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'The Most Moved Mover': Abraham Heschel's Theology of Divine Pathos in response to the 'Unmoved Mover' of Traditional Theism

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Born in Warsaw, Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-72) was educated thoroughly in Bible and Jewish writings. He suffered through the Holocaust as a victim, and was later compelled to emigrate to the United States because of German persecution. In his Berlin doctoral dissertation on prophetic consciousness, *The Prophets* (1937), he wrote very passionately against the traditional theistic conceptions of God, specifically that of divine impassibility. Jewish and Christian theologians, according to him, have traditionally assumed divine impassibility as 'the fundamental principle' in their doctrine of God.[1] The notion of divine impassibility, however, is more philo-

[1] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 254.

sophical than biblical.[2] 'If God is a being of absolute self-sufficiency, then the entire world outside Him can in no way be relevant to Him.'[3] This abstract God stands 'aloof from the affairs of man', existing in transcendent calm and having no contact with a world external to himself. The deity is thus an apathetic God, the Wholly Other, distant, shrouded in his unfathomable darkness, and is essentially irrelevant and unrelated to humanity. However, in the prophetic corpus of the Hebrew Bible, the question of 'divine pathos', which Heschel understood as the divine relatedness to humanity, is paramount. 'The supreme issue', he argued, 'is not the question whether in the infinite darkness there is the ground of being which is an object of man's ultimate concern, but whether the reality of God confronts us with a pathos.'[4] The nearness of God permeates the Hebrew Bible. It is precisely in divine pathos that God and humanity meet, and that the chasm between them is overcome.

The purpose of this essay is to expound Heschel's theology of divine pathos and defend it against the idea of divine impassibility, accentuating it as 'a more plausible view of ultimate reality'.[5] I shall first examine the basis of theology's rejection of the suffering God, and then explore Heschel's doctrine of divine pathos, showing that the God of Israel is not the 'Unmoved Mover' of traditional theism, but rather in Fritz Rothschild's salient description, 'the Most Moved Mover'.[6] The God, whom the prophets face is a God of compassion, a God of concern and involvement, and One who is most moved by the actions and fate of humanity. This will finally be explored in the various strata of the Old Testament, with special attention to certain specific theological perspectives within the canon. After presenting the biblical basis Heschel uses to advance his position, I will conclude with a discussion on the contemporary relevance of his concept of divine pathos for Christian life and ministry.

I The Greek Doctrine of Divine Impassibility (*apatheia*)

Christianity's embrace of impassibility stemmed from two Greek metaphysical concepts: apathy (*apatheia*)

[2] See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) and his *History and the Triune God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroads, 1992). While writing his noteworthy book *The Crucified God*, Moltmann observed that Jewish writers had already been discussing the theme of God's suffering (p. 267). In *History and the Triune God*, he acknowledged the impact the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel had had upon his theological understanding of the suffering God: 'My first discovery was the Jewish concept of the pathos of God with which Abraham Heschel has interpreted the message of the *Shekinah*, the indwelling of God in the persecuted and suffering people of God…' (p. 172). See also John Jaeger, 'Abraham Heschel and The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann,' *Perspectives on Religious Studies* 24 (1997), pp. 167-178, where he focused on the apparent parallels between Heschel and Moltmann.

[3] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 232.

[4] Abraham Heschel, 'The Jewish Notion of God and Christian Renewal, '*Renewal of Religious Thought*, Vol. I of Theology of Renewal, ed. by L.K. Shook (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p. 107. Also cited in Merkle, 'Heschel's Theology of Divine Pathos,' p. 74.

[5] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 247.

[6] Fritz A. Rothschild, ed., *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism from the Writings of Abraham J. Heschel*, rev.ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1975) pp. 25 & 89.

and sufficiency (*autarkeia*).[7] Apathy denotes incapacity of experiencing passion or feeling. For Aristotle, that which characterizes God's nature is immateriality and pure reason. This immaterial God of pure reason is insensitive to passion or feeling. To experience passion means to be acted upon from without. Aristotle therefore assumes God to be, by nature, apathetic. Divine apathy similarly undergirds the Christian denial of divine passibility. Divine sufficiency also reinforces the Greek conviction that no external agent affects or moves God. Furthermore, Aristotle's self-sufficient God lacks or needs nothing. 'Satisfying conditions of insufficiency requires that some being affect or move the individual who experiences deficiency.'[8] Furthermore, Aristotle's God is a completely actual God, and thus has no potential for change. Aristotle excluded his self-sufficient God from movement, and he thus understood God's nature as immutable.

Aquinas, following the Aristotelian tradition, saw potentiality as a kind of imperfection. Any potentiality in God's being would detract him from his perfection. God is pure act. While God can act, he cannot be acted upon; God moves us, while remaining unmoved. God is the 'Unmoved Mover', 'the first cause of all things'.[9]

The attributes of immutability and impassibility are closely related, but not equivalent. Immutability suggests that God does not change in any way, even from within, while impassibility suggests the impossibility of God being affected by any other realities, even in the emotional sense. Because the Greeks pursued pure reason as a human ideal, they did not evaluate emotions positively. The Stoic Zeno, for one, regarded emotions as 'diseases of the soul', irrational experiences by which the mind is passively swayed, resulting in sin and suffering.[10] Emotions ought to be subject to the rational mind, thus safeguarding its undisturbed rational operation. God's love for the world is to be understood not as a feeling, or a relationship in which he can be affected by what he loves, but as merely his benevolent attitude. The human ideal of apathy governs the way in which both Greek philosophy and Christian theology influenced by it conceive of God. What is disapproved of in humanity cannot be attributed to God. Therefore suffering and passion, which are characteristic of humans, are both inapplicable to the nature of a God who never becomes, but eternally is.

In theism, accepting any one of the attributes mentioned above logically or necessarily implies accepting the entire package.[11] Governed by this basic assertion, the divine impassibility is closely linked with other aspects of the Greek understanding of God.

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[7] John Russell, 'Impassibility and Pathos in Barth's Idea of God', *Anglican Theological Review* LXX (1988), p. 222. See also Francis House, 'The Barrier of Impassibility', Theology 83 (1980) 410-411; Colin Grant, 'Possibilities for Divine Passibility', *Toronto Journal of Theology* 4 (1988). pp. 6-8; T. E. Pollard, 'The Impassibility of God', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8 (1955), pp. 353-364; Richard Bauckham, 'Only the Suffering God can help': divine passibility in modern theology', *Themelios* 9 (1984), p. 7.

[8] Ibid., p. 233

[9] *Summa Theologia* 1.13.5 in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2 volumes, trans. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), pp. 8-25.

[10] Marcel Sarot, 'Divine Suffering: Continuity and Discontinuity with the Tradition', *Anglican Theological Review* LXXVIII (1996), p. 226.

[11] See David Griffin, *God, and power and Evil: a Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 73. He identified at least eight logically connected attributes in the writings of Aquinas, which constitute 'the essential core of theism'.

Suffering is connected with time, change and matter, which are features of this material world of becoming. But God is eternal in the sense of atemporal. He is also, of course, incorporeal. He is absolute, fully actualized perfection, and therefore simply is eternally what he is. He cannot change because any change (even change which he wills rather than change imposed on him from outside) could change only for the worse. Since he is self-sufficient, he cannot be changed. Since he is perfect, he cannot change himself.[12]

The Greek understanding of divine 'unconditionedness' undergirded the concept of divine impassibility.[13] They argued that because God is unconditional, he must be incapable of suffering, for suffering is always caused by something. God is perfect, so he cannot suffer from some aspect of his being. If God were to suffer, he would have to suffer from or under an outside force. But that would make him contingent upon something outside of himself. God's benevolent will cannot be swayed by passions nor his eternal blissfulness be interrupted.

It was mainly the influence of Greek Metaphysics that prompted the early Christians to adopt the notion of divine impassibility.[14] Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Parmenides and the Stoics developed an understanding of God as the Absolute monad, self-sufficient, immutable, impassible and static. These categories, which continue through the patristic and medieval periods, have been assumed by early Christian theologians to describe God. More specifically, the idea of divine impassibility held its grip on what may or may not be said of the Christian God. It erected, as Moltmann noted, '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'.[15] The Fathers accepted the concept of divine impassibility, the notion that God cannot suffer since God stands outside the realm of human pain or sorrow. Philo, the Hellenistic Jewish theologian, had already assumed this in his understanding of Israel's God.[16] Virtually all the early church Fathers took it for granted, denying God any emotions because they

[12] Bauckham, "Only the Suffering God can help", pp. 7-8. See also R. B. Edwards, 'The Pagan Doctrine of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God', *Religious Studies* 14 (1978), pp. 305-313.

[13] Sarot, 'Divine Suffering', p. 226.

[14] For further studies on the influence of Greek ideas upon classical Christianity, see Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reeve, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 104-106; Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992), pp. 32-35; Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* (London: William and Norgate, 1892), pp 3-4; pp. 114-115; Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology', in *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol.2., trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), pp. 119-183.

[15] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 228

[16] Bauckham, "Only the Suffering God can help", p. 7.

would interrupt his tranquillity.[17] For instance, Gregory of Nazianzus, even though constrained by the Alexandrian Christology to ascribe the sufferings of Jesus to the Logos, could speak of God's suffering only by a paradox, that 'by the sufferings of Him who could not suffer, we were taken up and saved'.[18] This usually means that the Logos, though aware of the sufferings of his human nature, is untouched by them. The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) declared 'as vain babblings' the idea that the divinity could suffer, and it condemned those who believed it.[19] Jaroslav Pelikan goes so far as to maintain that divine impassiblity was 'a presupposition of all Christological doctrine.'[20] Like most theologians of Chalcedonian and earlier times, Calvin—and Reformed theology after him—assumed divine impassibility. The Westminster Confession of Faith explicitly asserted that God is 'without body, parts, or passions, immutable'.[21]

II Beyond Theism: Heschel's Theology of Divine Pathos

Heschel sought to emancipate the biblical understanding of God from the categories imposed on it by Greek philosophy. In order to move beyond theism's idea of divine *apatheia*, he developed from the Old Testament prophets a theology of divine pathos. He affirmed that divine pathos is 'the central idea in prophetic theology', and is 'the summary of Jewish theology'.[22] By pathos he meant God's passionate and intimate 'concern' for humanity, even to the point of being stirred and affected by human activity and conditions in which humanity dwells. He called this concern 'transitive concern'.[23] Divine pathos constitutes 'the unity of the eternal and the temporal.' 'It is the real basis of the relation between God and man, of the correlation of Creator and creation, of the dialogue of the Holy One of Israel and His people.'[24] Divine pathos referred to God's outward relationship with his people, to the 'situation' in which God involves himself in sharing the history of his people. The Hebrew Bible reveals a

[17] For further discussions of the early Church fathers on the impassibility-passibility debate, see John Mozley, *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926); Joseph Hallman, *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God: Divine Suffering in Contemporary Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985); Dennis Ngien, *The Suffering of God According to Martin Luther's 'Theologia Crucis'* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1995).

[18] *Theological Oration* 4:5 as cited in Pollard, 'The Impassibility of God', p. 359.

[19] J. Stevenson, *Creeds, Councils, and Controversies: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church A.D. 337-461* (London: SPCK, 1966), p. 336. Also quoted in William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 5.

[20] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 270-271.

[21] Westminster Confession of Faith, chap. 2, *Book of Confessions*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 6.011 as cited in Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, p. 6.

[22] Abraham Joshua Heschel, 'Teaching Jewish Theology in the Solomon Schecter Day School', *The Synagogue School* 28 (1969), pp. 4-33. See John C. Merkle, 'Heschel's Theology of Divine Pathos', in *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Exploring His Life and Thought*, ed. John. C. Merkle (New York: Macmillan/London: Collier Macmillan, 1985), p. 67.

[23] Abraham Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1951), p. 245.

[24] Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, p. 231.

God who earnestly desires fellowship with humanity. 'God's dream is not to be alone', but 'to have mankind as a partner in the drama of continuous creation.'[25] It is in this context that Heschel said that God 'needed' human beings.[26] Heschel explains this divine-human intimacy:

> To the prophet, . . . God does not reveal himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. He does not simply command and expect obedience; He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly . . . Quite obviously in the biblical view, man's deeds may move Him, affect Him, grieve Him or, on the other hand, gladden and please Him. This notion that God can be intimately affected, that He possesses not merely intelligence and will, but also pathos, basically defines the prophetic consciousness of God.[27]

Heschel recognized that the static idea of Greek deity is the outcome of two major presuppositions: 'the ontological notion of stability and the psychological view of the emotion as disturbances of the soul'.[28] He repudiated each of these strands of thought, seeing them as contrary to the 'Most moved mover' of Israel.

Pathos and Ontology

The Greeks assumed Parmenides' static view of ultimate reality, and this influenced their concept of God: 'according to Greek thinking, impassivity and immobility are characteristic of the divine.'[29] Any movement in God's being is illusory. Change is viewed as a sign of imperfection. God's true being is 'that which 'always is' and 'never becomes': it is 'ever immutably the same'.[30] Responding to the 'Eleatic' ontology of Parmenides and to theology influenced by it, Heschel wrote:

> The Eleatic premise that true being is unchangeable and that change implies imperfection is valid only in regard to being as reflected in the mind. Being in reality, being as we encounter it, implies movement. If we think of being as something beyond and detached from beings, we may well arrive at an Eleatic notion. An ontology, however, concerned with beings as involved in all beings or as the source of all beings, will find it impossible to separate being from action or movement, and thus postulate a dynamic concept of divine being… Biblical ontology does not separate being from doing. What *is*, acts. The God of Israel is a God who acts, a God of mighty deeds… Here the basic category is action rather than immobility. Movement, creation of natures, acts within history rather than absolute transcendence and detachment from the events of history, are the attributes of the Supreme Being.[31]

Divine pathos, said Heschel, is 'not a name for God's essence';[32] it is 'functional' rather than 'substantial'.[33] It belongs to the realm of God's relatedness.[34] His emphasis is on how God acts in relation to his creatures, not on how God may be in himself. 'The Bible does not say how He is (in Himself), but how he acts

[25] Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 119.
[26] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 235.
[27] Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 223-224.
[28] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 260.
[29] Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, p. 65
[30] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 261.
[31] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 261.
[32] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 231.
[33] Heschel, *The Prophets bid*.
[34] For further discussions of whether duality exists in Heschel's doctrine of God, see Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 111-112; Lawrence Perlman, *Abraham Heschel's Idea of Revelation* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), pp. 91-101; Eliezer Berkovits, 'Dr. A. J. Heschel's Theology of Pathos', *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 6 (1969), pp. 67-104, and *Major Themes in Modern Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Ktav, 1974), pp. 192-224; Merkle, 'Heschel's Theology of Divine Pathos', pp. 75-81.

(towards us).'[35] 'God in Himself, His Being, is a problem for metaphysics.'[36] Classical metaphysics speculates upon God's 'inmost' essence apart from God's pathos in history. For prophetic theology, being as an ontological category is to be apprehended in relation, not in essence. Heschel made a distinction between God's essence, into which one cannot pry, and God's pathos, in which God and humanity meet most intimately.

This distinction poses a limit for a proper discourse about God. God as he is in himself was not the God with whom we have to do because this God was not preached, not revealed, and not worshipped. God in essence, in his own nature and Supreme Majesty, is beyond us, and theology must observe this limit. He warned against any speculative incursion into God as he is in himself, but pointed us rather to God's functional relatedness to humanity where he is to be apprehended. Because God chose to be found in his outward relation with humanity, the prophets dwelled on 'a dynamic modality,' on the actual concrete relationship that God has towards them.[37]

The prophets did not discuss God 'as He is in Himself, as ultimate being'.[38] God in essence is 'above and beyond all revelation.'[39] 'God cannot be distilled to a well-defined idea. All concepts fail when applied to His essence.'[40] What God discloses is not his 'essence'. 'He communicates only His pathos, His will.'[41] Here Heschel's terminologies seemed to drive a wedge between God's 'inmost' essence and his 'outward' actions, pushing God into a realm from whence no revelation ever proceeds. Apparently Heschel failed at times to reach clarity in this area.[42] Despite this, he expressly affirmed that God's being is known through his acts: 'For of God we know only what He means and does in relation to man.' 'God as turned toward man' is known to the prophet.[43] God's being is known through his intentionality and his interaction with humanity. He firmly stated that the object of prophetic revelation is not God's impenetrable 'essence', but God's revealed 'pathos'. And yet it is really 'God Himself' who relates to humanity. This is in line with biblical ontology which does not drive a wedge between being and act. Speculative ontology based on pure being is thus given up in favour of biblical ontology.

The identity of God is inseparable from his operations. As Heschel put it, 'What is, acts.' God's being corresponds to God's acts. God's being is

[35] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 262.
[36] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 484.
[37] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 229.
[38] Abraham Heschel, 'Prophetic Inspiration: An Analysis of Prophetic Consciousness', *Judaism* 11 (Winter 1962), p. 7.
[39] Heschel, 'Prophetic Inspiration, p 7.
[40] Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, p.108.
[41] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 485.
[42] Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 484-485. 'It is improper', Heschel informed his readers, 'to employ the term "self-revelation" in regard to biblical prophecy.' He argues that 'God never reveals Himself'. Heschel did not like the term 'self-revelation;' he called it a revelation of divine pathos. Heschel's phraseology such as 'God never reveals himself' seems to push God to a realm from whence no revelation ever proceeds. Did he mean that there really is no direct revelation from God to humanity? And must we, on the other hand, understand him to say that this same God who is hidden in himself ('beyond and above all revelation') is also so wrapped up in history that we may speak of 'history in God', and of 'an event in the life of God'? Heschel would have rendered us a great service had he elaborated upon these questions.
[43] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 485.

found in his acts of pathos, in his covenantal participation and involvement with humanity. Who God is, is the result of what he does, and what he does, is to act lovingly towards the objects of divine concern. To put it in Heschel's terms, God's concern, not God's rule, motivates his activity. God is truly involved in the lives of humanity, to the extent that human acts truly affect his being. 'Whatever man does affects not only his own life, but also the life of God insofar as it is directed to man.'[44] In divine pathos the Almighty goes out of himself, and in the fellowship of his covenant with Israel, God becomes capable of suffering. Thus the prophets could speak of the 'history in God', and 'of an event in the life of God'.[45] Suffering action is taken up into God's very being.

Critics have argued that Heschel, for all his efforts to avoid describing God's essence, seems to have done just that.[46] 'God's participation in human history', he argued, 'finds its deepest expression in the fact that God can actually suffer.'[47] God is so thoroughly woven into history that he allows himself to suffer under it. This motivated Berkovits to argue that in spite of Heschel's reluctance to think of God's innermost essence, suffering, a function of God's concern, is thus carried into the life of God. Heschel's theology did not admit a duality of the impassible essence and suffering action in his doctrine of God. Berkovits explained: 'The life-giving significance of God's relatedness to the world is not in the act of relatedness but in the fact that it is God who relates himself to it. It is the very essence of God, God as he exists in his absoluteness and perfection, that determines the value of his care for man.'[48] Heschel informed us of this: 'For all the impenetrability of His being, He is concerned with the world and relates Himself to it.'[49] It is in divine pathos that the gulf between God and humanity is overcome.

Heschel's understanding of God as self-moving or as moved by concern for others inevitably separates him from the unmoved mover of theism. The divine pathos which the prophets expressed in many ways constituted 'the modes of His reaction to Israel's conduct which would change if Israel modified its ways'.[50] This does not mean that God in essence changes. Heschel clearly distinguishes between a changeless essence and a changing intentionality. Divine pathos is 'not a name for His essence'.

What is changed is the structure of divine pathos, not God's being. For fear of limiting God's sovereignty and freedom, Heschel refused to attribute God's passion to God's ultimate being. Divine pathos is 'not an essential attribute of God'; it is 'an expression of God's will'.[51] If it were God's essential attribute, then God would be coerced to act in certain ways based on his pathic nature. 'God Himself is not pathos', but is a 'subject of pathos'.[52] Yet being this

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[44] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 226.

[45] Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 277 & 437; cf. Heschel, *God in search of Man* (New York: Crossroads, 1955), pp. 174-175.

[46] See note 34.

[47] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 232.

[48] Berkovits, *Major Themes in Modern Philosophies of Judaism*, p. 204.

[49] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 228.

[50] Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, p. 245.

[51] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 231. See Perlman, *Abraham Heschel's Idea of Revelation*, pp. 93-94.

[52] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 485.

'subject' who involves himself in human life, God must be passible. Given that 'biblical ontology does not separate being and act', God must be capable of being affected or moved, and thereby capable of varied modes of reaction depending upon human situations. In Merkle's reading of Heschel:

> Pathos may not be an 'essential attribute of God,' but Heschel would have to admit that passibility is. For pathos is only possible in a being that is in essence passible. But this does not mean that the divine essence is changeable. The fact that God's modes of reacting to the world are changeable does not mean that God changes in essence. To be in essence passible is not the same as to have a passible essence. To be in essence passible is to be by nature a being who may change modes of action and reaction; to have a passible essence is to have a changing nature—for example, now human, now divine, or now living, now inanimate. God's nature may be immutable while the modes of God's being-in-relation may change.[53]

Philosophically, a suffering God is an imperfect being who necessarily seeks his perfection and tries to overcome his deficiency through actions. The Bible is not concerned with that kind of perfection. The Hebrew concept of God, in contrast, is a passionate God who is infinitely charged with 'transitive concern'. God is so eager to express his concern for the people of his covenantal love that he suffers under their actions. And yet God suffers not out of any lack in himself, but out of his will to express his inexhaustible pathos for people. The immutability of God is understood not in terms of the divine perfection of Greek metaphysics; rather it is understood in terms of the Hebrew's belief in the constancy of God's faithfulness to his covenant.

The idea of self-sufficiency that it is unaffected or unmoved by external realities is no ideal in Hebrew thinking. 'Not self-sufficiency, but concern and involvement characterize His relation to the world.'[54] God's concern generates his activity on behalf of humanity. God is secure and trustworthy enough to be most moved by human situations. Biblically, God suffers change not because of any imperfection, but because different situations require different responses. This means that there is potentiality in God. God has the potential to be moved and to elicit responses not yet actual. This by no means implies that God's being is thereby perfected or enhanced or in the process of becoming more divine. Change is no sign of imperfection, but an aspect of his transitive concern for the world, the expressions of which are always subject to change.

Pathos and Psychology

In addition to Greek ontology, Greek psychology is also responsible for the rejection of the idea of divine suffering. Theists in the Aristotelian tradition, such as Maimonides or Thomas Aquinas, did not deny God's concern for humanity. What they denied was that God could be moved by the world. They conceived of God's concern merely as an intellectual act and benevolent attitude. This kind of concern, Heschel argued, does not signify a real genuine relationship because it is cold and remote. God's involvement with humanity is not

[53] Cf. John C. Merkle, *The Genesis of Faith: The Depth Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel* (New York: Macmillan/London: Collier Macmillan, 1985), p. 133.

[54] Merkle, *The Genesis of Faith*, p. 235.

merely a benevolent attitude, but 'a feeling of intimate concern.'[55] 'He is a lover engaged to His people, not only a king. God stands in a passionate relationship to man.'[56]

Heschel made a distinction between two kinds of concern: 'transitive' and 'reflexive'. The former focused on others whereas the latter focused on the self.[57] The pagan gods had only a reflexive, self-centred concern, a love dominated by self-seeking desires. The Israelite God had a selfless concern, a 'pure concern', sharing his boundless goodness without thought of return.[58] Pathos, which Heschel also characterizes as 'absolute selflessness' and 'undeserved love', is more divine than human. It is 'theomorphic'.[59]

In discussing divine pathos, Heschel stressed the freedom of God. Israel's God gladly bestows his goodness, and does so only for the sake of the ones he loves. God determined within himself to be divinely loving, sharing his pure concern for humanity. Divine passion is an act which God brought to himself, allowing himself to be most moved by the actions of humanity. This involves 'no inner bondage, no enslavement to impulse, no subjugation by passion'.[60] Human deeds do not necessitate divine pathos, but only occasion it. Divine pathos is not an 'unreasoned emotion', but 'an act formed with intention, depending on free will, the result of decision and determination'.[61] It is God's glory to give, to act, and to love freely. In Heschel's schema, the immutability of God's freedom must be affirmed alongside of the passibility of God's pathos. In so doing he avoided attributing to God the unbridled and selfish passions which characterize humanity.

In so far as God is not subject to creaturely passions, God is impassible. But the Greeks were wrong to conclude from this that God has no passion. Greek psychology regards pathos, an emotion implying change, as an imperfection. Since pathos is an emotional reaction rather than an intellectual act, and it is aroused by an external agent, it is viewed as a sign of weakness. 'The dignity of man' lies primarily 'in the activity of the mind, in acts of self-determination'.[62] Thus the Greeks radically dissociated reason from emotions, viewing them as sharply opposed to each other. To introduce emotion to God is to introduce change, and therefore to ascribe weakness to him, which, for them, would have seemed blasphemous. 'Such preference for reason', Heschel wrote, 'enabled Greek philosophy to exclude all emotion from the nature of Deity, while at the same time ascribing thought and contemplation to it.'[63]

The perfect example of an impassive deity is the God of Aristotle. By identifying the Deity with the First Cause with something which, while it has the capacity of moving all things, is itself unmoved, Aristotle's Deity has no pathos, no needs. Ever resting in itself, its only activity is thinking, and its thinking is thinking of

[55] Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 244.
[56] Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 244.
[57] Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 245; cf. his *The Prophets*, pp. 225-226.
[58] Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, p. 245.
[59] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 271.
[60] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 254.
[61] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 224.
[62] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 248.
[63] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 250.

thinking. Indifferent to all things, it does not care to contemplate anything but itself. Things for it and thus are set in motion, yet they are left to themselves.[64]

The Hebrew thinking, on the contrary, had a positive evaluation of emotion. In Heschel's terms: 'the mind is not a member apart, but is itself transformed into passion'.[65] 'Thought is part of emotion. We think because we are moved.' 'Emotion may be defined as the consciousness of being moved.'[66] 'Emotion can be reasonable just as reason can be emotional.'[67] Emotion is basic to the life of reason; it is also important to the life of action, because great acts are usually performed by those who are filled with passion.[68] Divine pathos, though an emotional response, is never devoid of God's reason and will, but informed by them.[69] Given this positive view of emotion in the Bible, Heschel rejected the dualistic framework of Greek metaphysics, that God could think but could not feel, that God could move, while remaining unmoved. Therefore, 'to the biblical mind the conception of God as detached and unemotional is totally alien'.[70]

III Biblical Strata of Divine Pathos

Heschel gave priority to biblical texts rather than to the presuppositions of Greek philosophy. This section offers a synthesis of Heschel's understanding of the texts, showing how he found justification for his view that God could fully experience the range of emotions.[71] A detailed analysis of the texts is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in all fairness, Heschel's exposition of the theme of pathos is biblically grounded.

Amos' proclamation does not consist of 'an impersonal accusation', but proceeds from a living God who cares, 'a Redeemer who is pained by the misdeeds, the thanklessness of those whom He has redeemed'.[72] The iniquities of God's people had aroused divine wrath against them. God cried out and roared in excitement and pain (Amos 1:2; cf. Isa.42:13-14). Amos' contemporaries were condemned because they had rejected the Torah, and had not kept God's statutes (Amos 2:4). Israel's election ought not to be 'mistaken as divine favoritism or immunity from chastisement'.[73] On the contrary, God's chosen ones are more seriously exposed to God's judgement. Divine justice in Amos's message is divine concern, not a 'stern mechanical justice'.[74] If the God in whose name Amos preached were a God of stern, mechanical justice, then long ago he would have nullified his covenant and abandoned Israel.

What transpires between God and his people is God's deepest affection for those whom he has known more intimately than any other people. Though Israel proved faithless, God called out to her, hoping that Israel might see her own failure and

[64] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 251.
[65] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 257.
[66] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 316
[67] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 256.
[68] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 258.
[69] Merkle, *The Genesis of Faith*, p. 131.
[70] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 257.

[71] For an Old Testament study of God's suffering, see Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).
[72] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 32.
[73] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 32.
[74] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 35.

repent. Numerous times, God had sent into Israel warning portents, that she might take heed and return to God. And yet she did not return to God. Amos tried to convey the sense of God's mercy and disappointment over Israel's faithlessness in the song of lament, with its recurrent refrain, 'yet you did not return to me' (Amos 4:6-13). Having been shown in a vision the imminent destruction of Israel by locust or fire, Amos did not question divine justice. He appealed to divine mercy: 'O Lord God, forgive, I beseech thee! How can Jacob stand? He is so small! The Lord repented concerning this; It shall not be, said the Lord' (Amos 7:2-3). At the heart of covenant lies God's everlasting love. God's wrath is less final than God's mercy. God's mercy will ultimately triumph over God's wrath; God's compassion prevails over justice (Amos 5:15). Mercy is a 'perpetual possiblity',[75] and will ultimately conquer the 'contingency and nonfinality' of wrath.[76] Thus the prophecy of Amos, which began with a message of doom, ended with an affirmation of hope (Amos 9:11ff).

Both Hosea and Jeremiah affirmed that God could be wounded. God grieved over his people even amidst his anger with them. For instance, God cried out concerning wayward Israel: 'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath' (Hos.11:8-9; cf. Jer.31:30).[77] Humanly speaking, in such a situation a complete abandonment is expected. But God's love is such that it eternally attaches itself to his people. Hosea spoke of the modulation of divine feelings toward repentance, which is expressed most movingly: 'My heart is turned within me' (Hos.11:8; cf. 12:6). Yet he also said: 'Compassion remains hid from me' (Hos.13:14). How does one reconcile the antinomy between the tenderness of divine love and the severity of divine judgement? True love, Hosea saw, is not a love that overlooks easily the wickedness of the beloved, forgiving carelessly every sin. Rather it is 'a love grown bitter with the waywardness of man'.[78] Israel's God also 'has passionate love of right and a burning hatred of wrong'.[79] God's anger against sin is 'a tragic necessity, a calamity for man and grief for God'.[80] God was moved into wrath by human sin. The wrathful opposition against sin is not generated by some abstractly conceived justice of God, which demands retribution for the broken law; rather it is generated by God's burning desire for reunion, a pure, simple and undefiled relationship with Israel. God suffered the pain of a broken relationship with his beloved. Yet this pain sprang from God's resolve to love the object of his own wrath. The mingling of sorrow and love in God prevents the final ruin of his beloved. God's being is revealed in the way in which, amidst all the sorrow and anger, his redeeming love endures forever. Heschel captured this crucial point: 'Over and above the immediate and contingent emotional reaction of the Lord we are informed of an eternal and basic disposition' already indicated at the

[75] Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 35-36.
[76] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 285.
[77] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 48.
[78] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 50.
[79] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 50.
[80] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 294.

beginning of the passage: 'I loved him' (Hos.11:1).[81] The pathos of love, expressed first in the pain of distress, reached its climax in the final triumph of reconciliation. 'I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for mine anger has turned from him' (Hos.14:4). As such God's judgement is not final, but only a disciplinary means of leading people to repentance. Anger is a mode of God's responsiveness to humanity, showing that he cares.

Though anger is aroused by human sin, it is conditioned by God's will. Anger is not a childish loss of temper nor is it a frustrated love turned sour or vindictive. Rather, it is an expression of God's pure love, that does not allow him to stand by idly in the face of unrighteousness. Wrath is the purity of God's love burning hot in the face of wickedness. God's pure love expresses itself in a wrathful opposition against anything that stands between God and humanity so that their unity might not be severed. As a mode of pathos, God's wrath is to be understood as 'suspended love, as mercy withheld, as mercy in concealment'.[82] Hidden in a severe 'no' is an assuring 'yes'. Anger generated by love is only 'an interlude', awaiting compassion to resume in its fullness. God's long-suffering love waits eagerly to overcome the contingency and non-finality of terrifying anger. Jeremiah 12: 14-15 confirmed this: 'I will pluck them from their land… and after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring them again each to his heritage and each to his land' (cf. Jer.26:13). Heschel grasped the mysterious paradox of Hebrew faith:

> Jeremiah had to be taught that God is greater than his decisions. The anger of the Lord is instrumental, hypothetical, conditional, and subject to his will. Let the people modify their line of conduct, and anger will disappear. Far from being an expression of 'petulant vindictiveness', the message of anger includes a call to return and to be saved. The call of anger is a call to cancel anger. It is not an expression of irrational, sudden, and instinctive excitement, but a free and deliberate reaction of God's justice to what is wrong and evil. For all its intensity, it may be averted by prayer. …Its meaning is …instrumental: to bring about repentance; its purpose and consummation is its own disappearance.[83]

The opening speech of Isaiah, using parental imagery, contains a mixture of lament and accusation (Isa.1:2-3). It sets the tone for the subsequent utterances of the prophet. It deals not primarily with divine anger but with the divine sorrow in anger. The prophet pleads with us to identify with the plight of a father whose children have abandoned him.[84] The focus here is not on Israel's disobedience to an external moral code, but on a broken relationship between parent and child. The rebellion occurs, even in the face of the best fatherly care possible. The prophet expressed divine anguish over Israel's rebellion in the form of rhetorical questions, powerfully expressed in the song of the vineyard: 'What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Why did it yield wild grapes?' (Isa. 5:1-7; cf. Jer.2:21).

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[81] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 48.
[82] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 295.
[83] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 286.
[84] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 80.

There is sorrow in divine anger. Commenting on Isaiah 30:18, 'Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you'; Heschel wrote that anger is not God's 'disposition, but a state He waits to overcome'.[85] God's anger, which is instrumental in purification, lasts only for a season. For when the Lord smites, he is both 'smiting and healing' (Isa.19:22). In anger, God's mercy is not abandoned, but merely suspended. God's mercy will finally triumph over his own wrath.

> In a very little while my
> indignation will come to an
> end …
> Come, my people, enter your
> chambers,
> And shut your doors behind you;
> Hide yourselves for a little while
> Until the indignation is past.
> (Isaiah 10:25; 26:20)

'The allusion to the Lord as "a woman in travail"', Heschel wrote, is 'the boldest figure used by any prophet (to) convey not only the sense of supreme urgency of His action, but also a sense of the deep intensity of His suffering'[86] (Isa.42:14). Of God's involvement in human pain, the prophet declares affirmatively: 'In all their affliction he was afflicted' (Isa.63:9).[87]

Conclusions

In the Bible, God is revealed not as an onlooker but as a participant. God is concerned for and moved by humanity. What are the implications of recognizing the 'Most Moved Mover' as Israel's God?

First, it has profound implication for ethics. God seeks a response from humanity that corresponds to the divine pathos. This response is sympathy. Heschel wrote:

> The nature of man's response to the divine corresponds to the content of his apprehension of divine. When the divine is sensed as mysterious perfection, the response is one of fear and trembling; when sensed as absolute will, the response is one of unconditional obedience; when sensed as pathos, the response is one of sympathy.[88]

'The prophet not only hears and apprehends the divine pathos; he is convulsed by it to the depths of his soul.'[89] He is 'inwardly transformed: his interior life is formed by the pathos of God'.[90] He, by sympathy with the divine pathos, is himself intimately involved in divine concern for his people. In this way, the prophet is a partner or associate rather than a mouthpiece or instrument of God. Just as divine *apatheia* has its anthropological corollary, so does divine pathos: 'The ideal state of the Stoic sage is apathy, the ideal state of the prophets is sympathy.'[91]

As opposed to *homo apathetikos* (apathetic man), the individual becomes *homo sympathetikos* (sympathetic man). His involvement in social justice, the passion with which he condemns injustice, is rooted in his sympathy with the divine pathos. Sympathy moves him out of the narrow confines of self-centredness. Sympathy is emotion, in the sense of motion, of movements, which motivates him to act on behalf of others. Thus sympathy is a precondition of moral actions. The church and the Christian life should be patterned after sympathy, which

[85] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 83.
[86] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 151.
[87] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 151.
[88] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 307.
[89] Heschel, *Between God and Man*, p. 125.
[90] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 319.
[91] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 258.

necessarily involves risk, pain, and loss. The church of a passionate God must exist in and for this world, accepting suffering itself as it cares for the needy, the sick, and the poor and seeks the liberation of the oppressed. In its moral behaviour, the church must reflect the person and righteous actions of God. This is what it means to live a life oriented towards 'the living reality of God'.[92]

Second, God's pathos governs the life of the preacher. The tension between God's love and God's wrath awakes a corresponding tension in the heart of the prophet. God feels anguish for his people, but he also feels anger for them. Likewise, the prophet feels it, and lives it. These two opposing currents of intense emotion felt by Jeremiah are attributed to God. Commenting on Jeremiah 23:9, 'My heart is broken within me, all my bones tremble; I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the Lord and his holy words', Heschel wrote: 'What convulsed the prophet's whole being was God. His condition was a state of suffering in sympathy with the divine pathos.'[93] The preacher must learn to identify both with God and with his people. This double sympathy inevitably leads to a painful conflict within the preacher's inner existence. Impassioned with the reality of divine wrath, Jeremiah, for one, pronounced judgement with a vehement indignation, while at the same time his heart was filled with tenderness and sensitivity to human suffering. His calling as a prophet required that he preached with severity; but at the same time he pitied his people. Heschel would concur with Calvin's remarks on this dual sympathy:

> Let then all teachers in the Church learn to put on these two feelings—to be vehemently indignant whenever they see the worship of God profaned, to burn with zeal for God and to show that severity which appeared in all the prophets, whenever due order decays—and at the same time to sympathize with miserable men, whom they see rushing headlong into destruction, and to bewail their madness and to interpose with God as much as is in them; in such a way, however, that their compassion render them not slothful or indifferent, so as to be indulgent to the sins of men.[94]

Furthermore, the preacher's anger must truly reflect the divine pathos. He must have enough discernment to be angry about the right things, and yet have enough control to hold it in check. The task of the preacher is not to recommend that God should depart from his merciful forbearance, but that he test and purify (Jer. 5:1, 4ff.; 6:9ff). When Jeremiah's anger became stronger than God's anger, God had to correct him and remind him about the non-finality of anger. In response to Jeremiah's prayer, 'Avenge me on my persecutors' (15:15), the Lord said to him: 'If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is base, you shall be as my mouth' (15:19).[95] Bearing in mind that God is concerned about the disciplining, not destruction, of his adversaries, the preacher must avoid a hypertrophy of sympathy for God's wrath.

Prophetic suffering, in various kinds, results from the two-fold sym-

[92] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 322.
[93] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 118.
[94] John Calvin, *Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1950), pp. 329-330. Also quoted in Donald A. Leggett, *Loving God and Disturbing Men* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 47.
[95] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 126.

pathy for God and for his people. Suffering is constitutive to the life of the preacher. However, the world must observe that he suffers not because of public scandal or vice, but because he holds to the Word of God, preaches it and practises it.

Third, prayer would lose its meaning if God were not responsive to human cries. If God remains unmoved by whatever we do, there is really very little point in doing one thing rather than the other. The apathetic God is impotent in bringing a change in human hearts because whatever humanity does, this God does not react or respond to it accordingly. However, the prophetic faith assumes a God whose attitude towards his people changes after his people repent and turn to him. Thus prayers make a difference not only in human lives but also in God's life. God desires humanity to be his conversation partner, and this provides a strong incentive for loving devotion. Prayer is not so much a duty for pleasing God as a delight at the heart of relationship. To pray is to enter into a living and loving relationship in which both parties influence each other. The reciprocal relationship of love into which God enters with humanity entails that God gives and receives from humanity.

The interaction between God and humanity does not occur simply on the intellectual level, nor in a law court; it occurs at the emotional level. God relates to humanity as 'a lover', who eagerly 'waits for (humanity) to seek Him'.[96] God takes human cries seriously, allowing them to affect his being and change his mind. Petitionary prayers may have a contributive, though not determinative, effect on the outcome because they have an effect on God himself. In Heschel's schema, petitionary prayer is not the cause of God's response, but rather is the reason for his response.[97] God is not of any necessity to answer human requests, otherwise he would not be the One who acts from free choice. Because God is responsive, humanity can pray with confidence that he will be moved by human cries.

Finally, it provides an appropriate entry point for sharing the gospel. Divine pathos discloses 'the extreme pertinence of man to God'.[98] Divine concern moves God to come to humanity, thus abolishing his distance from humanity. God does not conceive of humanity as an idea in his mind but as a concern, as 'a divine secret' (Ps.139:7-18). This means that humanity lives in the 'perpetual awareness of being perceived, apprehended, noted by God, of being an object of the divine Subject'.[99] An apathetic God, who

[96] Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 39. Cf. his *Man is not Alone*, p. 244.

[97] For further discussions of prayer, see Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer* (Illinois: InterVarsity, 2000); Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Peter R. Baelz, *Prayer and Providence: A Background Study* (New York: Seabury, 1968); David Basinger, 'Why Petition an Omnipotent, Omniscient, Wholly Good God?' *Religious Studies* 19 (1983), pp. 25-41. Clark H. Pinnock, in John Feinberg, Norman Geisler, Bruce Reichenbach and Clark Pinnock, *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Dowers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 15 where he states: 'God actually accepts the influence of our prayers in making up his mind. …Future events are not predetermined and fixed. If you believe that prayer changes things, my whole position is established. If you do not believe it does, you are far from biblical religion.'

[98] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 483.

[99] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 483.

dwells in the transcendent and lonely splendour of eternity, strips humanity of 'dignity and grandeur', striking them with a sense of 'poverty and emptiness'.[100] What consolation could such a God offer if he is too sublime to be moved by events on this earth? Of what help to wounded humanity is a God who knows nothing of pain himself? Furthermore this conception of God could easily give rise to atheism.

On the contrary, Israel's God is not remote from human struggles in history. God takes humanity so seriously that he attaches himself to human situations. God, in Whitehead's famous phrase, is 'the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands'.[101] That God who is understood as a suffering participant in human history would less likely be criticized as a deceiver, executioner, sadist and despot. It might reduce the intensity of the atheistic objections to belief in God. It might also enable the unbelievers to hear the gospel, and eventually to find faith. God feels for humanity; he cares! God is most supremely divine in his intimate concern for human agony. And that, surely, is the best news worth sharing.

[100] Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 258-259.

[101] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1929), p. 532.