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COMPASSION AS THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Daniel C. Peterson

***Abstract:** The Greek philosopher Aristotle, clearly one of the world's great geniuses, created the concept of the "unmoved mover," which moves "other things, but is, itself, unmoved by anything else." This label became the standard Jewish, Christian, and Muslim description of an impersonal God — a God without body, parts or passions — a concept that has, for nearly 20 centuries, dominated western theology, philosophy, and science. The problem for thinkers in these religious traditions is that the God depicted in the Bible and the Qur'an is plainly personal. A careful review of the Bible and modern scripture reveals a "compassionate, feeling" God. Numerous scriptures confirm that God, in fact, "feels more deeply than we can even begin to imagine."*

In a very famous story from the history of science, Galileo climbed to the top of the leaning bell tower at Pisa in order to refute Aristotle's teaching that bodies of different mass fall at different speeds. This story (which may or may not be authentic) illustrates the image of Aristotle with which many of us grew up — that of a dogmatic ancient fool whose influence stunted scientific progress for centuries. Yet, in most ways, this image could not be further from the truth.

A student of Plato, who was a disciple of Socrates, Aristotle ranks, without any question, among the greatest universal geniuses the world has ever known. (His own pupil, Alexander the Great, was also a high achiever, although of a somewhat different kind.) His writings on poetry and theater, music, logic, rhetoric, politics and government, metaphysics and ethics are still fundamental to the study of those fields. And, while his work in biology, zoology, physics and other sciences has long been superseded, it played a vital role in creating those disciplines.

One of Aristotle's most influential contributions to human thought is his concept of the "unmoved mover."

As the name suggests, the unmoved mover moves other things, but is, itself, unmoved by anything else. It affects other things but isn't affected by other things. Think of an inconceivably long chain of dominos standing in line. In order to start them collapsing, somebody or something needs to tip the first domino over. All the rest follow.

Aristotle's understanding is that the unmoved mover is God, the ultimate cause or "mover" of all the motion, which (in his terms) meant all the change, in the universe. In the twelfth book of his treatise on "Metaphysics," Aristotle describes the unmoved mover as being "simple" (that is, indivisible), unchangeable and perfectly beautiful. It endlessly contemplates the only thing in the universe worthy of its attention: itself.

Aristotle's prestige in the ancient and medieval periods was so enormous — and please recall that it was very far from undeserved — that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers felt powerfully compelled to incorporate his view of God into their own.

For example, one of St. Thomas Aquinas's famous "five ways" of proving the existence of God (or, at least, of describing the divine nature) relies on Aristotle's concept of the unmoved mover.

This is hardly surprising. For roughly twenty centuries, Aristotle represented the best science and the most advanced thought available, and it would have been simply impossible for any serious thinker to ignore him. In fact, it was even difficult to contradict him: By the Middle Ages, as depicted in Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* and in C.S. Lewis' scholarly study *The Discarded Image*, the few precious writings remaining from "the Ancients" had taken on something of the aura of scripture. And no non-scriptural writer carried more authority than Aristotle.

A major problem for Muslim, Christian, and Jewish thinkers, however, was that the God depicted in the Bible and the Qur'an is plainly personal, reacting to human sin and human faithfulness, intervening at some points in human history but not at others, revealing messages to prophets that are tailored to their specific times and circumstances. Yet the unmoved mover seems essentially impersonal. How were these two seemingly distinct conceptions of the divine to be reconciled, even blended?

It can be argued that they never really were. Not successfully. The unmoved mover, endlessly contemplating itself because it's the only thing in the universe worthy of its notice, seems unlikely to pay any attention to the sufferings of less worthy beings such as, say, humans. And if it truly affects all other things but cannot be affected, there appears little point in praying to it. One might as well pray to a rock. Finally, for Christians, is it even remotely conceivable that Aristotle's God "so loved

the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16)?

Aristotle’s concept of God and that taught in the Abrahamic revelations are like oil and water — they don’t mix. As the early twentieth-century Anglo-American mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once quipped with regard to this view of the divine (which he rejected), the God of the philosophers is, unfortunately, not available for religious use.

But the personal and emotional God of Christian theism most definitely is available for religious purposes. And this is essential to understand. Permit me to suggest why.

The English noun *compassion* comes from the Latin *compassio*, which is composed of the prefix *com-* (meaning “with,” or “together”) and the root *pati* (meaning “to suffer”; compare the noun *passion*). In its turn, Latin *compassio* is a fairly late ecclesiastical loan-translation of the Greek word *sympatheia*, which conjoins — did you see that *con-* prefix? “conjoins”? — the Greek *syn-* or *sym-* with the word *pathos* (suffering). Pretty obviously, this is the source of our English word *sympathy*.

All of these words — *compassio*, *compassion*, *sympatheia*, and *sympathy* — convey the sense of “suffering with” or “feeling with” someone else. And the same thing is precisely true with regard to their Germanic equivalents. In German, for example, *compassion* can be translated as *Mitleid* — literally “with-suffering.” In Dutch, the equivalent word is *medelijden*, which consists of *mede* (“with”) and *lijden* (“suffering”).

I won’t pursue these wearisome word games any further, much as I personally enjoy them, because I’ve established my point, which is that there is plainly a broad understanding of *sympathy* and *compassion* across many Indo-European languages as referring, in some way, to suffering or feeling with others, to sharing their emotional states. And it’s that kind of “fellow-feeling” on which I wish to concentrate.

One of the greatest sermons in the Book of Mormon is, without question, that recorded in Alma 5.

I believe it’s helpful, in reading through this sermon, to think of Alma the Younger’s own personal history. Remember his spectacular conversion story, which involved a dramatic appearance by an angel. That angelophany turned his life around and, as he saw it, literally saved him from damnation.

So when he speaks about captivity and about deliverance from bondage and from hell, about being awakened from a deep sleep, and about being saved from darkness and destruction and the chains of hell (in verses 5:5-10), it’s impossible to believe that he isn’t speaking from

his own autobiography, that he doesn't know precisely what it's like to be in such a condition, under such circumstances. Thus, too, his emphasis on "a mighty change in ... heart" in verses 5:12-14 seems to me clearly to reflect his own conversion, and his deep desire that others experience the transformation he himself had undergone.

"Do ye not suppose that I know of these things myself?" he asks rhetorically in verse 5:45.

When he speaks about how fearsome and painful it would be to stand before God in the acute consciousness of one's guilt (in verses 5:18-25), Alma knows exactly whereof he speaks, having, as he later explains to his son, personally experienced something of that terror. (See Alma 36:12-15.)

I suspect, too, that his list of sins in verses 5:28-31 also has its personal dimension. He had grown up as one of the Nephite elite, a son of the chief priest, closely associated with the wayward sons of the king. He knew pride firsthand.

Much more could be said, of course, but I read this sermon as a very personal and heartfelt statement from Alma, who never forgot that he was a brand that had, not a moment too soon, been graciously plucked from the burning. He feared that others might incur terrible suffering because he had experienced something of that terror and that suffering himself.

We see the same personal element when Alma famously expresses his yearning to reach all humanity with the message of the gospel:

O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people! Yea, I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder, repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth. (Alma 29:1-2)

Alma's expression of his desire seems plainly based upon his own personal conversion experience, in which an angel appeared to him who "spake as it were with a voice of thunder, which caused the earth to shake," and summoned him to repentance. "Doth not my voice shake the earth?" the angel asked, rhetorically. "He spake unto us, as it were the voice of thunder, and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet" (see Mosiah 27:10-15; Alma 36:6-11).¹

1. Incidentally, the close interrelationship between Mosiah 27:10-15, Alma 29:1-2, and Alma 36:6-11 — *intertextuality* is the current academic buzzword for such things — is a striking illustration, in my judgment, of the rich complexity of

He wanted others to experience the conversion he had experienced because, having gone through that agonizingly painful time, he had found joy and light — and he wanted others to find them, as well:

And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!

Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy.

Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there. ...

Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. (Alma 36:20-22, 24)²

On a far grander level, of course, literal sympathy or “suffering with” (*Mitleid*) is at the core of the atonement of Christ, which is at the heart of the Gospel.

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5)

For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;

But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I;

the Book of Mormon that is difficult to reconcile with any notion that Joseph Smith was simply dictating it off the top of his head every day, without notes, and at a high rate of speed.

2. The obvious verbal relationship between 1 Nephi 1:8 and Alma 36:22 — almost exactly three hundred pages apart in the current standard English edition of the Book of Mormon — represents another notable instance of impressive intertextuality.

Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit — and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink —

Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men. (Doctrine and Covenants 19:16-19)

And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. (Alma 7:11-12)

Famously the shortest verse in the King James Version of the Bible, John 11:35 — “Jesus wept” — records the reaction of the Savior to the death of his friend Lazarus and to the painful sorrow of his friends, Lazarus’s sisters Mary and Martha. In my judgment, too, it is quite arguably one of the most important of all biblical passages because it so plainly illustrates the emotional life of the Creator and Savior of the world.

Moreover, since Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Jesus is “the express image” of the Father’s “person”; and the Savior himself declares that “he that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9); and Paul says of Christ that “in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 2:9), it seems reasonable to assume that we can deduce the nature of the Father from the nature of his Son. “[N]o man knoweth ... who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him” (Luke 10:22).

One of the most remarkable revelations about the divine emotional life, the divine *sympatheia*, however, is to be found in Moses, in which the prophet Enoch

beheld Satan; and he had a great chain in his hand, and it veiled the whole face of the earth with darkness; and he looked up and laughed, and his angels rejoiced.

And Enoch beheld angels descending out of heaven, bearing testimony of the Father and Son; and the Holy Ghost fell on many, and they were caught up by the powers of heaven into Zion.

And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?

And Enoch said unto the Lord: How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?

And were it possible that man could number the particles of the earth, yea, millions of earths like this, it would not be a beginning to the number of thy creations; and thy curtains are stretched out still. ...

How is it thou canst weep? (Moses 7:26-31)

God's power is so awesomely, majestically great that Enoch is astonished to see evidence of divine emotional vulnerability. And, significantly, the being who now responds to Enoch's question speaks not as the Son but as the Father:

The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency;

And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood;

And the fire of mine indignation is kindled against them; and in my hot displeasure will I send in the floods upon them, for my fierce anger is kindled against them.

Behold, I am God; Man of Holiness is my name; Man of Counsel is my name; and Endless and Eternal is my name, also.

Wherefore, I can stretch forth mine hands and hold all the creations which I have made; and mine eye can pierce them also, and among all the workmanship of mine hands there has not been so great wickedness as among thy brethren.

But behold, their sins shall be upon the heads of their fathers; Satan shall be their father, and misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?

But behold, these which thine eyes are upon shall perish in the floods; and behold, I will shut them up; a prison have I prepared for them.

And that which I have chosen hath pled before my face. Wherefore, he suffereth for their sins; inasmuch as they will repent in the day that my Chosen shall return unto me, and until that day they shall be in torment;

Wherefore, for this shall the heavens weep, yea, and all the workmanship of mine hands. (Moses 7:32–40)

Echoing Enoch, how is it possible for God to weep? For centuries, classical Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theologians have agreed that it isn't. Such behavior would be unworthy of him. God's emotions seem, it's true, to be on display throughout the scriptures, but the passages describing them have typically been dismissed as metaphorical, as symbolic of something else.

Recent biblical scholarship, however, is reconsidering the emotions of God.³ The sections of the book of Jeremiah that precede the Babylonian captivity, to choose from among many possible examples, are absolutely replete with images and divine statements that depict God as deeply caring — worried, even — about the punishment that he himself has to impose upon his people.

In Jeremiah 12:7–8, for instance, the Lord is represented as saying, “I have given the dearly beloved of my soul into the hand of her enemies.”

These words remind us of the internal conflict within the soul of a father who loves his children, but who must still punish them and who must not intervene when consequences occur. The God speaking here is no distant, uninvolved, unemotional monarch. He loves Israel.

But even while biblical scholars increasingly recognize God's “passions” as genuinely scriptural, doing so is deeply problematic in the view of many traditional systematic theologians.

For how is it possible to have emotions without a body? Emotions are inseparably connected with such things as tears, rapid heartbeat, “feelings.” Pure mind, if such a thing exists, would seem incapable of anything remotely recognizable as emotion. If, these theologians argue,

3. For a more detailed discussion of this subject, see Daniel C. Peterson, “On the Motif of the Weeping God in Moses 7,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, eds. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 285–317, <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1122&index=12>.

God has emotions, it must follow that he has some sort of body. But in their view, he cannot have a body. Thus he can have no emotions. Which means not only that he can't be angry with us but neither can he love us in any humanlike sense of the word, or care for us, or feel our pain, or mourn our poor choices.

Like Enoch, theological commentators have been astonished at the sheer notion that God might weep. Unlike Enoch, though, who was an eyewitness, they flatly reject it. Classical theology has historically tended to depict God as a distant, dispassionate, and literally apathetic being unmoved by emotion. The unmoved mover doesn't weep. He (or, perhaps better, *it*) moves but is not moved; nothing can have any impact on him.

If emotional displays such as tears require a body, classical theism's solution is to deny all the emotions mentioned for God in the Bible, just as it denies or reinterprets the many passages that seem to describe him as having bodily form. (The embodied Jesus of John 11:35 can be permitted emotions precisely because he assumed flesh and human nature; it's far less acceptable to grant such "feelings" to his Heavenly Father or to God before the Incarnation.)

The question is whether Christians will in the final analysis opt for their traditional theology or for the Bible. The two are difficult if not impossible to reconcile.

The Pearl of Great Price's account of Enoch offers a spectacular instance of a suffering and weeping God, far clearer, even, than anything in the Bible. Fortunately, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are entirely comfortable with an embodied deity.

For those who accept the scriptures of the Restoration, Heavenly Father is not only a being with emotions, but also a God who, because he is perfect and perfectly embodied, feels more deeply than we can even begin to imagine. "God is love," says 1 John 4:8, simply — the very polar opposite of an "unmoved mover." He not only has and enjoys an emotional life but the most perfect emotional life possible. His love is richer and deeper than any love we can imagine. Therefore, he feels both pain and sorrow for his children, and boundless love and joy for them.

If we wish to be like our Father, we must seek to develop such love, such compassion, such sympathy, to the maximum extent of which we are capable.

"Be ye therefore perfect," commands the Savior in Matthew 5:48, "even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

Latter-day Saints frequently, and quite correctly, cite this verse to advocate and explain the Restoration doctrine of human deification, or exaltation, as the goal of the plan of salvation. It should not be overlooked, however, that Matthew 5:48 comes as the culmination of a longer passage

(beginning at 5:43) about loving our enemies, blessing those who curse us, doing good to those who hate us, and praying for those who spitefully abuse and persecute us. About, among other things, compassion and sympathy.

Daniel C. Peterson (*PhD, University of California at Los Angeles*) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Latter-day Saint subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).