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Does a Red-Faced God Sing the Blues? Emotions, Divine Suffering, and Biblical Interpretation

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Speaking (not so) well of God

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.¹ So says Richard Dawkins, for whom God is a “moral monster.” Christopher Hitchens echoes the claim, entitling his own book *God is Not Great*.

One expects such bluster from over-confident atheists. More troubling are Christian biblical scholars and theologians who similarly stumble over biblical passages that speak of God’s jealousy, anger, grief and other emotions, and who speak of God not as a moral monster but as an emotional wreck.

How can pastors and others speak well of God in the light of biblical texts that depict God as having emotions, especially “negative” emotions? May we depart from the classical tradition’s affirmation of God’s divine impassibility (i.e., his imperviousness to suffering), as many today are inclined to do, and say instead that God suffers change? Or does this move confuse the God of the Old and New Testament with the gods of pagan myths, or worse, ourselves?

For various reasons, the doctrine of God is once again center Evangelical stage. This time the problem is not divine foreknowledge (as in Open Theism) but divine emotion, though the underlying issue is still the nature of the God who is love (1 Jn. 4:8). Does God’s love entail emotional change (i.e., suffering)? Contemporary opinion is divided. Hence the perennial challenge of theology: to speak well (i.e., truly; biblically; coherently; intelligibly) of the God of the gospel.

What biblical authors say

Last year’s Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting featured a provocative session on “The God Ezekiel wants us to meet.” Like Dawkins, a number of the scholars in that group view the God of Ezekiel as a narcissistic, self-absorbed, and ruthless deity – a jealous husband marked by an obsessive fear “that no one is going to know who he is.”² Some go even further, viewing God as an *abusive* husband so jealous of his holy name (Ezek. 39:25) that he is willing to punish Israel.³ Consider, for example, God’s promise to spare a remnant so that they would remember “how I was crushed by their unfaithful heart that has departed from me” (Ezek. 6:9).

The second commandment forbids idolatry because “I the Lord your God am a jealous God” (Ex. 20:5). Jealousy is a passion aroused when a loving relationship is threatened. This is why it is deeply woven into the

story of God's covenant with Israel. The Hebrew term for jealousy (*qanna*) is based on an Arabic root *qn* that means "to become intensely red" – no doubt a reference to the effects of anger or deep feeling on one's facial complexion. Hence my question: is being jealous – red-faced – a divine perfection?

The New Testament does not say whether or not Jesus was ever red-faced, but it does attribute emotion to him: "he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.... Jesus wept" (Jn. 11:33, 35). The eternal word of God has a human face. We don't know what his face looked like as he cried "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," but it could well have been flushed.



Scripture thus depicts both Yahweh and Yeshua as red-faced: in turmoil, even, in Jesus' case, on the verge of despair. We can understand that: he was about to be crushed for our iniquities (Isa. 53:5). But can God himself – immortal, invisible – be crushed as well and, if so, does this mean that God despairs? Does a red-faced, jealous God sing the blues?

Listening to our Reformed elders

Calvin warns against taking anthropomorphisms – "forms" (*morphe*) drawn from the sphere of the human (*anthropos*) – as literal descriptions of God. God does not have arms. God does not literally break nor is he wrathful the way humans are. Indeed, according to Calvin we do not know what God is in himself, only how he appears to us. Calvin urges us to use great caution "that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends ... Let us then willingly leave to God the knowledge of himself" (*Inst.* 1.13.21).

How then should we interpret God's admission that Israel's rejection "crushed" him, and all the other biblical "anthropopathisms" (i.e., attributions of humans passions, feelings, and suffering to God)? The Westminster Confession of Faith famously declares God to be "without body, parts, or passions." Subsequent theologians agreed, taking care to distinguish "passions" from "affections" (i.e., positive dispositions). Fair enough: but which is the proper category for God's love? And, if we're not to take God's being red-faced literally, then what does red-faced (jealous) mean?

Divine perfections: shapes of God's being in communicative action

We speak well of God when we say *who* God is and *what* this "who" is like. Although we do not have exhaustive knowledge of God as he is in himself, we can know him truly, for everything God says and does reveals something of who and what God is.

God's acts in history "communicate" his eternal nature. The way God is in time, especially in the history of Jesus, corresponds to the way he is in eternity. Jesus is the historical "exegesis" of the eternal Father (Jn. 1:18). Think of revelation and redemption alike as forms of communicative action.

God's communicable attributes – perfections like goodness and love in which humans participate to a greater or lesser degree – are not "parts" of God but rather shapes of God's indivisible communicative activity. As one whose being is communicative activity, God is like us; as the one who is the Author of all being, however, God is wholly unlike us. Everything that God does, all his communicative acts, must therefore be qualified by his Authorial status. God is good, but not in the same way in which humans are good. God's goodness is *Authorial* (i.e., unoriginated and infinite).

The divine communicative acts that reveal God and propel the history of redemption forward are dynamic analogies of the eternal triune life. The work of Father, Son, and Spirit in history is a dramatic analogy (a being-in-temporal-act) of the light, life, and love that God is in himself (a being-in-eternal-act). So, while God's acts in history may seem to resemble human acts, we must take care to keep in mind the "Authorial qualifier," especially when we are confronted with the Bible's anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms. Speaking well of God means using human terms *and* remembering that God is the "wholly Author" in our midst.

What is an emotion?

Is "being moved by" among the perfections of God? Everything depends on whether we can rightly predicate motions, by which I here mean *emotions*, of God, and this in turn depends on our definition of *emotion*.

Robert Roberts, a philosopher and moral psychologist, thinks that emotions are primarily mental rather than physical.⁴ First and foremost, emotions are about things of which we are *aware*. Non-cognitivists are wrong to reduce emotions to the physical sensation, say, of being hit in the stomach. Emotions are cognitions that typically involve a person believing something (i.e., a proposition) about a particular person or object. Saul became jealous and angry with David because he believed that David's success and the people's celebration constituted a threat to his own status as king (1 Sam. 18:6-9).

Second, emotions are *construals*, ways of grasping one thing in terms of something else. To construe something is to characterize it in a certain way, to perceive or believe it *as such-and-such*. What distinguishes one emotion from another is not the content but the way in which one construes it. Emotions are perspectival evaluations of particular situations. David's military victories (the proposition) led the people to rejoice (construal) but made Saul miserable (opposite construal).

Third, emotions are *concern-based* construals, value-laden judgments. Saul is jealous of David *because he is personally invested in the situation*. His construal of David as a threat is not that of a disinterested political analyst but of one who perceives something dear to his heart (viz., his own status) as endangered.

Divine emotions: covenantal concern-based dramatic construals

Roberts's definition provides several helpful concepts with which to elaborate the Bible's depictions of God's "inner life" and minister understanding, though we also need to modify his account in light of the biblical material.

First, God has neither body nor biochemistry. God can nevertheless have emotions if we understand them as mental states, each with its own object and mode of awareness. God's cognitions, volitions, and affections alike always have particular objects: "Jacob I loved . . . Esau I hated" (Rom. 9:13).

Second, God's emotions are unintelligible apart from his construals of human history (e.g., God views Israel's worship of the golden calf *as heinous*). In particular, God's emotions proceed from his construals of the ways in which human beings respond to his words and deeds that comprise the drama of redemption, especially as these come to a climactic focus in Jesus Christ (call it *theodramatic construal*). Unlike our construals, however, God's construals are always objective, hence his judgments about situations are always right and true (remember the "Authorial qualifier").

Finally, God's concerns are covenantal. Israel is the object of God's intense concern inasmuch as she relates to God's own important project: forming a people that will glorify him and be his. The theodrama is ultimately a love story. Better: it is the story of God's marriage (a covenantal relationship) to his people, his treasured possession. It is surely significant that, with very few exceptions, almost all of the biblical depictions of divine emotions take place in the context of God's covenant relationship to Israel (and later, the church). Even God's "hating" reflects a covenantal concern, namely, that some people are "not my people" (Hos. 1:9) and are thus under judgment.

In a nutshell: God's emotions, as covenantal concern-based construals of various scenes in the drama of redemption, display the whole panoply of divine perfections.

Conclusion: towards an Evangelical theology of the divine emotional attributes

The challenge for a theology of divine attributes is to avoid the two extremes of mythologizing and demythologizing. To “mythologize” biblical texts that attribute emotion to God is to see God as a larger-than-life Othello, tormented by a strong, possibly irrational, passion that causes him to suffer change and experience brokenness. Conversely, to “demythologize” God’s jealousy would be to see it as a mere figure of speech that neither means what it says nor is in any way reality-depicting.

The biblical ascription of jealousy to God is indeed reality-depicting: it represents God’s true construal of the theodramatic situation, his legitimate (and constant!) concern to preserve an exclusive relationship with Israel, and all the other perfections of his nature. God’s “feeling” jealous is his covenantally concerned cognition of Israel on the verge of transferring her allegiance. However, this feeling is not an instance of God changing emotional states. On the contrary, God is always and at all times fully himself. God’s jealousy is no irrational passion but rather a fitting display of his love, goodness, wisdom, righteousness, etc. – the sum total of the divine perfections.

The God of the Old and New Testaments is not “the most unpleasant character in all fiction” but rather the Holy One in our historical midst. The God of the gospel cannot be deterred or diminished. To forget God’s Authorial status, his absolute perfection, is to forget that God is God, and that God is always and at all times everything that God is, including love. That God’s love is sovereign and impassible is good news, for it means that God’s face is never changing. God is always and everywhere and to everyone as he shows himself to be in the face of Jesus Christ: the impassible Author lovingly in our midst. ❖

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Notes:

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006) p. 51.

² David J. Halperin, *Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993) pp. 170-71.

³ David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) pp. 240-248.

⁴ Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

... the reason why God has no passions is that passions imply passivity and intermission... He cannot be affected with love because He is love. To imagine that love as something less torrential or less sharp than our own temporary and derivative “passions” is a most disastrous fantasy.

C.S. Lewis

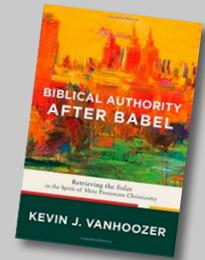


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RECOMMENDED READING

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Brazos Press, 2016)

In recent years, notable scholars have argued that the Protestant Reformation unleashed interpretive anarchy on the church. Is it time to consider the Reformation to be a 500-year experiment gone wrong? World-renowned evangelical theologian Kevin Vanhoozer thinks not. While he sees recent critiques as legitimate, he argues that retrieving the Reformation's core principles offers an answer to critics of Protestant biblical interpretation.



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