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Emotions and the Divine Nature: Impassibility in the Greek Apologists and Irenaeus

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of impassibility in the early Greek apologists and Irenaeus. The paper focuses on impassibility as related to emotion in the divine nature, and individually examines Justin Martyr, Athenagoras and Irenaeus. This paper attempts to present a nuanced and faithful interpretation of impassibility in these fathers *contra* the assumption that impassibility equates to static emotionlessness. The author argues that the early Greek fathers used impassibility as an apophatic qualifier tied to God's immutability, virtuousness, and status as creator and further used impassibility to indicate that God was not overwhelmed by passions like the pagan and gnostic deities. This thesis is substantiated by briefly noting the lexical and philosophical backgrounds of the terms for impassibility used by the early Greek fathers and by an individual examination of each of the fathers mentioned above.

Keywords

Impassibility, patristics

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Emotions and the Divine Nature: Impassibility in the Greek Apologists and Irenaeus

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Introduction

In current theological discussions, divine impassibility has been cast into disrepute. One only needs to look at the work of Jürgen Moltmann or Jung Young Lee to find some of the reasons for this disenchantment. An impassible God is considered to be cold, static, impersonal, and incapable of being the loving God that the Scriptures describe and that humans so desperately need.¹ Lee exemplifies this perspective in his book *God Suffers For Us* by arguing that a loving God must be able to empathize with his people and that God cannot empathize without suffering and emotions. Other scholars, such as Bertrand Brasnett in his book *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, have attempted to maintain some small elements of divine impassibility while allowing for strong statements of emotion and suffering.

Some of these theologians have buttressed their skepticism of divine impassibility by casting doubt upon the origin of the doctrine. These scholars recognize that this attribute was ascribed to God at a very early stage in Christian theology. However, scholars have a general tendency to blame the adoption of divine impassibility upon undue deference to Hellenistic philosophy. Robert M. Grant, while more nuanced than many contemporary theologians, reflects this assessment in *The Early Christian Doctrines of God*. After briefly outlining some of the patristic claims of the subject and then noting possible philosophical influences upon the doctrine of divine impassibility, Grant concludes that the, “philosophical atmosphere undoubtedly did early Christian theology no good.”²

I hold that this interpretation of divine impassibility is a misunderstanding of what the early Christian theologians meant when they ascribed impassibility to God.³ Divine impassibility was not a claim that God is a static being with no interest in his creation. Rather, the early Greek fathers used divine impassibility as an apophatic qualifier tied to

¹ See Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 21-25 for a classic example of this argument.

² Grant, *The Early Christian Doctrine of God*, 113-114. The development of this perspective is complicated and part of a larger suspicion of Hellenistic influences upon patristic thought that stretches back at least to the work of Adolf von Harnack.

³ It is of course important to note that this rejection of divine impassibility is not unanimous. Scholars such as Weinandy, Gavriluk, and Castelo (all referenced elsewhere in this work) have all made arguments for some form of impassibility much more closely akin to the classical model. Creel has attempted to do this as well in *Divine Impassibility* from the perspective of analytical philosophy.

God's immutability, virtuousness, and status as creator. It was used to indicate that God was not overwhelmed by passions like the pagan and gnostic deities.

This article shall serve as an introductory argument for this understanding of the patristic doctrine of impassibility. In the demonstration of my thesis, I will focus primarily upon emotions in the Godhead rather than suffering.⁴ Furthermore, I will focus predominantly upon the Greek apologists (specifically Justin Martyr and Athenagoras)⁵ and Irenaeus of Lyons.⁶ These thinkers are helpful to this project because they are situated quite early in the theological thought of the church. Furthermore, they include a philosophical theologian (Athenagoras), a Biblical theologian (Irenaeus), and a theologian who falls somewhere in the middle (Justin Martyr). Before we examine these theologians, we must first set the stage by addressing two common misconceptions: first, that the terms for impassibility had only one possible linguistic meaning that was tied to complete emotionlessness,⁷ and second, that patristic theologians formulated divine impassibility by simply accepting Greek thought on the subject.

Intellectual Backgrounds: Linguistic Analysis

In the early Greek fathers' writings, the terms translated as impassibility and impassible are *απαθεια* and *απαθης*, respectively. *Απαθεια* is the noun form, while *απαθης* is the cognate adjective. Understanding the origin and flexibility of these terms is important in order to understand the concept that the fathers used these words to convey. This is especially important since these terms have often been assumed to describe something as completely static and emotionless. The basic lexical structure of *απαθεια* suggests against such a narrow definition. *Απαθεια* is an apophatic term and is effectively a negation of *παθος*.⁸ *Παθος* has the basic meaning of passion or emotion.⁹ However, it often carries the connotation of strong desire or lust.¹⁰ This derivation suggests that *απαθεια*, and by extension its cognate adjective, *απαθης*, has a possible range of meaning from a denial of all

⁴ I intend to focus on this for two reasons. First, the question of emotions specifically does not seem to have been as closely studied as the question of suffering in terms of historical theology. Second, emotions/passions seem to be the predominant focus of the theologians we shall study. This paper will further focus on this question within the question of divine nature itself rather than in the Incarnation, due to both the reasons described above and necessity of limiting the scope of such paper. Such an examination is, of course, important to a final analysis of this doctrine in Christian belief and practice. It is worth noting that many of the fathers we discuss are perfectly willing to say that Jesus was in some sense passible during the incarnation.

⁵ These two were selected due to their greater contribution to the subject and actual usage of *απαθης* (impassible).

⁶ The demonstration and examination contained in this paper will be preliminary in nature. There remains much work to be done on each of these thinkers. Examination of related patristic thinkers from slightly varying times and schools would be welcome as well. However, the examination contained within this paper allows us to provisionally assert a nuanced understanding of impassibility in these early Greek fathers.

⁷ This often a subconscious misperception, but a damaging and important one nonetheless.

⁸ This is clear from the usage and structure of the term itself and is noted by Liddell-Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 170-171.

⁹ See both Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 994 and Liddell-Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1285.

¹⁰ Bauer, Danker, Arndt, & Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 748.

emotions to a more specific denial of strong passions or lusts. The emphasis upon strong passions or lusts suggested by παθος is of particular significance for this article. This understanding of the term's range is supported by the lexical definition of απαθεια, which is described by Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon* as including the ideas of insensibility, freedom from emotion, and mastery over the passions.¹¹ These considerations clearly cross-apply to the adjectival form of the word απαθης and allow us to understand απαθης as a qualifier indicating a negation of παθος in the noun it is modifying.

The term's flexibility is further supported by its probable origin as a specialized term in the early Grecian fathers' works. The usage of απαθεια as a technical term mostly likely arose from Stoic moral philosophy.¹² Scholars then and now debate whether this term was used by the Stoics to indicate the elimination of the passions, mastery over the passions, or some mixture of the two.¹³ This picture is further complicated by the fact that many Stoics also recognized the existence of ευρηθεια: good or "'rational emotions' such as joy, wishfulness, and a sense of precaution."¹⁴ This indicates that even the Stoics did not necessarily intend to advocate complete emotionlessness when they used the term απαθεια. If scholars are correct in tracing this term back to a Stoic root, this ambiguity should cause us to expand the range of meanings we consider when examine the fathers' views of impassibility.

This conclusion of flexibility is enhanced by the way the fathers tended to use philosophical terminology. As noted by Gerald Bray, "abstract theoretical terms were interpreted to suit the requirements of the biblical revelation."¹⁵ Thus, we must be careful not to assume a direct, one-to-one correspondence between the patristic usage of the term and philosophical Greek usage of the term. Furthermore, we must recognize the difference between the concept and the terms involved. The lexical flex and philosophical background of the terms involved are important, but a faithful and honest reading of their texts must shape our understanding of impassibility in the fathers' works. A valid specific understanding of the larger concept cannot be assumed; it must be established by studying the fathers' specific comments and the related concepts. The lexical dimensions of the term provide basic boundaries for the concept of impassibility and indicate that impassibility is not immediately synonymous with emotionlessness.

Philosophical Backgrounds

While the contemporary theological community has had a tendency to discount many patristic theologians as mere philosophical Hellenizers, current patristic scholarship forces us to take a much more nuanced view. Scholars have come to respect many of these early

¹¹ Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 170-171.

¹² On this point, see Castelo *The Apatheic God*, 44-46 and Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 27-29; specifically in Justin, see Thorsteinsson, "Justin and Stoic Cosmo-Theology," 544-545. It is also important to note that while the technical term came from Stoicism, conceptual influences can come from a variety of sources.

¹³ Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 27. He further notes that Rist has argued that the definition of παθη is not always entirely clear as well, as noted above.

¹⁴ Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, 45.

¹⁵ Bray, *God Has Spoken*, 986

theologians as faithful Christians using existing philosophical terminology, and we will see that this is a good description of the thinkers focused on in this article. They are perfectly willing to make claims that run counter to the prevailing philosophies of the day. Irenaeus' embrace of creation *ex nihilo* is a particularly striking example of this willingness to contradict Greek philosophy, as contemporary Platonism believed that the world had been formed from pre-existent matter.¹⁶

In particular, the theory that divine impassibility is a simple importation from Hellenism ignores the fact that Hellenistic thought held a wide variety of views on the emotional state of the divine being (or beings). Gavriluk demonstrates this by documenting the views of several schools on emotions, the divine nature, and divine involvement in the world.¹⁷ The Epicureans espoused the corporeal, anthropomorphic Homeric gods but insisted that they were not involved in the affairs of men. They had some emotions, such as joyfulness, but "their existence had no bearing whatsoever upon the world."¹⁸ The Stoics had a more complex view of God. On the one hand, God was an impersonal principle akin to the element of fire and was spread throughout the cosmos.¹⁹ On the other hand, they would often use traditional piety and speak of the providence and care of God.²⁰ Finally, the Middle Platonists²¹ held that the world of ideas, and therefore the divine being, was impassible. However, even this is not as clear-cut as it appears on first glance. While this view was held partially because of the belief that the passions are tied to the material realm rather than the intellectual realm, other factors were in play here as well.²² Furthermore, much of the development of the Platonic view of impassibility occurs in Neoplatonism through the work of Plotinus, who was later than the thinkers considered in this article.²³ There was also a multiplicity of views on the validity of emotions in general. We have already noted the diversity within the Stoic view of emotions, and the Peripatetics had a more clearly positive view that simply called for moderation of the emotions.²⁴ There is simply no single Hellenistic view of the divine nature or even of the validity of emotions. The many views of emotions and the divine nature within Greek thought, as well as the variety of motivations for such descriptions of God, force us to recognize that the fathers

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2,10, 4.

¹⁷ The second chapter of his book *The Suffering of the Impassible God* is incredibly valuable on this question.

¹⁸ Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 25.

¹⁹ Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Volume I*, 387-389.

²⁰ Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 29-31. Cosmo-theology, 537, 544.

²¹ Examining the Middle Platonists as a school is probably more appropriate than examining Plato's own texts; both Athenagoras and Justin seem to be interacting more with Middle Platonism than directly with Plato. In regards to Athenagoras, see Rankin, *Athenagoras*, 50-71. In regards to Justin, see Barnard, *Justin Martyr*, 27-39. Goodenough, also addresses this, albeit less clearly and somewhat indirectly in *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 61-72.

²² Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 32. It is important to note that this view addressed human souls and not merely the divine nature. Thus, in this sense impassibility is not so much the result of trying to uphold an impersonal God but a result of considering what attributes are appropriate to ascribe to a non-corporeal entity. Gavriluk further asserts that Plotinus makes this distinction in order to guard against the evil passions ascribed of the divine being by various forms of Gnosticism.

²³ For example, Gavriluk's discussion of Platonism in regards to impassibility discusses Plotinus in far more detail than any other Platonic philosopher. See Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 31-33.

²⁴ Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 26-27. This is in contrast to the Stoic view, which we have already seen is more nuanced than simply a negative rejection of all emotions.

were working within a complex intellectual milieu and to mitigate the claim that they simply imported Hellenistic philosophy into their theology. Any theological development would have to choose between conflicting positions. Where would the fathers turn to answer such questions? If we give any credence to the fathers' self-interpretation,²⁵ we must recognize that their basic understanding of God from both the Scriptures and the apostolic tradition would have guided these decisions.

The lexical flex of key terms and the complex philosophical milieu must be kept in mind as we examine specific fathers. The lexical contours of the terms ἀπαθεια and ἀπαθης indicate that assuming a complete negation of emotions from the outset would be misinformed. In fact, lexical factors indicate this term may be focused on strong desires, and non-Christian sources use these terms in a manner that does not completely exclude all emotions. Furthermore, the complex philosophical background indicates that the fathers had to critically assess multiple conceptions of the divine nature. This undermines the claim that early Greek fathers uncritically imported an understanding of God from Hellenistic culture. These facts provide basic parameters for us to fairly examine specific father's claims regarding divine impassibility.

Assessment of Primary Sources

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr lived from AD 100-165.²⁶ A number of works have been attributed to him, but the only definite authentic works we possess are the First and Second *Apologies* and the *Dialogue with Trypho*.²⁷ He is one of the first Greek apologists. His intellectual background seems to be that of eclectic Platonism, but he strongly held to Christianity as the one true philosophy.²⁸ In his conversion account in *The Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin describes his attempts to find satisfaction in various philosophical schools. He finds the greatest satisfaction in Platonism, but a conversation with an "old man" convinces him of Platonism's shortcomings and of the pure truth of Christianity.²⁹ Justin Martyr shows a tendency to speak of God in an apophatic manner, a recurring theme throughout the apologists.³⁰ He consistently describes God as ineffable, saying,

²⁵ Something that I would suggest is crucial to any scholarship in historical theology.

²⁶ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 85.

²⁷ Barnard, *Justin Martyr*, 14.

²⁸ Barnard, *Justin Martyr*, 38.

²⁹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 2-8. There is debate over the historical veracity of this account. See Barnard, *Justin Martyr*, 7-12, for a convincing defense of taking this account as actually representing his experience.

³⁰ Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, 50. This practice naturally arises from Biblical depictions of the transcendence of God the Father, such as statements that he dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16), and has never been seen by men (John 6:46). The apophatic statements of the fathers also to seem to reflect some Platonic and Pyrrhonic apophatic rhetoric. See A. H. Armstrong, "On Not Knowing too Much About God," 129-154 for a discussion of these influences. It is important to note that this choice to draw upon philosophical rhetoric does not equate to an uncritical importation of Hellenistic philosophy, but a choice to utilize Hellenistic resources to engage in Biblically grounded explanation of key theological concepts

“But to the Father of all, who is unbegotten, there is no name given . . . But these words, Father, and God, and Creator, and Lord, and Master, are not names, but appellations derived from His good deeds and functions . . . also the appellation “God” is not a name, but an opinion implanted in the nature of men of a thing that can hardly be explained.”³¹

And again “For no one can utter the name of the ineffable God; and if any one dare to say that there is a name, he raves with a hopeless madness.”³² God is the unbegotten creator and transcends our names and ascriptions for him. We must therefore avoid placing more weight upon his descriptions than they can bear. One can summarize Justin’s apophatic tendencies by recognizing one key insight: the creature must always be careful to not say more than is rightly spoken of the creator. Thus, the language of impassibility comes in the context of a God who is transcendent and cannot be fully described in human terms.³³ However, this transcendence is softened by Justin’s firm belief in God’s self-revelation and activity in the world.³⁴ The Christian God is a creator who sends his Spirit to inspire the prophets to glorify him and proclaim his son.³⁵ When Justin ascribes impassibility to God, he is describing a God who ultimately transcends our statements while also acting to reveal himself in the world he created.

Justin only directly describes God as impassible once, in *The First Apology* 25. However, this description provides key information regarding the purpose and content of Justin’s ascription of impassibility to the divine nature. Justin states that the Christians

“have dedicated ourselves to the unbegotten and impassible God;³⁶ of whom we are persuaded that never was he goaded by lust of Antiope, or such other woman, or of Ganymede, nor was rescued by that hundred-handed giant whose aid was obtained through Thetis, nor was anxious on this account that her son Achilles should destroy many of the Greeks because of his concubine Briseis. Those who believe these things we pity, and those who invented them we know to be devils.”

This description of God as impassible clearly corresponds to two elements of Justin’s thought, both of which must be considered at length. The first is the transcendent nature of the Christian God versus the anthropomorphic character of the Homeric gods. The second is the righteousness of the Christian God versus the decadence and corruption of the Homeric gods.

In this passage, Justin draws a clear contrast between the heathen gods and the “unbegotten God.” His use of unbegotten in this passage fits neatly into his consistent

³¹ Justin Martyr, *The Second Apology*, 6.

³² Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 61.

³³ Barnard, *Justin Martyr*, 81.

³⁴ Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 138.

³⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 7.

³⁶ Gr. Θεω δε τωο αγνητω και απαθει εαυτους ανεθηκαμεν. All English translation of Justin taken from the translation found in *In The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I*, edited by Alxander Roberts and James Donaldson. The Greek is taken from the text presented in *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies*, edited by Denis Minns and Paul Parvis.

description of God as the transcendent creator. The heathen gods are all too human and fall into wickedness and folly on account of their passions while the “unbegotten” God of the Christians transcends the torments of lust. Furthermore, the Christian God is not subject to anxiety or in need of help from another. This contrast is given more clarity and force when one perceives that these desires are spoken of as something almost external to a person and thus something that can override a person. This contrast indicates that God’s impassibility is implicitly tied to the idea that he cannot be forced into acting by anything other than himself. God will not and cannot be overridden by external forces. Justin’s connection between the impassibility of God and his freedom from the “external forces” of lust and anxiety points to the self-sufficiency of God. The Christian God is fully capable of accomplishing his purposes and is self-directed in his actions and concerns. He is the transcendent creator of all, and indictments against his self-mastery and complete sovereignty must be rejected. Justin thus defends the transcendence of God by denying what he is not and implicitly asserting God’s self-sufficiency.

This apophatic defense of God’s transcendence and self-sufficiency is a far cry from describing God as static and emotionlessness, especially in the context of Justin’s larger apophatic tendencies. He has simply denied that God can be mastered by lusts, but he has not denied the use of any emotionally colored terms to describe God.³⁷ This assessment is supported by other passages that indicate that he does “not wish to deny . . . God’s providential goodness and love.”³⁸ Only a couple of chapters after describing God as impassible, Justin insists that God does care for men, matters of salvation, and vice and virtue.³⁹ He explicitly rejects a concept of God as static or uncaring by denying that God can exist “like a stone.”⁴⁰ In Chapter 37 of *The First Apology*, Justin cites (without qualification) a passage describing God as hating something. Thus, while describing God as impassible, he allows for emotionally colored descriptions such as love, caring, and hatred. These mitigating passages make it clear that while God is transcendent and in some ways distant from us, he is still aware of and involved in the world he created. Justin seems to be describing God in a way that prohibits domineering lusts while allowing for God to have real, emotionally colored dispositions towards certain things or people.

Justin also utilizes the concept of impassibility as a moral qualifier. God is not simply ontologically superior to the Greek gods because of his independence from lustful passions; he is morally superior because of his perfect righteousness. God’s righteousness is something that Justin repeatedly declares throughout his works. He describes God as “the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is free from all impurity.”⁴¹ This emphasis seems to carry over into his previously quoted ascription of impassibility. God is distinguished from the pagan deities by not falling prey to foul lusts. This tie between righteousness and control over the passions is not merely limited to God; this is a description given to the righteous followers of God as well, although with a slightly

³⁷ This fits with our earlier assessment of the emphasis on strong lusts or passions inherent in the term *απαθης*.

³⁸ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 86.

³⁹ Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 28

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

different nuance. Justin describes those who understand the import of the prophecies of Christ and believe in him as “those who embrace the truth, and are not bigoted in their opinions, nor are governed by their passions (απαθης).”⁴² Furthermore, those who follow God’s commands are described as impassible in both *The Second Apology* and the *Dialogue with Trypho*.⁴³

Thus, for Justin, to be impassible and not governed by one’s passions is a core element of virtue. Admittedly, whether he intends this to be understood as the governing of one’s passions and emotions or the complete erasure of one’s emotions is unclear. However, his nearly mystical passion for the truth⁴⁴ and previous insistence upon God still caring for virtue (with the implication being that we ought also to care for virtue) suggest that Justin views this righteous impassibility as the mastery of certain passions but not complete emotionlessness. His willingness to describe God in emotionally colored terms and to use terms that are semantically tied to strong lusts supports interpreting virtuous impassibility as the control and limitation of one’s passions rather than complete emotionlessness.⁴⁵ In the case of the divine nature, Justin affirms God’s freedom from corrupt desires without denying his providential care. God is fully righteous in part because he will never be subject to sinful lusts. He is beyond the passions that tormented the Homeric deities. God’s impassibility safeguards his moral purity without converting him into a static, uncaring being.

The impassibility of God in Justin Martyr’s writings serves as an apophatic concept that safeguards the transcendence and righteousness of God. As a negative concept describing the ineffable God, impassibility does not serve as a positive, comprehensive description of God. Rather, it serves as a safeguard against ascribing improper passions of God. God is impassible and is therefore not vexed nor governed by the world that he created. Thus, Justin describes a self-sufficient and righteous God who is not swayed by changing passions but maintains providential interest in the world.

Athenagoras

Athenagoras the Athenian was one of the later Christian apologists who lived and wrote during the latter part of the second century.⁴⁶ He was likely based in Athens.⁴⁷ He claimed to be both “philosopher and Christian”⁴⁸ and presents his arguments in a more philosophically sensitive and intellectually sophisticated manner than Justin.⁴⁹ In his *Legatio*, the text in which he discusses impassibility, he is likely drawing heavily from the

⁴² Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 53.

⁴³ Grant, *The Early Christian Doctrine of God*, 111.

⁴⁴ See Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr*, 72-73.

⁴⁵ This assessment is furthered by Justin’s apparent acceptance of Trypho’s claim that he believed of the Word that “he became man, of like passions with all, as you said previously.” It seems unlikely that Justin would assent to this if he thought the righteous eliminate all passions/emotions. See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 58.

⁴⁶ Rankin, *Athenagoras*, 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 6-10.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 14.

⁴⁹ Parvis, “Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition,” 125.

format established by Justin Martyr's apologies.⁵⁰ In a similar fashion to Justin, he presents the apology as a letter to the authorities demonstrating that Christians are not atheists, proclaiming the Christian understanding of God, and denying charges of pervasive morally corrupt behavior among Christians. Athenagoras' philosophical background is likely that of middle Platonism, but his primary authority is clearly the Christian faith as presented in both the Scriptures and the apostolic *kerygma*. He states that Christian dogma is superior to the hypotheses of the philosophers because the philosophers had to rely upon their efforts and therefore "were able to gain no more than a peripheral understanding."⁵¹ In contrast, Christian dogma relies upon the prophets, who "have spoken out by a divinely inspired Spirit about God and the things of God."⁵² Rankin thus reasonably concludes, "Where there is conflict . . . his loyalties are clear. He is a *Christian* Platonist, not a *Platonizing* Christian."⁵³ Athenagoras ascribes impassibility to God more often than Justin, and he gives us even greater insight into the meaning and context of divine impassibility in early Greek patristic thought. He attributes impassibility to God in two contexts. First, he asserts God's impassibility in his general description of the Christian conception of God. This description was a part of his reply to the charge of atheism. Second, he asserts the impassibility of God even more forcefully in contrast with the anthropomorphic Homeric gods.

Athenagoras begins his *Legatio* by stating his view of the basic Christian understanding of God, describing Christians as those "who distinguish God from matter and show that matter is one thing and God another and the difference between them immense; for the divine is uncreated and eternal and can be contemplated only by thought and reason, whereas matter is created and perishable."⁵⁴ Athenagoras posits an important distinction between the imperishable creator God and the perishable created matter.

Thus, Athenagoras sets the context by asserting the transcendence of Christianity's great creator God and the reliability of his self-revelation. God as creator will play an important role in Athenagoras' understanding of impassibility. This tendency to associate impassibility with the incorruptible creator is a common theme in the apologists' works and something that is important to understanding Athenagoras' thought.⁵⁵ Athenagoras first directly mentions impassibility in an argument for God's unity and non-composite nature. He states,

"If it is suggested that God is one, as in the case of one body a hand and eye and foot are complementary parts forming one being, we reply: Soctrates, since he is created

⁵⁰ Parvis, "Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition," 123-125.

⁵¹ Athenagoras, *Legatio*, 7.2.

⁵² Ibid 7.3.

⁵³ Rankin, *Athenagoras*, 167. Athenagoras forces us to reject a full-fledged dichotomy between faithful theologian and philosophizing theologian. He is clearly influenced to some extent by Hellenistic philosophy, but he is willing to hold to the message of Christianity in the face of philosophical opposition. This is most markedly demonstrated by his writing of a treatise defending the resurrection.

⁵⁴ Athenagoras, *Legatio*, 4.1.

⁵⁵ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 89.

and perishable, is indeed composite and divisible into parts; but God is uncreated, impassible, and indivisible; he does not consist of parts.”⁵⁶

In this passage, Athenagoras continues the theme of God as creator and further ties impassibility to divine simplicity: the great creator God is not made up of parts and should not be described as being governed by distinct passions.

After further discussion of God as the one creator, Athenagoras summarizes the kind of God he has presented and includes impassibility among his list of attributes:

“We have brought before you a God who is uncreated, eternal, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible, and infinite, who can be apprehended by mind and reason alone, who is encompassed by light, beauty, spirit, and indescribable power, and who created, adorned, and now rules the universe through the Word that issues from Him.”⁵⁷

This passage contains three key elements in understanding impassibility. First, Athenagoras is clearly carrying on the strongly apophatic tradition of the apologists. Second, he continues to strongly emphasize the status of God as the sovereign creator. This exemplifies a tension noted by Castelo: the apologists often preferred to speak of God by describing what he is not. However, the apologists also demonstrated a desire to speak positively and actively of how God operated in the world as revealed in the Scriptures.⁵⁸ The apologists often satisfy this tension by appealing to the “Logos-doctrine,” as Athengoras does here.⁵⁹ Third, this passage relates impassibility to a cluster of terms that are also often tied to God’s incorruptibility, especially the terms *uncreated*, *eternal*, and *infinite*. A God who can be described in these terms is one who is stable and not subject to corruption or to decay. He is free from the vicissitudes of created life. Thus, in Athenagoras’ description of the basic Christian conception of God, he asserts impassibility as an apophatic qualifier that is tied to God’s sovereignty and incorruptibility.

Athenagoras returns to the concept of impassibility when he addresses the Greek pantheon. We are told that God does not experience anger, lust, or desire.⁶⁰ He later explains his rejection of the Greek gods on the grounds that they do not match the nature of the divine being: “For either they are gods and lust does not touch them . . . yet if a god assumes flesh by divine dispensation, is he forthwith a slave of lust?”⁶¹ Here Athenagoras makes an interesting tie between lust and slavery. The divine nature, then, cannot be

⁵⁶ Athenagoras, *Legatio*, 8.3.

⁵⁷ Athenagoras, *Legatio*, 10.1.

⁵⁸ Castelo, *The Apathetic God*, 50-51.

⁵⁹ Mozley, *The Impassibility of God*, 15. Mozley notes that the Logos-doctrine allowed the apologists to uphold the Scriptural teaching of Fatherhood and Sonship within the Godhead without degenerating into the anthropomorphic characteristics of the Greek pantheon, characteristics that are clearly condemned within the Scriptures themselves.

⁶⁰ Athenagoras, *Legatio*, 21, 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 21, 4.

touched by lust because it cannot be subjected to the domination of such a thing.⁶² This relates back to Athenagoras' earlier descriptions of the divine nature. Impassibility must be upheld to maintain the self-sufficiency of the divine nature, which is uncreated and incorruptible in contrast with the corruptible decaying matter of creation. He reiterates this point later when he states, "Either they are gods, then, and neither would they yield to gold . . . (for the divine needs nothing and is above all desire⁶³), nor would they die. Or they are men, and wicked because of their ignorance and incapable of resisting money."⁶⁴ Here again we find that denying passions is directly concerned with denying some created thing exerting control over the self-sufficient divine nature.

Athenagoras' uses his strongest language when he is contrasting the Biblical God with the Homeric gods. His statement that God does not possess anger or desire is set against the backdrop of a pantheon that will murder and commit adultery to satisfy their twisted desires. Athenagoras' seems to have a narrower view of what emotionally colored terms can be ascribed to God than Justin does. However, he clearly posits the impassibility of God with the goal of describing him in a way that preserves his incorruptibility and ensures that the sovereign creator will not be overwhelmed by impulses arising from an external state. This is distinct from a detached, uncaring view of God.⁶⁵

We must conclude our study of Athenagoras by noting that he also applies the descriptor "impassible" to Christians after death. He states that we shall live a heavenly life in which we will "remain changeless and impassible in soul as though we were not body, even if we have one, but heavenly spirit."⁶⁶ While he clearly does not attribute impassibility to created humans in the same way as he attributes it to the uncreated God, this use of *απαθης* cannot be ignored. In this context, Athenagoras is likely focusing on the "free from suffering" aspect of *απαθης*. This interpretation is substantiated by the context: he immediately follows this description of the blessed eternal life of the Christian with a description of the punished life suffered by unbelievers in the realms of fire.⁶⁷ This appears to be significantly narrower than, and distinct from, Athenagoras' concept of divine impassibility. This is to be expected; Athenagoras ties divine impassibility to the uncreated nature of God, which

⁶² This explicitly brings out what was hinted at in Justin; the stronger passions are in some sense viewed as external forces that come "take us over" when we submit to them.

⁶³ The word for desire here *ἐπιθυμία* is a strong word that can also mean lust and is translated by Weinandy as "carnal desire" in his treatment of this passage. See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 88.

⁶⁴ Athenagoras, *Legatio*, 29, 3.

⁶⁵ This nuanced understanding of Athenagoras can be further substantiated by a comparison between him and Theophilus of Antioch. Theophilus does not directly describe God as impassible, but he does describe God with apophatic clusters of terms that are strikingly similar to Athenagoras. (On this point, see Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 89). Mozley notes that his description of God's impassibility would have allowed him to describe God as *απαθης* (See Mozley, *The Impassibility of God*, 14). However, Theophilus also states that God is active, and even describes him as angry. This correlation of similar apophatic qualifiers with emotionally colored terms indicates that our interpretation of Athenagoras is plausible and consistent with the use of language among the apologists.

⁶⁶ Athenagoras, *Legatio*, 31, 3.

⁶⁷ This can be further substantiated by the fact that he describes resurrection bodies specifically as impassible in Athenagoras, *On the Resurrection*, 9. Incapable of or free from suffering seems to best fit both of these instances. This understanding of *απαθης* in these instances appears to be supported by Lambe's *A Patristic Greek English Lexicon*, 171.

implies that human impassibility is something that must be distinct from that. However, an interesting note is that Athenagoras continues the trend of connecting immutability to impassibility even in this distinct usage of the term.

In regards to divine emotions, Athenagoras is the most negative thinker that we shall examine. However, even Athenagoras uses ἀπαθης as an apophatic qualifier rather than a definitive description of God, and he makes his strongest negative claims in contrast to the twisted, overpowering desires of the Greek gods. His denial of passions in God is tied to his desire to maintain God's complete self-sufficiency and to accurately describe the unperturbed character of an immutable, perfect, incorruptible being.⁶⁸ Athenagoras maintains the tradition of holding impassibility as an apophatic qualifier that safeguards aspects of God's nature by telling us what he is not.

Irenaeus

Irenaeus of Lyons was a church father who wrote in the late second century, and he is the last major thinker considered in this study.⁶⁹ He tends to be the most scripturally grounded of all the thinkers we have considered, especially in his shorter work, *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. Weinandy describes him as "far more the Biblical theologian than the philosopher."⁷⁰ Irenaeus engages in Scriptural exegesis throughout *Against Heresies*⁷¹ and *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. He demonstrates a significant willingness to challenge Hellenistic thought throughout his work. He explicitly holds to creation *ex nihilo*.⁷² Furthermore, he accuses the Gnostics of deriving their views from false Greek thought.⁷³ Irenaeus follows the apologists in drawing a strong contrast between the creator and the created; his struggles with the Gnostics cause him to place heavy emphasis upon the act of creation.⁷⁴ Irenaeus' primary discussion of impassibility occurs in Book II of *Against Heresies*. He describes this book as being devoted to overthrowing the heretics' systems of doctrine.⁷⁵ The exact systems under discussion are somewhat debated, but he primarily focuses upon the Gnostics and Marcionites. He specifically mentions Valentinus, Secundus, and Ptolemaeus as representatives of this Gnostic heresy, and these followers of Ptolemaeus were likely his primary opponents.⁷⁶ The specifics of this Gnostic heresy are incredibly complicated and far beyond the scope of this article. A brief summary of the points pertinent to our discussion must suffice. Irenaeus' primary Gnostic opponents seem to have believed in a divine pleroma. Within this pleroma, a hierarchy of divine beings generated from each other in pairs to distance the origination of evil⁷⁷ as far as possible from the divine nature.⁷⁸ This pleroma was much more strongly united than the

⁶⁸ Traits which reflect claims of God within the Scriptures as well as certain philosophical positions.

⁶⁹ Behr, *The Way to Nicea*, 111-112.

⁷⁰ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 90.

⁷¹ Behr, *The Way to Nicea*, 113-114.

⁷² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2,10, 4.

⁷³ Ibid, 2,14,2.

⁷⁴ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 91.

⁷⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2 Preface, 2.

⁷⁶ Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 82.

⁷⁷ Or matter or any other imperfection.

⁷⁸ Chiapparinni, "Irenaeus and the Gnostic Valentinus," 111.

polytheistic pagan systems. However, it still included a large number of divine beings (referred to as *Aeons*) in male and female pairs, with the first god being described as Bythos.⁷⁹ The pairs are often attributes or mental properties and operations, including Nous (mind), Ennoea (thought, intent), and Logos (reason).⁸⁰ The Gnostics tended to have a lower view of matter and described the Old Testament god as the Demiurge: a distorted god whom they distinguished from Bythos and the Savior. Some sects (including Irenaeus' primary opponents) apparently held that matter came from Sophia's (one of the younger Aeons) passion.⁸¹ In Gnostic theology, Sophia's passion is associated with several problematic outcomes and is the origin of imperfection in the world.⁸²

Impassibility first appears in Irenaeus' writing as a denial of an opposing claim, similar to what we have found in the apologists. He uses it to reject the Gnostic claim that passions led Sophia astray. The first hint of this discussion comes when he mocks the Gnostic idea that matter came from the tears, smile, and terror of Sophia.⁸³ He ridicules this primarily by affirming creation *ex nihilo* but in so doing foreshadows that he will later reject passions within the pleroma.

Irenaeus first explicitly discusses impassibility in chapters thirteen and fourteen of *Against Heresies* book II. After he states that the Gnostics' described order of production within the Aeons does not actually make sense (as it does not follow the standard order of mental operations), he makes an even more serious accusation: the Gnostics have ascribed the attributes of men to a God that is above all of these things. He states,

“By their manner of speaking, they ascribe those things which apply to men to the Father of all, whom they also declare to be unknown to all; . . . they endow Him with human affections and passions. But if they had known the Scriptures, and been taught by the truth, they would have known, beyond doubt, that God is not as men are; and that His thoughts are not like the thoughts of men. For the Father of all is at a vast distance from those affections and passions which operate among men. He is a simple, uncompounded Being, without diverse members, and altogether like, and equal to Himself . . . And so, in all other particulars, the Father of all is in no degree similar to human weakness. He is spoken of in these terms according to the love [we bear Him]; but in point of greatness, our thoughts regarding Him transcend these expressions.”⁸⁴

In this long passage, we see two important features in Irenaeus' understanding of God that inform his attacks on the Gnostics. First, Irenaeus rejects that the divine nature can suffer imperfection as doctrines of the Gnostics suggest. The proponents of this position would disagree as they felt that their gradation of being actually protected God from imperfection. Irenaeus argues that if they are all of the same divine nature, these imperfections are

⁷⁹ Ibid, 105.

⁸⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2,13,1-2.

⁸¹ Chiaparinni, “Irenaeus and the Gnostic Valentinus,” 106.

⁸² Mozley, *The Impassibility of God*, 16-17.

⁸³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2,10, 3.

⁸⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2,13,3-4.

inevitably attributed to God.⁸⁵ Second, Irenaeus explicitly argues that the Gnostics have erred by applying human descriptions to God far too readily. God is above the thoughts of men.⁸⁶

For Irenaeus, God is above the thoughts of men in two ways. First, God's affections, thoughts, and experiences are simply different from ours. He is the uncreated, transcendent God and the source of all other things. We do him and ourselves a great disservice to straightforwardly anthropomorphize him. This distance between man and God is increased by the understanding that God is a simple whole and not a conglomeration or list of attributes. His character and powers cannot be truly divided. Second, God is above the thoughts of men in a more linguistic sense: our understanding of him transcends the expressions we use to describe him. The language and descriptors that men apply to God cannot completely capture who he is. We should note that Irenaeus does allow for meaningful descriptions of God, but he qualifies such description as helpful but incomplete. Converting the divine being into a conglomeration of mental properties and affections is abhorrent to Irenaeus, and he responds with a strong apophatic statement cautioning against such descriptions of God. Irenaeus' first statement of God's impassibility is thus a highly apophatic statement and is grounded in the conviction that the Gnostics have erred by applying overly human descriptors to God. Irenaeus expands upon these points (and adds new considerations) as he continues to wrestle with the Gnostic tendency to attribute passions to some of the younger Aeons.⁸⁷

Irenaeus further insists upon the impassibility of God in two primary ways. First, he ties impassibility directly to the uncreated nature of God, stating,

“For the Father of all ought not to be counted with other productions; He who was not produced with that which was produced; He who was unbegotten with that which was born; He whom no one comprehends with that which is comprehended by Him, and who is on this account [Himself] incomprehensible; and He who is without figure with that which has a definite shape. For inasmuch as He is superior to the rest, He ought not to be numbered with them, and that so that He is impassible and not in error should be reckoned with an Aeon subject to passion, and actually in error.”⁸⁸

Within this passage, Irenaeus repeatedly makes a marked distinction between God the Father and the Aeons, who the Gnostics claimed proceed from Him. He contends that the Aeons should not be counted as divine. The creator God cannot be conflated with the things that are created; a pleroma of beings temporally proceeding from each other cannot all be God. Irenaeus then moves to reaffirming the impassibility of the uncreated God. The

⁸⁵ Mozley, *The Impassibility of God*, 17-18.

⁸⁶ The claim that they would know God is above men specifically if they had looked to the Scriptures provides another interesting counterpoint to the claim that impassibility is driven by the over-reach of Greek influence.

⁸⁷ These assessments of anthropomorphisms are not a direct commentary upon Biblical anthropomorphisms. However, Irenaeus' remarks in this passage seems to suggest that Biblical anthropomorphisms should be taken as telling us something about God while not necessarily being interpreted in a literal manner.

⁸⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.12.1

unbegotten, uncreated God who comprehends all but is not fully comprehended by his creation cannot be described with merely human passions, especially not passions which lead him to error. This final tie is important to note. Irenaeus is primarily concerned with refuting an understanding of God that allows for the divine nature to be governed by deceitful passions. He is rejecting the ascription of such human passions to God. This does not, however, apply to all emotionally colored terms, nor does it imply that Irenaeus' God is static.

Second, Irenaeus argues for impassibility by tying it to immutability and incorruptibility. He argues that the ignorance and damaging passion displayed by Sophia must attach to the entire pleroma because they are all of the same nature. He then denies that such things could be ascribed to the divine nature when he concludes, "so all these . . . must either be naturally impassible and immutable, or they must all, in common with the light of the Father, be passible, and are capable of varying phases of corruption."⁸⁹ This passage makes a startlingly clear connection between immutability and impassibility. Claiming that the Father is passible implies that the Father would be capable of corruption or negative change. In contrast, Irenaeus firmly believes that God is immutable. He then views impassibility as a natural outworking of immutability. How could an unchanging God go through changing emotional states? In the specific example of Sophia, how could the divine nature be corrupted and changed to the point of going astray if God is immutable?

Irenaeus makes this same point in a slightly different way by tying impassibility to perfection in *Against Heresies* 2.17.7. The Father is perfect and impassible, and any being of the same substance as him must be perfect and impassible. Here the idea seems to be that a perfect being would not be ensnared in passions, *contra* the ensnarement of Sophia taught by the Gnostics. The denial of passions and lust in God's character safeguards his immutability by preventing him from being subject to shifting passions. It also safeguards his perfection by preventing him from falling into disturbances that lead to error. In summary, Irenaeus upholds the impassibility of God in order to safeguard his role as the one and only creator:⁹⁰ simple, perfect, and immutable. Irenaeus does so by denying directly anthropomorphic descriptions of God and by denying the Gnostic claim that the divine nature can fall prey to misleading passions. He does this similarly to the apologists by describing what God is not. This understanding of God does not mean that Irenaeus believed in a static and uncaring God. In fact, several elements of his writings clearly demonstrate that this interpretation of Irenaeus' thinking would be false.

First, Irenaeus explicitly describes God as active rather than static. He states, "God is all mind, all reason, all active spirit, all light, and always exists one and the same."⁹¹ God is an active God: a God who thinks and speaks.⁹² His activity is a fundamental part of how we

⁸⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.17.5

⁹⁰ His rejection of any God but the creator is consistent throughout *Against Heresies*, but is especially explicit in 2.19.8-9

⁹¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.28.4. This claim is made in the context of affirming the unity of God and the fact that the division of operations cannot be ascribed to Him and the Gnostic division and production of Aeons, such as Nous and Logos, is flawed.

⁹² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.28.5.

describe him. However, this active spirit is also one who never changes. These two descriptions serve as checks upon each other. God is not a static, impersonal thing. But he is a perfect person, such that he will not change nor be corrupted.

Second, Irenaeus views God as meaningfully good and loving.⁹³ He states, “the love of God, being rich and ungrudging, confers upon the suppliant more than he can ask from it.”⁹⁴ He further describes God as good and kind, saying, “And those things which, through His super-eminent kindness, receive growth and a long period of existence do reflect the glory of the uncreated One, of that God who bestows what is good ungrudgingly.”⁹⁵ These descriptions of God hardly match a cold and static view. God is kind and possesses rich love. God can be understood as both the “primary cause”⁹⁶ and the God who is good and kind. In *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, Irenaeus further describes God as “merciful, compassionate, good, righteous, the God of all.”⁹⁷ All of these descriptions serve as limits for how we understand Irenaeus’ view of impassibility. God is unchanging and, as creator, is not subject to the passions of man. However, he is consistently good, compassionate, and kind. Irenaeus follows the Scriptural narrative in allowing creation to signal that this transcendent God is disposed towards us in meaningful and personal ways.⁹⁸

Third, Irenaeus upholds the wrath and judgment of God. He derisively says of his heretical opponents,⁹⁹ “thinking that they had found out a God both without anger and [merely] good, they have alleged that one [God] judges, but that another saves, unconsciously taking away the intelligence and justice of both deities.”¹⁰⁰ For Irenaeus, the anger of God is an important attribute that is intimately tied to his justice.¹⁰¹ God’s wrath against sin is essential to maintaining his justice and must be maintained along with impassibility. The God of Irenaeus is a God who is both just and wrathful.

These three limiting factors further clarify Irenaeus’ apophatic use of impassibility. This use maintains an understanding of the divine nature as unchangeable and incorruptible. It appropriately recognizes the distance between creator and created and warns us against assuming that God has the same passions as men. At the same time, it does not mean that God is inactive, and it certainly does not discount his anger and goodness. The God of Irenaeus is a trustworthy and incorruptible God who cares about his creation.

⁹³⁹³ I am indebted to Weinandy for his analysis of this aspect of Irenaeus’ thought. See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 93-95.

⁹⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3 preface.

⁹⁵ Ibid 4,38,3.

⁹⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4,38,3.

⁹⁷ Irenaeus, *Apostolic Demonstration*, 8.

⁹⁸ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 93.

⁹⁹ In this case the Marcionites.

¹⁰⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3,25,2.

¹⁰¹ Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 53.

Conclusion

G. L. Prestige, in his book *God in Patristic Thought*, has summarized the early fathers' understanding of impassibility as follows: "It is clear that impassibility means not that God is inactive or uninterested, . . . but that his will is determined from within instead of being swayed from without."¹⁰² Our study seems to have demonstrated this to be correct. But we are now in a position to expand upon this statement. Our studies of impassibility lead us to five generally shared concepts among Irenaeus and the Greek apologists.¹⁰³

First, in all of the thinkers we have examined, divine impassibility has been asserted as an apophatic statement. It has been declared primarily as what God is not rather than what God is. Furthermore, most of these apophatic statements have occurred in similar contexts. They have been made primarily when these theologians demonstrate the large difference between the Christian God and the gods of either the Homeric deities or the heretics. The apologists strongly declared that God is not overmastered by shameful lusts or led astray by debilitating desires. This element is a strong feature of all the thinkers we have discussed, but it is most pronounced in the writings of Justin Martyr.

Second, God's impassibility was used to defend his virtuousness. This is most obvious in Justin Martyr and Athenagoras' assertion of impassibility *contra* the Greek gods, but it also comes through in Irenaeus' connection between perfection and impassibility. The Christian God is not a God who rapes or murders; he is not a God who is consumed by lust or greed. He is above these sensual and corrupt passions, and he calls his followers to abandon such corrupt passions as well.

Third, these assertions of impassibility have been concerned with distinguishing the creator God from his creation. This aspect of impassibility can be discerned in all of the thinkers we have examined, but it is clearer in Athenagoras' writing and is most pronounced in Irenaeus'. These thinkers hold that the creator of all cannot be directly described in purely anthropomorphic terms. The creator of changing matter cannot be subject to the same shifting emotions experienced by his creation. This concern has also been tied to God's self-sufficiency and simplicity. The self-sufficient God does not feel anxious or struggle with fulfilling his purposes.

Fourth, this understanding of impassibility is closely tied to a belief in God's immutability. The Scriptures made it clear to these thinkers that God was immutable. He does not change his mind or fluctuate in the face of changing passions. This can be seen in both Athenagoras' and Irenaeus' writings, but it reaches its fullest understanding in Irenaeus' writing. The unchanging God cannot be subject to the fickleness of ordinary human

¹⁰² Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 7.

¹⁰³ This is not meant to imply that the fathers we have studied have all held to the same position. However, our study of impassibility has made it clear that there are significant similarities between these thinkers and it these similarities that shall conclude our discussion. As noted at the beginning of the paper, these conclusions are provisional. Our understanding of the early conception of impassibility would benefit from further in-depth study of each of these thinkers and an examination of impassibility in related influential Greek fathers.

emotion. He is far too real and active to fluctuate in such a manner and far too trustworthy to be buffeted by shifting and unstable emotions.

Fifth, impassibility does not negate the applicability of emotionally colored terms. Athenagoras does not tend to use clear emotionally colored terms for God, but our study has shown that he does not directly exclude such ascriptions. Irenaeus and Justin Martyr, on the other hand, clearly describe God in emotionally colored ways. They do this by affirming God's kindness, wrath, providential care, and love. The God of these theologians is not static, apathetic, or uncaring. He is the good creator, which means there is a link between him and his world. This link gives these thinkers grounds to describe him as fundamentally interested and involved.

The thinkers discussed in this article provide a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of divine impassibility. They are not merely parroting Hellenistic philosophy; they are striving to develop a faithful conception of the Christian God. They describe a God who is the transcendent, unchanging creator while simultaneously affirming God's providential care and love for his creation. They describe a God who is consistently kind, good, and loving. This nuanced understanding of impassibility counters the contemporary rejections of the doctrine and must be taken seriously. We must engage with the insights of the early Greek fathers as we attempt to enrich our understanding of the divine nature.

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