

Does God Have Real Feelings?

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Introduction

The Hebrew Old Testament contains some 842 references to the emotions of God. The most common emotions are anger/wrath (447x), compassion (101x), joy/pleasure (94x), love (44x), and zeal/jealousy (42x).¹ In spite of the frequency of these occurrences the question still needs to be asked whether they refer to *real* emotions. Are they to be understood as ontological statements about God, or should they be regarded as accommodating to our human limitations, or are they to be seen as mere projections of human emotions on to the screen of infinity? A test case is what would appear to be the very first reference to the emotions of God in the Old Testament. In Gen 6:6 we read that “the LORD *was sorry* that He had made man on the earth, and He *was grieved* in his heart” (italics mine).² On this verse John Calvin comments as follows:

The repentance which is here ascribed to God does not properly belong to him, but has reference to our understanding of him. For since we cannot comprehend him as he is, it is necessary that, for our sake, he should, in a certain sense, transform himself. That repentance cannot take place in God, easily appears from this single consideration, that nothing happens which is by him unexpected or unforeseen. The same reasoning, and remark, applies to what follows, that God was affected with grief. Certainly God is not sorrowful or sad; but remains forever like himself in his celestial and happy repose: yet, because it could not otherwise be known how great is God’s hatred and detestation of sin, therefore the Spirit accommodates himself to our capacity . . . God was so

¹ Because the overwhelming majority of biblical references to the emotions of God are found in the Old Testament, this study will confine itself to those occurrences. There are only ninety-two references to the emotions of God in the New Testament (compared to ninety references to the emotions of Jesus). In the New Testament the emotions of God mentioned most frequently are love (53x), anger/wrath (29x), and compassion (7x).

² Unless otherwise indicated, English Bible quotations are from the NASB.

offended by the atrocious wickedness of men, as if they had wounded his heart with mortal grief.³

Far from being isolated, Calvin's comment forms part of a larger theological agenda. Not only an infrequently mentioned emotion like grief, but even an emotion as ubiquitous on the pages of Scripture as divine anger is not invested by Calvin with any ultimate reality. As he explains in the *Institutes*:

Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us. Although he is beyond all disturbance of mind, yet he testifies that he is angry toward sinners. Therefore whenever we hear that God is angered, we ought not to imagine any emotion in him, but rather to consider that this expression has been taken from our human experience; because God, whenever he is exercising judgment, exhibits the appearance of one kindled or angered.⁴

The data found in the Old Testament would seem to lend some support to Calvin's view. The vast majority of terms it uses to depict the emotions of God are also used to describe human emotions. There are only seventeen occurrences of a divine emotion where the Old Testament uses the term exclusively of God. There would therefore seem to have been very little effort – if any effort at all – spent by the authors to develop a special vocabulary for the emotions of God. Words commonly used for the emotions of human beings were generally considered adequate also to describe the emotions of God. This gives Calvin's approach at least a semblance of plausibility. God is generally described with familiar words used elsewhere to depict known and experienced human emotions. This would certainly appear to be the language of accommodation.

Plausible though Calvin's view may be, if correct, it would have serious implications for our view of God. In fact all further discussion would terminate at this point. If there are no divine emotions for the simple reason that God has no emotions, then God does indeed remain forever in "his celestial and happy repose." Then it becomes pointless to ask whether God

³ John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis* (trans. J. King; London: Banner of Truth, 1965; first published in Latin, 1554), 248-249.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford L. Battles; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:227.

has real feelings, for the question has already been answered in the negative. According to Calvin's theory no emotion has the potential to rise beyond the level of the human. For our discussion to advance, the validity of this view will need to be examined thoroughly.

1. *The Hebrew Old Testament and the Septuagint*

Most of the references to the emotions of God in the Hebrew Old Testament presented the LXX translators with little difficulty.⁵ Words for such emotions as love, anger/wrath, joy, and zeal/jealousy, and even those for weeping and hatred, were translated in straightforward ways. For some words there was even a consistent, one-to-one correspondence between the Hebrew term and its Greek translation over a significant number of occurrences. The nouns θυμός ('wrath') and ὀργή ('anger') are found with great frequency as the pair of choice for translating words for anger. From this evidence it would appear that the LXX translators were theologically and culturally comfortable in ascribing these emotions to God.

There were other instances, however, where matters were not so simple. Moderate difficulty seems to have been encountered in the translation of such concepts as delight, indignation and compassion. Perhaps the greatest single challenge for the translators was the נחם ('be sorry,' 'console oneself' etc.) word group, not only because of its wide semantic range but also because it seemed to suggest that the deity could change.

The most serious translation difficulties seem to have been encountered in a small minority of cases where the LXX translators appear hesitant to render a Hebrew term by an equally emotive Greek word. Some of the most prominent of these are worth looking at specifically. In each case a comparison of the Hebrew and LXX renderings proves to be illuminating:

(a) Genesis 6:6

וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה כִּי עָשָׂה אֱתֵרֶהָּ בְּאָדָם וַיִּחַעֲצַב אֱלֹהִים לְבוֹ:

⁵ The Septuagint, commonly denoted as the 'LXX', is the most important Greek translation of the Old Testament. Its origins are traditionally traced back to Alexandria in Egypt during the second and third centuries BC. It is the oldest known influential translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in any language.

“And the Lord *was sorry* that He had made man on the earth, and He *was grieved in His heart*.” (italics mine)

καὶ ἐνεθυμήθη ὁ θεὸς ὅτι ἐποίησεν τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, καὶ δι-
ενοήθη.

“Then God *laid it to heart* that he had made man upon the earth, and he *pondered it deeply*.”⁶ (italics mine)

The LXX translation certainly seems to be straining the meaning of the Hebrew. Only here and in v. 7 is ἐνθυμέομαι (translated ‘lay to heart’) ever used by the LXX to translate any form of the verb נחם (here rendered ‘be sorry’). Although the Greek word possibly has emotional overtones,⁷ it precludes any idea of change in God. More remarkable is the choice of διανοέομαι (‘ponder’) to render the verb עצב (translated ‘be grieved’), the root of which “is used to express the most intense form of human emotion, a mixture of rage and bitter anguish. . . . The word is used of God’s feelings in only two other passages (Ps 78:40; Is 63:10). Only here is the verb supplemented by the phrase ‘to his heart’ (in our translation ‘bitterly’), underlining the strength of God’s reaction to human sinfulness.”⁸ While in the Hebrew Gen 6:6 is an emotionally charged statement, the LXX translation is far more subdued. Although it would be rash to attribute motives to the translators, they seem to have toned down the emotional language considerably.⁹ A similar sense of reserve can be detected in the Aramaic Targum on this verse.¹⁰

⁶ This is the translation of Launcelot L. Brenton, *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament with an English Translation* (London: Bagster, n.d.).

⁷ By New Testament times it appears that this word had a purely noetic meaning (Matt 1:20; 9:4; Acts 10:19) which Bauer defines as “to process information by thinking about it carefully.” This is also the only meaning for which MM find evidence in the papyri. Even so, it is by no means certain that an emotive element can be excluded, particularly from the earlier literature. Although the examples they cite predominantly support a noetic meaning, Liddell and Scott also supply the gloss *take to heart, be concerned or angry at*. If this was the meaning intended by the LXX translators, it would exclude the idea of change in God, but not of emotion. What precisely that emotion was, however, remains difficult to define.

⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Waco: Word, 1987), 144-145.

⁹ This impression is strengthened by the fact that the *hitpa`el* stem of the verb עצב is used here. Its only other occurrence in Genesis is in 34:7, where it depicts the grief of Jacob’s sons at the sexual abuse suffered by their sister. Here the LXX

(b) Deuteronomy 32:27

Although it cannot be conclusively demonstrated that the LXX has eliminated all emotion from Gen 6:6, there are other instances where this does seem to have occurred. Deut 32:27, for example, opens with an extraordinary clause:

לִּי לֹא יָרָא אֶת-אֹיֵב אֲנִי

“Had I not feared the provocation by the enemy . . .”

The LXX omits any reference to an emotion of God here:

εἰ μὴ δι’ ὀργῆς ἐχθρῶν

“Were it not for the wrath of the enemy...”

Apparently the LXX translators balked at the prospect of attributing fear to God. In the Hebrew Old Testament this is the only time that the verb נָרָא has God as its subject.¹¹ It is stunning that the LORD who is elsewhere seen as the object of dread (Ps 22:23; 33:8) should here be depicted as dreading. Like the LXX, the three Aramaic Targums on this verse remove the anthropopathism, each in its own way.¹²

does not hesitate to use a strongly emotive verb - *κατανύσσομαι*. Brenton, *Septuagint*, 45, translates: “the men *were deeply pained*.”

¹⁰ See Bernard Grossfeld, *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes* (The Aramaic Bible 6; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 53: “. . . then the Lord regretted *through his Memra* that He had made man on earth, *and He was determined to break their power according to His will*.” The words in italics, which indicate additions to and modifications of the Hebrew text, either reduce the force of the anthropopathisms or remove them altogether. In the second set of italics “[t]he Hebrew anthropopathism ‘He was grieved in His heart’ is here paraphrased by transferring God’s grief to man, whose power – and, by implication, spirit – is broken by divine ‘will’” (n. 7).

¹¹ According to Brown, Driver, Briggs this verb has two other homonyms, one meaning *sojourn* and the other *stir up strife, quarrel*. BDB and Even-Shoshan agree precisely on the occurrences of the third group, to which BDB assign the meaning *dread, stand in awe* of, namely Num 22:3; Deut 1:17; 18:22; 32:27; 1 Sam 18:15; Job 19:29; 41:17; Ps 22:24; 33:8; Hos 10:5.

¹² “[W]ere it not that the provocations of the enemy would *grow strong* (Neofiti); “but that the anger of the enemy is feared” (Pseudo-Jonathan); “Were it not that the

(c) Isaiah 59:16; 63:5

Another example is furnished by the two occurrences, in Isaiah, of the verb שׁמם in the *hitpo`el* stem. In both cases BDB assign this verb the strongly emotive meaning, *be appalled, astounded*. Again the Hebrew and LXX are worth comparing:¹³

Isaiah 59:16

וַיֵּרָא כִּי־אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּשְׁחַרֵּם כִּי אֵין מִפְּנֵיעַ וְחֹשֶׁעַ
לוֹ זָרְעוּ וְצָדִיקָתוֹ הִיא סִמְכָתָהּ׃

“And He saw that there was no man,
And was *astonished* that there was no one to intercede;
Then His own arm brought salvation to Him;
And His righteousness upheld Him.”

καὶ εἶδεν καὶ οὐκ ἦν ἀνὴρ, καὶ κατενόησεν καὶ οὐκ ἦν ὁ ἀντιλημψόμενος, καὶ ἤμύνατο αὐτοὺς τῷ βραχίονι αὐτοῦ καὶ τῇ ἐλεημοσύνῃ ἐστηρίσατο.

“And he looked, and there was no man, and he *observed* and there was no one to help: so he defended them with his arm, and stablished them with his mercy.”¹⁴

Isaiah 63:5

וְאֵבִיט וְאֵין עֹזֵר וְאִשְׁחַרֵּם וְאֵין סוֹמֵם וְחֹשֶׁעַ לִי זָרְעִי

fury of the enemy were *accumulated*” (Onqelos). See respectively Martin McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1: Deuteronomy Translated, with Apparatus and Notes* (The Aramaic Bible 5A; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 156; Ernest G. Clark, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Deuteronomy Translated, with Notes* (The Aramaic Bible 5B; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 93; Bernard Grossfeld, *The Targum Onqelos to Deuteronomy: Translated, with Apparatus, and Notes* (The Aramaic Bible 9; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 97.

¹³ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 90, describes the LXX of Isaiah as a “very free translation, verging on paraphrase.” The Pentateuch and Jeremiah, on the other hand, he regards as “literal translations” (88, 90).

¹⁴ Brenton, *Septuagint*, 894 (italics mine).

וְהִמְתִּי הִיא סִבְכָתָנִי:

“And I looked, and there was no one to help,
And I was *astonished* and there was no one to uphold;
So My own arm brought salvation to Me;
And My wrath upheld Me.”

καὶ ἐπέβλεψα, καὶ οὐδεὶς βοηθός, καὶ προσειόησα, καὶ οὐθὲις ἀντελα
μβάνετο, καὶ ἐρρύσατο αὐτοὺς ὁ βραχίων μου, καὶ ὁ θυμός μου ἐπέστ
η.

“And I looked and there was no helper; and I *observed*, and none upheld:
therefore my arm delivered them, and mine anger drew nigh.”¹⁵

These verses again illustrate the tendency that has already been observed in the preceding examples. A vigorous and powerful Hebrew term has been translated into Greek by the rather domesticated verbs κατανοέω and προνοέω (both translated ‘observe’). All sense of emotion and pathos has been lost in translation.¹⁶

(d) Jeremiah 48:31 (31:31 LXX)

Here it seems that a strong reference to a divine emotion has been removed by a subtle change of subject:

עַל-כֵּן חָצַח עַל-מוֹאָב אֵילֵּי וְלִמוֹאָב כָּלֵה אֲזַעֵק
אֶל-אֲנָשֵׁי קִיר-חֶרֶשׁ יְהִנָּה:

“Therefore *I shall wail* for Moab,
Even for all Moab *shall I cry out*;
I will moan for the men of Kir-heres.”

¹⁵ Brenton, *Septuagint*, 897 (italics mine).

¹⁶ The same is again true of the Aramaic Targum: “*It was disclosed before him, and there was no man whose deeds were good, and it was known before him, and there was no person who would arise and beseech concerning them . . .*” (Is 59:16a); “*It was disclosed before me, but there was no man whose deeds were good; it was known before me, but there was no person who would arise and beseech concerning them . . .*” (Is 63:5a). See Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum: Introduction, Translation, Apparatus, and Notes* (The Aramaic Bible 11; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 115,121.

διὰ τοῦτο ἐπὶ Μωαβ ὀλολύζετε πάντοθεν, βοήσατε ἐπ’ ἀνδρας Κιραδ
ας αὐχμοῦ.

“Therefore *howl* for Moab on all sides; *cry out* against the men of drought-
stricken Kir-heres.”

In the Hebrew text it is God who does the wailing and the crying out, while in the Greek translation the people are told to do so.¹⁷ First singular verbs have been transformed into second plural imperatives. In the very next verse, however, the first singular is inexplicably retained in the verb ἀποκλαύσομαι (“I will weep”). Although the LXX seems to have no problem with a weeping God (Is 16:9; Jer 31:32), it has carefully removed any explicit references to his tears (Is 16:9; Jer 9:18; Lam 2:18)!

From the above examples the conclusion could be drawn that the LXX avoids speaking of God anthropopathically¹⁸. The same could be said of the targums which, although of a later origin, probably reflect an oral tradition current in Palestinian Judaism at the turn of the era. As Jeff Sharp has observed:

If there was some attempt in certain circles in Palestinian Judaism to deal with anthropomorphisms in scripture by a form of metaphorical exegesis, this concern can be clearly seen in Alexandrian Judaism. Perhaps the earliest allegorical exegesis in Alexandrian Judaism is to be seen in the Septuagint. Here we have a very deliberate attempt to remove the anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms ascribed to God.¹⁹

Emanuel Tov has likewise recognised the LXX’s tendency of “eliminating anthropomorphic biblical expressions.”²⁰ So has Ernst Würthwein, who advances the discussion by suggesting a possible motivation for this trend:

¹⁷ In the Aramaic Targum the emotions are attributed to the Moabites: “Therefore *the Moabites howl*, and *the Moabites*, all of *them*, shout: *over* the men of *their strong fortified city* they lament.” See Robert Hayward, *The Targum of Jeremiah: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes* (The Aramaic Bible 12; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 173-174.

¹⁸ For a definition of the word see footnote 23.

¹⁹ Jeff Sharp, “Philo’s Method of Allegorical Interpretation,” *East Asia Journal of Theology* 2 (1984): 96-97.

²⁰ Emanuel Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research* (Jerusalem Biblical Studies 3; Jerusalem: Simor, 1981), 105.

The differences between the Jews of the Greek diaspora and the people who wrote the Hebrew Old Testament were not restricted to matters of their language alone. They lived in a world of different social conditions, with different ways of thinking, and not least with differences of belief. Their environment affected them, 'hellenized' them. They spoke more abstractly and philosophically about God than the 'Hebrews,' and they avoided the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic expressions which are so characteristic of the Hebrew Old Testament.²¹

Attractive though these suggestions may be, any conclusions reached from our study of a limited corpus of materials could easily be overdrawn. Although the examples we have discussed do indicate a definite trend, our observations should not outstrip the available evidence. Over against these rather dramatic illustrations stands the overwhelming majority of references to the emotions of God which the LXX has translated quite literally. An interesting case in point is Jonah 3:9-4:2, a passage where not only the references to God's emotions but also to divine relenting or repenting have been unequivocally retained by the LXX. Moreover, in all the cases that were specifically considered, the Aramaic Targums avoid anthropopathisms with the same consistency as the LXX. This too serves as a caution against drawing sweeping conclusions. When we examine all of the occurrences, rather than a handful of the more unusual cases, it would be prudent to conclude that no consistent anti-anthropopathic pattern can be found. While a somewhat different conception of God from the Hebrew Old Testament can be detected in the LXX, it would be dangerous to generalise. Any claims to have discovered "the theology of the Septuagint" should therefore be avoided. As Jobs and Silva have pointed out:

. . . we should not assume that there was a homogenous, codified theology to which the Greek translators subscribed. If such a thing existed in Hellenistic Judaism, it has not survived. The sources we do have are not sufficient to deduce a reconstruction of Jewish theology in the Hellenistic period. Therefore, it is impossible to know if the theological elements introduced by a translator were

²¹ Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica* (trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; 2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 68-69; trans. of *Der Text des Alten Testaments* (5th ed.; Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1988).

common to the thought of Judaism at the time, peculiar to the particular theological tradition of the translator, or idiosyncrasies of the translator alone.²²

Although some of the more striking anthropopathisms in the Hebrew Old Testament seem to be more than the LXX translators could handle, there is no evidence to suggest that the Septuagint denied the reality of divine emotions. In the vast majority of cases the *Hebraica veritas* has been accurately preserved. On the whole the LXX has therefore remained relatively immune to the anti-anthropomorphic tendencies that were to develop later in Christian thought under the influence of Greek philosophy. It is to this development that we must now briefly turn our attention.

2. Anthropomorphisms and Anthropopathisms²³

That the Old Testament resorts to anthropomorphic language in speaking about God can hardly be denied. It speaks frequently about his face, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, lips, tongue, arms, legs and feet.²⁴ Mention is also made of his heart and his soul. The last two examples show how easily anthropomorphisms can slide over into anthropopathisms, and also how difficult it is to distinguish between the two. An even more difficult line to draw is between the literal and the metaphorical uses of these expressions. Initially the task is simple enough. As God is spirit, any body parts attributed to him must surely be understood metaphorically. But can the same be said for his actions, such as seeing, hearing, speaking, smelling and walking? Finally, when it comes to his feelings, should they be understood literally or metaphorically? If anthropomorphisms can be taken as figures of speech, why not anthropopathisms? Would it not be hermeneutically consistent to understand all these expressions figuratively?

²² Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 94.

²³ For the purpose of our discussion we will adopt the definitions offered by Graham A. Cole, "The Living God: Anthropomorphic or Anthropopathic?" *RTR* 59 (2000): 16-17, "An anthropomorphism speaks of God by using words about the human physical form. . . . An anthropopathism speaks of God by using words about human emotional life or cognitive life."

²⁴ This is a summary of the more detailed and comprehensive account given by Adrio König, *Here Am I! A Believer's Reflection on God* (tr. from Afrikaans; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 60-61.

To these questions classical Christian theology gave a logically satisfying and relatively simple answer. Reacting against the pique and petulance so characteristic of the Greek pantheon early Christian theologians took their cue from the philosophers.²⁵ Plato had argued that God, being perfect, is unchanging and self-sufficient. As a perfect being he cannot be affected by anything outside himself. Aristotle took this line of thinking a logical step further and excluded God's divine being from change and suffering, and hence also from emotion, whether pleasurable or painful.²⁶ Thus emerged the doctrine of divine impassibility which Christian thinkers then transferred to the God of the Scriptures. A catalyst in this development was Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenistic Jew who vigorously defended the impassibility of God. "Biblical passages which seemed to speak of God suffering were," according to Philo, "to be treated as metaphors, and not to be allowed their full weight. To allow that God changes was to deny his perfection."²⁷

Once it had been imported into the ancient church the impassibility idea became an accepted Christian doctrine and was espoused by Church Fathers as influential as Clement, Origen,²⁸ and Augustine. Via the last of

²⁵ The history of this development has been well documented elsewhere. Therefore the briefest summary will suffice here. It is a distillation of the contributions by Richard Bauckham, "Only the Suffering God Can Help": Divine Passibility in Modern Theology," *Them* (1984): 6-12; Michael Flinn, "The Pathos of God in Relation to the Concept of the Covenant" (Th.D. diss., The University of South Africa, 1999), 45-65; and Alister E. McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology, 1750-1990* (2d. ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 204-211.

²⁶ Bauckham explains the connection between suffering and emotion in Greek thinking as follows: "The connecting thought is passivity. Suffering is what comes upon one, against one's will. It is something of which one is a passive victim. Thus suffering is a mark of weakness and God is necessarily above suffering. But, for the Greeks, one is also passive when one is moved by the passions or emotions. To be moved by desire or fear or anger is to be affected by something outside the self, instead of being self-determining. Again this is weakness and so God must be devoid of emotion. To suffer or to feel is to be *subject* to pain or emotion and the things that cause them. God cannot be subject to anything." ("Only the Suffering God," 7) Cf. Flinn, "The Pathos of God," 49, "Greek philosophers . . . could only construe personal language about God, including feelings and emotion, as mere anthropomorphic constructions that needed to be stripped away in order to arrive at God in his impassible, unchangeable essence."

²⁷ McGrath, *German Christology*, 205.

²⁸ For Origen "God is apathetic and knows no emotions such as anger or grief." (Flinn, "Pathos of God," 50)

these it was mediated into medieval theology and became standard teaching in the Western church.²⁹ Anselm of Canterbury, for example, argued that God was compassionate in terms of our experience, but not in terms of his own being. Thomas Aquinas reflected on the love of God along similar lines, dismissing the suggestion that it implied vulnerability, as God can neither be affected by our sorrows nor be moved by our misery.³⁰ Within this classical tradition Calvin's view (see introduction, above) was therefore typical, rather than exceptional. The most notable figure to break with this tradition was Martin Luther whose *theologia crucis* focussed on the "God who is hidden in suffering."³¹ When the idea of an impassible God was strongly challenged in the twentieth century, it was therefore hardly surprising that this development was spearheaded by theologians in the Lutheran tradition, namely Jürgen Moltmann in Germany and Kazo Kitamori in Japan. In the aftermath of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, increasingly, belief in the Impassible became impossible. The biblical evidence stood in need of careful re-examination. The breakdown of the age-old classical consensus, based as it was on Greek philosophy, had begun.

Recent theological developments have therefore given our questions about the reality of divine emotions a new urgency and complexity. No longer can theology appeal *simpliciter* to the figure of metaphor and the language of accommodation. Rather than lumping anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms together and treating all alike as metaphor in the interests of consistency, there is wisdom in making a hermeneutical distinction between the two. On the grounds that God is spirit and on the basis of his genuine personhood Graham Cole describes the difference as follows:

In developing the distinction one could argue that biblical language used of our physical bodies is an anthropomorphism that is to be taken as metaphorical. God's eyes is way [*sic*] of speaking of

²⁹ Cole, "The Living God," 21, comments: "According to Sanders' account [*The Openness of God*, 1994, 80] it was Augustine (354-430 AD) especially who 'made God's immunity to time, change and responsiveness to his creatures axiomatic for Western theology.'"

³⁰ Aquinas' thought was not new, but had its antecedents in the patristic writings. As Bauckham points out: "The Fathers have no doubt of God's love for the world, but his love is his benevolent attitude and activity, not a feeling, and not a relationship in which he can be *affected* by what he loves." ("Only the Suffering God," 8).

³¹ McGrath, *German Christology*, 207.

God's knowledge of the historical, or an aspect of idiomatic speech (Job 34:21 and Gen. 6:8 respectively). However, an anthropopathism such as God's grief is to be given its face value. God does not merely *seem* to have grief in Genesis 6:6; He *is* grieved, *contra* Calvin. In other words there is some important counterpart to our emotional life in God. To argue otherwise is beg [*sic*] the question of why we should not dismiss references to the divine love and compassion also as mere anthropopathisms. . . . Our creation in the divine image is not about our physical form. However, our creation in the divine image does not preclude emotion unless we already believe on other grounds that an emotion like grief cannot be predicated of God. We are usually quite content to speak of the divine mind. Why balk at speaking of the [*sic*] God's feelings? Indeed when the Bible writers speak of God's grief it may not be so much a matter of God being anthropopathic (human like) but of our being theopathic (God like) as bearers of the divine image.³²

Recent debate has therefore renewed respect for the reality of God's emotions. No longer can the many Old Testament references be regarded as mere metaphors or be allegorised so as to conform to the doctrine of divine impassibility. These references should be taken at face value and their exegesis should proceed accordingly, without being subservient to an alien philosophical or theological agenda.³³ The alternative, as Donald Macleod has cautioned, is to do an injustice to the biblical data:

Scripture, and particularly the Old Testament, makes it very clear that God has a rich emotional life. He is full of pity. He is jealous. He is angry. The implications of denying this are grave in the

³² Cole, "The Living God," 23-24.

³³ Frederick S. Leahy, "Does God Suffer?" *The Banner of Truth* 403 (April 1997): 15, seeks to create a hermeneutical division among the feelings that Scripture attributes to God. Some of these ascriptions, like love and wrath, are to be understood literally, while others, such as fear and jealousy, are to be taken metaphorically. The criterion for distinguishing between the two is the divine blessedness, as God cannot be the subject of an emotion that is intrinsically an unhappy one. The distinction, however, is arbitrary in that it is ultimately based on the assumption of divine impassibility. Hermeneutically it is more consistent to understand all the divine emotions literally, not just the "happy" ones. Moreover, divine love (the reality of which Leahy freely admits), in that it addresses the blighted human situation, necessarily entails vulnerability, suffering, and grief.

extreme. For example, if God is impassive, does this mean that He looks on evil with indifference and equanimity?³⁴

This last rhetorical question brings us to the next aspect of divine emotions. The anthropopathisms in Scripture are evidence of the continuity between divine and human emotions, but there is also an element of discontinuity that needs to be preserved. The emotions attributed to God in Scripture are not simply human emotions projected on to the screen of divinity. To avoid this danger, and to maintain the integrity of God's emotions, a further distinction needs to be made.

3. *Pathos and Passions*

The foregoing discussion has indicated the influence of Greek philosophy on the understanding of God's emotions in the Old Testament. Perhaps the beginnings of such an influence can already be detected in some of the anti-anthropopathisms in the LXX and the Targums, but in the present state of our knowledge such an influence would be impossible to prove. Yet there can be little doubt that Greek thought cast its spell on early Christian theology and the Classical Theism that resulted from it. In effect the God of the philosophers was superimposed on the God of Israel. Carl Braaten has graphically described the Greek philosophical concept of God as follows: "The absolute God of Greek metaphysics was heartless, graceless, and faceless. That God could not suffer, because suffering meant lack, and God does not lack anything. God must be beyond the pale of human suffering. God must be impassible, apathetic, and without compassion."³⁵ This superimposition of Greek thought on to the Hebrew Scriptures led to a

³⁴ Donald Macleod, *Behold your God* (rev. and exp. ed.; Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1995), 32. Cf. John Goldingay, *To the Usual Suspects: One Word Questions* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 47: "God is a real person. God is someone with feelings and passions such as compassion and mercy. God is someone who loves and cares, who joys and delights, who gets jealous and gets angry. . . . God is not an idea, nor merely the ground of my being."

³⁵ Carl E. Braaten, "The Person of Jesus Christ," in *Christian Dogmatics* (ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1:531. Cf. König, *Here Am I!* 62: "God might well think, but by definition he could think only of himself. He is the unmoved mover, pure form, eternal *actus purus*, immoveable, unchangeable, self-sufficient and totally separate. Having no need of anything or anyone, he would therefore need no friend, and indeed, did not have one. All pathos, all feeling (emotion) would be precluded from this god."

distorted understanding of the latter, the full extent of which has only recently been realised. In that this recognition has led to a questioning of the concept of divine passibility, “one may also speak of the revival of the Jewish way of thinking as against the Greek.”³⁶ To restore the Old Testament portrayal of the emotions of God, Christian theology needs to undergo a process of de-hellenisation, a process which is arguably already well under way. When it comes to understanding the divine emotions referred to in the Old Testament, the God of Israel and the God of the philosophers need to be contrasted, not confused.

But there is another contrast to be made, namely between the God of Israel and the gods of Greek mythology. Needless to say, this was a contrast that early Christian theology recognised far more readily. The Fathers were unlikely to attribute to the God of Israel some of the immoral exploits and “larger than life” personifications that were a feature of the Homeric pantheon. Zeus, for example, whom Homer regarded as the father of gods and men, ruled according to power rather than righteousness. His wrath was therefore often the result of caprice, rather than the outworking of a moral principle. He also had innumerable loves and children including Apollo, Dionysius and Hermes. Homer did not hesitate to describe him as “the most malicious” of all the gods.³⁷ In short, “[d]ishonesty, deceit, theft, violence, immorality abounded in the tales of the gods.”³⁸ In Greek mythology projections were rife. The vices and emotions of men assumed divine proportions.

If we reject the impassible God of Greek philosophy and Classical Theism do we then not *ipso facto* revert to the projections of Greek mythology? Is there then any qualitative difference between the wrath of Zeus and the wrath of Yahweh? How can the God of Israel escape the charge of petulance and caprice any more than the gods of Olympus? In his discussion of divine emotions the Jewish theologian, Abraham Heschel, makes a vital distinction at this point between pathos and passion: “By passion we mean drunkenness of the mind, an agitation of the soul devoid of reasoned purpose, operating blindly . . . In contrast, pathos was understood not as unreasoned emotion, but as an act formed with intention,

³⁶ Kazo Kitamori, “The Problem of Pain in Christology,” in *Christ and the Younger Churches: Theological Contributions from Africa, Asia, and Latin America* (ed. Georg F. Vicedom; London: SPCK, 1972), 85.

³⁷ Flinn, “The Pathos of God,” 46-47.

³⁸ König, *Here Am I!* 62.

depending on free will, the result of decision and determination.”³⁹ God reacts to human history not with blind passion, but with purposeful pathos.⁴⁰ Moreover, “God’s pathos was not thought of as a sort of fever of the mind which, disregarding the standards of justice, culminates in irrational and irresponsible action. There is justice in all His ways. . . . It is because God is the source of justice that His pathos is ethical.”⁴¹

Both the gods of the Greeks and the God of Israel express emotions, but whereas the former can be guilty of immoral passions, the latter manifests only ethical pathos. As Heschel further explains:

The divine pathos is not merely intentional; it is also transitive. The gods of mythology are self-centered, egotistic. The cowardice of Ares, the incontinence of Aphrodite, the lusts of Zeus, the jealousy of the gods, are reflexive passions. . . . Pathos, on the other hand, is not a self-centered and self-contained state; it is always, in prophetic thinking, directed outward; it always expresses a relation to man. It is therefore not one of God’s attributes as such. It has a transitive rather than a reflexive character, not separated from history.”⁴²

If the Old Testament references to the emotions of God are not projections, should they perhaps be regarded as accommodations to finite, human understanding? Heschel reasons as follows:

³⁹ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (2 vols.; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975), 2:4.

⁴⁰ According to Cole, “The Living God,” 24, a distinction of this kind can be found as early as Tertullian who distinguished between *motus* (‘emotion’) and *sensus* (‘feeling’) on the one hand and *passiones* (‘passions’ [which subvert character]) on the other. For Tertullian, God has emotions and feelings but not passions. This distinction appears to underlie some of the Protestant confessions coming out of the Reformation. For example, both *The Thirty-Nine Articles* (Art. 1) and *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (2:1) describe God as “without body, parts, or passions.” Charles Sherlock, *God on the Inside: Trinitarian Spirituality* (Canberra: Acorn Press, 1991), 69-70, comments on the expression: “There is . . . an important truth in saying that the God of Jesus is ‘without passions’. This God is not fickle or capricious, swayed by the latest fad, but consistent, dependable, and faithful. Jesus shows us that God is not unfeeling, distant, static.”

⁴¹ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:5.

⁴² Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:5, 6.

The statements about pathos are not a compromise – ways of accommodating higher meanings to the lower level of human understanding. They are rather the accommodation of words to higher meanings. Words of psychological denotations are endowed with a theological connotation. In the biblical expressions of divine emotions, which are always morally conditioned and morally required, the religious consciousness experiences a sense of super-human power rather than a conception of resemblance to man.⁴³

Anthropopathic expressions in Scripture should therefore not be understood as divine accommodations in the face of human limitations, but rather the reverse. Heschel continues:

The idea of the divine pathos combining absolute selflessness with supreme concern for the poor and the exploited can hardly be regarded as the attribution of human characteristics. Where is the man who is endowed with such characteristics? Nowhere in the Bible is man characterized as merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abundant in love and truth, keeping love to the thousandth generation. Pathos is a thought that bears a resemblance to an aspect of divine reality as related to the world of man. As a theological category, it is a genuine insight into God's relatedness to man, rather than a projection of human traits into divinity, as found for example in the god images of mythology. . . . Absolute selflessness and mysteriously undeserved love are more akin to the divine than to the human. And if these are characteristics of human nature, then man is endowed with attributes of the divine.⁴⁴

God is intimately affected by events in history. For all its sublimity, God's pathos is therefore neither incomprehensible nor irrational, but "is a state

⁴³ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:51.

⁴⁴ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:51. What Heschel intends as a rhetorical question is answered by König, *Here Am I!* 78: "Heschel has rightly asked . . .: Where is the man that exhibits the human characteristics ascribed to God e.g. that he is loving, gracious, prepared to change and forgive (in contrast to Jonah, who was angry about this), one who cannot find it in his heart to destroy the people even when they richly deserve it? In answer to Heschel I would point to the man, Jesus Christ. *The anthropomorphisms in the Bible represent the proclamation about God in terms of the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is the most profound reason why they must be judged differently from the anthropomorphisms current in Israel's environment.*" [italics his]

which the prophet is able to comprehend morally as well as emotionally.”⁴⁵ Yet when the prophet seeks to describe divine pathos in human language, he can never do it justice:

The Bible speaks in the language of man. It deals with the problems of man, and its terms are borrowed from the vocabulary of the people. It has not coined many words, but it has given new meaning to borrowed words. The prophets had to use anthropomorphic language in order to convey His nonanthropomorphic Being. . . . It is precisely the challenge involved in using inadequate words that drives the mind beyond all words. Any pretension to adequacy would be specious and a delusion . . . One must not forget that all our utterances about Him are woefully inadequate. But when taken to be allusions rather than descriptions, understatements rather than adequate accounts, they are aids in evoking our sense of His realness.⁴⁶

Heschel has demonstrated convincingly that the anthropopathic expressions about God in the Old Testament are neither projections nor accommodations. By reversing the direction of the language of accommodation he has added a striking dimension to the discussion. The question still remains, however, whether there is a sense in which the anthropopathisms (if after Heschel they may still be called such) say anything about God that is of ontological significance. In speaking of the inadequacy of human language has Heschel in fact advanced the debate beyond the oft-quoted words of John Calvin?

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking [anthropomorphisms] do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.⁴⁷

A fresh perspective can be thrown on these age-old questions if proper use is made of a hermeneutical key that is given in the opening chapter of the

⁴⁵ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:7.

⁴⁶ Heschel, *The Prophets* 2:56-57.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* 1:121.

Old Testament, namely the creation of man and woman as the image of God.

4. *The Image of God*

According to König, one of the great deficiencies in the traditional treatment of the biblical anthropomorphisms (an approach of which Calvin was a leading representative) is its failure to take seriously the concept of the image of God. It is possible to dispense with the language of accommodation for the simple reason that God and man “suit each other, at least to the degree that it is fitting to speak of God in human terms, *because* man has been created in the image of God.”⁴⁸ König argues his point forcefully, insisting that God *must* be compared to man, as man is his likeness and image. Working from this premise he draws a bold conclusion which, if valid, has shattering implications for classical theology that has its roots in Greek philosophy: “because man is made in the image of God it is possible to speak of God in human terms, and to do so most appropriately. In contrast, it is inappropriate to speak of God in metaphysical and transcendental terms.”⁴⁹

This claim is followed by a strong qualification. God can indeed be spoken of in human terms, but “only in terms of man as God willed and intended him to be, and not in terms of man the sinner.”⁵⁰ This explains the limitations that Scripture places upon anthropomorphic language. The distinction is a useful one and again contrasts Yahweh to the Greek gods and other pagan deities who often committed the most abhorrent sins. Biblical anthropomorphisms are also circumspect in that they attribute neither birth nor death, nor sexual functions, to God. These limitations are significant and form a strong argument against the suggestion that God was merely a product or projection of Israel’s thinking.⁵¹

König’s argument over-reaches itself, however, when he refuses to exclude the human body from the image of God. On the basis of the Scriptures’ use of both spiritual and physical anthropomorphisms König declares: “There

⁴⁸ König, *Here Am I!* 102.

⁴⁹ König, *Here Am I!* 104.

⁵⁰ König, *Here Am I!* 107.

⁵¹ Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (tr. Dirk W. Jellema; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 79: “In all such anthropomorphisms, Israel carefully respected the boundary beyond which God would be ‘humanized,’ subject to all the ambiguous, capricious, dark and changeable aspects of man.”

is no difference between the way in which reference is made to the love and repentance of God and the way in which his hands, or eyes, or ears are spoken of.”⁵² The refusal to make such a basic distinction soon leads to difficulties, with König making the implausible claim, “I find no valid theological reason for saying that God cannot have eyes, or ears or hands.”⁵³ One problem leads to the next, and he admits that it is “difficult to conceptualise an *uncreated* mouth or eye or ear.”⁵⁴ His concept of “uncreated reality” injects a very speculative element into the debate.⁵⁵ For a scholar who makes such fine distinctions elsewhere, it is surprising that König does not distinguish between anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms. Had he done so, he would have avoided conclusions which can only be described as a theological embarrassment in what is otherwise a convincing and penetrating presentation.

In spite of the above oversight, König is certainly correct in discovering the theological grounds for biblical anthropomorphisms in the concept of the image of God. But his argument needs further refinement. If with Cole we distinguish between anthropomorphisms (which refer to the human physical form and are to be understood metaphorically) and anthropopathisms (which are also used of human emotions and cognitions and can be taken at face value),⁵⁶ the way is open to making meaningful and realistic statements about the emotions of God. Because of the concept of the image of God such language is analogical, not in the sense of being metaphorical, but – to quote Heschel once more – because it involves “the accommodation of words to higher meanings.”⁵⁷

The image of God, however, is not the only hermeneutical key that the Old Testament provides for understanding its references to the divine emotions. The other key is the covenant. The image of God is not to be regarded as an abstraction, but it comes to its sharpest expression and loftiest fulfilment in humanity’s relationship with God. In Scripture this relationship is covenantal in nature. Uniquely the image of God, humans have “been

⁵² König, *Here Am I!* 80.

⁵³ König, *Here Am I!* 81.

⁵⁴ König, *Here Am I!* 81.

⁵⁵ Berkouwer handles the issue far more guardedly: “Scripture never makes a distinction between man’s spiritual and bodily attributes in order to limit the image of God to the spiritual, as furnishing the only possible analogy between man and God” (*Image of God*, 77).

⁵⁶ Cole, “The Living God,” 16-17, 22-23.

⁵⁷ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:51.

rightly spoken of as the crown of creation, and the covenant as the goal of creation.”⁵⁸

5. A Covenantal Perspective

Created as God’s image-bearers man and woman were also his covenant partners. Although the actual word for ‘covenant’ (ברית) does not occur before Gen 6:18, it is clear that the content of the covenant was present in the relationship between God and humankind from the very beginning. In the words of S. G. De Graaf:

In Genesis 2 we read about the establishment of a covenant. The objection that there is no literal or explicit mention of a covenant in this chapter carries no weight, for all the elements of a covenant are to be found here. . . . Without covenant, there is no religion, no conscious fellowship between man and God, no exchange of love and faithfulness. Without the covenant, man would be just an instrument in God’s hand. When God created man, He had more than an instrument in mind: He made a creature that could respond to Him. Only if man was capable of responding would he be able to assume his position as partner in a covenant. Without a covenant, God would have only claims and man only obligations.⁵⁹

This understanding depends of course on the definition of covenant that we adopt. As Heschel has pointed out, a covenant is not to be confused with a contract, as the idea of contract was unknown to the Hebrews.⁶⁰ Rather, “what obtains between God and Israel must be understood, not as a legal, but as a personal relationship, as participation, involvement, tension. God’s life interacts with the life of his people. To live in the covenant is to partake of the fellowship of God and His people.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ König, *Here Am I!* 103.

⁵⁹ S. G. De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance* (trans. H. Evan Runner and Elisabeth W. Runner, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 1:36.

⁶⁰ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:10; cf. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 15: “Both biblical and extra-biblical evidence point to the unilateral form of covenantal establishment. No such thing as bargaining, bartering, or contracting characterizes the divine covenants of Scripture. The sovereign Lord of heaven and earth dictates the terms of his covenant.”

⁶¹ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:10.

Flinn has defined this language of relationship and fellowship more sharply: “The essence of covenant is companionship, friendship, intimate communion – a reciprocal sharing of one another’s lives, as in a marriage. While a covenant does not *manufacture* such communion and shared identity, it is designed to express and perpetuate the intimacy that is already felt by the parties concerned.”⁶² Kline has also highlighted the relational character of biblical covenants: “Every divine-human covenant in Scripture involves a sanction-sealed commitment to maintaining a particular relationship or follow a stipulated course of action. In general, then, a covenant may be defined as a relationship under sanctions.”⁶³ In the term ברית the nuances and differing emphases make it difficult to arrive at a definition that will fit every given instance. Nevertheless the fundamental element within the concept is clear, namely “a close interpersonal relationship of love and living communion between persons, rather than a contractual, mercantile arrangement between parties for mutual benefit.”⁶⁴

On the above understanding of the covenant concept, the relationship between God and Adam can certainly be understood as covenantal.⁶⁵ This

⁶² Flinn, “The Pathos of God,” 11.

⁶³ Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 16; cf. William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 20: “. . . covenants presupposed a set of existing relationships to which by formal ceremony they gave binding expression.”

⁶⁴ Flinn, “The Pathos of God,” 33; cf. Robertson, *Covenants*, 7: “By the covenant, persons become committed to one another.” *Contra* John H. Walton, *Covenant: God’s Purpose, God’s Plan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 20: “The purpose of election is certainly relational, but that does not mean that the purpose of the covenant is relational. The goal of God’s plan is relationship, but there are objectives along the way that have their own sub-purposes. Likewise, there is no doubt that one of the functions of the covenant is relational. But the fact that the covenant has a purpose beyond that relationship with Israel is evidenced in the contexts in which God carries on the program ‘for his own name’s sake,’ not because of Israel or his relationship with them.” Against this it can be argued that election cannot be artificially separated from the covenant, since election is actualised through the covenant (Deut 7:6-12). If the purpose of election is relational, it follows that the covenant has the same purpose.

⁶⁵ Geerhardus Vos has reasoned in the opposite direction: “If man already stood in covenant relation to God before the fall, then it is to be expected that the covenant idea will also dominate in the work of redemption. God cannot simply let go of the ordinance which he once instituted, but much rather displays his glory in that he

point can also be supported exegetically. The first occurrence of the word בְּרִית is in Gen 6:18 where God says to Noah:

וְהִקְמַתִּי אִתְּךָ בְּרִית אֶתְּךָ : “But I will establish My covenant with you.”

The *hip'il* of the verb קָם (literally meaning ‘cause to stand’) that is used here, and also in Gen 9:11, 17; 17:7, 19, does not indicate the initiation, but rather the confirmation, of the covenant.⁶⁶ The covenant that God is confirming with Noah was the covenant that had already been made at creation. As Peter Gentry explains: “When God says that he is confirming or establishing his covenant with Noah, he is saying that his commitment to his creation, the care of the creator to preserve, provide for, and rule over all that he has made including the blessings and ordinances that he initiated with Adam and Eve and their family are now to be with Noah and his descendants.”⁶⁷

In the covenantal language of Gen 6-9 Gentry detects parallels with the story of creation. Dominant ideas, key words, parallel sequences of actions, and similar themes link the two accounts. From this he concludes that the flood story is a new creation and that Noah is a new Adam: “If we compare Genesis 1 and Genesis 9 we can see that the blessing and commission given to Noah is the same as that given to Adam adapted and modified somewhat to suit a fallen world.”⁶⁸

Another new start is made with Abram. Abram and his family constitute another Adam, and Gen 12 is a new creation. His children are God’s true humanity, and their homeland is the new Eden.⁶⁹ Hence the covenant with Abraham becomes the basis for all God’s dealings with the entire human race:

carries it through despite man’s sin and apostasy.” (*The Covenant in Reformed Theology* [trans. W. Van Gemeren and S. Voorwinde; publ. privately by K. M. Campbell, Philadelphia, 1971], 10)

⁶⁶ From the form of the verb Dumbrell concludes that “the institution of a covenant is not being referred to but rather its perpetuation.” (*Covenant and Creation*, 26)

⁶⁷ Peter J. Gentry, “He Gave Us a Story” (unpublished paper presented at the Reformed Theological College, Geelong, Vic., 3 September 1998), 4.

⁶⁸ Gentry, “He Gave Us a Story,” 4.

⁶⁹ “Israel in Canaan is presented [in Deuteronomy] in terms analogous to Adam in Eden – created outside the land, placed in the land, placed under obligations by which the land was to be kept, and yet finally to forfeit the land.” (Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 126)

So the covenant with Abraham is the basis for delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt (Deut 7:7-9). As Abraham's family becomes a great nation, God makes a covenant with the nation at Sinai, so that the nation can be the new Adam, his true humanity. The Agreement or Covenant at Sinai will enable the nation to display to the rest of the world within its covenant community the kind of relationships first with God and then with one another that God intended originally for all of humanity.⁷⁰

The covenant at Sinai in turn becomes the basis for the covenant with David. The king is the administrator and mediator of the covenant, and represents God's rule to the people while also representing God's people as a whole (2 Sam 7:22-24).

As the story of the covenant unfolds, it is marked by divine faithfulness on the one hand and human unfaithfulness on the other. It is this tension within the covenant relationship that provides the context in which God's emotions operate. The covenant defines the setting for the divine pathos. As H. M. Kuitert has noted: "Yahweh's wrath, his mercy, love etc. . . . proclaim him as Israel's covenant partner."⁷¹ The anthropopathisms of the Old Testament are therefore not the language of ontology but of relationship, or (to borrow Heschel's terms) not the language of *essence* but of *presence*.⁷² As Flinn concludes: "Though not ontological language, anthropopathic expressions are most definitely *covenantal* language and we should seek to understand and appreciate them within this framework."⁷³

Yahweh's regret and grief that has so troubled interpreters of Gen 6:6 can best be understood in the light of the covenant at creation that humanity had so flagrantly disregarded (Gen 6:5). The dire unfaithfulness of his covenant partner is the cause of deep sorrow to God. This is no mere metaphor but eloquently demonstrates that the disloyalty of his covenant breaking image-bearers affects him at the deepest level. His sheer covenant loyalty, epitomised in the word חסד ('goodness,' 'kindness') goes a long way towards explaining God's many expressions of emotion in the Old

⁷⁰ Gentry, "He Gave Us a Story," 13.

⁷¹ H. M. Kuitert, *De mensvormigheid Gods: Een dogmatisch-hermeneutische studie over de anthropomorfismen van de Heilige Schrift* (Kampen: Kok, 1962), 225 [translation mine].

⁷² Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:55.

⁷³ Flinn, "The Pathos of God," 64.

Testament. It is out of *love* that he enters into the covenant (Deut 7:6-13; Jer 31:1-3; Hos 11:1-4).⁷⁴ His *jealousy* or *zeal* arises from the intensity and exclusiveness of the covenant bond (Exod 20:4-6; 34:12-16; Num 25:11-13; Deut 4:23, 24). When his partner breaks the covenant he reacts with *anger/wrath* (Exod 32:10-13; Lev 26:14-33; Num 25:1-5; Deut 31:16, 17; Josh 7:1-26; Judg 2:20; 1 Kings 11:9-11; 2 Kings 17:7-18; Ezek 16:8-63; Hos 8:1, 5). Subsequently it is in *compassion* that he restores the covenant relationship (Exod 33:19; 34:6; Deut 30:3; Neh 9:5-38; Is 54:1-10; Hos 2:14-23; Zech 10:6). Upon restoration he again *rejoices* and *delights* in his covenant partner (Deut 30:9, 10; Is 42:1-6; Jer 32:40, 41).

From the above discussion it is clear that the covenant *concept* can operate even where the word ‘covenant’ (בריה) itself does not occur. This is seen primarily in the early chapters of Genesis, but also in as pivotal a passage as 2 Sam 7 where the Davidic covenant is instituted. Any word study of בריה will therefore have its limitations. Even so, there are occasions when explicit references to the term tend to cluster and these could be significant. Of potentially even greater relevance could be such clustering in conjunction with a clustering of references to God’s emotions. It is precisely this combination that we find in Deuteronomy. According to our calculations בריה occurs 23x, and there are 59 references to divine emotions (compared to the remainder of the Pentateuch where the figures are 45 and 38 respectively). In Deuteronomy the correlation between the covenant emphasis and divine emotions would therefore appear to be particularly strong. The book represents a high point in covenant revelation⁷⁵ as well as

⁷⁴ “God’s *’ahabah* (love) for Israel is the very basis and the only cause of the existence of the Covenant between God and Israel. *’Ahabah* is the cause of the covenant; *chesed* is the means of its continuance.” (H. N. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* [Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997; copyright 1944], 95).

⁷⁵ According to Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 28: “Deuteronomy is a covenant renewal document which in its total structure exhibits the classic legal form of the suzerainty treaties of the Mosaic age.” Furthermore, “Yahweh is . . . the Suzerain who gives the covenant and Moses is his viceregent and the covenant mediator” (30). In that he has comprehensively included all of Deuteronomy in comparisons with the treaty from which he has drawn, “Kline’s view . . . seems a little contrived” (Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 116). In the interests of accuracy Dumbrell therefore modifies Kline’s approach: “Deuteronomy is covenant *renewal* and we have no parallel in the Ancient Near East for a similar use of treaty form to renew the same arrangement. There is no reason, of course, why a general form current in Moses’

a high point in the expression of God's emotions. In terms of the covenant Deuteronomy provides the paradigm by which subsequent Old Testament history can be conjugated.⁷⁶ This perspective is particularly prominent in chapters 29-30 where the covenant is renewed on the plains of Moab.⁷⁷ Breaking the covenant incurs divine anger, jealousy, and wrath (29:20, 23, 24, 27, 28), but after the blessing and the curse come restoration and divine compassion (30:1-3) and the promise that the Lord will once again rejoice over his people (30:9). This is precisely how events transpired in the later history of Israel (cf. 1 Kings 8:46-53).⁷⁸ While a general pattern may be detected, divine wrath is expressed par excellence with the exile. However, beyond the exile comes restoration which is in turn accompanied by divine compassion and love. The theme of restoration is particularly prominent in Isaiah and Jeremiah, and it is precisely within this context that there is a strong emphasis on divine compassion (Is 49:8-13; 54:7-10; 60:10; Jer 12:14, 15; 30:18; 31:15-20; 33:23-26; 42:12).

From the above overview it would appear that in the Old Testament God's emotions are not expressed randomly, but follow an observable pattern. They are set within a covenant framework. God feels most strongly about those with whom he has entered into a covenant relationship. In Genesis, for example, the first references to the emotions of God (6:6, 7) would appear to be related to his covenant with creation. The few remaining references to God's emotions in Genesis flow out of his covenant with Abraham and would seem to be directed to him personally (18:30, 32), his extended family (19:16), or his descendants (43:14). In the remainder of the

day could not have been adapted to the particular circumstances of its Deuteronomic use" (116).

⁷⁶ As Kline, *Treaty*, 34, has observed: "Worthy of parenthetical comment is the fact that the Mosaic curses and blessings provided the outline for the eschatological message of the prophets. In the nature of the case the blessings and curses of a covenant whose lord was Yahweh, sovereign Judge of history, could not but be prophecy."

⁷⁷ The continuity of this covenant with those preceding it is significant: "The covenant in Moab renewed the covenant at Sinai, which renewed the covenant with Abraham, which renewed the covenant with Adam (cf. Gen. 3:15; Deut. 5:2, 3)." (Kline, *Treaty*, 129-130) More specifically the basic theological aim of Deuteronomy "is to unite the Sinai and Abrahamic covenants, to marry nation and land" (Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 117).

⁷⁸ "The remarkable preview in Deuteronomy 28-30 of Israel's history, especially of the far-off exile, has been a major stumblingblock to the recognition of the Mosaic origin of this document by naturalistic higher criticism." (Kline, *Treaty*, 124)

Pentateuch God's emotions are directed to the children of Israel in the light of the covenant at Sinai. Following the covenant with David it seems significant that God's love is expressed very personally to Solomon (2 Sam 12:24, 25; 1 Kings 10:9).

There are also instances in the Old Testament where God expresses emotion towards those who do not belong to his covenant people. Most striking are the examples in the closing chapters of Jeremiah, namely his fierce anger against Elam (49:37) and his indignation against Babylon (50:13, 25), but also his sorrow over Moab (48:31, 32, 36). The first two examples can probably be explained in terms of the curse associated with the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3). The last example is more difficult, but the fact that the Moabites were related to Abraham via Lot could provide a clue (Gen 19:36, 37). The enemies of the covenant people were the objects of God's wrath, whereas he sorrowed over those who were their relatives.

God's emotions need therefore not be considered atomistically, but can be discussed most fruitfully within a covenant framework. It is within the intimacy of the covenant relationship that they most frequently come to expression and within which they are also least likely to be misunderstood. As Flinn explains:

Rather than dismissing these expressions as divine accommodation to human limitation and inadequacy, we should appreciate them for what they are - revelations of the characteristics of God in his immanence – specifically his immanence in relation to the covenant bond. Anthropopathic language, rather than being interpreted in a way that dualistically removes God from our understanding as 'wholly other' in [*sic*] Greek philosophical sense, actually brings Yahweh closer to his people by revealing how and why he relates to them the way he does. . . . [T]he divine emotions set forth a God who goes to incomprehensible lengths to maintain the covenant relationship with his people and in this sense they far exceed what human beings are capable of comprehending, let alone expressing.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Flinn, "The Pathos of God," 91.

Conclusion

The divine passibility debate which erupted with force after World War 2 has successfully challenged former ways of speaking about the emotions of God. He cannot simply be humanised or personified, nor can his pathos be explained away. With the erosion of the old consensus new questions have emerged. One of the healthier consequences of recent debate has been that it has opened up new avenues of theological exploration.

Our discussion has afforded us the liberty of not being impaled on the horns of the passible-impassible dilemma. The grief, sorrows, and pains that God suffers are emotions that can be understood covenantally. As the sovereign Lord of the covenant he is not the hapless victim of circumstance whose emotions have spun out of control. There is nothing beyond him or bigger than him that would cause him to suffer. Rather, by entering into a covenant with his people, he has placed himself in a position of vulnerability. With love as the motive for instituting the covenant, he enters into the lives of his covenant partners and refuses to protect himself from the frustrations that such a relationship might entail. Appropriately therefore the Old Testament pictures God as the divine Bridegroom /Husband (Is 54, Ezek 16) and as the heavenly Father (Jer 31, Hos 11). In these roles he opens himself to rejection and suffering, but also to the joys and delights that cannot be experienced apart from such relationships.

It would therefore be more accurate to speak with Heschel of the *pathos* rather than of the *suffering* of God, as 'suffering' carries the connotation of being the experience of the unwilling victim rather than of the active participant. This qualification does not detract from the reality of God's emotions, but rather enhances them. At best our emotions are but shadows of his. Unlike their human counterparts they are sinless, pure and holy. Never are they tainted by mixed motives and questionable agendas. The driving force behind the many and varied emotions of God in the Old Testament is his unswerving loyalty to the covenant.