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Divine Suffering And Passibility: Terence Fretheim And Jürgen Moltmann

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DIVINE SUFFERING AND PASSIBILITY:
TERENCE FRETHERM AND JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN

A Guided Research Paper
Presented to Professor Mark Powell
Harding School of Theology
Memphis, Tennessee

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
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Contents

Chapter 1	Introduction	1
Chapter 2	Terence Fretheim	13
Chapter 3	Jürgen Moltmann	40
Chapter 4	Conclusion	70
Bibliography		78

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the fictional story, *The Shack*, Mack, the main character, meets with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in a shack where his daughter was brutally murdered.¹ The purpose of this meeting is for Mack to see how much God deeply loves him even in the midst of his suffering. God comes to help bring faith back into Mack's doubting heart. At one pivotal moment in the story, Mack questions whether God can fully understand the pain that he feels in losing a child and offering forgiveness to the one that murdered her. God, personified as a woman in the book, calmly looks at Mack and turns over her wrists to reveal the marks of the nails present in her own body.² It is then she reminds Mack, "Don't ever think that what my Son chose to do didn't cost us dearly. Love always leaves a significant mark."³ God fully knows and understands the great depth of suffering, not only of the Son, but also of the people He so greatly loves.

A God that suffers alongside his creation brings great comfort to the people of God and the world at large, but this theology of divine suffering must be examined in light of God's infinite, divine nature. A suffering God experiences emotions and pain, even as the divine. This idea has led to the belief that God is passible in his divine nature,

¹ William P. Young, *The Shack* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007).

² This statement borders on the doctrine of Modalism by implying that the Father dies on the cross with the Son. While that is not the stance of this paper, this illustration demonstrates the shared suffering of the Father and the Son on the cross.

³ Young, 146.

and therefore, able to experience the depths of emotions (joy, sorrow, pain, suffering) with creation. Yet, God is transcendent over creation—He is God, not human. Divine suffering and passibility must hold intact the immanent nature of a holy God in order to be true.

Divine Passibility

Passibility covers two broad ideas.⁴ First, it relates to one being susceptible to certain experiences (sensitivity, vulnerability, etc.). Secondly, passibility represents the emotions themselves (emotion, passion, sympathy). Divine passibility represents more the former where God is vulnerable with creation, and therefore, capable of experiencing emotions with creatures.

Divine passibility poses a challenge when compared to other divine attributes. Greek philosophy claims the divine is incapable of suffering otherwise it is no longer divine.⁵ This led to the long-standing classical belief that God is impassible, and therefore, unable to suffer or be affected by emotions (*apathetic*). Suffering in this context becomes a negative attribute and a sign of weakness in God. God's *apatheia* is, as Hart describes, an "infinite fullness of perfect love."⁶ This love does not require an

⁴ Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility, and Corporeality* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Pub. House, 1992), 135.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 21.

⁶ David Bentley Hart, "Impassibility as Transcendence: On the Infinite Innocence of God," In *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas J. White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 301.

external force of emotion to deeply know and love creation. Furthermore, Highfield portrays impassibility as the means that “nothing can disturb God’s heart or rob him of his joy.”⁷ God’s impassibility is grounded in his immutability and his transcendence.

On the other hand, one of the leading passibilitists, Jürgen Moltmann, objects and sees divine *apatheia* to suggest that God is *incapable* of feelings and being affected by outside influences.⁸ An apathetic God is insensitive and unchangeable, and therefore, distant and uninvolved with creation. This view of God raises many questions regarding God’s care and love for creation. When faced with suffering, the world is left on its own accord. God becomes one who is far removed from the daily struggles of the world. William Temple states, “no idol has been found so hard to destroy” as Aristotle’s apathetic God.⁹

Within scripture, divine suffering is present throughout the pages of the Old Testament and reaches up to the cross in the New Testament. God not only suffers for his people, but also calls his prophets and leaders to share in his sufferings.¹⁰ Divine suffering impacts the way God’s people understand their significance to Him and plays an important role in building faith within the body of Christ.

⁷ Ron Highfield, *Great Is the Lord: Theology for the Praise of God*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub., 2008), 375.

⁸ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 267.

⁹ William Temple, *Christus Veritas* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1924), 269.

¹⁰ Is. 22:4; Is. 53; Jer. 9:1, 10, 15:15; Amos 5:16; Micah 1:10; Lk. 17:25, 19:41; Rom. 8:17; 1 Pe. 2:21.

The question remains: Does divine suffering imply a weakness or a strength in God's character? If God's suffering is a positive attribute, then can God remain impassible—and therefore perfect—and still suffer? Furthermore, why does God call his people to suffer and what does suffering teach them about him?

Significance of the Problem

Until the end of the nineteenth century, impassibility was an uncontested belief held by the church.¹¹ However, the events of World War II left a yearning in the hearts of Christians to seek a God that was near to them in their suffering. This shift in mindset encouraged theologians to revisit the classical belief of the impassibility of God.¹² Following this shift, the pendulum of contemporary belief swung heavy towards the side of God's passibility with emerging works like Jürgen Moltmann's *Crucified God* and *The Trinity and the Kingdom*.¹³

Yet, many remain unsatisfied that divine suffering requires God to be passible.¹⁴ For classical theism, divine passibility presents a God that is tossed back and forth by

¹¹ Daniel Castelo, "Moltmann's Dismissal of Divine Impassibility: Warranted?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 4 (2008): 397.

¹² An early work that questioned impassibility was Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). An early work that defended impassibility was J.K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1926).

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

¹⁴ Contemporary examples include Daniel Castelo, Paul Gavriluk, Paul Fiddes, and Thomas Weinandy. These authors do not see the traditional belief on impassibility to

human emotions and brings into question God's transcendence and immanence. The greater question within this argument is the metaphysical one—does God experience human emotions? If so, this would imply a weakness of his divine nature because human emotions are imperfect, leading to the need for God to be impassible.

Another concern of impassibilitists is that divine passibility is grounded in narcissism.¹⁵ Because of people's need for compassion, they create a God that is overly compassionate in order to comfort themselves. In this way, the world becomes the center point for understanding God. This anthropocentric view of God is a form of idolatry by creating a God that people design instead of worshipping God for who He is. Gavriilyuk cautions to ascribe this "unrestricted passibility" to God.¹⁶ Not all human emotions are ascribed to God and God is not controlled by his emotions. This distinction helps in placing God as the center point for one's theology and understanding of divine suffering.

imply that God does not experience some form of suffering and seek to clarify this common misunderstanding. This idea is further explained later in the paper.

¹⁵ Mark Stephen Smith, "'Only the Non-Suffering God Can Help': Recovering the Glory of Divine Impassibility." *Churchman* 126, no. 2 (2012): 148 and Dennis W. Jowers, "The Theology of the Cross as Theology of the Trinity: A Critique of Jürgen Moltmann's Staurocentric Trinitarianism." *Tyndale Bulletin* 52, no. 2 (2001): 251.

¹⁶ Paul L. Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.

Classic versus Contemporary Thought

The contemporary debate on divine passibility has been influenced by four major proposals.¹⁷ First, classical theism holds the longest standing view that God is impassible.¹⁸ For classical theists, divine impassibility sets God apart from the pagan deities. God's transcendence and goodness remain intact because of his immutability and perfection. One key doctrine in classical theism is the two natures of Christ. On the cross, the one person Jesus suffers and dies in his human nature but not in his divine nature. In this way, the Triune God remains impassible even through the death of the Son. Furthermore, the *apathetic* God masters all passions within himself and represents perfection through his love.¹⁹ God's *apatheia* represents his strength as the true God.

Secondly, the "death of God" theology came as a critical response to classical theism. These theologians argue the dictator God is dead, but the God of the cross is very much alive.²⁰ Their theology is centered on the death of Jesus which represents the death of God. Divine suffering demonstrates the absence or helplessness of God. When faced with personal suffering, the world can no longer turn to God for help or comfort. The

¹⁷ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 12-15. Fiddes gives an excellent overview of these four major influences.

¹⁸ Divine impassibility was an uncontested tenant held by the East and West during the first five centuries of the emerging church. See Castelo, "Moltmann's Dismissal of Divine Impassibility: Warranted?" 397.

¹⁹ David Bentley Hart, "No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility." *Pro Ecclesia* 11, no. 2 (2002): 193.

²⁰ Fiddes, 14. For more on the 'death of God' theology see Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 201.

absence and death of God leaves the world on its own. This theology led to a rise in atheism and bitterness through the difficulties of world wars and global hardships.

Thirdly, A.N. Whitehead's work on process theology has had a heavy influence on the passibility debate. For Whitehead, God is the "absolute wealth of potentiality."²¹ He exists alongside creation and experiences time and change with them. God's nature is dipolar allowing for parts of him to remain unchanged while others are affected by the actions of creation. God's primordial nature sets him apart as eternal where He is free and complete. Although God experiences human suffering, his freedom allows him to see all things in relation to the beginning of creation and his eternal plan. On the other hand, God's consequent nature is incomplete and dependent on the temporal world. Because God experiences both the good and bad of creation, his consequent nature represents his judgement and his infinite patience. As one that moves in process with creation, God is the "fellow-sufferer who understands."²²

Finally, Jürgen Moltmann's theology of the cross plays a significant role in defense of divine passibility. For Moltmann, Jesus' death is best understood as a death *in* God, not a death *of* God.²³ God remains present with his people through their suffering. On the cross, God experiences true suffering through Jesus and invites others to

²¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1955), 521. For a helpful overview of process theology see Gilles Emery, "The immutability of the God of love and the problem of language concerning the 'suffering of God'," In *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas J. White (Grand Rapids.: Eerdmans, 2009), 38.

²² Whitehead, 532.

²³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 207.

understand their suffering through the cross. God's power is shown in his suffering as one that relates to humanity's struggles and loves them enough to suffer for them. God acts within himself on the cross to suffer and die in order to open himself up for life and freedom for sinners. Divine passibility is grounded in the divine suffering on the cross.

Thomas Weinandy attributes the shift in contemporary theology towards divine passibility to three factors: social and cultural trends, modern interpretation of the Bible, and current trends in philosophy.²⁴ A hurting world needs a God that relates to their struggles and shares their pain. This mindset allowed the theology of divine passibility to quickly take root and grow. While the traditional view on impassibility has had a quieter voice in contemporary discussions, recent works have sought to clarify and defend classical theism. These recent proposals have resulted in the emergence of three basic positions in the contemporary passibility debate: traditionalists, constructivists, and passibilitists.²⁵

Traditionalists hold to the classical teachings of divine impassibility.²⁶ They argue in support of the early church fathers who sought to qualify divine impassibility in order to maintain the transcendent nature of God. Because He is transcendent, God cannot change (immutable) or experience emotion (impassible). For Traditionalists, a passible

²⁴ Thomas G Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?" *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 35.

²⁵ Daniel Castelo describes two camps in the passibility debate: traditionalists and constructivists. I have added the third category, passibilitists, for the purposes of this paper. See Daniel Castelo, "Continued Grappling: The Divine Impassibility Debates Today." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 3 (July 2010): 366-367.

²⁶ Traditionalists include Paul Gavrilyuk, David Bentley Hart, and Thomas Weinandy.

God is imperfect and incapable of overcoming evil. Constructivists seek a new perspective on impassibility in light of contemporary discussions.²⁷ They redefine the classical definition of impassibility by differentiating between divine and human emotions. God demonstrates his love for humanity by becoming an active sufferer who is still transcendent over that which causes the suffering. Constructivists attempt to find a middle ground between the classical and contemporary ideas on passibility. Passibilitists reject the classical teachings on impassibility and argue that God experiences and is affected by a range of emotions including suffering.²⁸ God's love is most evident through his suffering. This suffering love manifest itself in the life of the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus on the cross in the New Testament.

Goal of the Paper

This paper will present the theological arguments for divine suffering and passibility from two of the leading passibilitists: Terence Fretheim and Jürgen Moltmann. Terence Fretheim, an Old Testament scholar, sees divine suffering as the place where God is close enough to his people that he experiences their pain and their joy. A key

²⁷ Paul Fiddes belongs to the constructivist camp. Fiddes spent a year studying divine suffering under Jürgen Moltmann at the University of Tübingen. He expresses that his goal is “to speak consistently of a God *who suffers eminently and yet is still God, and a God who suffers universally and yet is still present uniquely and decisively in the sufferings of Christ.*” See Fiddes, 3.

²⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, Terence Fretheim, and Abraham Heschel defend the passibility of God. Abraham Heschel's, *The Prophets*, represents the groundbreaking work on divine suffering and the passibility of God. Heschel emphasizes the *pathos* of God and the role of the prophets. The emotional experiences of the prophets with God allows them to not only hear his voice, but also feel his heart. Both Moltmann and Fretheim are heavily influenced by Heschel's work.

question for Fretheim as he reads Scripture is, “What kind of God?” Fretheim notes, “It is not enough to say that one believes in God. What is important finally is the kind of God in whom one believes.”²⁹ Additionally, Fretheim argues that a God who chooses an intimate relationship with his people also chooses to be changed by that relationship. Fretheim calls this a “relationship of reciprocity” where God and his world depend on each other.³⁰ Fretheim’s theology on divine suffering centers around four key ideas: the significance of divine metaphors, the theophany and the divine presence, the self-limiting God, and the role of the prophet in displaying divine suffering. While God experiences grief and suffering, it never alters his salvific plan. Fretheim states, “God’s grief does not entail being emotionally overwhelmed or embittered by the barrage of rejection. Through it all, God’s faithfulness and gracious purposes remain constant and undiminished.”³¹ In this way, Fretheim presents the suffering of God as one that maintains his sovereignty despite his pain.

Jürgen Moltmann, a leading German theologian, places the cross as the starting point for his theology. For Moltmann, suffering is crucial for understanding God’s power, his love, and his nature. He states,

What sort of being, then, would be a God who was ‘almighty’? He would be a being without experience, a being without destiny and a being who is loved by no one. A man who experiences helplessness, a man who suffers because he loves, a man who can die, is therefore a richer being than an omnipotent God who cannot suffer, cannot love, and cannot die.³²

²⁹ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

³² Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 223.

On the cross, God, through Jesus, shows humanity what it looks like to suffer and invites him to join with him in suffering. On the cross, not only does the Son suffer the loss of the Father, but also the Father suffers the loss of the Son. Moltmann points out, “The grief of the Father here [on the cross] is just as important as the death of the Son.”³³ Moltmann’s theology on divine suffering relies on four key ideas: the freedom of the Triune God, the power of suffering, the suffering of the Father and the Son on the cross, and the passibility of God. Through suffering, mankind can experience the divine passion and be led into the mystery of God where God himself meets us.

My goal in writing is to defend the constructivists’ argument which maintains the impassibility of a suffering God. I will first demonstrate how divine suffering is a positive attribute of God which does not take away from his divine nature. The suffering of God is in itself distinct from human emotions as God maintains perfection even through his grief. I predict that this distinction plays a key role in maintaining the divine attributes alongside divine suffering.

Secondly, I will distinguish between passive and active suffering. Fiddes describes these two as “suffering which befalls and suffering which is chosen.”³⁴ God is an active sufferer, one that freely chooses to suffer for and with his creation. This exercise of divine freedom demonstrates our significance to God and his desire to love us. Suffering does not control or change the divine nature as God himself maintains

³³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 243.

³⁴ Fiddes, 62.

power over suffering. Hence, suffering becomes a place of strength and sovereignty for God.

Finally, I will propose that God invites his people to join with him in active suffering. In choosing to suffer for others, we experience the divine *pathos* and gain a closer look into the heart of God. The Old Testament prophets give a clear picture of the connection between active suffering and the divine presence. This connection is best represented at the cross where God chooses to suffer for the world so we may be made worthy to be in his presence. In this way, we are invited as his people to share in, not only his suffering, but also his glory.

Chapter 2

Terence Fretheim

Terence Fretheim, an Old Testament scholar on the Pentateuch and the prophets, presents a strong argument for divine suffering and passibility. Fretheim grew up within the heritage of Norwegian Lutheran Pietism which emphasizes God's intimate involvement and affectivity by people.¹ His religious background has greatly shaped his theology on the interdependent relationship between God and the world. Additionally, Fretheim's work has been influenced by three developments: the work of Abraham Heschel on the pathos of God, feminist theology, and the contemporary discussions on how the divine experience of the world affects not only the world, but God himself.² Fretheim seeks to regain the picture of the personal nature of God portrayed in the Old Testament who chooses to walk beside his people and experience their joys and sorrows. This loving picture of the Old Testament God connects equally to the God of the New Testament who lovingly sends his Son to redeem creation on the cross. The incarnation, ministry, and cross, which Fretheim labels "central touchstones," are neither different than nor a departure from the portrait of God revealed in the Old Testament.³

After receiving his ThD from Princeton Theological Seminary, Terence Fretheim became the professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary where he has worked for the past fifty years. He has written a plethora of books on the Old Testament, including *The*

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), xvi.

² *Ibid.*, xvi.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

Suffering of God, God and World in the Old Testament, Jeremiah, and Creation Untamed. Fretheim has also written extensively on the topic of suffering in the Old Testament as well as essays on the nature of God in his collected work *What Kind of God?* Fretheim's underlying desire is to know God and make him known to his people. He remains committed to the goodness and righteousness of God which stays consistent throughout history. Fellow Old Testament scholar, Steven Duby, sees this commitment to God's goodness as "vital to the practice of Christian theology and discipleship."⁴ Fretheim's knowledge of the Old Testament texts, namely the prophets, brings an insightful addition to the discussion on divine passibility.

Fretheim's Theology

God is one who "has entered deeply into the human situation and made it his own."⁵ There are two images that demonstrate Israel's understanding of the God-world relationship: monarchical and organismic. A monarchical relationship emphasizes the discontinuity between God and the world where God stands outside the world and does not interfere. This view is widely held by Old Testament scholarship. On the other hand, an organismic relationship is a "relationship of reciprocity" between God and the world.⁶ In this intimate relationship, there is an interdependence between God and mankind. Fretheim states, "The world is not only affected by God; God is affected by the world in

⁴ Steven J. Duby, "'For I Am God, Not a Man': Divine Repentance and the Creator-Creature Distinction," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 12, no. 2 (January 1, 2018): 155.

⁵ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, xv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

both positive and negative ways.”⁷ Fretheim sees the predominant Old Testament perspective to be organismic, where God is intimately involved in the lives of his people.

The relationship between God and the world is best described by the word “relatedness.”⁸ In God’s relatedness to the world, he gives up some aspect of his freedom. “God’s freedom is now most supremely a freedom *for* the world, not a freedom *from* the world.”⁹ This freedom allows human decisions to play a role in the divine plan. There is a temporal distinction between God’s plan and his execution of it on earth. This can best be seen with the call to repentance given by the prophets.¹⁰ During these warnings, God shows his people what will take place if they do not repent. The people have the opportunity to choose differently, and therefore alter the execution of God’s judgement and plan.¹¹ Although events on this earth can be changed by human decision, God’s salvific will remains unchanged and his faithfulness and love are never compromised.¹² There remains a difference between God’s mutability and the mutability of humans. God

⁷ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 35.

⁸ Ibid., 36. Fretheim describes relationality as a fundamental aspect of the divine nature and actions. Furthermore, relational categories are a key to interpreting God’s relationship with realities such as suffering and evil. See Terence E Fretheim, “To Say Something—About God, Evil, and Suffering,” *Word & World* 19, no. 4 (1999): 346.

⁹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰ Isa. 30:8-18; Jer. 4:1-4, 18:13-17, 25:32; Ezek. 22:10-20; Hosea 14:1-9; Amos 5:1-17; Zech. 1:1-6.

¹¹ The story of Jonah and the repentance of Nineveh illustrates this temporal distinction. Here Nineveh’s repentance changes the outcome for the nation. See Jon. 3: 1-10.

¹² Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 44. God’s unchanging salvific will is a key theme for Fretheim. DUBY describes this theme as Fretheim integrating a relational view of God with God’s constancy. See DUBY, 150.

changes based on his love and relationship with his people but not as one that is unstable. Fretheim explains, “To be affected and to interact genuinely does not mean some imperfection in God. In fact, it should be said that not to be able to genuinely respond and interact, not to be open and vulnerable, or refusing to change are signs of imperfection.”¹³

Vulnerability between God and humankind is another key feature of Fretheim’s theology. God shows vulnerability to Israel by giving them his presence and his name. At certain times, God sends his presence in human form as a divine messenger. Fretheim calls these encounters “theophanies” where God becomes most vulnerable with His creation.¹⁴ In addition to his presence, God gives Israel his name. Fretheim states, “Naming makes true encounter and communication possible.”¹⁵ In Exodus 3:14, God tells Moses to tell the people of Israel that “I AM has sent me to you.” Here God makes himself known to Israel, and they have a choice to honor God by his name or to misuse it. Fretheim argues that in giving his name to Israel, God opens himself up to the possibility of suffering.¹⁶ God not only gives the people his name, but demonstrates a deeper vulnerability by calling Israel by his name as the people of Yahweh. Vulnerability is the foundation of a suffering God.

Within Terence Fretheim’s theological perspectives, there are four specific areas that relate to divine suffering and passibility: the significance of Divine metaphors, the

¹³ Terence E Fretheim, “The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10, no. 1 (June 1988): 63.

¹⁴ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 79.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

theophany and divine presence, the self-limiting God, and the role of the prophet in displaying divine suffering. In this next section, I will lay out these four key ideas and their application to divine passibility.

Significant Role of Divine Metaphors for Understanding the Divine Nature

Divine metaphors play a significant role in portraying the heart and character of God. Not only do metaphors guide one's understanding of God, but they also play a role in bringing continuity between the history of God in the Old and New Testament.¹⁷

Schlimm argues that a theologian's approach to divine metaphors directly influences how they characterize God. He states, "Hermeneutics determine theology."¹⁸ This statement holds true for Terence Fretheim.

Metaphors for God in the Old Testament are taken from the human sphere. Examples of divine metaphors include: God's form and function, emotions, mental states, and roles and activities within a family.¹⁹ These anthropomorphic metaphors are the center point of Fretheim's arguments. For the prophets, anthropomorphic language plays an important role in explaining a non-anthropomorphic God.²⁰ While Fretheim agrees

¹⁷ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 5. Fretheim calls this a "decisive continuity" and argues that metaphors are one of the best ways to analyze the continuity between the Old and New Testaments.

¹⁸ Matthew R. Schlimm, "Different Perspectives on Divine Pathos: An Examination of Hermeneutics in Biblical Theology," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (October 2007): 690.

¹⁹ Examples include God speaking (Num. 12:8), rejoicing (Zeph. 3:17), and parenting (Hosea 11:1). See Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 6.

²⁰ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 276. Like Fretheim, Heschel defends the importance of anthropomorphic language for understanding God but sees less continuity between God's divine character and

that metaphors cannot have a “one-to-one correspondence,” they still function in relating to the reality which is God.²¹ For example, the Bible describes a God that suffers, but he does not suffer in the exact way that humans do. In this way, there is an element of both continuity and discontinuity in divine metaphors.²² Both elements play an important part of understanding the nature of God.

Fretheim emphasizes the importance of using a multitude of metaphors when seeking to understand God. There are three varying degrees of correspondence for metaphors: low capacity (God as dry rot, Hosea 5:12), moderate capacity (God as rock, Ps. 31:2-3), and high capacity (God as parent, Hosea 11:1).²³ The low capacity metaphors are used for their surprise or shock value and are less useful in understanding God’s nature. The high capacity metaphors are more communal and relational. They describe our experience and understanding of God and are often used in the life of the community

metaphors than Fretheim. For Heschel, anthropomorphic metaphors demonstrate how God relates to the world but do not show God’s essence. For an excellent analysis of Heschel and Fretheim’s approach to divine metaphors, see Schlimm, 679-680.

²¹ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 8.

²² Fretheim describes this relationship as both a “yes” and “no” claim for metaphors. For example, while the same term (*baloi*) is used for God’s anger and human anger in the Old Testament, God does not share the same emotions with human beings. Anger is an emotion that should be controlled and at times is an appropriate response. God’s anger is always exercised correctly while human anger is not. See Terence E Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God in the Old Testament,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24, no. 2 (December 2002): 6.

²³ G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 154. Caird distinguishes between these levels based on their use and the number of times a particular metaphor is mentioned. The varying degrees have three important applications. First, they help to distinguish between the non-literal and literal interpretations. Second, they differentiate between parable and allegory. Finally, they provide a useful classification of metaphors in the Bible that speak about God. See also, Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 10.

of faith for a long period of time. Within the high capacity metaphors, God takes on “theomorphic terms” rather than anthropomorphic terms— allowing people to reverse the process and look at the human in order to learn what God is like.²⁴

While Fretheim’s theology is greatly shaped by his understanding of metaphors, some scholars see Fretheim to be too literal in his translation of them.²⁵ Anthropomorphic metaphors are better described as accommodations made by God in order to relate to his creation.²⁶ While there is some correspondence between the metaphor and God, the metaphor itself does not speak to God’s nature but rather his outward action and its effects on the world.

Furthermore, when interpreting metaphors, Brewis emphasizes the importance of taking each one in context of God’s transcendent nature and the Bible as a whole. As a transcendent God, his suffering and emotions must be interpreted as one who is over the created order and working within the created order.²⁷ For Schlimm, Fretheim overly

²⁴ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 11.

²⁵ Elizabeth Bellefontaine, “The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective,” *Horizons* 13, no. 1 (1986): 152 and DUBY, 166.

²⁶ Mark Stephen Smith, “‘Only the Non-Suffering God Can Help’: Recovering the Glory of Divine Impassibility,” *Churchman* 126, no. 2 (2012): 149. DUBY also sees metaphors as accommodations that seek to bring understanding to something that may be incomprehensible. See DUBY, 166. Patrick argues that even the imaginary character of YHWH in the Old Testament was an accommodation by God. I would strongly disagree that YHWH was merely an accommodation as this leads to questioning the truthfulness and integrity of God. YHWH is more than an imaginary character; he is the almighty God that makes himself known to Israel. See Dale Patrick, “How Should the Biblical Theologian Go About Constructing a Theological Model: A Debate with Terence Fretheim,” *Encounter* 47, no. 4 (January 1, 1986): 367.

²⁷ Robert D. Brewis, “So Passionate He Is Impassible: Impassibility Defined and Defended,” *Churchman* 131, no. 2 (2017): 127. Brewis argues that because of the transcendent nature of God, all language about God must be seen as analogical and not to be interpreted literally. God’s transcendence does not allow us to know the essence of his

emphasizes the importance of metaphors and “threatens to eclipse the raw power of the text itself.”²⁸ Too much focus on anthropomorphic metaphors leads down the path of making humanity the central aspect of God and not vice versa.²⁹ One must allow space for the mystery of God as Creator whose essence is greater than that of his creation.

Another shortcoming of Fretheim’s use of metaphors is his lack of clarity on what descriptions of God hold the most value.³⁰ For Duby, the Creator-creation distinction better enables one to know which attribute or action can be literally applied to God. This distinction helps in “identifying something constitutive of or proper to one thing and not another.”³¹ There is a critical distinction between Creator and creature when approaching the text. The Israelites are not confused by the divine metaphors in the Old Testament because they have an understanding of what is proper and not to God. This same strategy, an awareness of the transcendence of God and what is appropriate thereto, remains applicable for interpreting divine metaphors. Dale Patrick emphasizes the importance of

grief. See also Thomas G Weinandy, “Does God Suffer?” *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 37 and Patrick, “How Should the Biblical Theologian Go About Constructing a Theological Model: A Debate with Terence Fretheim,” 364.

²⁸ Schlimm, 693.

²⁹ Brewis, 126 and Schlimm, 691.

³⁰ While Fretheim does describe the varying degrees of correspondence, it remains difficult to determine the exact importance for each metaphor as there is room for one’s own interpretation. This leads to an emphasis of certain metaphors that become more relevant than others when looking at scripture through our lens of tradition. Schlimm sees Fretheim’s own faith tradition to lend to a greater emphasis on the Christological claims and referencing God in human terms. See Schlimm, 691.

³¹ Duby, 159 and 166. See also Brewis, 127. Both Brewis and Duby both argue for the importance of the Creation-creature distinction when interpreting metaphorical language for God.

paradoxical language when speaking of God. He categorizes biblical God-language as a “dramatic representation.” Within this drama, paradoxes work to describe the different aspects of God’s nature while maintaining his transcendence.³² Patrick, Brewis, Smith, and Weinandy represent the traditional camp on impassibility.

While divine metaphors play a key role in Fretheim’s argument, they are better understood in light of his overall theology of the nature of God displayed throughout the Bible. For example, Fretheim’s use of multiple metaphors helps give a well-rounded picture of the nature of God. Metaphors represent a way in which God comes down to make himself known to creation. Metaphors speak to humans in a language they can understand in order to relate to a God that is beyond their understanding. In this way, metaphors are a demonstration of the consistent nature of God’s love and salvific will found throughout the pages of scripture.

Theophany and the Divine Presence

The presence of God among his people is one of his greatest gifts. In the Old Testament, Israel is given different degrees of God’s presence throughout history. Fretheim states, “These varying intensities of the divine presence are thus related to the varying intensities of human need and experience.”³³ God’s overall presence is constant within the world, yet his specific presence comes at certain times and places. God sets up vehicles for his presence in the Old Testament, such as the tabernacle, both for himself and the people. These vehicles allow him to be intimately present with his creation.

³² Patrick, “How Should the Biblical Theologian Go About Constructing a Theological Model: A Debate with Terence Fretheim,” 365.

³³ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 62.

There are three examples of the divine presence: *accompanying presence*, *tabernacling presence*, and the theophany.³⁴ The accompanying presence is most apparent in the wilderness wanderings where God is present with his people on their journey.³⁵ God's accompanying presence is for all of Israel as they journey to the promised land and learn to trust him as their God. The tabernacling presence represents a specific place where God chooses to dwell among the people.³⁶ This form of presence represents a place of greater vulnerability for God and people as both choose to live together and honor one another in a covenant relationship. If humankind chooses not to honor God's presence by turning to sin and other forms of idolatry, the divine presence will be forced to leave the community of Israel. The loss of the divine presence represents God's wrath towards his people.³⁷

The third form of divine presence is the theophany where God presents himself in a "highly specific, articulate, tangible, formful, and revealing" way.³⁸ Theophanies come

³⁴ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 63.

³⁵ Examples include: Exod. 13:21-22 (Yahweh leads Israel by the pillar of cloud and fire), Exod. 23:20-21 (Yahweh sends a messenger to guard and lead Israel), Exod. 23:22 (Yahweh protects his people on their journey), and Exod. 33:14 (God's presence goes with them).

³⁶ The tabernacle represents this form of divine presence in the Old Testament (Exod. 25: 8-9) while the Lord's Supper demonstrates God's presence in the New Testament (Matt. 26:26-28).

³⁷ Fretheim sees Divine wrath as a distancing of God from his people. While God's presence with Israel may be removed, his eternal salvific will never falters. See Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 66.

³⁸ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 79.

in human form where God shows himself face to face with creation.³⁹ Eichrodt describes these self-manifestation moments as ones where “God’s connection with the world can be most clearly observed.”⁴⁰ Theophanies bring forth concrete imagery from personal experiences in scripture which allows the reader to understand the nature of God. The revealing of God’s presence sets theophanies apart from other situations where God only speaks to the people. Fretheim states, “the intensity of the relationship between speaker and addressee is heightened when bodily presence is involved.”⁴¹ God reveals himself more directly with individuals (i.e. Moses and Jacob) than the community where he takes on a more nebulous form (cloud, smoke). While theophanies are a more intense encounter with the presence of God, they do not take away from his general presence throughout the world.

There are two types of theophanies: God as the divine warrior and God as bearer of the word. God as the divine warrior comes to help Israel in a time of need by inducing terror in the enemy camp.⁴² God is less concerned with speaking to Israel as showing his power and might. On the other hand, God as bearer of the word comes to bring a

³⁹ Other than to Moses, God’s face is revealed to others through a messenger. Walther Eichrodt explains that the ‘angel of God’ (*mal’ ak yhw*) serves in certain cases as the operation of God himself. While this encounter is not the same as the incarnate Christ, it is best seen as a mask or dummy of the overwhelming presence of God. Eichrodt states, “in the quasi-human form of the messenger he [God] can temporarily incarnate himself in order to assure his own that he is indeed immediately at hand.” Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1961), 27.

⁴⁰ Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 15.

⁴¹ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 86.

⁴² Examples include Exod. 14:19-25; Judg. 7:19-23; 2 Kings 19:35; 2 Chron. 20:22-24.

message. This type of theophany happens momentarily, is initiated by God, and has a direct impact on the people. The word that is spoken brings a “*new level of knowing*” and “*a new level of being*.”⁴³ God comes out of his hiddenness and enters in to a relationship with his people thus revealing his transcendence and immanence. Eichrodt argues, “He is still none the less surrounded with miracle and mystery; but as the one who offers himself in fellowship, he makes both these things perceptible and comprehensible.”⁴⁴ The combination of both presence and word brings divine vulnerability between God and his people. For Fretheim, God’s presence represents his intimacy, his intimacy represents his passion, and his passion represents his passibility.

A strong emphasis on the theophany raises the question: can God be more present in certain places if he is omnipresent? Highfield gives a negative response as he believes God’s presence is constant, and therefore, does not become more or less intense. Although one feels a heightened awareness of God’s presence in certain moments, this feeling does not make his presence stronger or more real than in any other place. He argues, God maintains the same “state of mind” in regards to the world, regardless of how the world perceives his love and involvement in it.⁴⁵

⁴³ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 82-84. At times, God brings new children or new names to his people which reflect the new status and new relationship with them (I.e. Gen. 18:2, 16:7-8, 32:22-32; Exod. 3:2; Judg. 6:11-12).

⁴⁴ Eichrodt, 492. Fretheim agrees with Eichrodt and adds that God is transcendent as one who appears in order to speak and immanent as the God that speaks from within the world. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 86.

⁴⁵ Ron Highfield, *Great Is the Lord: Theology for the Praise of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 379.

Another concern with Fretheim's argument is the balance between the transcendence and immanence of God in the theophany. While Fretheim sees these two characteristics to stand side by side, Duby argues that "more transcendence means less immanence and vice versa."⁴⁶ The more God is above the world, the less he is able to be involved in it. Fretheim's heavy emphasis on God's involvement and presence lessens his transcendence. Duby emphasizes the use of the Creator-creature distinction where God as creator is one that transcends all that is created and yet is immediately present to his creation. He states, "His engagement of creatures does not turn on his giving up a measure of his original identity in order to 'make room' for creatures alongside himself."⁴⁷ While both scholars hold reasonable arguments, Fretheim's view upholds the transcendent nature of God as one that comes down in order to speak to and love the world. Samuel Terrien calls this the "descent" in the theophany which paints a picture of how the "power of love" wears the "appearance of weakness."⁴⁸ In this way, God's transcendence and his immanence remain intact even through his relatedness to his creation. There is no better picture of this balance than that of Jesus Christ.

The Self-Limiting God

For Fretheim, the self-limiting God is one that has "so bound himself in relationship to the world that they move through time and space together. God is the

⁴⁶ Duby, 157.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁸ Samuel L. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology*, 1st ed. Religious Perspectives, v. 26. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 289. Terrien uses Psalm 18:35 as an example of this "descent."

eternal, uncreated member of this community, but God, too, will cry out from time to time, ‘How long?’”⁴⁹ God limits his own self in order to make room for human decision and spontaneity. Another perspective of God’s self-limitation is the “divine *kenosis*”, which is a “self-emptying, an act of self-sacrifice” made by God.⁵⁰ Out of God’s great love for humanity, he chooses to engage in a relationship in which he willingly risks an openness to his divine plan that often leads to suffering. Heschel labels God’s involvement and affectivity by humanity a “paradox beyond compare.”⁵¹ Despite God’s openness, his abilities still exceed humankind’s in seeing all possibilities of the future and their likelihood. His omniscience must take the limited perspective of his creation into account.

In creation, God exhibits self-limitation by sharing power with Adam and Eve in the command to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28) . From the beginning, God seeks a partnership with his creation to not only populate the world, but also to share in his redeeming work. God’s self-limitation continues after creation in the story of the flood. In Genesis 6:6, the Lord grieves because of humankind’s sin and decides to blot him out from the face of the earth. Yet, Noah finds favor in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:8), and God changes his plan to destroy all humanity and continue his work through him. God’s sorrow and pain cause a change in the divine plan.⁵² God’s decision to start again after

⁴⁹ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 44.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵¹ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 259.

⁵² Terence E Fretheim, “The Self-Limiting God of the Old Testament and Issues of Violence,” In *Raising up a Faithful Exegete: Essays in Honor of Richard D. Nelson*, ed. K.L. Noll and Brooks Schramm (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 185.

the flood will result in long-term suffering for God. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah brings about a similar response from God, who once again alters the execution of judgement based on the faithfulness of one man (Genesis 18). While God does fulfill his plan to destroy the two cities, he gives Abraham foreknowledge and allows him to play a role in seeking out any that remain faithful. Later in the wilderness, God is affected by the pain of sin once again and prepares to destroy all of Israel (Exodus 32). Yet, another faithful leader, Moses, boldly steps in and pleads for the people. Moses reminds God of his covenant made to Abraham, and God relents from the execution of his wrath on Israel. Here we see the grave impact sin has upon the heart of God as well as the love God has for his faithful ones in allowing them to affect his decisions.

It is important to note the difference between God's circumstantial and salvific will. This is a key distinction for Fretheim.⁵³ God's circumstantial will is mutable but not his salvific will. Not only is God's salvific will immutable but also his divine nature. While the emotions of the world can move and change God, the core of who he is remains the same. Schlimm explains that his changeability does not entail a type of "ethical mutability."⁵⁴

God's openness allows room for humankind's choices to impact his future. There are two phrases that represent this concept well. The first is the Old Testament's use of

⁵³ Fretheim, "The Self Limiting God of the Old Testament and Issues of Violence," 185; Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 44; and Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," 66.

⁵⁴ Schlimm, 689. Schlimm sees Fretheim's theology as one that affirms and qualifies divine mutability.

ulay meaning “perhaps.”⁵⁵ This phrase is used by both God and his leaders to allow for a change in the divine plan. God allows a pause between his decision and its execution which allows Israel to play a role in the outcome. God hopes for their repentance, but Israel remains free to choose their own destiny. Secondly, the Divine “If” statements offer Israel two different possibilities for their future.⁵⁶ If Israel turns to God then good will spring forth, but if they continue to walk away from God, God will give them over to their enemies. God is also open to change because of his relationship with his faithful leaders.⁵⁷ Fretheim states, “The decision (will), insight (knowledge), and energy of the intercessor are placed in the service of God.”⁵⁸ This gives God more possibilities to work and makes his presence more effective.

God’s openness to the world demonstrates the integrity of his relationship with it. This relationship is interdependent as God gives creation the freedom to decide within his divine plan. In this way, God shares his power and freedom. God sharing power in this way leads to a possibility of a clash of powers. Humans are given the opportunity to reject God and thus have a negative impact on God’s influence in the world.⁵⁹ In this

⁵⁵ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 46. Examples include Amos 5:15; Exod. 32:30; Isa. 37:4; Jer. 36:3; Ezek. 12:3; and Jon. 3:9.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 48. These conditional sentences use the participle *‘im* (if). These are found in Ex. 15:26; Is. 1:18-20, 58:13; Jer. 4:1, 7:5-7, 15:19, 22:4-6.

⁵⁷ This occurs in Num. 14:11-20; Exod. 32: 12-14; and Amos 7: 1-6.

⁵⁸ Terence E Fretheim, “To What Kind of God Do You Pray?” *Word & World* 35, no. 1 (2015): 20. See also Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 51.

⁵⁹ Fretheim sees this as a representation of “divine helplessness” where Israel cannot be forced to repent and must make their own choice to follow God. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 76 and Fretheim, “The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk,” 64.

way, human free will makes God's power and choice self-limiting and creates space for vulnerability between God and his people. While God is affected by the world and adjusts his plan as needed, it does not change his ultimate goal to save the world.

Another aspect of God's openness is the idea of "divine humiliation."⁶⁰ There are two Biblical examples that represent this concept: the capture of the Ark of the Covenant in 1 Samuel 4-6 and Hosea's marriage to an adulterous woman. When the ark of God is captured, God himself, in some sense, is captured and subject to humiliation and suffering by the Philistines. Terrein states, "He surrendered his sovereignty to the shame of alien imprisonment."⁶¹ God works through his own humiliation in order to bring about salvation and deliverance for Israel. God tells Hosea to marry a woman which will be unfaithful as a representation of God's pain towards Israel. Hosea takes on the humiliation and shame of God as the husband of an adulterous woman just as Israel is an adulterous nation to God. Yet, Hosea's story calls Israel back to follow Yahweh and demonstrates his mercy towards them. Both of these stories point forward to Jesus as he endures scorn and shame in order to bring salvation to his people and show them mercy.

Finally, the role of prayer represents God's openness. Fretheim sees prayer as a "God-given way for God's people to make a situation more open for God."⁶² Through prayer, God hears the desires of his people and responds to their requests. Human words are a "contribution to the shape of the future at stake."⁶³ While humanity cannot force

⁶⁰ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 145-148 and Terrein, 265-266.

⁶¹ Terrein, 265.

⁶² Fretheim, "To What Kind of God Do You Pray?", 13.

⁶³ Fretheim, "To Say Something—About God, Evil, and Suffering," 347.

God to action, God does change his mind because of prayer. Prayer is the avenue for one's relationship with God. However, human sin and rebelliousness can impact the effectiveness of prayer.⁶⁴ By inviting his people to pray, God shows care and concern for the thoughts and desires of humankind which impacts his work in the world. The world's affectivity on the self-limiting God demonstrates his passibility.

There are three major critiques to Fretheim's theology on the self-limiting God. First is the ontological issue and the way in which God experiences time. For Raabe, God is both omnipresent and omnitemporal, confined by neither space or time.⁶⁵ The "perhaps" texts given by Fretheim do not show a God that is planning for the future, but rather a God calling Israel to repentance. As a God that is above time, God is able to prophesy future events which speaks to his transcendence.⁶⁶ Fretheim's theology represents a God that is overly dependent on people and temporal as he experiences the past, present, and future alongside his creation. Furthermore, Hart sees God's work within creation as an act of freedom, "a sort of immanent transcendence."⁶⁷ Creation is free to work out their own salvation. This freedom is God's *apatheia* where he remains

⁶⁴ God may not hear or answer prayers because of the distance sin brings to the relationship. I.e. Prov. 1:28; Ps. 66:18; Isa. 1:15; and Zech. 7:13.

⁶⁵ Paul R. Raabe, "The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective," *Concordia Journal* 12, no. 4 (July 1986): 151. See also Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?" 39. Weinandy sees God as the one that exists within his own "distinct ontological order as the Creator."

⁶⁶ Examples include: Gen. 37: 5-11, 41: 25-36; Isa. 48:14; and Dan. 11. DUBY sees the foreknowledge of God to be an important characteristic that sets him over and against any other gods. See DUBY, 159.

⁶⁷ David Bentley Hart, "Impassibility as Transcendence: On the Infinite Innocence of God," In *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, 2009, 314.

present in our passions and action, but as a free, creative and pure act.⁶⁸ This freedom represents both his transcendence and his impassibility.

The second critique of Fretheim's theology is the mutability of God. Weinandy argues that God acts within the historical order without losing his transcendence. He writes, "What we find here is not that God changes through his actions within history, but that through his historical actions a historical people now has access to God in a manner that was not possible prior to his historical action."⁶⁹ It is not God that changes but the people and their situation. God shapes situations according to his divine purposes which remain the same. Duby suggests a better explanation is to distinguish between "*potentia absoluta*" (God's power to do anything possible) and "*potentia ordinata*" (that same power as God exercises it under his decree for particular ends).⁷⁰ While human actions can impact the world, they are not in the same category as divine actions.

The third concern with Fretheim's theology is his heavy dependence on process theology. Process theology believes that all of reality is in process, and God is a part of its development.⁷¹ While God remains omnipotent, he cannot alter the actions of free creatures. With statements such as, "For God the future is not something which is closed. God, too, moves into a future which is to some extent unknown," it is not surprising why

⁶⁸ Hart, "Impassibility as Transcendence: On the Infinite Innocence of God," 301.

⁶⁹ Thomas G Weinandy, "God and Human Suffering: His Act of Creation and His Acts in History," In *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, 2009, 112. See also Smith, 152.

⁷⁰ Duby, 156.

⁷¹ Mark E. Powell, Class Lecture Notes, Systematic Theology, Harding School of Theology, Fall 2018.

Fretheim is commonly labeled a process theologian.⁷² For Patrick, Fretheim's process theology is a "conception of God involving limits upon God's power and knowledge and real interaction between God and creatures."⁷³ In his overemphasis of power-sharing, Fretheim allows too much room for humanity to control the actions of God. A better label for Fretheim's theology may be open theism which maintains both settled and open aspects about the future. God's omniscience means he knows all things, but he cannot know the decisions free-will creatures will make. For Fretheim, God's salvific will is settled while his circumstantial will is open and able to be altered based upon the decisions of humankind. This balance upholds the integrity of the relationship between God and his creation.

The Prophet and the Suffering of God

Fretheim's key hermeneutical question, "What kind of God?" plays an integral part in his theology on divine suffering. What kind of God is the God that is near to the brokenhearted (Ps. 34:18)? To be truly present with the suffering entails some level of suffering on oneself. Fretheim explains, "God's power of commiseration, of shared suffering, must be considered unsurpassed. God's presence with the distressed and the oppressed must mean that God has so entered into their situation that it truly becomes his

⁷² Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 49. Additionally phrases such as "the history of God," "God's becoming," and "change in the life of God" demonstrate common ideas of process theologians. See Raabe, 150 and Patrick, "How Should the Biblical Theologian Go About Constructing a Theological Model: A Debate with Terence Fretheim," 361.

⁷³ Dale Patrick, "The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective." *Word & World* 5, no. 4 (1985): 444.

own.”⁷⁴ God suffers not only for his chosen people, Israel, but also for the whole world as he calls creation to follow him.⁷⁵ Suffering is an integral part of divine passibility as it gives understanding to his divine nature and love.

God suffers because of the people’s rejection of him as Lord; He suffers with the people who are suffering; and God suffers for the people.⁷⁶ As one who has a perfect memory of the past, present, and future, God suffers as the omniscient God. He knows the joy of times of faithfulness for Israel and the pain of watching them walk away.⁷⁷ Additionally, God knows the sufferings of his people which cause him to suffer. In the Old Testament, the verb *yada*’ (“to know”) carries an intimate meaning. As Israel’s God, Yahweh sees their suffering from the inside and knows personally their heartache. Unlike most gods and kings, God chooses to experience and care about the suffering of his people.⁷⁸ Additionally, God suffers because of his anger towards unfaithful Israel. God’s judgement is a breakdown of the personal relationship he shares with Israel. Just as when a marriage breaks apart, there is a loss of intimacy, withdrawal, and pain when God’s

⁷⁴ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 130.

⁷⁵ One clear example of God’s love for the world is his compassion for Nineveh spoken about in Jon. 4:10-11. Additionally, God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 speaks of all families on the earth being blessed through him. From the beginning, God’s plan for salvation included the whole world.

⁷⁶ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 108. Fretheim uses these three categories as the structure of his chapter on suffering.

⁷⁷ Isa. 1:2-3 and Jer. 2:2-3.

⁷⁸ Fretheim sees God’s willingness to share in the suffering of his people (i.e. Exod. 2:24-25, 3:7-8) as a unique divine quality. See Terence E Fretheim, “Suffering God and Sovereign God in Exodus: A Collision of Image,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 11, no. 2 (December 1989): 38 and Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 128.

people are unfaithful to him. Judgement becomes something that is necessary because of the breach of covenant but not something God enjoys. God's extreme patience in bringing judgement upon Israel and upon the world today represents his long-suffering.

God is an active sufferer—it is his choice to suffer for his people. He does not suffer passively as one that is acted upon but rather allows himself to experience the pain of his people. God's suffering does not leave him powerless to act in his divine sovereignty in fulfilling his ultimate plan of salvation.⁷⁹ His decisions and actions are rooted in his love and transcendence above humankind. There is an ongoing balancing act between the holiness of God and his great compassion. Yet, "God's Godness is revealed in the way in which, amid all the sorrow and anger, God's salvific purposes remain unclouded and the steadfastness of divine love endures forever."⁸⁰ Heschel describes this background of divine love as God's "eternal and basic disposition."⁸¹

The divine laments serve as another example of divine suffering. Claus Westermann describe laments as the "voice of suffering."⁸² The divine lament is best determined by looking at the form and language of human laments.⁸³ Most divine laments come from the prophets and are caused by a broken relationship between God and

⁷⁹ Isa. 57: 15-16; Hosea 11:8-9; and Ps. 89: 32-33.

⁸⁰ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 120.

⁸¹ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 48. Hosea 11:1 speaks of this disposition with the phrase, "I loved him." God's love is ever present for Israel.

⁸² Claus Westermann, "Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 28, no. 1 (January 1974): 31.

⁸³ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 108. Fretheim clarifies that not all human language is used in divine laments.

Israel.⁸⁴ God's grieving in the prophets is tied to Israel's rebellion. However, divine grief has been present from the first sinful act of creation and remains evident in the flood story (Genesis 6:5-6). God grieves out of his love for his people and desire for their undivided heart.

The suffering servant of Isaiah 53 serves as an example of a divine lament. Fretheim points out a connection between the Noahic promise in Isaiah 54 and the suffering servant in Isaiah 53.⁸⁵ The suffering servant represents not only the pain of Israel's rejection, but also a means for their salvation. He is a mediator between God and humanity as he bears their griefs and carries their sorrows, even to the point of being pierced for their transgressions. The suffering servant points forward to the Son of God who will be a mediator between God and humanity in order to bring healing through his wounds. Despite divine grief, God's promised salvation faithfully comes to the world.

The role of the prophet demonstrates a unique connection between God and man. The prophet is a continuation and replacement of the divine messenger. Both the prophet and divine messenger come in human form, yet there are distinct differences between these two roles. The divine messenger exists only a short time while the prophet lives and works over an extended period of time to deliver God's message to the people.⁸⁶ Divine

⁸⁴ Jer. 2 (divine questioning); Hosea 11 (God's "Why?"); Isa. 53 (Suffering Servant). Westermann sees Jeremiah as the clearest description of the divine lament. See Westermann, "Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," 36.

⁸⁵ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 113 and Westermann, "Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," 37. Westermann labels the suffering servant a lament of the mediator.

⁸⁶ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 149 and Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967, 100. Westermann considers the messenger to be a "transitional mode of appearance" for God whereas the prophet represents a more concrete presence among the people.

messengers are not named while the prophets are individuals that have a name and a unique personality. The prophet delivers a word of judgement while the messenger brings a word of favor. Theophanies before the prophets are a one-time event, but God's word is "embedded" into the prophet and functions as an "ongoing theophany."⁸⁷ This ongoing theophany allows the Word of God to make an extended appearance in human form.

The prophet plays a role in the divine council where God asks questions regarding his decision-making process and Israel's future.⁸⁸ After hearing of God's plan for judgement, the prophet's task is to share the divine plan with the people and call them to repentance. This occurs during the pause between the divine plan and the divine execution. Fretheim sees this as an important period of time for both God and his people. He states, "The interaction between God and people will determine whether the plan is put into effect."⁸⁹ By consulting first with the prophet, God allows for Israel's input and choice in where their future will go.

Along with sharing God's message, the prophet embodies God before the people. Fretheim describes the prophet as a "vehicle for divine immanence" where "the heart and mind of God pass over into that of the prophet to such an extent that the prophet becomes a veritable embodiment of God."⁹⁰ The prophets not only speak the word of God but also

⁸⁷ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 151.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 54. There is a new pattern that emerges with the prophet where God consults with the prophet leaders for their insight before carrying out a divine decision (i.e. Amos 3:7). Fretheim sees this as the divine council taking place between God and prophet.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 150-151.

demonstrate symbolic acts in bringing forth the divine message.⁹¹ Hosea lives out God's broken marriage to Israel. Jeremiah lives as an outsider of the community which parallels God's rejection by Israel. Here the prophets become a synthesis of the theophany and divine suffering. God gives them a front row seat to experience the pain of Israel's rejection. Eichrodt recognizes a shift in suffering in the life of the prophets from something negative to something positive. For the prophets, suffering is a divine calling and an "active service for God's people."⁹² In this way, the prophets experience the heart of God and bear the burden of humankind's sins as active participants of God's plan of judgement and salvation.

Abraham Heschel describes the prophet's understanding of God and his passion as the divine pathos. He argues, "Pathos is an act formed with intention, depending on free will, the result of decision, and determination."⁹³ The divine pathos is more than just the feelings of God, it is an expression of his will. Hosea and Jeremiah display divine pathos more explicitly than any other place in the Old Testament.⁹⁴ Both prophets describe the sorrow of God and share insight into his present pathos. The emotional experience of the prophet with God is such that he not only hears his voice but also feels his heart. The prophet can feel what Israel's decision means to the life and pathos of God. The divine pathos represents a unity of the eternal and the temporal, which is the basis of

⁹¹ Isa. 20; Jer. 19; and Ezek. 4:4.

⁹² Eichrodt, 332.

⁹³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Divine Pathos: The Basic Category of Prophetic Theology," *Judaism* 2, no. 1 (January 1953): 61.

⁹⁴ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 122.

the relationship between God and people.⁹⁵ While the prophets understand the functional importance of the divine pathos, they do not ascribe it to his essence. God's anger and sorrow are not eternal attributes of his character but rather expressions of his will. In this way, God's divine nature stands intact despite the inner wrestling of the divine pathos. Nonetheless, the divine pathos serves as a motive of power and an incentive for God's actions of justice and mercy.⁹⁶

Fretheim's theology on the role of the prophet and divine suffering provide helpful insights into Israel's story, but fail to answer questions on theodicy. How does the goodness of God stand up against innocent suffering? Additionally, the role that suffering plays within the power and nature of God is another concern with Fretheim's theology. For impassibilitists, suffering implies a weakness within the divine nature. Smith states, "To suffer is not a privilege but a lack, and to be impassible is only to lack a lack."⁹⁷ A suffering God entails a God that cannot overcome evil and leaves no hope for justice. In this way, suffering paralyzes God.

Furthermore, Fretheim does not clearly differentiate between human and divine suffering. He simply states, "God suffers *as God*" and emphasizes the unchanging will and love of God.⁹⁸ Ron Highfield points out the importance of defining what suffering is in order to reach a balanced view on impassibility. He sees human suffering to involve

⁹⁵ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 231.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 258. Heschel equates the Hebrew word *ruah* (spirit) with the pathos of God. He states, "Great deeds are done by those who are filled with *ruah*, with pathos."

⁹⁷ Smith, 154.

⁹⁸ Fretheim, "Suffering God and Sovereign God in Exodus," 46.

three things: a painful state of mind, an external source that causes suffering, and an infliction or threat of damage to the sufferer.⁹⁹ Based on these criteria, God can never experience human suffering because of his transcendence. While God desires for Israel's repentance, their sin does not threaten his divine nature. Although Fretheim fails to clarify the difference between divine and human suffering, he upholds the relationship between sovereignty and suffering. He states, "Suffering and sovereignty are internally related to one another in God, such that the sovereign God is always suffering and the suffering God is always sovereign."¹⁰⁰ He leaves room for the mystery of God as one that experiences emotion in such a way that he is not overcome by it. For Fretheim, the suffering of God displays the greatness of his love for his people. The suffering of God in the Old Testament is most clearly seen in the life of the prophets and their role as active sufferers as men of God and mediators for the people.

The ultimate picture of suffering comes to earth in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. He plays the role of prophet, priest, and king in showing his love and sovereignty over his people. Unlike the prophets who only represent God, Jesus is God himself that lives out the balance of the divine nature and divine suffering. It is to this topic that this paper now turns.

⁹⁹ Highfield, 385. Gavriyuk agrees with this differentiation between human and divine suffering. He argues that in order for God to experience human suffering he must take on a human nature. Paul L. Gavriyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁰⁰ Fretheim, "Suffering God and Sovereign God in Exodus," 45.

Chapter 3

Jürgen Moltmann

Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian, has devoted much of his life to the study of the cross and its implications for the passibility of God. Daniel Castelo points out that “no single theological voice has done more to shape the current debate [on divine passibility]” than Jürgen Moltmann.¹ Moltmann was born and raised in Hamburg, Germany in the midst of World War II.² At the age of 17, Jürgen went to war and within a year was captured by the British forces. He spent three years (1945-1948) in captivity and, while in prison, was given a copy of the New Testament and the book of Psalms by the British prison ward. Growing up in a secular home, Moltmann had never read scripture before. In the words of the Bible, he discovered a way to express the great suffering he had experienced and a hope that he longed for. Over time, the reality of God’s presence amidst his sufferings was impressed upon his heart more and more.

Upon returning to Germany in 1948, Moltmann experienced the “collapse of [his] certainties.”³ This experience led him to pursue an education in theology where he could better understand the hope of the Christian faith. He began his theological studies at Gottingen the same year the German church was rebuilding after the war. He describes

¹ Daniel Castelo, *The Apathetic God: Exploring the Contemporary Relevance of Divine Impassibility* (Colorado Springs: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 70.

² Dean Gordon Peerman and Martin E Marty, *A Handbook of Christian Theologians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 661.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 166.

his faith and theology as a result of the “collective experiences of guilt and suffering in [his] generation.”⁴ His faith was not only a private matter, but also a social one involving the situation of the world around him. He states, “The problem is how one can speak of God ‘after Auschwitz.’ But even more it is how one cannot speak of God after Auschwitz.”⁵ Moltmann first studied the Bible as a theology student. This perspective allowed him to look at scripture with fresh eyes and brought him to unique beliefs on eschatology, the doctrine of hope, the theology of the cross, and the doctrine of the Trinity. Moltmann was an unlikely theologian in post-war Germany, yet his emphasis on hope was a much needed message for the Germans and the world at large.

After completing his master’s degree, Moltmann served five years as a pastor in a small rural church. Following the completion of his doctorate, he became a teacher at the academy of the Confessing Church in Wuppertal. He spent a majority of his career at the University of Tübingen as a professor of Systematic Theology. While Moltmann does not provide a comprehensive dogmatic system, a key theme throughout his works is the *eschatologia crucis*, or the eschatology of the cross and especially how Christian hope shapes revelation, the doctrine of God, and mission.⁶ His theology is greatly influenced by the works of fellow German theologian, Karl Barth. Moltmann’s three leading works on passibility are: *Trinity and the Kingdom*, *Crucified God*, and *History and the Triune God*.

⁴ Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, 166.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶ Peerman and Marty, 663-664. Moltmann’s idea on mission is also labeled the “practice of hope.”

Moltmann's Theology

Jürgen Moltmann sees the cross as the center point for theology. He argues, "It is the suffering of God in Christ, rejected and killed in the absence of God, which qualifies Christian faith as faith, and as something different from the projection of man's desire."⁷ The picture of God on the cross stands against any logical idea of a powerful and sovereign being. Moltmann's staurocentric theology sees the cross not only as the center but also the beginning of Trinitarian history.⁸ The triune God works from the cross forward to bring about God's plan until the eschaton. In the pain of the cross, love comes into the world. God's love is the powerful force that breaks down the apathetic attitude of the world. Moltmann sees his realistic look at the "religion of the cross" as scandalous yet freeing.⁹ It is scandalous in that it neither elevates nor edifies the crucified God, yet it brings freedom to a world that is in the bondage of sin and suffering. Humanity's search for significance and purpose is found at the cross.

In addition to staurocentrism, Moltmann defends the passibility of God. He emphasizes the importance of a theological understanding of passibility rather than a philosophical one held by the traditionalists.¹⁰ The center for his argument on passibility

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰ Moltmann dismisses the traditionalist's argument on the two natures of Jesus. For the traditionalists, suffering takes place in Jesus' human nature and not the divine. For Moltmann, the suffering and passion of Christ is the full representation of the suffering and passion of God. See Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 88 and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 21. This idea will be further discussed later in the chapter.

is the passion of Christ. In order to best understand the suffering of Christ, one must start with “the passion of the passionate God.”¹¹ Passion encompasses the overwhelming love and suffering of God. This passion, present in both word and sacrament, awakens faith in the life of humankind.

Liberation theology is another key argument for Moltmann. The crucified God brings hope to the afflicted. The cross paints a picture of a God who is crucified with the outsiders.¹² This experience demonstrates God’s fellowship with the oppressed. Moltmann states, “suffering is overcome by suffering, and wounds are healed by wounds.”¹³ The crucified Christ brings God to those that are abandoned and considered outcasts through his sufferings. Because of this, people that live in the midst of suffering relate best to the suffering Savior. Jesus understands their struggles and through his suffering sets them free.

Moltmann presents four key arguments in defense of divine suffering and passibility. First, the freedom of the Triune God displays openness in the divine nature to love and suffers with creation. Secondly, divine suffering represents the power of God’s love for his people. Third, suffering on the cross occurs both to the Father and the Son. Finally, the suffering of the cross demonstrates the passibility of God. In the following section, each of these key arguments will be presented as well as the critical responses related to each point.

¹¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 44.

¹² Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 40. Moltmann gives the example of Jesus being crucified between two thieves (Matt. 27: 38) and outside of the city (Luke 23:33) to further this point. He describes this as the homelessness of God.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40.

Freedom of the Triune God

There is a mystery in the trinitarian relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But, there is also a greater mystery as to why God invites his creation into the eternal love and union of the Trinity. Christian tradition has sought to understand God and the Triune relationally in two ways: the doctrine of the Trinity and the theology of the cross. For Moltmann, Jesus represents the humanity of God.¹⁴ Colossians 2:9 states, “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” Jesus is the full representation of the Father. To look at Jesus is to look at God. Paul portrays the nature of Christ as a servant who humbles himself and becomes obedient even to death.¹⁵ This picture reveals the self-humiliation of God in Christ. Moltmann expresses:

God in the person of the Son enters into the limited, finite situation of man. Not only does he enter into it, descend into it, but also accepts it and embraces the whole of human existence with his being. He does not become spirit so that man must first soar to the realm of the spirit in order to participate in God. He does not merely become the covenant partner of an elect people so that men must belong to this people through circumcision and obedience to the covenant in order to enter into his fellowship. He lowers himself and accepts the whole of mankind without limits and conditions, so that each man may participate in him with the whole of his life.¹⁶

God invites humankind into the trinitarian relationship through Jesus. As the mediator, Jesus not only invites creation into this relationship, but also makes a way for them through his sacrifice on the cross. Christ as the mediator brings a relationship where the *pathos* of God and the *sympatheia* of humankind are shared between Creator and

¹⁴ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 118. Moltmann is heavily influenced on Barth’s teachings on the humanity of God. See Karl Barth, “The Humanity of God,” *Cross Currents* 10, no. 1 (1960): 77.

¹⁵ Phil. 2: 6-8.

¹⁶ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 276.

creation.¹⁷ This relationship allows for people to experience the heart of God and for God to experience the suffering and hopes of humanity.

The Spirit is the love that is shared between the Father and the Son. Within the Trinity, the Spirit works to both unify and glorify the Father-Son relationship. God gives his Spirit as a gift that allows his presence and power to dwell in his people.¹⁸ Moltmann describes the indwelling of the Spirit with the Jewish idea of *shekinah*.¹⁹ Through *shekinah*, God participates in humankind's suffering and humankind participates in the suffering of God. Just as the Spirit unifies the Father and the Son, God and creation are united by the indwelling of the Spirit. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, humanity is invited into the Trinity; through the indwelling of the Spirit, creation experiences the eternal love of the Triune God.

God is self-sufficient within himself yet freely chooses to create and co-exist with creation.²⁰ God not only creates humankind in his image, but he also chooses to enter a covenant relationship with them as his people. God makes the choice to elect creation as partners that share in his love and glory. While God makes the determination to be in relationship, he does not dismiss the sinfulness and fallenness of humanity. He carries

¹⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 275.

¹⁸ Acts 2:38, 5:32; Rom. 8:11; and 1 John 4:13.

¹⁹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 110. *Shekinah* denotes the divine dwelling or presence of God among the people in the Old Testament.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 53-55. Moltmann references Karl Barth's work on the freedom of God. God's freedom and love are complementary in that God is not required to love but still does. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas E. Torrance, vol. 4, pt. 2, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 346.

upon himself the wrath and justification in order to make this relationship possible. God's freedom lies in the friendship he offers humanity.

God demonstrates self-limitation and freedom in creation. Moltmann points out, "Creation in chaos and out of nothing, which is an act of power, is also a self-humiliation on God's part, a lowering of himself into his own impotence."²¹ In order for God to create out of nothing, he must release a part of himself and choose to withdraw from it. Moltmann describes this as the *zimusum*, a self-limiting act of God which allows space for creation.²² In this space, God gives humanity the freedom to choose to love or turn against him. Regardless of humankind's decision, God's sovereignty and transcendence remains intact.

God's inner passion for his people leads to his outward action. There is no greater example of this than the incarnation. God freely sends Jesus to redeem his people. The cross demonstrates the extent of God's love and his willingness to take on their sufferings. God, in his freedom, wants to be *with* humanity and *for* humanity, not against them. Through Jesus, God dwells with us. The concomitant nature of God allows him to be fully present here on earth as he is in heaven. As one that is present, God experiences and shares in the pain and joy of His people. God's freedom to love humankind brings about his passibility.

While Moltmann's staurocentrism elevates the importance of Christology, he lacks clarity in his arguments on pneumatology. The Spirit plays the role of the shared

²¹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 110.

²² *Ibid.*, 109. Moltmann sees this self-emptying act of God an action of "self-determination for the purpose of self-limitation."

love between the Father and the Son, but is not given its rightful place as an independent part of the Trinity.²³ Additionally, Moltmann's focus on the link between the cross and the Trinity negates the important work of the Trinity prior to the cross.²⁴ An over-emphasis of the cross leads one to neglect other important Biblical themes.

Moltmann's arguments on the incarnation pose additional concerns. First, he falls short in describing the human nature of Jesus—his body and his mind. Moltmann's greatest focus of Christ is on his divine nature. There is an important distinction between the "discarnate and incarnate roles," as Attfield labels them.²⁵ In his discarnate role, Jesus lives life as a part of the Trinity with all of the divine attributes. In this role, he decides to become incarnate in order to redeem the world. He experiences passibility and humanity as a man, not as God. Additionally, there is an important distinction between the human nature of Christ and the human nature of man. Jesus' human nature is enhypostasis, uniquely encompassing two natures in one person.²⁶ Furthermore, Brewis describes the

²³ Dennis W. Jowers, "The Theology of the Cross as Theology of the Trinity: A Critique of Jürgen Moltmann's Staurocentric Trinitarianism." *Tyndale Bulletin* 52, no. 2 (2001): 264. Castelo agrees and adds that Moltmann fails to protect the transcendence of God by downplaying the mystery of the Trinity. The "immanent Trinity" provides space for the attributes of God that cannot fully be understood. See Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, 94.

²⁴ Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, 93-94.

²⁵ David G. Attfield, "Can God Be Crucified: A Discussion of J Moltmann." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30, no. 1 (1977): 54. Attfield defends the traditional teachings on impassibility that Jesus experiences death and suffering only in his human nature and not the divine. See also Robert D. Brewis, "So Passionate He Is Impassible: Impassibility Defined and Defended." *Churchman* 131, no. 2 (2017): 132.

²⁶ Steven J. Duby, "Atonement, Impassibility and the Communicatio Operationum." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 3 (July 2015): 292 and Thomas G Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?" *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 37.

incarnation as the peak of God's accommodation in revelation. In the human nature of Christ, we see a representation of the divine, not a real picture of the invisible God.²⁷ This argument stands against the Biblical teaching that Jesus is God in flesh.²⁸ God in the flesh seems less of an accommodation and more of an exact representation of the nature and character of God.

Finally, Moltmann's theology leans towards an interdependence between God and the world that lessens God's transcendent nature. Ron Highfield upholds the transcendent nature of God as one that is independent of creation. He states, "The existence of the world does not make God greater, and the absence of the world would not diminish his majesty. In joining himself to human nature, God does not change or gain perfections that were not already eternally his."²⁹ In this way, the incarnation does not change God's relationship with creation but rather creation's relationship to God. Paul Fiddes suggests an alternative argument: God does not need the world but has chosen to be in need of the world.³⁰ God's freedom allows him to be free to be God. In this way, God's freedom and

²⁷ Brewis, 132. Weinandy agrees and sees this ontological difference between the Trinity and humanity as a necessary part of understanding the impassibility of God. Thomas G Weinandy, "God and Human Suffering: His Act of Creation and His Acts in History." in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas J. White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 116.

²⁸ John 1:18, 10:30; 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:3.

²⁹ Ron Highfield, *Great Is the Lord: Theology for the Praise of God*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 343. See also Brewis, 129 and Daniel Castelo, "Moltmann's Dismissal of Divine Impassibility: Warranted?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 4 (2008): 401. Brewis adds that human relationships do not affect the innertrinitarian relationship because of the transcendence of God.

³⁰ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 74.

desire to love the world are one in the same. He freely chooses to be an active participant in his relationship with mankind. Consequently, God engages with the world in both his immanence and his relatedness.

Power of Suffering

Suffering plays a key part in Moltmann's theology on divine passibility. Suffering is a sign of living in the world and loving those in it. The two actions of suffering and love go hand in hand. Moltmann calls this the "dialectic of human life" where the more one loves, the more one is open to suffer.³¹ Suffering love is the only cure for apathy in the world. Furthermore, for Moltmann, suffering is the highest form of love. The cross represents the vulnerability of the love of God for the unloved person. The vulnerability of love opens oneself up to suffer.³² Because God is love, suffering is a part of the divine nature and the divine love. Moltmann explains, "Creative love is always suffering love."³³ As God's people, Christians share in the love of God. This fellowship leads them to share in his joy and his suffering.³⁴

The history of God encompasses the suffering of the world. "There is no suffering which in this history of God is not God's suffering," declares Moltmann.³⁵ As the creator

³¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 253.

³² *Ibid.*, 248. See also Stott, 332. Stott agrees with Moltmann that opening oneself up to love leads to suffering.

³³ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 59.

³⁴ Rom. 8:17; Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:13.

³⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 246.

and sustainer of the world, God has experienced every tragedy and every loss. Despite his transcendent nature, God freely chooses to love his creation and suffer alongside of them. Moltmann gives two ideas for the reason behind God's suffering: solidarity and atoning intervention.³⁶

First, God seeks to relate to the struggles of people through his suffering. Hebrews 2:18 states, "For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." The cross demonstrates a God that is near to the brokenhearted (Ps. 34:18) and does not forsake his people (Ps. 9:10). A strong argument for atheism is the presence of suffering in the world and a God that allows for the circumstances that cause it. The cross paints a different picture of God as one that relates to them through his sufferings. Christ's sufferings include not only his own but also the sufferings of humanity. His sufferings are a sign that God solidifies himself with humanity in their sufferings and takes their pain upon himself.³⁷

Secondly, God displays atoning intervention through his suffering. Christ is not only a brother in his solidarity with people, but through his suffering and death becomes their redeemer. Atonement is necessary for forgiveness and freedom from guilt. Christ on the cross bears the guilt of creation and transforms it into his own suffering.³⁸ By taking the suffering upon himself, he overcomes sin and death for all of humankind. Suffering is a necessary part of the atoning work of the cross.

³⁶ Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, 38.

³⁷ The suffering servant in Isaiah 53 demonstrates this idea of shared suffering. "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows..." (Isa. 53:4).

³⁸ Isa. 53: 11 and 1 Pet. 2:24.

The way in which God suffers is an important distinction for Moltmann. God *chooses* to suffer on behalf of his people. Moltmann describes this action as active suffering, “the willingness to open oneself to be touched— moved—affected by something other than oneself.”³⁹ Unlike passive suffering where one is acted upon by an outside force, active suffering involves compassionate love for another. By choosing to suffer, the active sufferer rules over suffering and is not dominated by it. One is able to overcome suffering because of the freedom in choosing to love another person. Love is a greater power than the outside forces which cause suffering.⁴⁰

God’s love for his people opens himself up to suffer. He suffers from the abundance of his love, but at the same time remains “master of the pain that love causes him to suffer.”⁴¹ This suffering love affects the Father as well as the Son and Spirit. Pain is a part of the inner-trinitarian relationship. The Son suffers on behalf of his people, but, through his sacrifice, overcomes their suffering. In this way, the Triune God does not avoid pain but rather accepts it and turns it into glory.⁴² The Spirit suffers with us as he intercedes on our behalf with “groanings too deep for words.” (Rom. 8:26). Powell describes this moment as one where “our groans become God’s groans.”⁴³ God’s people

³⁹ Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*, 44.

⁴⁰ For further explanation of the power of active suffering over suffering see Fiddes, 107. God’s power in suffering appears as weakness, but it is through suffering and death that God saves the world.

⁴¹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 23.

⁴² Ibid., 34. For more on Jesus overcoming suffering on the cross, see Mark E. Powell, *Centered in God: The Trinity and Christian Spirituality*. (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2014), 201.

⁴³ Powell, *Centered in God*, 208.

are not left alone in their sufferings, because they are vessels of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit helps them in explaining their suffering in prayer as well as giving them the power to overcome them.

Just as God chooses to suffer for creation, Christians are called to share in the sufferings of God. To love others as God loves them one must learn to "feel everything within [oneself]" and "personalize everything," explains Miguel De Unamuno.⁴⁴ This action of joining in the love of God for others is the divine force working within humanity to experience the heart and suffering of God.⁴⁵ This form of active suffering comes not from the consequence of personal sin but rather out of a love for others. Moltmann describes this as the "open wound of life" where an increase of belief in God leads to an increase of suffering for those in this world.⁴⁶ To know and love God is to suffer alongside him.

For impassibilitists, Moltmann's suffering God is a weak God. Paul Gavriyuk considers the picture of a suffering God to be "falsely romanticized" as something which carries a redemptive value.⁴⁷ God's perpetual suffering is purposeless other than to show God being in misery. While Jesus weeps over the death of Lazarus, he does not sit in his sorrow but continues on to raise Lazarus from the dead. Moltmann overemphasizes the

⁴⁴ Miguel De Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), 139.

⁴⁵ Examples in scripture of sharing in the suffering of God include suffering for his church (Col. 1:24), sharing in the suffering and comfort of Christ (2 Cor. 1:5; 1 Pet. 4:13), and sharing in his suffering that leads to glory (Rom. 8: 17-18).

⁴⁶ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 49.

⁴⁷ Paul Gavriyuk, "God's Impassible Suffering in the Flesh: The Promise of Paradoxical Christology" in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas J. White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 145.

suffering on the cross and downplays the power of the resurrection to conquer and transform suffering into glory. The resurrection demonstrates God's power, not his suffering. Gavriilyuk argues for the word "compassion" in lieu of suffering when describing God. He states, "The compassionate person is not conquered by suffering, whereas the sufferer is weak and helpless."⁴⁸ A compassionate God maintains his impassibility as one that transcends suffering.

Additionally, Moltmann's picture of the suffering of God fails to demonstrate God's transcendence over suffering. The fact that God infinitely transcends all human suffering makes him capable of overcoming suffering and providing true compassion. If God experiences suffering alongside his creation, his love comes into competition with his omniscience and "creation is greater than his eternal begetting," as Brewis points out.⁴⁹

In like manner, God's transcendence necessitates his immutability to suffering. Brewis argues, "Emotional states in God do not tell us about change in God, but say something of how an unchanging God of holy love relates to changing people."⁵⁰ Divine emotions are not equal to human emotions. Moltmann's emphasis on divine suffering leans towards a God that is swayed by human emotions and emotionally divided. This presents a God that looks and acts like the pagan divinities who are overcome by

⁴⁸ Paul L. Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11.

⁴⁹ Brewis, 125. Brewis argues that suffering requires God to be temporal and experience new things which provoke his suffering.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

emotions and passions.⁵¹ God's emotions and love go above suffering and are distinct. Smith describes God as one that is "closer to the sufferer than the sufferer is to himself."⁵² God perfectly achieves this level of love and connection because of his ongoing creative act where he is one with his sufferers. A human's love is imperfect and marked by suffering because it is not perfect as God's love.⁵³

Finally, impassibilitists argue that suffering is not a necessary component of love.⁵⁴ Suffering Christians cry out for a God that loves fully, not one who weeps beside them. God's love, not his suffering, is at the heart of his compassion. Gavriyuk gives the example of a house which catches fire, and those on the outside stare at it with fear, anxiety, and sadness. These emotions do nothing in helping to rescue the people that are still in the house. A compassionate person is the one that remains above their emotions and goes into the house to help the people.⁵⁵ Such as with God, his impassibility

⁵¹ Gary Culpepper, "'One Suffering, in Two Natures': An Analogical Inquiry into Divine and Human Suffering." in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas J. White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 80.

⁵² Mark Stephen Smith, "'Only the Non-Suffering God Can Help': Recovering the Glory of Divine Impassibility." *Churchman* 126, no. 2 (2012): 155.

⁵³ While I agree that God's love is perfect and far above human's love, I think Smith misses the important point that as Christians, we grow in learning to love as God does. God's Spirit lives in us and teaches us to see people as God sees them. As Christians allow God to change their daily actions to look more like His Son, there is an increase in the Spirit's power. In this way, we can experience the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven by the way we practice loving those around us with the love of God.

⁵⁴ Gavriyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 9-10; Brewis, 128; and Smith, 154.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

demonstrates his compassion and love. “Because God’s hands are not busy wiping his own tears, they are free to wipe away ours,” argues Highfield.⁵⁶ Moltmann’s requirement of suffering in the divine love creates a God that is anthropocentric instead of theocentric.⁵⁷ A theocentric view requires space for mystery as one seeks to understand the divine love. Brewis seeks to explain this mystery by describing the compassion of God. He states, “God’s love means he can perfectly, freely, and fully behold those who suffer in compassion, without suffering.”⁵⁸ In this way, divine compassion does not require suffering in order to demonstrate God’s love for humanity.

Suffering of the Father and the Son on the Cross

The inner trinitarian relationship of the suffering of God sets Moltmann’s work apart. Most theologians argue the two natures of Jesus, human and divine, separate God and the world on the cross. However, Moltmann believes that on the cross, Jesus experiences suffering and death as both God and man. Consequently, suffering affects the inner trinitarian relationship. He points out, “The Son suffers in his love being forsaken by the Father as he dies. The Father suffers in his love the grief of the death of the Son.”⁵⁹ The cross is the story of suffering that takes place between the Father and the Son through the love of the Spirit.

⁵⁶ Highfield, 389.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 12 and Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, 99. This is a strong point and one that needs to remain at the forefront of one’s mind when studying divine passibility. For the theologian, one must allow God’s essence, not one’s desires or emotions, to dictate one’s theology.

⁵⁸ Brewis, 124.

⁵⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 245.

There are three causes of the Father's suffering on the cross. First, the Father suffers the death of his one and only Son. While the pain of the Father is not identical with the Son's, it corresponds to his suffering. In his suffering, the Father demonstrates his solidarity with his creation and reveals his love for his people. The cross causes an interruption in the relationship between the Father and the Son in order to make a way for humanity's fellowship with the Triune God.

Secondly, the Father suffers alongside the Son. The cross represents the place where the Father and Son are most deeply separated and at the same time most inwardly one in their surrender. Second Corinthians 5:19 states, "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself." Jesus' death represents both God's actions and his suffering. "God (himself) suffered in Jesus, God himself died in Jesus for us," Moltmann declares.⁶⁰ Just as God himself is present in power at the resurrection, so God is present and active in the crucifixion. The cross reveals a change in the Godhead where God *becomes* love through sacrifice and suffering.

Third, the Father suffers as God. Moltmann describes the cross as the "theological trial" between God and God.⁶¹ The cross divides God from God with the utmost degree of hatred while the resurrection of the Son unites God with God in the most intimate way of love. In God's rejection of Jesus, Jesus' proclamations on the deity of God and his fatherhood are at stake. How can the God that proclaims to never forsake his people, forsake his own Son? Where is the power of God in the weakness of his suffering and

⁶⁰ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 192.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 152. Moltmann sees the abandonment of the cross to also occur within God himself.

sacrifice on the cross? The answer lies in the power of God's love for his people. It is through the forsaken Son that God becomes the Father of the forsaken. "In the self-giving of the Son we discern the self-giving of God," Moltmann explains.⁶²

Along with the suffering of the Father, the cross represents the suffering of the Son. The Son suffers a painful and terrible death. Unlike other martyrs that approach death with confidence, Jesus expresses great fear and dread in facing death.⁶³ The story of Jesus' death describes the physical pain of beatings and the crucifixion as well as the emotional pain of abandonment by his disciples. Even greater than the physical pain of death, Jesus is forsaken by the Father.

For Moltmann, the cry of dereliction (Mark 15:34 and Ps. 22:1) gives the most historically accurate picture of the death of Jesus.⁶⁴ On the cross, Jesus is actually abandoned by God. His cry begins with, "My God," implying a closeness to the Father and a legal plea to remember his promise to never forsake his people. It is easier to understand the Christ that has been abandoned by the Father, but harder to understand the God who would abandon His Son. For Christ, the greatest struggle in suffering is not the pain but the forsakenness he feels in the middle of it. Jesus fully understands the heart of God, yet experiences Him turn his back and desert him. In this moment, God is abandoned by God. Moltmann suggests an exaggerated form of Jesus' cry of dereliction

⁶² Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, 38.

⁶³ The clearest example of this is in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus pleads for the Father to take this cup from him. Matt. 26:39; Mark 14: 35-36; and Luke. 22: 44.

⁶⁴ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 146-147 and Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, 34. Moltmann emphasizes the importance of Ps. 22 when seeking to understand what is happening on the cross between God and Jesus.

as not only, “My God, why hast thou forsaken *me?*” but also, “My God, why hast thou forsaken *thyself?*”⁶⁵

God’s self-abandonment sets the cross apart from any other form of suffering. When people begin to see and believe God in the suffering and dying of Christ, they are set free from their vain attempts of becoming their own god through knowledge and power. Christianity takes on the form of suffering and sacrifice where one seeks to be “crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20) in order that Christ may live in them. For Jesus, suffering was a necessary part of being the Messiah. He takes on sin and death in order to bring eternal life for all of humankind.

The suffering of the Father and the Son bring significant changes for all of humanity. First, God suffers with his people as one that fully understands. For Stott, the cross is “*proof of God’s solidary love*” where God becomes one with his people in their pain.⁶⁶ God’s relationship with humankind is forever changed on the cross. The death of Jesus tears open the veil and invites all people into the Holy of Holies to pray before the Father and share their joys and sorrows. Additionally, the suffering of the Triune God redeems humanity from suffering. The world’s redemption comes out of the mercy of the Trinity. Moltmann describes this merciful act as, “the dying of the Son, the grief of the Father, and the patience of the Spirit.”⁶⁷ In the midst of suffering, there is hope. Creation holds tight to the God that not only understands their pain, but has overcome it.

⁶⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 150.

⁶⁶ Stott, 329.

⁶⁷ Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, 24. Moltmann sees mercy as the divine attribute and representative of his omnipotence.

Moltmann's theology on the suffering of the Father and the Son on the cross raises concerns for those in the impassibility camp. First, Moltmann's over-emphasis of suffering on the cross trumps his theology.⁶⁸ Moltmann focuses on certain gospel accounts of the crucifixion in order to support his ideas on suffering. In doing so, he fails to show the strength of Jesus on the cross which is more evident in John and Luke's gospel.⁶⁹ The strength of the cross lies in Christ's victory over death and the forgiveness of sins that is now available. Additionally, Moltmann proclaims that the suffering of God begins at the cross. While the suffering of God is unique on the cross, the Bible portrays a God that suffers long before the cross on behalf of his people. Fiddes points out, "if God suffers universally, we cannot speak of the being of God as first becoming suffering love at the cross. God must always have been so."⁷⁰

Furthermore, Moltmann's theology places God as the guilty party and the Son as the victim.⁷¹ This sheds a negative light on the Father. Additionally, Moltmann's view on the suffering of God separates the trinitarian relationship. In distinguishing the roles of the Father and Son, Moltmann denies the divine essence of the Trinity.⁷² Highfield

⁶⁸ Castelo, "Moltmann's Dismissal of Divine Impassibility: Warranted?" 402. Castelo sees Moltmann's theology to be largely based on the cry of dereliction which does not give a full picture of the significance of the cross.

⁶⁹ Jowers, 257.

⁷⁰ Fiddes, 7.

⁷¹ Ibid., 137. Fiddes argues that Moltmann leaves us with a God that is the source of his own suffering. In this way, "God seems less the supreme victim than the supreme self-executioner." See also Castelo, "Moltmann's Dismissal of Divine Impassibility: Warranted?" 402 and Jowers, 248-249.

⁷² Jowers, 250. Jowers argues that Moltmann contradicts himself by pushing for both a separation of and unity of nature between the Father and the Son. If the Father and Son are one, than in choosing to send and inflict torment on the Son, He torments his own

describes the trinitarian love as one that gives himself fully to the others and dwells completely within the other. He states, “The love among the persons of the Trinity is not painful but joyful, not forced but freely given.”⁷³ Therefore, neither the Father nor the Son suffer in giving themselves to one another. God suffers on account of the sinfulness of humanity and not on account of himself.

Finally, impassibilists argue that the suffering of Jesus took place only within his human nature.⁷⁴ Jesus’ passibility is present in his human nature where he experiences suffering, pain, and human emotions. However, the divine nature of Jesus is impassible as it shares in the same essence with the Father and the Spirit. Attfield uses the idea of kenosis, a renunciation of the divine nature, to describe this separation. He explains this hypostatic union as one where experience is only possible in God’s human role which is “veiled from the divine by a drastic kenosis.”⁷⁵ It is only by kenosis that Jesus is the crucified God. To claim that Jesus is fully God then one must see him as such for the entirety of his time on earth. The incarnation requires God to fully experience human life such that the God that suffered on the cross is the same God that was nursed by Mary and slept on a boat in the Sea of Galilee.⁷⁶

self. Moltmann’s theology does affirm the idea of God being against himself. See Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 150.

⁷³ Highfield, 387.

⁷⁴ Brewis, 132; Duby, 286; Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 175; Highfield, 388; and Weinandy, “God and Human Suffering,” 114.

⁷⁵ Attfield, 57.

⁷⁶ Richard Bauckham, “In Defence of The Crucified God,” in *The Power and Weakness of God: Impassibility and Orthodoxy*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990), 111-112. Bauckham sees the incarnation as the

Another concern is that if Jesus suffers as God, then a part of the Triune God dies on the cross. Brewis labels this idea “tri-theism.”⁷⁷ The death of God would create a “black hole” in the divine mind.⁷⁸ Both of these ideas are not possible being that the divine cannot die, therefore, the only logical conclusion for maintaining divine impassibility is to separate Jesus’ human and divine nature. In this way, death and suffering occur only within the human nature of God.

Passibility of God

An impassible God raises several issues for Moltmann. First, an impassible God is one that never changes his mind. While Moltmann agrees that God is immutable in his nature, God does allow himself to be changed by others out of his own free will.⁷⁹ God’s mutability is not the same as humans who are passively changed by outside influences and emotions. Rather, God chooses to be changed by humanity because of his love for them. The incarnation presents another concern for God’s immutability. Moltmann raises the question: how does an intransitory God be fully present in a transitory human being? Furthermore, how does the unchangeable God ‘become’ flesh?⁸⁰ These questions led

stumbling block for Moltmann’s theology. He states, “unless divine nature includes the possibility of being human, incarnation is not possible.”

⁷⁷ Brewis, 131.

⁷⁸ Attfield, 49.

⁷⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 229.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

many early Christians to doubt the divinity of Jesus. If Jesus is God in flesh, there is some aspect in which God allows himself to be changeable.

Secondly, the passion of Jesus poses another concern for impassibility. For Moltmann, the passion of Christ is the center point for his ministry on earth. An impassible God stands over a suffering and divided world as one that is not subject to its emotions or destiny, yet Jesus comes as one that shows compassion, weeps with the people, and endures suffering for their sake. Moltmann questions, “If deity cannot suffer, how can Christian faith see Christ’s passion as the revelation of what God is?”⁸¹ Moltmann describes this dilemma as the “apathy axiom” where suffering is seen as a weakness of the divine nature.⁸² If this is true, then Christ’s sacrifice becomes merely a human tragedy. God becomes one that is cold and indifferent to his people and Christianity will lose its center point. Moltmann proposes a different explanation of the apathy axiom where God’s suffering comes out of his choice to love humankind and is a unique way of suffering that sets him apart from humanity.

Third, an impassible God is an apathetic God. *Apatheia* is to be incapable of feeling and unable to be affected by outside influences.⁸³ Moltmann sees apathy to be important to the early teachings on impassibility for two reasons. First, it sets God apart from humans which are subject to suffering and death. Second, God gives humans the chance for eternal life which entails a life that is free from human suffering like his own. Yet, for Moltmann, the argument falls short in giving only two options for God: apathetic

⁸¹ Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*, 43.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 267.

and indifferent or passionate and weak. Moltmann suggests a third alternative where God is an active sufferer and chooses to engage in suffering with his people. This third option breaks down the apathy axiom and allows God to remain fully divine even through his suffering. If God remains apathetic, human suffering and pain can likely lead one to despise an impassable and indifferent God. A God that suffers with the sufferer brings hope and love to a hurting world.

For Moltmann, suffering is the greatest evidence of God's passibility. There are three different forms of suffering: unwilling suffering, accepted suffering, and the suffering of love.⁸⁴ Divine suffering is the latter form where God takes on the role of an active sufferer. Active suffering is evidence of the "passionate love" of God.⁸⁵ On the cross, Christ chooses to suffer out of his love for the Father and for creation. Divine passibility is closely connected with divine and human freedom. God and the world maintain a reciprocal relationship where creation causes God's suffering and brings him joy. Just as in a parent/child relationship, there are painful moments that come in parenting children (birth, disobedience, moving away), but the joy far outweighs the sorrows. While creation's sin and separation from God causes him pain, God delights in his people and rejoice over them.⁸⁶ God's way of suffering is redemptive. Although sin causes God to suffer, he remains holy as one that stands outside of it and free from its bonds.

⁸⁴ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 230.

⁸⁵ Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, 44.

⁸⁶ Ps. 149:4 and Zeph. 3:17.

Divine passibility is also seen in the pathos of God. Like Fretheim, Moltmann's theology is influenced by Abraham Heschel's work on the *pathos* of God.⁸⁷ God's *pathos* reflects his emotions. God's emotions are not irrational, like a human's, but represent how God is affected by events, human actions, and suffering in history. God is affected by emotions because he is interested in creation. Moltmann writes, "The divine *pathos* is expressed in the relationship of God to his people."⁸⁸ God opens his heart through his covenant with creation and, therefore, is affected by their disobedience and their suffering. Just as for Fretheim, Moltmann sees God's vulnerability to love as a direct link to his passibility.

Divine accommodations are another example of divine passibility. God accommodates himself by coming down to creation and meeting humans in their lowliness. For Moltmann, accommodations are an example of the "self-humiliation" of God.⁸⁹ God limits himself within the confines of history in order to enter into the situation of the world—even those of guilt and suffering. Moltmann states, "In his 'indwelling' in the people he suffers with the people, goes with them into prison, feels sorrow with the martyrs."⁹⁰ A God that accommodates himself to his people brings great

⁸⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*. 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

⁸⁸ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 271.

⁸⁹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 27. Examples of accommodation include creation, choosing of the patriarchs, God's covenant with Israel, the exodus, and the exile. For Moltmann, accommodations do not take the form of a person (like theophanies or the prophets), but are examples of God coming down and dwelling within creation by His Spirit. As one that indwells within them, he experiences their joy and sorrow. This is especially evident in the exile where God continually suffers with Israel.

⁹⁰ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 273. Moltmann sees the Spirit of God as an accommodation that God sends to dwell with His people. The Holy Spirit lives within

hope to creation. The comfort of the crucified Christ brings hope through the love of God and the fellowship of the eternal Spirit. God binds himself to the suffering of his people to the point that “our true suffering is also his suffering, our sorrow is also his sorrow, our pains are also the pains of his love.”⁹¹

Moltmann’s theology on the passibility of God dismisses the beliefs of the church fathers and their teachings on impassibility that have shaped Christianity for the past two-thousand years.⁹² Castelo defends the church fathers’ desire to maintain God’s transcendence in adopting divine impassibility. The church fathers did not “blindly adopt divine impassibility but rather qualified it significantly,” explains Castelo.⁹³ This was necessary in setting God apart as the one true god.

A weakness in Moltmann’s theology is that he gives only two options for belief: passibility or impassibility. Because of this limitation, Moltmann is unwilling to accept paradoxical language (i.e., suffering impassibly). Paradoxical statements keep God’s transcendence intact while still showing his divine care and involvement in suffering.

God’s people which gives him the closeness to feel what they feel. If God’s Spirit is given as a gift to those that choose to follow Him, how does God experience the suffering and pain of those that are not Christians? While this brings great hope to believers, there is still a need to emphasize God’s love for all of creation, even those that have yet to choose Him.

⁹¹ Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, 29.

⁹² Castelo, “Moltmann’s Dismissal of Divine Impassibility: Warranted?” 400. See also Attfield, 49.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 398.

Impassibilitists see these statements as a necessary part of reaching a theological consensus on impassibility and suffering in today's world.⁹⁴

Furthermore, Gavriilyuk sees passibilitists to wrongly define impassibility as emotional impotence and indifference. He sees it better defined as a "sense of perfect control over emotional states."⁹⁵ In this way, God's impassibility becomes a strength of God, not weakness. Jowers argues, "he who worships a changeable God, worships an unreliable God."⁹⁶ Impassibility must be dealt with alongside all other divine attributes. Passibilitists tend to isolate divine impassibility, which can lead one to question the truth of other attributes of God. For example, if one questions the impassibility of God, does this lead one to question his transcendence? There is a need for consistency when studying the divine nature that holds all attributes to an equal standard of importance.⁹⁷

Another concern of Moltmann's theology is his teachings on the *apatheia* of God. Moltmann's dismissal of the traditional teachings of *apatheia* are a result of his overemphasis on the suffering of God. Castelo labels this the "straw-man" of his

⁹⁴ Castelo, "Moltmann's Dismissal of Divine Impassibility: Warranted?" 400 and Gavriilyuk, "God's Impassible Suffering in the Flesh," 149.

⁹⁵ Gavriilyuk, "God's Impassible Suffering in the Flesh," 137.

⁹⁶ Jowers, 254. Jowers sees Moltmann to misunderstand divine love as merely suffering love. Because of this, Moltmann fails to give enough justice to the intensity of the divine love which encompasses far more than just suffering for his people. See also Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, 106 & 108 and Smith, 159. Castelo and Smith both see passibility as a weakness of God because it undermines his trustworthiness to defeat sin and death.

⁹⁷ See Gavriilyuk, "God's Impassible Suffering in the Flesh," 139 and Jowers, 250 & 251. Jowers sees a denial of God's impassibility to require a denial of God's ontological and ethical immutability as well.

doctrine.⁹⁸ He sees Moltmann's personal conversion to overly influence his theology. For Moltmann, there is an intimate connection between the question of suffering and the question of God. His teachings have led suffering to gain a "foothold, perhaps a non-negotiable space," in contemporary theology.⁹⁹

For the patristics, *apatheia* is a positive attribute of God that demonstrates his mastery over all emotions and passions.¹⁰⁰ God's love is pure and free from all other emotions and is in its own way impassible. His love is *apatheia* because it is perfectly full of joy and peace. Because of this, humanity cannot add or subtract from God's desire, love, or power. Hart explains, "because God's is a Trinitarian love, one that is always open to the other, it can include us in itself without changing its nature."¹⁰¹ Divine *apatheia* is the infinite interval of love between the Father, Spirit, and Son. This infinite love represents impassibility within the Trinity.

Bauckham seeks to find a more balanced view of *apatheia* that focuses less on what God is not (exclusions) and more on who He is (inclusions). He states, "That God transcends time need not mean that he cannot relate to us in time...That God is not subject to change or suffering as we are need not mean that he cannot change or suffer in any way at all."¹⁰² In this way, God suffers alongside creation, but as one that transcends all

⁹⁸ Castelo, "Moltmann's Dismissal of Divine Impassibility Warranted?" 397.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 397.

¹⁰⁰ David Bentley Hart, "No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility." *Pro Ecclesia* 11, no. 2 (2002): 193.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 200.

¹⁰² Bauckham, 117.

suffering. The suffering of a transcendent God remains difficult to describe as humans are limited in their knowledge as finite beings. While one can say confidently that God suffers, one may not fully understand the specifics of what divine suffering entails. This idea leaves space for divine mystery, which is a necessary part of seeking to understand the divine attributes.

A final concern is Moltmann's emphasis on the passion of God as displayed in Jesus. Passion is something that is brought about by an external factor and causes a change in one's state of consciousness.¹⁰³ The traditional doctrine of impassibility differentiates God's passions from the passion of people. Highfield explains, "God is not passionate in the sense that his states of mind are triggered by another or come and go, or that his passions carry him along toward an action."¹⁰⁴ God's passion comes from the trinitarian relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The trinitarian love is a perfect, mutual, self-giving love. The impassibility of the Father makes the incarnational passibility of the Son even more significant.¹⁰⁵ While the Son maintains his impassible nature as the divine, he chooses to take on the passible nature of a man and rescue humanity. The Father is moved by suffering through his experience and knowledge of it through Jesus. Gavrilyuk labels this paradox the suffering of the impassible God. God is impassible as one that conquers suffering and passible as one that suffers through the human nature of Jesus.¹⁰⁶ For Highfield, the best way to describe the doctrine of

¹⁰³ Highfield, 376. Highfield gives this definition for passion versus impassibility.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 379. See also Weinandy, "God and Human Suffering," 109.

¹⁰⁵ Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, 107.

¹⁰⁶ Gavrilyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, 11. See also Culpepper, 88.

impassibility is “passionate impassibility” where “God’s infinite and perfect passion is unchangeable.”¹⁰⁷ While God does experience passion, this occurs within the perfect love of the Trinity. The strength of God lies in His unchanging nature and His transcendence as Creator.

Despite the large amount of criticism Moltmann has elicited, his work on suffering and passibility has been monumental in shaping new ideas on the classical teaching of impassibility. Theologians have been challenged to take another look at the traditional teaching of an impassible God in order to bring hope to a hurting world. This has led to the birth of new perspectives on impassibility. For example, the constructivists camp, a group of modern theologians, seek to find a middle ground between the classical and contemporary teachings on impassibility. Their work has sought to maintain a balance between God’s impassibility and his compassion by redefining divine suffering. The constructivist’s perspective provides helpful pushback on Moltmann’s work and has been instrumental in shaping the conclusions of this paper.

¹⁰⁷ Highfield, 380.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The goal of this paper is to analyze the works of Terence Fretheim and Jürgen Moltmann in order to gain a clearer picture of divine suffering and its relation to the passibility of God. These passibilitists help bring out suffering as a positive attribute of God who actively suffers out of his love for humankind. While Fretheim and Moltmann defend the passibility of God, I argue that the nature of divine suffering allows for God to remain impassible in the midst of suffering. There are two important distinctions which make divine suffering and impassibility possible: the unique suffering of God and God's role as an active sufferer.

God suffers in a unique way. Weinandy suggests four characteristics that make God the one true God: He is One (there is no other like Him), He is Savior (He transcends all worldly forces), He is Creator (transcendent above all created things), He is holy (set apart from anything that is sinful).¹ One concern with divine suffering is the appearance of weakness in a God who suffers. This weakness brings into question his perfection and his transcendence as Creator. However, divine suffering is distinct from human emotions. While human emotions tend to control and consume a person, God maintains perfection and control in the midst of his grief. Fiddes describes God's unique suffering as "transcendent suffering."² God's suffering is transcendent in that He

¹ Thomas G Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?" *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 37.

² Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 143.

maintains relationships that are both inclusive and exclusive of the world. Fiddes explains, “He can include all suffering in himself as he includes all human relationships, yet he is other than the world in his unique suffering, taking our sufferings into himself out of the depths of the more profound and terrible suffering which remains his own.”³ In this way, God remains transcendent and perfect even as one that suffers for and with his people. The suffering of God represents not an imperfection, but a positive attribute of love and concern for his creation. God’s power manifest itself through suffering which demonstrates his holiness and salvific essence.

Secondly, God is an active sufferer.⁴ Unlike passive suffering that happens upon a person, God *chooses* to suffer for his people. As an active sufferer, God is not controlled by the emotions of suffering. His choice to suffer on behalf of another gives him the upper hand on it. Fiddes points out, “God’s victory over evil consists in the way that he deals with the suffering that befalls him, whatever evil causes lie behind it.”⁵ While God does not seek to suffer, he does desire to be in fellowship with his creation. This fellowship brings about an integral relationship between sovereignty and suffering. God’s choice to suffer demonstrates creation’s significance to God.

God not only chooses to suffer, but also invites people to share in his suffering love for the world. The Old Testament prophets represent the suffering of God to the

³ Fiddes, 143.

⁴ Both Moltmann and Fiddes emphasize this idea of active suffering when describing the distinct suffering of God. This idea is further explained in chapter three of this paper. See Fiddes, 62 and Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 44.

⁵ Fiddes, 62.

world. Their suffering calls Israel to repentance and reminds them of their place as God's chosen people. The suffering God comes even closer to humankind through the life and death of Jesus. Jesus is the picture of God and, therefore, each part of his life is important for understanding God's nature. "His teaching informs us about God; his character shows forth the qualities of God; his death reveals the suffering of God; and his resurrection vividly declares the creative power of God," expresses Grenz.⁶ Both Moltmann and Fretheim emphasize the important role suffering plays in the Old and New Testament. Their work helps to express the depth of God's love in choosing to take on the role of suffering in order to bring people back into a relationship with the Creator. At the cross, God's relationship with creation reaches both a climax and a new stage. Fiddes describes the cross as the "supreme expression" of God's love where He experiences a "deeper death leading to a richer life."⁷

Just as suffering unites God with humanity, humanity draws close to God through suffering. Suffering is an avenue to experience the divine pathos where one gains a closer look into the heart of God. As creation participates with God, they enter into a "sympathetic union" with Him.⁸ This union allows one to learn to suffer with God's suffering, love with God's love, and hope with God's hope. When people choose to suffer for the sake of others they begin to move from a "natural happiness to the blessed

⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 265.

⁷ Fiddes, 10.

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 272.

fellowship with God as the supreme good,” as Eichrodt describes.⁹ The pathos of God helps reveal the worth God gives to humankind. Because God sees worth in his creation, Christians are able to count all people worthy. This allows them to love others, even to the point of suffering with and for them. In so doing, they begin to look more like God.

While divine suffering aids in understanding the nature of God, the question of theodicy still remains unanswered—how does a good God allow evil things to happen? Furthermore, if God has power over suffering, why does he choose to allow it? Neither Fretheim nor Moltmann seeks to answer these questions. Both scholars attempt to better understand the nature of God in regards to suffering, not answer why God allows innocent people to suffer. When people gain a better understanding of the goodness of God, they find comfort and strength in the midst of suffering. Because suffering plays a significant role in the debate over the rationality of God’s existence, there is still a need for further study in this area.

Significance of Divine Suffering

Divine suffering is significant in the life of a Christian for two reasons. First, suffering is the path to the glory of God. Romans 8:18 states, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” Through perseverance in suffering, God leads us to glory. Suffering finds its purpose through the glory of Christ. Stott points out, “The cross does not solve the

⁹ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*. (London: SCM Press, 1961), 358.

problem of suffering, but it supplies the essential perspective from which to look at it.”¹⁰

Additionally, when we share in the sufferings of Christ, we also share in his resurrection.¹¹ This closeness provides an intimate connection between God and his people that sets Christianity apart from other religions. Stott boldly states:

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as ‘God on the cross’. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statues of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us us. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering.¹²

The cross makes Christianity worth living for. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13) Divine suffering displays the heart and love of the one true God.

Secondly, divine suffering is a source of hope for humankind. God promises to never leave or forsake his people. (Heb. 13:5) The promise of not walking through suffering alone brings hope to a hurting world. Furthermore, when the people of God share in the sufferings of Christ, they also share “abundantly” in his comfort.¹³ This

¹⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 329.

¹¹ Phil. 3: 10-11.

¹² Stott, 335.

¹³ 2 Cor. 1: 5-7.

comfort that God gives his people is then shared with those in the world that undergo suffering. In this way, hope in the midst of suffering demonstrates the kingdom of God breaking into the world. When someone accepts suffering and is no longer resentful of it, they begin to take ownership over their struggles. This allows the person to see ways to end and deal with suffering in that moment and not just in the eschatological future. Suffering that is chosen and overcome through God results in action that seeks to change the conditions that cause suffering.¹⁴ Accepting suffering in this way helps one not become bitter when undergoing difficulties. Moltmann points out, “People who believe in the God who suffers with us, recognize their suffering in God, and God in their suffering, and in companionship with him find the strength to remain in love and not to become bitter, in spite of pain and sorrow.”¹⁵ In finding joy and strength through their hardships, Christians represent hope to a suffering world.

Application for the Church Today

God invites his church to join the mission of representing his love for the world.¹⁶ In this way, the church partners with God in bringing about his salvific plan. As with any close partnership, God and his church share both joys and sorrows. Paul’s love for God and the church causes him great suffering. Yet, in the midst of suffering over persecution or weak faith, he finds reason to rejoice. Colossians 1:24 states, “Now I rejoice in my

¹⁴ Fiddes, 108. Fiddes emphasizes this idea and relates this to God’s power over suffering.

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 46.

¹⁶ John 13:35 and 1 John 4:7.

sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." As the church grows in maturity, they must not be surprised by the presence of suffering. Suffering flows from a deep love for the Lord's church and the world it seeks to reach. A suffering church represents a place of vulnerability, forgiveness, and love.

Just as the children of God are united to the Father in their salvation, they are united with him in their sufferings. He shares in their joy and their pain. This gives each Christian a reason to find joy and hope even in the course of suffering. "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." (1 Pet. 4:13) A part of a life with Christ is learning to suffer on behalf of others with joy and hope. God is the supreme example of how to deal with suffering. In spite of suffering, his love for the world never wavers. Ministers of the gospel must ground themselves in God's love such that even when the world disappoints them and turns away, they remain steadfast in reaching out and proclaiming God's message of salvation. This is not an easy task. It requires a close walk with the Lord in order to not grow weary in being his ambassadors. Just like Jesus, ministers must learn to balance their time between reaching out to others and up to God. In this way, God shares in their sufferings and gives them the strength to overcome by the power of His Spirit.

Along with those in ministry, the mission field can be a place of great suffering.

Stott points out,

The place of suffering in service and of passion in mission is hardly ever taught today. But the greatest single secret of evangelistic or missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die. It may be a death to popularity (by faithfully preaching the unpopular biblical gospel), or to pride (by the use of modest methods in reliance on the Holy Spirit), or to racial and national prejudice (by identification with another culture), or

to material comfort (by adopting a simple lifestyle). But the servant must suffer if he is to bring light to the nations, and the seed must die if it is to multiply.¹⁷

In these examples of death, the missionary makes a choice to be an active sufferer for the kingdom of God. Suffering that lacks purpose appears meaningless. But when suffering has a purpose and place within the mission of God, missionaries can experience God's power. Divine power allows for patient endurance and long suffering. This perspective leads one to rejoice and find joy through the most difficult moments. I can remember the early days of mission work where I often felt like an outsider living in a place where I had no family and very few friends. God's gentle reminder of his mission and his love for the lost around me gave me the strength to persevere. When one of our family's closest friends and first converts came to our house to tell us he had given up on faith, God faithfully comforted our hearts as we mourned the spiritual death of our friend.

Through each of these moments and many others, missionaries begin to relate to the Old Testament prophets who are, what Fretheim considers, vocational sufferers.¹⁸ Vocational sufferers love their neighbors and suffer on their account. Their heart displays the heart of God to those they are around. Their greatest desire is to reach and love the hurting world, and because of that, the pain of those they work with becomes their own. In those moments, they begin to experience the God who loves to the point of suffering. God gives them his perspective of the world around them. And as they weep, they find joy in being counted worthy of the sufferings of Christ.

¹⁷ Stott, 322.

¹⁸ Terence E Fretheim, "To Say Something—About God, Evil, and Suffering." *Word & World* 19, no. 4 (1999): 350.

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