliness of the cross, not in power and majesty." Ngien, *The Suffering of God*, 113.

in the Incarnation, which only changed God imputatively.[46] Provided one understands clearly that the suffering of God is only the consequence of him being willing to become incarnate and to atone for our sins,[47] the pastoral implications are wide and provide a powerful example. Jesus undergoes "the deepest agonies of the human condition"[48] and thus "demonstrate[s] that even under the most difficult of circumstances he did not fall into sin—only in doing so could he win the victory over sin and death."[49] Eventually however, "sin and suffering only form one cluster of mysteries that grip human beings to their very core as they search to understand themselves and their surrounding world."[50]

Whereas love is then the ontological character of God, suffering cannot be, otherwise mankind would worship an ever-complaining God. Because most of the time love involves suffering *in the context of relationship*, God assumes pain and suffering *in the context of his relationship with us*, in *concreto*: "God suffers on account of the flesh he assumes, and not on account of what makes him God, or his divine nature."[51] This is most blatantly shown in the context of suffering and death because those experiences are the definitive human experience. Consequently, if God really becomes incarnate, he *must* endure suffering and death:[52] However, it is of utmost importance to precise that this "must" is only a consequence

[46] Turretin captures it well: "God was not changed by the incarnation; the Word (logos) was made flesh, not by a conversion of the Word (*tau logou*) into flesh, but by an assumption of the flesh to the hypostasis of the Word (*logou*)." Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992), 205.

[47] Ngien densely states it in the following way: "The crucified Christ in history reveals God in that he discloses the depth of God's love in history, that is, in the suffering of the cross for atonement. God reveals himself in his alien work of suffering as an outflow and expression of God's self-sacrificial love which is ontologically constitutive of God's divine being, Christ thereby unveils historically that which is ontologically true of God's being as love. The love of God thus forms the aetiology of Luther's atonement, creating through the act of the incarnate Christ *sub contraria* 'the object of his love' as the teleology of his atonement." Ngien, *The Suffering of God*, 106.

[48] Mouw, *The Suffering and Victorious Christ*, 48.

[49] Mouw, *The Suffering and Victorious Christ*. See also, p. 56.

[50] Daniel Castelo, *The Apathetic God: Exploring the Contemporary Relevance of Divine Impassibility* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 136.

[51] Marshall, "The Dereliction of Christ and The Impassibility of God," 297.

[52] "Now if it is truly the Son of God who exists as man and, as man, dies on the cross, then it must be the Son of God who experiences all that human life entails and, most importantly, he must experience suffering and even death itself." Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 15.

of God's ordained power and *not* of any constraint which would be acted upon himself by any other power to which God would have to submit.[53] This would be totally inacceptable of an all-powerful creator God. This all-powerful character of God is closely linked to his freedom. If God was acted upon or had to submit himself to contingencies or worse, were subjected to creaturely passions, thus blurring the distinction between creature and Creator,[54] he would not be free to love,[55] neither would he be free at all. However, the freedom of God is an essential requirement for his salvific relationship to us, as Hart, synthesising the Fathers, points out:

> It is a patristic commonplace, which one could illustrate copiously from Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Maximus, and many others, that the true freedom of the rational creature is a freedom from all the encumbrances of sin that prevent us from enjoying the full fruition of our nature, which is the image and likeness of God; when sin is removed, when we are restored to the condition in which God called us from nothingness, our entire being is nothing but an insatiable longing for and delight in God, a natural and irresistible eros for the divine beauty.[56]

Having said this, it should have become clearer that the ontological character of the love of God does not compel in any manner to deduce an

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[53] Furthermore, it should be underlined that God's soteriological way is strongly paradoxical to natural human understanding of how God "should" act: "The belief that an omnipotent, immutable, and impassible God took upon himself powerless, conditioned, and suffering humanity implies that God's power has been revealed in human weakness, not for God's sake but for the redemption of suffering humanity itself." Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, 137.

[54] Summarising Luther's position on this aspect, Ngien states: "It is God's glory to give, to act, and to love freely. The immutability of God's freedom must be affirmed alongside of the passibility of God's love in order to avoid attributing to God creaturely passion." Ngien, *The Suffering of God*, 110.

[55] "Precisely because God is the sovereign, non-correlative, self-sufficient and self-contained God above the universe, he is *free* to love." Blocher, "Divine Immutability," 21. Cf. "Moltmann conceives the self-communication love of God in a sense that implies the denial of the divine freedom. By insisting that God is necessitated to create because self-communication is intrinsic to his nature, Moltmann gives the impression that creativity is a compulsory act for God, indispensable for the fulfilment of his inner-Trinitarian life." Amuluche Gregory Nnamani, *The Paradox of a Suffering God: On the Classical, Modern-Western, and Third World Struggles to Harmonise the Incompatible Attributes of the Trinitarian God* (New York: Lang, 1995), 181.

[56] Hart, "No Shadow," 196.

ontological character of the suffering of God. In fact, as Hart continues, "to call this infinite act of love *apatheia,* then, is to affirm its plenitude and its transcendence of every evil, every interval of sin, every finite rupture, disappointment of longing, shadow of sadness, or failure of love—in short, every pathos."[57] It is exactly here that most of the weaknesses from the passibilist option come to surface: one cannot "simply" deduce from the ontological character of God's love an identification with love as humans experience it. The pathetic love of humans is very different from God's all-perfect love, as McCall aptly summarises: "Perfect love, rather than being incompatible with impassibility, *demands* impassibility. Love that is passible fluctuates. Love that is passible gets caught up in the 'heat of the moment.' Love that is passible is subject to greater and lesser degrees of intensity. Love that is passible could, then, strengthen or weaken."[58]

It is maybe one of the first *differentiae specificae* of the God of Israel to have a steadfast love and not experience whims which consequently would affect his people.[59] If the Christian God is the loving and caring God of Israel, characterised by his *hesed,* his love is nevertheless holy as God's nature is, and consequently very different from human love which depends on many outside influences.[60] In order to redeem suffering, God does not need to suffer *essentially*. In his omnipotence, he "only" needs—because he chooses that way for our redemption—to assume suffering and thus, death:

> On the one hand, they [the traditional advocates of divine impassibility] insist that "the unassumed is the unhealed." On the other hand, though, they also insist that what is assumed must be assumed by someone able to rescue it! In other words, they argue, salvation hinges on impassibility. So what if we have a fellow sufferer who is entrapped in our predicament? How is that really good news? What we need is someone who joins himself to our humanity, and to our condition, but who is not affected by it and ensnared by and overcome by it as we are. In other words, we actually need a Savior who is impassible.[61]

[57] Hart, "No Shadow," 199.
[58] McCall, *Forsaken*, 70.
[59] "To affirm impassibility, then, precisely denies that any of these things are true of God. Impassibility thus means that God's love is *absolutely* steadfast and perfect. If it could weaken or wane, then God's love would not be absolutely steadfast and perfect. If it could weaken or wane, then God would be caught up in the same vortex of passion that surrounds and encompasses us." McCall, *Forsaken*, 70.
[60] See McCall, *Forsaken*, 70.
[61] McCall, *Forsaken*, 69.

The problem with the argument that God is love and therefore *must* suffer because love *essentially* entails suffering, is that the reasoning proceeds more from human experiential knowledge and understanding of what love is than from what love is revealed to be like, either in the Old Testament or in the Incarnation. It could be argued that all the suffering occasioned by love is not neutral but actually ensues from sin and thus evil.[62] Therefore, it is more than disputable to ascribe this suffering to God, who is by definition perfect and does not have any share with evil.[63] On the contrary: it is less the love of God which causes him to suffer—always *in concreto*—than the sin of human beings.[64] From what precedes it shall not be concluded that God does not suffer at all[65] but that his suffering cannot be deduced from any necessity, but only from his disposition, his willingness to suffer and what is more, the freedom he grants to his creatures to offend him with their sin.

If God really was somewhat compelled to suffer, he would be inconsistent. Although many theologians argue with Bauckham that "only the suffering God can help,"[66] one can wonder where the important distinction between God and man has disappeared. It is true that the very idea of a God who is able to understand human suffering as appears to be evident from Hebrews 4:15 is comforting for people enduring suffering. However, if this understanding and knowledge that God has of suffering

[62] A close reading of 1 Cor 13 shows that all the negative descriptors of love can be traced back to sin.

[63] As Hart states it, "a God who can by nature experience finite affects and so be determined by them is a God whose identity is established through a commerce with evil; if the nature of God's love can be in any sense positively shaped by sin, suffering, and death, then sin, suffering, and death will always be in some sense features of who he is." Hart, "No Shadow," 191.

[64] It would be beyond the scope of the present paper to address the whole question of theodicy, but a small remark must be made: even the suffering of "innocent" people—one thinks of concentration camps, gulags and wars but also earthquakes and other natural catastrophe—is ultimately a consequence of sin: either in a direct sense or as a consequence of the original sin which submitted Creation to futility and the bondage of corruption (Rom 8:20–23).

[65] "There is an infinite conceptual difference between the claim that (1) God does not change with respect to his goodness or righteousness (which was the Biblical view of the perfection and unchangeableness of God) and the claim that (2) God does not change in any conceivable respect whatsoever (which was the Greek view of the nature of divine perfection)." Rem B. Edwards, "The Pagan Dogma of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God," *RelS* 14, no. 3 (1978): 306.

[66] Richard Bauckham, "'Only the Suffering God Can help.' Divine Passibility in Modern Theology," *Them* 9 (1984): 6–12.

does not surpass, in fact transcend human suffering, there is not much hope for mankind. Indeed, if God suffers the same suffering, that is endures the same suffering as man, it undermines his very omnipotence. In this case, one could argue that even if God chooses to be open to suffering, it simply cannot be in the same fashion as man endures suffering. Thus, a strong distinction must be made between God's suffering and man's suffering. The impassibility of God has to be qualified, unless one risks not to render justice to much biblical data, especially in the Old Testament. There is a difference between arguing that God never changes—what suffering in a human common sense would imply—in any respect or that he may indeed change in some respect which needs further specification.

Conclusion: Only an Impassible Suffering God Can Help

Eventually, the question of the suffering of God is linked to the question of suffering as such. Although this paper does not aim at treating comprehensively the question of theodicy, some points must be made. Reading many of the passibilist writings, one wonders the role, place, and even value suffering has in life, both in human life and in God's life. Whereas implicitly all writers affirm the negative character of suffering, the question remains why God should suffer, provided suffering would be non-existent in a perfect world and therefore, in God. Consequently, if suffering really is a consequence of sin resulting from the original sin, it is arguable that suffering not only has to be understood and even shared but has to be *redeemed*.[67] In the long run, the question suffering people have to ask is whether God *really can* help them. That is why locating suffering in the essence of God and not "only" in the Incarnation of the Logos and thus in the relationship of God with us poses more problems than it solves,[68] because it undermines God's power eventually to save, either here below or in the *eschaton*. As Goetz puts it, "any concept of a

[67] Castelo astutely makes this point: "As one who voluntarily took the human condition upon himself, moving from impassibility to passibility, the Son suffered willingly and truthfully for the purpose of redeeming the created and yet fallen order so that believers may be joined with him in his divine impassibility signaled by the resurrection. In this depiction, suffering is not inherent to the human condition as originally intended but something foreign and troublesome that needs nothing less than vanquishment." Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, 133.

[68] "Clearly one of the primary reasons theologians have been drawn to the idea of a suffering God is that such an idea appears to help resolve the problem of evil. But in fact, appeals to God's suffering only shift the ground on which the problem of evil is discussed." Goetz, "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," 388.

limited deity finally entails a denial of the capacity of God to redeem the world and thus, ironically, raises the question of whether God is in the last analysis even love, at least love in the Christian sense of the term."[69] Traditionally, Christians have trusted in a wholly transcendent God who is in charge of the world and supersedes it.[70] A suffering God who would not only be willing to suffer with us but also would not be able to avoid suffering, could not be the God of history who is the final warrant of justice,[71] and thus undermines hope. It is thus preferable to argue with Woollcombe that "there would seem to be strong grounds for saying that the comfort which we receive from God derives from the fact that, although he understands, he does *not* share our pain."[72]

Where are we to go from here? The problem is not fully solved, since every reader still has to struggle with the biblical text. As this paper has shown, most of the proponents of either camp assume or infer biblical accounts more than they really quote them in order to make their points. As Castelo wisely remarks, "after all, the language of (im)passibility is alien to the biblical witness, and so deference to this testimony's voice should be granted. As a point of fact, the Bible maintains a multivalent account of God and pathic speech, and no need appears within the canon to reconcile what appear to contemporary observers as disparate positions."[73]

Although Heschel's view was that of the essentially passible God, his rephrasing of Isaiah's well-known verse offers a very good conclusion to the considerations of this paper. Underlining the difficulty of approaching such a big paradox as the *suffering of the impassible God*,[74] the

[69] Goetz, "The Suffering God," 388.

[70] "In that God the Father did not abandon Christ, Christians have the hope that they are not abandoned in their trials." Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, 140.

[71] Weinandy astutely summarises this: "God's historical actions are to free humankind from sin and evil, and thus from the suffering that accompanies them and, simultaneously, to establish, by these same actions, a new or deeper relationship with him as he is, as the wholly other transcendent and all-loving God. If God existed as a member of the same ontological order as everything else, he too would be infected by the evil that resides within that order, would experience the suffering produced by it, and thus would also need to be freed from it." Thomas G. Weinandy, "God and Human Suffering: his Act of Creation and his Acts in history," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 111.

[72] Woollcombe, "The Pain of God," 143.

[73] Castelo, "A Crisis in God-Talk?," 412.

[74] And with this notice, it seems that the mystery of the Incarnation, of the divine suffering, of salvation and atonement is preserved alongside the tradition and not subjected to the contemporary (existentialist?) agenda: "To say, in accordance with

fundamental discrepancy between the Lord and mankind must be kept, "For My pathos is not your pathos, neither are your ways My ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My pathos than your pathos."[75]

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Cyril and the Christian tradition, that 'the Impassible suffers' is not, then, to be incoherent, but to state the very heart of the incarnational mystery." Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 202–203.

[75] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), 276.