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Introduction

Is it possible to reconcile divine impassibility with the imitation of God ethic (*imitatio Dei*)? Modern proponents of divine impassibility claim that God is morally praiseworthy with respect to his[1] motives, acts, and judgments. What drives the doctrine of divine impassibility is the assumption that God is perfect—for him to learn, grow, or change would imply he has not reached perfection—and that he is wholly transcendent, living in an eternal now. The divine moral nature, then, consists of an inner life and emotions that are unaffected by external acts or circumstances. *Imitatio Dei* asserts that the most virtuous way of life comes by imitating the divine moral nature. It also offers a normative methodology for engaging in moral reflection. Because human beings are created in the image of God, *imitatio Dei* asserts, we are accountable to the same moral standard. We should therefore look to normative accounts of love and justice a*s humans experience them* for evidence of the way *God* experiences them.

This book reveals a fundamental incompatibility between *imitatio Dei* and the doctrine of divine impassibility. While some theories of divine impassibility refuse to attribute any emotion to the divine realm, many modern accounts argue powerfully for a "healthy emotional life" in God. Where these accounts still fall short—normatively speaking—is by systematically rejecting that God is capable of being acted upon and having his emotional experience changed by an external force. If in fact God cannot experience emotional vulnerability in this fashion, I argue, then he is not

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1. By employing such personal pronouns to refer to God I am in no way advocating a specific gender-description of the divine. Rather, I employ the traditional masculine pronoun throughout this book only for the sake of brevity and simplicity.

worth imitating. To develop this idea, I argue that a constitutive element of love and justice is *vulnerability to the other*. No matter what modern account we subscribe to, love necessarily involves a *concern* for the other person, a bestowal or recognition of *value* for the relationship, recognition of a *union* with one another, or an intimate *identification* with the beloved. Indeed, none of these foundations for love are compatible with impassibility. Similarly, an impassible being would be unable to possess the virtue of justice since emotional vulnerability is also constitutive of its corollaries: compassion, empathy, and forgiveness. My argument poses a challenge to moral defenses of divine impassibility, which hold that God is not "constrained" by external forces and is thus better able to console and alleviate the suffering of his people. Yet this kind of rejection of emotional vulnerability, I argue, is based on a very limited understanding of moral judgment, not to mention a normatively mistaken concept of self-love and an exaggerated view of self-sacrifice.

This book makes four contributions to philosophical theology and Christian ethics. First, this book illuminates the theological implications of *imitatio Dei*. In short, if the reader affirms *imitatio Dei* as the normative ethical paradigm, then he cannot also affirm divine impassibility. Critics may challenge this implication, pointing out that the original proponents of *imitatio Dei* found ways to reconcile their moral paradigm with divine impassibility. This might be true, but this suggestion does not threaten my argument in any substantial way. My goal is to show how divine impassibility *is*—not *was*—incompatible with *imitatio Dei*. Perhaps early proponents of *imitatio Dei* deemed emotional vulnerability as a moral weakness, and if so, perhaps it reflected the best moral wisdom of its time. But such an assertion is wrong by any modern standard. As such, if my argument succeeds, anyone who holds that God is the chief moral exemplar for humanity must give up his commitment to divine impassibility. He cannot have it both ways.

Second, this book challenges proponents of divine impassibility in a similar manner. Just as the *imitatio Dei* advocate cannot have it both ways, neither can the divine impassibility advocate. Divine impassibility may be a legitimate *theological* or *philosophical* claim. In other words, it might make sense from a metaphysical standpoint. But this book shows that divine impassibility is not legitimate from a *moral* standpoint. So while divine impassibility may be compatible with other theological or philosophical commitments, it is *not* compatible with *imitatio Dei*. As such, this book's challenge to the divine impassibility camp is not to give up on divine impassibility *per se*, but only to give up on the prospect of reconciling this doctrine with *imitatio Dei*. God cannot be both impassible *and* worthy of our imitation.

Third, this book seeks to open doorways for further interaction between theology and moral philosophy. Part of what is unique about my investigation is its heavy reliance on normative conceptions of love and justice *as they are presented in modern philosophical literature.* There is a tendency among theologians and Christian ethicists to betray an elementary understanding of philosophical ethics, due to either an unwarranted skepticism or a naïve dismissal of its non-theological assertions. A prime example occurs when Christian ethicists write about love. Mostly operating under the (rather unhelpful) categories of *agape*, *eros*, *philia*, and *storge*, very few Christian ethicists, if any, offer a substantive treatment of the normative accounts included in this book (e.g., robust concern, value, union, and emotional accounts). We need only look at modern feminist criticisms of agape love to see how the theological "task" can benefit from a critical and creative engagement with philosophical ethics. Recall, these criticisms forced theologians to confront the troubling patriarchal biases undergirding a love ethic that is widely embraced as noble and virtuous. As a result of these feminist theorists, our conceptions of both human and divine love have been shaped for the better. Drawing from a variety of human experiences and perspectives can only help on our journey to better knowing and imitating God. As such, one of this book's implicit aims is to foster a deeper conversation between and within the fields of theology and moral philosophy.

Fourth, this book challenges the separation of the theological and moral spheres by illustrating how one's theological commitments play a pivotal role in shaping one's conception of the good life. Whether God is impassible or emotionally vulnerable will inevitably shape the way we view the role of vulnerability in the good life. How we view God's emotional life directly affects how we view *our* emotional life. As a result, responsible theological reflection requires placing our doctrines under close moral scrutiny. Or, to borrow from the medical field, the theological task must include a proper "moral diagnosis." This book aims to establish *imitatio Dei* as a chief instrument by which we perform this "moral diagnosis" on our theological commitments. If we actually believe that God's moral character is worth imitating, then our theology requires such an examination. As my argument will show, *imitatio Dei* diagnoses divine impassibility as morally bankrupt. The reason why divine impassibility fails *in a moral sense* is that emotional vulnerability is necessary for a human being to live a flourishing life. As a consequence, emotional vulnerability is necessary for God to be virtuous, too. Attempts to reconcile *imitatio Dei* and divine impassibility result in tragic consequences. After all, if an impassible God *is* worth imitating then humans are wise to *reject* vulnerability as a necessary condition for the good

life. But as this book argues, *imitatio Dei's* moral diagnosis (and critique) of divine impassibility does not lead us to *reject* emotional vulnerability but to *embrace* it—both human and divine.

STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book aims, first and foremost, to understand the relation between *imitatio Dei* and divine impassibility. If *imitatio Dei* is right in asserting that God is accountable to the same moral standard as human beings, then divine impassibility will be shown to be incompatible with *imitatio Dei*. The reason, as I will attempt to establish, is that *an impassible God is not worth imitating.*

In chapter 2 I survey the divine impassibility literature and arrive at a satisfactory working definition. Chapter 3 draws on principles of Hebrew thought, philosophical theology, and moral philosophy to explain the *imitatio Dei* paradigm, the view that the most virtuous moral life consists of reflecting God's character. Based on the picture of *imitatio Dei* developed herein, I begin to argue that *imitatio Dei* is incompatible with divine impassibility. To support this claim that an impassible God is not worth imitating, I examine two moral virtues—love and justice—commonly ascribed to God, and argue that each virtue requires an emotionally vulnerable component that divine impassibility fails to accommodate. I continue this investigation in chapter 4, where I draw on contemporary moral philosophy and psychology to defend the constitutive role of emotional vulnerability in both love and justice. In chapter 5, I show how the Old Testament literature contains traces of these modern accounts of love and justice. In chapter 6, I examine a number of attempts by modern theologians to reconcile impassibility with God's moral perfection. I then reject these attempts on moral grounds. I conclude the book by highlighting some key implications of this study. In so doing, I invite the reader to think *morally* about theology, especially in regards to our language about God, emotion, and the good life.

METHODS AND ASSUMPTIONS: "GOD TALK"

What does it mean to talk about God? And why is the debate so fierce? Understandably, the problem of religious language involves the following difficulty: how do finite human beings with finite language (limited to time and space) speak of an infinite God who transcends time and space? How do we speak of the incomprehensible? Of the unknowable? Of the God who is different, or wholly different? When we do use language—such as "loving" or

"just"—how much translates from the human understanding to the divine? For centuries, theologians and philosophers have dealt with this difficulty of discerning *some* way to speak adequately and meaningfully about God.

In this section I will be addressing the above questions, along with other closely related ones. First, it is worth noting that whenever we claim that God "speaks" or "forgives," we are stating *something* about God, and that this *something* usually derives from our personal understanding of the term. In this case, our experience of "speaking to" and "forgiving" others gives some sort of indication as to what it means for God to take part in these actions. But how much of the term—in the way humans experience it—extends or applies to God is uncertain. In other words, it is difficult to discern the ways in which human and divine mercy, for example, are *similar* and in what ways they are *different*.

The first proposed solution is to extend these terms to God in the same manner in which we apply them to humans. To do so is to employ *univocal* religious language, extending the same definition or use to two or more applications.[2] Thus, to claim that God is merciful is to suggest that he is like a human who is merciful. I must note that one can hold to this theory while still maintaining that God is different than human beings. For example, although they may share the same definitional application of "merciful" (i.e., extends mercy to others), it still allows for God to be infinitely *more* merciful than human beings.

The main objections to univocal language are rooted in the notion that human beings are embodied, whereas God is not. God is outside of time and space, whereas we are not. The first is easier to combat since claiming that God "speaks" does not entail that he has a mouth like us. In other words, the meaning is not contingent on God's bodily parts. As long as God delivers a message and is willing to communicate to us in some non-corporeal way, the substantive part of the translation sticks. The transcendence issue, however, is more difficult to deal with, given that much debate surrounds its implications. We will discuss this further in chapter 2, since it undergirds much of impassibility and immutability's theological assumptions. We will also see in chapter 6 how proponents of divine immutability and impassibility assert that God can hold these moral attributes while existing in an "eternal now."

Resistance to speaking of God univocally also comes from classical theology's notion of divine simplicity.[3] If God is absolutely simple, meaning

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2. Alston, "Functionalism and Theological Language."

3. For a more detailed overview of this theological concept, see my discussion in chapter 2.

that no real distinction exists between God and his actions, faculties, or attributes, then to speak of God *at all* is to attempt to grasp something completely beyond human comprehension.[4] While I understand the reluctance to approach all religious language univocally—since we want to uphold God's transcendence—the alternative is not without its pitfalls. To use all religious language in an *equivocal* manner, as some theologians do, is to view it as something that needs to be purified, leaving God in a hidden state from his creation, and therefore stripping him of all immanence.[5] But those who remain skeptical of univocal language fail to realize that they already employ such language whenever they, for instance, speak of God as *living* or *being.* "We must speak of God as living in symbolic terms," Paul Tillich writes. "Yet every true symbol participates in the realities that it symbolizes. . . . [They] are adequate for speaking of God religiously. Only in this way can he be the living God for man."[6]

Imitatio Dei assumes that God has accommodated himself to human beings, that by choosing to have and participate in relationships with people, he chose to abide by a certain set of properties; in essence, he chose to play by the same rules as we do. *Imitatio Dei's* theory of religious language, then, focuses on (1) God as *Other*, as opposed to *wholly Other* and (2) God's desire to be known and relate to his creation. Thus, this divine accommodation is a *relational* accommodation, an accommodation that requires him to share in certain relational properties—both ontological and moral. *Imitatio Dei* does not deny that a difference exists between humans and God, but rather that this difference—when it comes to our moral properties—is one of degree, not kind. In short, if a relationship between God and humans is to exist, then a shared moral vocabulary must exist. A philosophical defense of this position is offered in chapter 3.

I continue our discussion below by surveying various methods of speaking about God: analogy, metaphor, and models. Within this discussion I argue why it is preferable to speak of God as other, rather than wholly other. I continue by explaining the main reason for insisting that language does indeed communicate something about God: namely that God *wants* to be known. In short, God's revelation through word and the incarnation depicts a God who allows himself to be named, described, and narrated in human language. I will subsequently explain what I believe to be the cognitive

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4. See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, pt. 1, ch. 30: "As to the mode of signification, every name is defective."

5. Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, 68–69.

6. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:242.

value of religious language, and finally conclude with a lens by which the reader can view the remaining "God-talk" in this book.

Aquinas and Analogy

Thomas Aquinas no doubt preferred literal terms and descriptions for clarity's sake, but he preferred a different method when discussing the nature of God. Since God exists apart from—and is independent of—this world, humans are left in a quandary: how does one employ language of "this world" to speak of a God in another world? Indeed, human and earth-bound language is all humans know. At the same time, to use such language univocally would suggest a fundamental equality between God and humans.

Aquinas believed that human beings could know something about God. This type of language, however, is limited, and must rely on analogy.[7] At its most useful, analogical reasoning conveys a truth about God while only accepting those similarities that are appropriate. By analogically applying names to God, we must remember that these names apply primarily to humans, and thus only share the slightest—although meaningful—similarities with the divine.[8] The reason is that God holds different properties than his creatures. Every property contains a certain quality (*res significata*), Aquinas argues, and a mode of its possession (*modus significandi*). While the first may reveal striking similarities between God and humans, the second highlights the exact opposite.[9] God, unlike humans, possesses all properties in an infinite capacity. As a result, Aquinas' understanding of language can be seen as an attempt to accommodate this similarity/dissimilarity tension between the human and divine natures.

Metaphor

Analogical reasoning shares a close resemblance to the concept of metaphor in religious language. Metaphor, writes Mark Johnson, "is a *deviant* use of a *word* to point up *similarities*."[10] Aristotle defined a metaphor as "the application of a word that belongs to another thing: either from genus to species,

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7. See Lyttkens, *Analogy between God and the World*, 218–25; Ashworth, "Analogy and Equivocation," 128; McInerny, *The Logic of Analogy*.

8. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.6.

9. Ashworth, "Signification and Modes," 67.

10. Johnson, *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, 11. Johnson's italics.

species to genus, species to species, or by analogy."[11] A metaphor, therefore, operates by proposing analogies between the original context of a word and its new one, between the familiar and the unfamiliar.[12]

Metaphors, however, do not merely describe or reflect emotive value. They create new meaning. As Paul Ricoeur notes, "Metaphor is living not only to the extent that it vivifies a constituted language. Metaphor is living by virtue of the fact that it introduces the spark of imagination into a 'thinking more' at the conceptual level. This struggle to 'think more' guided by the 'vivifying principle,' is the soul of interpretation."[13] A metaphor, according to Ricoeur, does not just act as a substitution. Rather, the attributing of a metaphor to something creates a necessary tension between the literal and the metaphorical, and between what is and what is not.[14] These dual tensions work together to create a new meaning, but not necessarily in the literal sense. "To take metaphorical thinking seriously," Sallie McFague writes, "is a demand for precision and clarity, though not of the logical sort."[15] In fact, metaphors bring with them attitudes and feelings,[16] which is why many theologians have no problem speaking univocally of a God who is loving, compassionate, or merciful. We understand such words because of our experience, which itself is composed of memories, feelings, and images. This is not to say, however, that God experiences love, mercy, or compassion in the same *degree* as us; rather God's is more complete, fuller, and richer than ours.

Models, or what Sallie McFague calls "dominant" metaphors or metaphors "with staying power,"[17] serve a similar function. The purpose of religious and theological models is to provide meaning and faith to life, unlike scientific models where models are primarily used for explanatory purposes—that is, its primary aim is to explain the physical world.[18] These models, however, are not mutually exclusive. Religious and theological models contain explanatory power since the study of God necessarily incorporates the study of reality. As McFague puts it, all models "re-describe reality; the reference is not to reality as ordinarily or conventionally understood."[19]

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11. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1457b7–9.
12. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 42.
13. Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 303.
14. Ibid., 299. See also McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 13.
15. McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 39.
16. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 14.
17. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 23.
18. McFague, *Body of God*, 13–14.
19. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 133–34.

Rather, "something new is being said about reality which the user of the model believes describes it better, more appropriately, than the accepted views."[20] As such, models, like other metaphors, may evoke a spiritual or emotional response. But it does not necessarily follow that a model lacks all cognitive or explanatory value.

Eberhard Jüngel follows Ricouer by defending metaphor as the proper vehicle to apprehend God's revelation. Metaphor, according to Jüngel, brings together that which is familiar to the hearer and bridges it to the unfamiliar. Like Ricoeur, Jüngel proposes that metaphor does not just describe, but it creates new meaning.[21] Thus, metaphor distinguishes itself from analogy since it serves not simply a linguistically creative function, but an ontologically creative one as well. The creative function suggests that meaning and reality do not depend on what is present and real in language, as if meaning only came from that which is familiar. Rather, metaphor seeks meaning by referring to something beyond the familiar, beyond what is near, and in the process reveals new possibilities and new meanings.[22] Through metaphor, then, God comes to this world primarily through speech and language and is subsequently appropriated through faith.

To better appreciate Jüngel's concept of metaphor, it is worth taking into account Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion's view of God as *wholly Other*. As Levinas notes,

> The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched—for in the visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content. The Other is not other with a relative alterity as are, in comparison, even ultimate species, which mutually exclude one another but still have their place within a community of genus. . . . The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity.[23]

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20. Ibid.

21. Jüngel, *Theological Essays*, 2:68.

22. Ibid., 16–71. It is worth noting that Jüngel critiques analogical reasoning for overlooking God's nearness. By providing too drastic an ontological separation between the two relations, he argues, analogy assumes too distinct a separation between the members. If God truly is wholly Other, and therefore not to be thought or spoken of directly, he can only be known by his shared qualities with human beings. This, according to Jüngel, is a mistake.

23. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.

To make any claim about the Other, then, would "nullify" the alterity of the Other. As a result, he is no longer the *wholly Other*. Like Levinas who wanted to preserve this wholly Other nature of the divine, Marion refers to God as an "absolute phenomenon" which precludes any analogical understanding whatsoever. Pointing to the implications of their claim, Marion observes that the "phenomenon would escape all relations."[24] By not maintaining "any common measure with these terms," he concludes, it would therefore "be freed from them."[25]

If God's alterity, however, restricts him from coming into the world and being known by the creature, then any covenantal relations would be precluded. As Jüngel notes, "Justification implies recognition. Recognition, however, requires that the one who is recognized *permit* himself to be recognized. . . . To permit oneself to be recognized implies, in turn, that the one who is recognized knows the one who is recognizing. In the event of recognition, such knowledge is realized in that the recognizer must reveal himself if his recognition is to mean anything at all. No one can be recognized by a totally unknown person."[26] Levinas and Marion, according to Jüngel, overlook the logical inconsistencies of how the wholly Other is to "appear." After all, any sort of revelation can only be received or apprehended if the recipient himself possesses the "condition for its reception."[27] Otherwise, this being will remain unknown. To illustrate, James K. A. Smith offers an insightful parallel:

> If a friend wanted to "reveal a secret" to me, and revealed the secret in a note written in Japanese, the secret would remain a secret and unknown to me because, lacking the knowledge of Japanese, I lacked the condition to receive the revelation. So also with the Wholly Other: if the Wholly Other is to "appear"—and this is imperative for both Marion and Levinas—then it must appear in terms that the recipient of the revelation can understand—otherwise, it will remain unknown, the "relation" will not be established, and the "revelation" will not take place.[28]

One could argue that such a revelation would necessarily empty the transcendent being of its transcendence. But one need not give up the notion of a transcendent God in order to believe in a God who reveals himself in conditions and terms of finite perceivers. In other words, the mystery of God's

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24. Marion, *Visible and the Revealed*, 117.

25. Ibid.

26. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery*, 231.

27. Smith, *Speech and Theology*, 159–60.

28. Ibid.

transcendence need not be compromised, since mystery does not cease to be mystery when it has been apprehended.[29] In fact, it is necessary that the mystery *permit* itself to be grasped.[30] Even Søren Kierkegaard recognized the danger in imposing too great a gap between God's intellectual capacities and humankind's. Without a certain likeness or "equality" between the revealer and the recipient, he argues, understanding becomes impossible.[31]

Whether God and humankind exist "on the same level," however, is dubious, according to Kierkegaard. That is, unless God comes down in a manner that appeals to man's ultimate "condition of reception": "If a human being is to come truly to know something about the unknown (the god), he must first come to know that it is different from him, absolutely different from him. The understanding cannot come to know this by itself (since, as we have seen, it is a contradiction); if it is going to come to know this, it must come to know this from the god."[32] Only when the revealed being becomes *like* the recipient, then, does a sufficient equality exist which allows the finite recipients to understand divine revelation. We see this of course in the incarnation, where God himself becomes the ultimate *hermeneut*, or interpreter. By taking human form, he engages in the translation of his language into ours.[33] God, therefore, *interprets* himself in the incarnation, thus allowing him to be narrated and named in human language.[34]

While Jüngel focuses more on God's revelation via word and language than he does via the incarnation, he nonetheless offers a suitable paradigm for a qualitative distinction between human beings and God, while at the same time acknowledging God's coming into the world. In this "analogy of advent," as he calls it, the linguistic assumptions of natural theology are exposed. The mistake of natural theology, according to Jüngel, lay in its reliance on what is *actual and real* in order to understand God.[35] But under the analogy of advent, God enters the world and comes from beyond actuality, and thus changes. As a consequence, our talk about the divine no longer relies on language of the past, but on the present and future as well. Says Jüngel: "In that God gains space in the world through the means of the world by coming to speech, the horizon of this world is expanded in such a way that the world's actuality, its problems, conflicts and values can be more sharply

29. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery*, 250.

30. Ibid., 251.

31. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 27.

32. Ibid., 46.

33. Bayer, "Hermeneutical Theology," 131.

34. Ibid.,139.

35. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery*, 285.

grasped. The language of faith sharpens our sense of actuality by addressing us with more than is actual."[36] Thus, while the "actual" and the "real" are incorporated in this analogy of advent, it is not entirely reliant on it.

God Wants to Be Known

The tension between transcendence and immanence is made most evident in the incarnation, as God expresses his communicative identity. To accept the incarnation—that the divine being experienced full human life—is to see God as relating and communicating to the world in the same way human beings do. As John Sanders explains, "The divine self-disclosure in Jesus puts an end to the claim that being in the form of a human is contrary to the divine nature. To overturn this, we would need a priori knowledge that the divine nature is completely unlike human nature, which would render an incarnation impossible."[37] It is by this incarnation that God not only reveals himself, but also reveals the fact that he indeed *wants* to be known. This will play an important role in articulating my approach to "God talk" at the end of the chapter.

Jüngel is keen to point out an erroneous assumption of theologians and philosophers of religion about their phenomenological starting point.[38] The first step is not to ask how we can know or even think about God. Rather, the first step is God's coming; not the *recognition of* God's coming, but the coming itself. Similar to Barth, Jüngel asserts that we can only think about and process the properties of God because God *gives himself to be thought*. Thus, before we can discern *how* to speak and think about God, we must first ask how God lends himself to speak and be thought of. God has spoken *first,* Jüngel notes, "And because he communicates and discloses himself in the word event, just as persons can communicate and disclose themselves in their words, God becomes *thinkable* on the basis of his speakability. The way God is to be thought is then dependent on the kind of speakability which is his."[39] Thus, an incarnational theory of divine accommodation follows Jüngel by first assuming that God has revealed himself. In other words, it does not start by asking how we define or speak of the unknowable, but assumes that God has made himself known through word and thought.

This very concept is prevalent in Hebrew and rabbinic literature as well. Various passages in the Hebrew Bible substantiate the claim that God

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36. Ibid.

37. Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 26.

38. Jüngel, *Theological Essays*, 12.

39. Ibid. Jüngel's italics.

is intimately related to, and involved in, his creation. God fears (Deut 32:27), he weeps, (Jer 9:10; 48:31–32), and he repents (Exod 32:11–14; Gen 6:6; also Amos 7:6). Though it is sometimes stated that God does not repent: "for he is not a man, that he should repent" (1 Sam 15:29), he is nonetheless in the same chapter made to repent: "and the Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Sam 15:35). To be sure, there are instances in the Old Testament that emphasize God's transcendence and otherness (Isa 31:3; Job 10:4; Hos 11:9; Ps 121:4; Isa 40:28). But the passages portraying him in anthropomorphic and corporeal terms are nonetheless evident.[40]

How should these statements be taken? Should they be interpreted as reflecting God's desire to be known, or is it, as John Calvin argues, merely an instance of God "lisping" to us from above?[41] As Jacob Neusner observes,

> God figures in the canon of the Judaism of the dual Torah as premise, presence, person, and, at the end, personality. God is represented not solely in abstract terms of attributes (e.g., merciful, loving) but in concrete terms of relationships with the world, humanity, and Israel. The theological discourse of the dual Torah may be classified in four parts: first comes discourse which presupposes God as premise; second is the recognition of God as a presence; third, God appears as a person; and fourth, God personally participates in the here and now of everyday discourse.[42]

By tracing the history of God's involvement with his people as it is described in Judaic literature, we can, as Neusner concludes, "compose something very like a gospel of God incarnate on earth."[43] The affinity between human and divine is thus presented. As God desires to reveal himself and come down to the world, he simultaneously appropriates himself to our terms and our language, mainly through the use of anthropomorphisms.

Anthropomorphisms refer to descriptions of God's emotions, actions, and being in human terms.[44] Many church fathers rejected this mode of religious language. Clement of Alexandria for example, denied that God experienced joy, grief, or pity, since it necessarily assumed a corporeal body. Thus, some early church fathers and classical theologians came to view anthropomorphisms as God's mere accommodation due to humankind's

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40. For an excellent treatment on the subject, see Shah, *Concept of God*, 137. For a more comprehensive account of these passages, see chapter 5 below.

41. See my discussion of Calvin's theory of divine accommodation in chapter 2.

42. Neusner, *Incarnation of God*, 19.

43. Ibid.

44. Longman, "Anthropomorphism," 30.

inability to understand.[45] John Calvin led the antagonism among Reformation theologians:

> The Anthropomorphites, also, who imagined a corporeal God from the fact that Scripture often ascribes him a mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet, are easily refuted. For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to "lisp" in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.[46]

No Bible scholar or theologian would deny the use of anthropomorphic language in the Bible, but, as noted above, debate surrounds its ability to explain God. While some classic theologians were no doubt hesitant of the negative implications of employing such language,[47] other scholars have recognized the insights it provides into the nature of God.

In reading the Old Testament, Walter Eichrodt observes, it is not the transcendent and spiritual nature of God that serves as the bedrock of Old Testament faith. Rather, it is his personhood, "a personhood which is fully alive, and a life which is fully personal, and which is involuntarily thought of in terms of human personality."[48] The biblical writers spoke in anthropomorphisms because God was seen primarily as a *relational* being. Indeed, the Jews' relationship to God is not abstract; it is one of deep personal and historical roots. After all, it was God who delivered them from Egypt, thus marking the crux of their intimate relationship.

To take such imagery seriously is not to take it all literally. To speak of God weeping, for example, is not to suggest that God has a body. Paul Helm, however, seems to think so:

> This approach to Scripture, if carried out consistently, has rather embarrassing consequences. For Scripture also says that God has eyes, ears, a backside—anthropomorphic language, as we quickly say. And we say that God uses such language in Scripture not because he in fact has eyes, ears and a backside but because by the use of such terms he adapts himself vividly to our way of thinking. There is something in God that corresponds to this language, which it draws attention to, even though it is not

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45. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 8.
46. Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, 1.13.1.
47. See chapter 2.
48. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2:212.

literally descriptive of God. God sees—what does this mean? That he has eyes? And if he eyes, does he have eyelashes and eyebrows? How many eyes does he have? Does he have 20/20 vision? None of this is appropriate. Talking in this way about God would be absurd. In saying that God sees, Scripture means (something like) God has immediate, unimpaired knowledge of what he allegedly sees. A child will readily understand this.[49]

While Helm is right to point out the dangers of taking religious language to the extreme, he overstates his case. To say that God weeps does not entail a belief that he has eyes, but it may point to a God as the bearer of thoughts, attitudes, and even vulnerabilities. What is even more problematic is the inconsistency of Helm's critique. Helm is reluctant to ascribe human vulnerabilities to God, but he is perfectly comfortable ascribing "unimpaired knowledge"—itself a human term—to God. Why is he not equally afraid that presenting God as "knowledgable" will lead to the embarrassing consequence of claiming that he possesses a prefrontal cortex?[50] Thus, a more responsible and nuanced approach would be to see anthropomorphic language as a sliding scale, from those aspects of the metaphors that are more fundamental and serious to those that are less so. The rabbis, for instance, generally thought that God has no eyes with which to see, literally, or no actual legs upon which to stand. "But God can nonetheless come and sit down, so to speak," they believed, "because the Shekinah is God dwelling among us, in communiqué with us."[51] For this reason, the Hebrew word for "dwelling" (*shakhan*) was often employed to communicate this very reality that God was near to, active in, and present with the world.[52]

MOVING FORWARD: LANGUAGE ABOUT GOD'S MORALITY AND VULNERABILITY

Conceptually there must be some overlap between the way in which we speak of God and the way in which we speak about ourselves. . . . God and self are analogous concepts with analogous roles to play in our language. It should not be unusual then if the one should serve as the model for the other, if in order to

49. Helm, "Divine Impassibility: Why Is It Suffering?"

50. Of course, Helm's critique is probably due to the common impassibilist philosophy that prejudices the nobility of reason and the mind, while proclaiming the inferiority of the passion and the body. I discuss this in greater detail in chapter 6.

51. Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham*, 22.

52. Ibid.

> get clear about the concept of God we should look to the con-
> cept of the self.[53]

The concept of *imitatio Dei* provides a revealing insight concerning the way we apply human moral standards to God. As I will discuss further in chapter 3, it asserts that the linguistic gap between divine morality and human morality is not as wide as others may claim. More importantly, *imitatio Dei* suggests that this shared moral lens is the only legitimate lens by which we can appropriate God's actions. Our sense of morality must apply to God because it is the only one we have. Human beings have no supernatural way, for example, of claiming that the act of torturing innocent children is morally good. To grant God some sort of divine moral immunity by suggesting "his ways are mysterious" would have sounded alien to early proponents of *imitatio Dei*. There is, according to *imitatio Dei*, no "mystery" to God's morality. At least not in any way that runs disturbingly contrary to what humanity sees as good, virtuous, and noble.[54] Yes, we should embrace the beautiful mystery of God's infinite compassion and mercy, for example. But we should not embrace the "mystery" of divine love entailing the annihilation of an entire civilization.[55] As such, *imitatio Dei* assumes a univocal standard of measure between divine and human moral language, so this book does so as well. In fact, it only seems appropriate to do so since my aim is to show an incompatibility between *imitatio Dei* and divine impassibility. As a result, this book plays by the same moral, linguistic, and phenomenological assumptions as *imitatio Dei*.

To be sure, I assume a greater degree of "mystery" when I claim that God is emotionally vulnerable. I do not claim, for instance, that God has a corporeal nature. But I do assume that God has *some* way of experiencing emotion without possessing a physical body. In other words, I do not mean to suggest that a physical body is a constitutive element of an emotionally vulnerable being. The crux of my argument, however, does intend to show that possessing a capacity to have one's emotional experience changed by an external force is a constitutive element of moral goodness. In order for my argument to succeed, I need not explain *how* God experiences emotional vulnerability, but only that he must do so if we are going to claim that he is worth imitating.

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53. King, *Meaning of God*, 21–22, 45.

54. See chapter 3 for a biblical, theological, and philosophical defense of this view.

55. See chapter 3 for my discussion of the Canaanite genocide and a more substantive response to the "God's ways are mysterious" claim.