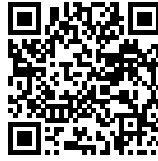




DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY

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It is fascinating how the ever-changing needs of the times often call us to tread again the same ground once covered by the Fathers. In their day the need was to show how the Scriptural account of God's self-revelation was consistent with a more Hellenistic and philosophical view of the impassable divine nature.

Such a project was required in their day if they were to commend the Hebrew Scriptures which the Church received as divinely-inspired to the wider pagan audience which viewed the divine nature as eternal, impassable, transcendent, and unchanging.

The problem, of course, is that this philosophical view of divinity didn't seem to line up with what people read about the Hebrew God in the Hebrew Scriptures.

People believed—correctly—that the divine nature was unchanging and unchangeable, that it was eternal and untroubled. Or, in the words of St. John of Damascus, that “He is invariable and unchangeable, and it would not be right to speak of contingency in connection with Him. [The divine nature is] uncreated, without beginning, immortal, infinite, eternal, immaterial, good, creative, just, enlightening, immutable, passionless, immeasurable, unlimited, undefined, unseen, unthinkable, wanting in nothing” ([Exact Exposition](#), book 1, chapters 13, 14).

St. John Cassian said the same thing at an earlier time: The idea that God has physical limbs “cannot be understood literally of Him who is declared by the authority of Holy Scripture to be invisible, ineffable, incomprehensible, inestimable, simple, and uncompounded, so neither can the passion of anger and wrath be attributed to that unchangeable nature without fearful blasphemy” ([Institutes](#), book 8, chapter 4.)

What both John of Damascus and John Cassian meant was not that the Scriptures were unreliable, but that they needed interpretation. For if one read the Hebrew Scriptures with a simple heart and insufficient subtlety, one might come away with an erroneous view of the Hebrew God.

One might imagine that Yahweh had a short fuse, that He sometimes lost His temper and needed calming down, that He did not know everything in advance, and sometimes needed to find things out by investigation and then might need to change His mind.

They might imagine that mere human beings could ruffle the divine feathers and get Yahweh worked up, and that He was subject to passions and emotions such as jealousy, uncontrolled rage, as well as bouts of happiness, and that His emotions could see-saw between extremes of happiness and sadness.

Even simpler readers might conclude that Yahweh had arms, fingers, eyes, ears, and a mouth because the Scriptures spoke of these things.

And some people even justified their own human rage by referring to the divine wrath mentioned in the Bible: "We have heard some people trying to excuse this most pernicious disease of the soul [i.e. anger] in such a way as to endeavour to extenuate it by a rather shocking way of interpreting Scripture: as they say that it is not injurious if we are angry with our brethren who do wrong, since they say God Himself is said to rage and to be angry" (*Institutes*, book 8, chapter 2).

These overly-simple interpretations of Scripture flew in the face of what an intelligent pagan audience believed about the divine nature, and led a number of them to dismiss the Scriptures and the Church which received them as infantile and unworthy of true philosophy.

Of course, they said, the divine nature cannot be subject to such human passions. In fact, the Church had been saying the same thing about the pagan gods for some time, pouring scorn on the pagan myths and stories of Jupiter becoming angry and lustful.

But if it was true, as the Church always taught, that divine nature was essentially impassable and beyond the reach of change and passion, how could the Church's Hebrew Scriptures have any credibility when they seemed to present a very changeable and passionate God? That was the problem that the Fathers had

to grapple with as they presented the Christian Faith to a pagan world.

The Fathers' solution is well known: they affirmed the philosophical view of God and interpreted the Scriptural account of God's limbs (such as His mouth, eyes, and hands) metaphorically, as well as the Scriptural narratives about God's wrath and seeming changeability.

St. John Cassian again: "By God's mouth we should understand that His utterances are meant...by His eyes we can understand the boundless character of His sight with which He sees and looks through all things. By the expression 'hands' we understand His providence and work".

But the Scriptural references to His divine wrath, though they should not be understood as declaring that God is subject to the passion of anger or that our sins cause Him to throw a fit, are not to be explained away.

Thus Cassian: "When we read of the anger or fury of the Lord, we should take it not according to an unworthy meaning of human passion, but in a sense worthy of God, who is free from all passion, so that by this we should understand that He is the judge and avenger of all the unjust things which are done in this world, and by reason of these terms and their meaning we should dread Him as the terrible rewarder of our deeds, and fear to do anything against His will."

It is clear therefore that God still has wrath against sin, in that He will judge and avenge human wrong. Because of this divine vengeance we should "dread Him and fear to do anything against His will".

The Fathers do not declare that God has no wrath, but only that His anger is just and not the result of fits of passion or pique. God's anger is not like human anger, and is consistent with the divine impassibility. God is always good, and His beneficence never changes.

Whether or not we experience His kindness or His severity (see Romans 11:22)

depends not upon His shifting moods, for He is not subject to shifting moods. Rather it depends entirely upon us and how we live.

St. Irenaeus said as much even earlier still: "As many as according to their own choice depart from good, He inflicts that separation from Himself which they have chosen of their own accord. But separation from God is death and separation from light is darkness and separation from God consists in the loss of all the benefits He has in store...It is in this matter just as occurs in the case of a flood of light: those who have blinded themselves are forever deprived of the enjoyment of light. It is not that the light has inflicted upon them the penalty of blindness, but it is that the blindness itself has brought calamity upon them." ([*Against Heresies*](#), book 5, chapter 27).

God's unchanging nature remains light; those who experience calamity and the divine wrath do so because of their own actions, not because God is no longer light or willing to enlighten.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose: in the Fathers' day, many took offense at the Scriptural teaching about the wrath of God, saying that this was incompatible with the divine nature, the objection taking its force from the philosophical conviction that divine nature cannot be subject to emotions of any kind (including presumably nice emotions, such as happiness).

Today also many take offense at the Scriptural teaching about the wrath of God, saying that this is incompatible with the divine nature, the objection taking its force from our modern conviction that a loving God could not also have wrath.

We have seen that the Fathers' teaching overthrows both objections. The Fathers agree that God's nature is good and unchanging and unaffected by our sins. They also assert that the Scriptural teaching about God's wrath is true, and that God will one day act as "the judge and avenger of all the unjust things which are done in the world".

The modern attempt to deny this latter truth by appeal to God's good and unchanging nature cannot be sustained, and those who attempt to use the truth of divine impassibility to deny the truth of divine wrath are in error.

I suggest that those making this attempt are not motivated by the venerable philosophical appreciation

for the doctrine of divine impassibility so much as by a very modern squeamishness about the doctrine of divine wrath.

The Fathers affirmed both divine wrath and divine impassibility, and we must tread in the way that they walked, following along the path they blazed for us.

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The [photo](#) shows, "Moses on Mount Sinai," by Jean-Léon Gérôme, painted ca. 1895-1900.

