

THE BIBLICAL QUIVER FROM WHICH ATHANASIUS DREW HIS ARROW OF IMPASSIBILITY AIMED AT THE ARIANS

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“[T]he sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth.”
Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, I.1.3.

Like all humans throughout all ages, the church fathers are a product of the philosophical air that they breathed. With the platonic dualism of the universals and particulars leading to a concept of reality based on spiritual and physical, it was only natural for the realm of philosophy to bleed into Christian conceptions of theology. Indeed, a common criticism against the church fathers who championed Nicene orthodoxy was that they drew more from Platonic philosophical conception of God than from Scripture.

Taken as *the* key representative of Nicene orthodoxy, Athanasius made frequent use of impassibility in his explanation and defense of the deity of the Logos against the Arians. This was polemically convenient since the Arians did not deny impassibility either but rather asserted it quite often. Is it correct to think that orthodoxy could withstand heretical pressure in the 4th century with a wrong view of God (as passible) or at least a wrongly sourced view of impassibility (from Greek philosophy rather than Scripture)? This article will seek to demonstrate from the works of Athanasius that this ardent defender of the faith also fervently relied upon Scripture to uphold his view of divine impassibility. Essentially, this is an examination of Athanasius’s theological method as he used impassibility against the Arians.¹

His engagement with the doctrine only has merit because he believed it to be from Scripture and therefore the necessary consequence that he draws from it against the Arians. One must explore such a central tenet to his theological system in order to ascertain if it truly was a development of a biblical foundation or simply the Platonic air that he breathed. For truly if Athanasius was the sharp theological marksman that the church has promoted him to be, those who claim to adhere to orthodox and creedal theology, especially from the Protestant perspective and the Reformed crying *sola scriptura*, will desire of Athanasius an archer drawing from a biblical quiver.

Platonic Ammunition?

Many ascribe Adolf von Harnack as the first to propose the Hellenization of early Christian theology saying, “Dogma in its conception and development is a work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the gospel. ... But it is not only Greek philosophy that comes into question for the history of Christian dogma. The whole of Greek culture must be taken into account.”² Jaroslav Pelikan made the case,

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¹ For a similar assessment in which the conclusion reached was that the Nicene fathers were using the language and categories of their day to interpret what they believed Scripture to truly be saying, especially pertaining to the matter of *homoousious*, see Yeago, David S. “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis.” *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 2 (1994): 152–64.

² Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan (London: Williams & Norgate, 1894), 17, 127.

It is significant that Christian theologians customarily set down the doctrine of impassibility of God as an axiom, without bothering to provide very much biblical support or theological proof... Whether theologians found Platonic speculation compatible with the gospel or incompatible with it, they were agreed that the Christian understanding of the relation between Creator and creature required “the concept of an entirely static God, with eminent reality, in relation to an entirely fluent world, with deficient reality” — a concept that came into Christian doctrine from Greek philosophy.³ [emphasis added]

Paul Gavriilyuk similarly described the state of scholarly criticism explaining, “The mind of the early Fathers, according to this commonly accepted view, was held captive to the Greek philosophical concept of divine impassibility and simply failed to recognize that it stands in stark contradiction to the Christian revelation.”⁴ However, these examples do not tell the entire story.

A number of theologians still maintain that the notion of the infection of Greek philosophy in patristic and orthodox theological development is wrong-headed. Consider the statement of Amos Oei: “Accusations that the fathers of the church were influence [sic] by their pagan philosophical background do not stand up to serious examination.”⁵ The Renihans have claimed, “Divine impassibility is one of the widely accepted tenets of the orthodox Christian faith, stated by the overwhelming majority of theologians... [and] was derived from the careful study of the Scriptures and the scriptural ideas expressed by earlier writers.”⁶

Even if one granted that early theologians like Athanasius did not draw from Scripture but Greek philosophy in its assertion and use of impassibility, this does not of necessity rule out the soundness of their theological conclusions. Rather, this tends to be a cudgel used by various thinkers either to beat against those who would argue for the biblical nature of Nicene Trinitarianism or even against those in the Protestant tradition espousing *sola scriptura* yet charging them of holding an extra-scriptural view. Most vehemently opposed to impassibility, the proponents of the recent controversy of Open Theism who reject the classical theistic view of God’s omniscience have also weighed in on this matter. Outspoken Open Theist Clark Pinnock asserted, “The God of the gospel is not the god of philosophy, at least not of Hellenic philosophy. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is compassionate, suffering [or passible], and victorious love. The god of philosophy is immutable, timeless [sic] and apathetic [or impassible].”⁷

Admittedly, all theology will make use of or at least interact with philosophy in some way. Yet this does not negate the scriptural basis of its conclusions. It simply means that theologians seek to understand the God of Scripture by “necessary consequence” (WCF 1.6) drawn from logical conclusions “necessarily contained in the Holy Scriptures” (2LCF 1.6). As Helm cogently stated, “Greek or some other philosophy might provide the conceptual tool for developing the doctrine of divine impassibility, but it does not follow that what doctrine results is derived not

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1:52–53.

⁴ Paul L. Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3. He elaborated further (p. 21), “The standard approach to the issue of the divine (im)passibility in the writings of early Fathers is to draw a sharp distinction between the unemotional and uninvolved God of the Greek philosophers and the passionate God of the Bible. The allegedly biblical vision of an emotional and suffering God is then taken as a norm by which the whole development of patristic theology is judged. The verdict is that on the whole, patristic theology was a departure from this vision.”

⁵ Amos Winarto Oei, “The Impassible God Who ‘Cried,’” *Themelios* 41, no. 2 (August 2016): 246.

⁶ Michael T. Renihan, James M. Renihan, and Samuel Renihan, “Historical Theology Survey of the Doctrine of Divine Impassibility: Pre-Reformation through Seventeenth-Century England,” in *Confessing the Impassible God*, ed. Ronald S. Baines et al. (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2015), 226.

⁷ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 27.

from Scripture but from philosophy.”⁸ Those defining Trinitarian orthodoxy both drew on philosophical language to express the biblical nature as well as invented theological jargon and grammar to help clarify and codify its teachings. For instance, the church fathers either created or borrowed and eventually bandied about words like *homoousios* and *hypostasis* to clarify the Trinity of the godhead. All this led Dustin Burlet to conclude, “In sum, although the Fathers were able to make good use of the ‘conceptual tools’ of Greek philosophy... they were also more than capable of ‘molding the conceptual content’ to fit a Scripturally determined worldview.”⁹

A More Diverse Armory

There has been push-back by some scholars who want to both uphold Nicene orthodoxy as well as legitimize the theologians who helped cement it into the Christian landscape by seeing theologians like Athanasius drawing their doctrine more from Scripture than Plato.¹⁰ Some point out that the early church’s development of its theological language and thought was not restricted to Greek philosophy and Roman/Hellenistic culture but also to the early church’s Jewish heritage as well.¹¹ For example, Oei explained, “We must understand that the early Fathers lived and worked within the environment of the Jewish and Hellenistic culture. Therefore, they did not think it inappropriate to use language and concepts that were prevalent among their contemporary philosophical proponents.”¹²

Some have also demonstrated that even in 2nd temple Judaism, there was an acknowledgement that Scripture spoke of God with anthropomorphisms in that God could not truly have human passions.¹³ Others have sought to show how the varying Hellenistic philosophical schools were not as tightly bound to the concept of impassibility as so many often assert. Though often treated as monolithic, there was a “variety of understandings of the divine emotions and divine involvement offered by the Hellenistic world.”¹⁴

In answering why the church fathers were unified on the doctrine of divine impassibility, Robert Culver claimed, “Enlightenment and liberal critics and historians blame the influence of Plato and other Greek philosophers, but I propose a compelling reason in the fact that in Scripture God is most forcefully and grandly said to be supremely ‘blessed.’”¹⁵ Unfortunately, Culver

⁸ Paul Helm, “The Impossibility of Divine Passibility,” in *The Power and Weakness of God: Impassibility and Orthodoxy*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1989), 135.

⁹ Dustin G. Burlet, “Impassible Yet Impassioned: The Doctrine of Divine Impassibility in Conversation with the Noachian Deluge of Genesis,” *Didaskalia* 28 (2017): 111.

¹⁰ This of course supposes that there is a Scriptural case to be made for divine impassibility. For recent, scholarly monographs that attempt to demonstrate this, see Helm, “The Impossibility of Divine Passibility”; Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2000); Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*; Ronald S. Baines et al., eds., *Confessing the Impassible God: The Biblical, Classical, & Confessional Doctrine of Divine Impassibility* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2015).

¹¹ Daniel Castelo, *The Apathetic God: Exploring the Contemporary Relevance of Divine Impassibility* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 48. He went on to rightly point out, “All of these influences led to a complex belief system, on that adapted and reconfigured various terms and strategies from a number of sources to convey in a compelling and relevant way the implications of the gospel.”

¹² Oei, “The Impassible God Who ‘Cried,’” 241.

¹³ Mark Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 62-77. Sheridan argued, “The idea that God could be angry like human beings was excluded from Jewish Hellenistic interpretation no less than from the Greek philosophical tradition” (p. 76).

¹⁴ Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 46. See especially pages 21-36 for his presentation of the variegated nature of Greek theological thought concerning divine emotion.

¹⁵ Robert Duncan Culver, “The Impossibility of God: Cyril of Alexandria to Moltmann,” *Christian Apologetics Journal* 1, no. 1 (1998): 4.

leaves his “compelling reason” to the inference of the reader. He cites OT and NT Scripture pointing to the biblical theme of God being blessed, but he did not draw any theological inferences from that other than the assertion. He concluded, “Though I shall not carry my argument far in this paper, the evidence from *eulogetos* and *makarios* has impressed me that we need not give up the impassibility of God. God transcendent in heaven and immanent in all creation is supremely happy (a synonym of blessed), always has been so, and for ever [sic] will be.”¹⁶ The idea is that God is supremely blessed in himself. As James Dolezal asked, “Do creatures contribute to God’s being or blessedness?”¹⁷ To which the answer Culver was intimating is a resounding “No!” If creatures were to add to his blessedness, then he would be moved by them and thus undergo a change or mutability. Though Culver’s argumentation is rather bare, his emphasis seems to be correct. If the concept of God’s “blessedness” is a biblical pointer to impassibility, then the church fathers would have inferred that concept from Scripture just as easily.

Similarly, while Thomas Weinandy acknowledges shared concepts and words between the NT and Greek philosophy, what separated the Christian worldview from the Greek philosophical/religious one is that despite the overlap, Christianity started from the vantage point of God (in Trinity) as creator and therefore personal. He said,

While both the New Testament and Platonic/Aristotelian philosophy would hold that God is perfect, the New Testament upholds this attribute because God must be perfect as the Creator of a good world, whereas Greek philosophy tends to hold that God is perfect because he is removed from the imperfect world of materiality... It is the concept of creation then, with its one Creator God, that separates Christianity from popular pagan religion.¹⁸

As Culver pointed out, the church fathers who were in unanimous agreement about this doctrine of impassibility “did not cite Aristotle’s unmoved mover, Plato’s eternal forms or anything of the sort. These arguments were based mainly on the usual biblical texts we still today cite to teach God’s immutability.”¹⁹ Very similarly, Gavriilyuk concluded,

[I]t is misleading to think of the patristic theological dilemma as involving a choice between the unemotional and uninvolved God of the Hellenes and the emotional and suffering God of the Hebrews. This is a false dilemma that fails to reckon with the variety of understandings of the divine emotions and divine involvement offered by the Hellenistic world and the qualifications of anthropomorphic [and anthropopathic] representations of God that appear in the Greek and even in the Hebrew biblical text, as well as in its early non-Christian interpreters.²⁰

Therefore, it would appear to be an over-simplification to accuse the church fathers of drawing from a theology that was thoroughly Hellenized. Not only was Greek conceptions of deity rather variegated, but even those early tradents of Scripture and its inherent teachings were fairly diverse in their theological presuppositions beyond Hellenistic philosophy.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 23.

¹⁸ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* 87–88.

¹⁹ Culver, “The Impassibility of God,” 1–2.

²⁰ Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 46.

The Trinitarian Targeting for Impassibility

In order to proceed toward a survey of Athanasius's use of impassibility against the Arians, it must first be determined what was (and is) meant by impassibility and how it fit into the arsenal of the church fathers. Specifically, (1) what is impassibility rightly understood, and (2) how did the "Nicene" theologians use impassibility in their arguments against the Arians?

Impassibility Rightly Understood

While a large swath of modern theologians has rejected the notion of divine impassibility for fear it presents God in a distant and callous manner,²¹ much of the disagreement has come from either a lack of consensus of definition or correctly understanding the historic meaning of the doctrine. In contrast to the current climate, how strange it seems that the great Puritan divine John Owen could say of impassibility, "It is agreed by all, that those expressions of repenting, grieving, and the like, are figurative, wherein no such Affections are intended as those words signify in created Natures, but only an event of things like that, which proceedeth from such Affections."²²

As is true with so much else in this field, each theologian will nuance the doctrine slightly each time. But the general tenor of divine impassibility classically confessed, especially as the church fathers understood it, sheds much light onto the topic.²³ To begin with, many who write on the subject often quote a definition by G. L. Prestige:

It is clear that impassibility means not that God is inactive or uninterested, not that He surveys existence with Epicurean impassivity from the shelter of a metaphysical insulation, but that *His will is determined from within instead of being swayed from without*. ... If it were possible to admit that the impulse was wrung from Him either by the needs or by the claims of His creation, and that thus whether by pity or by justice His hand was forced, He could no longer be represented as absolute; He would be dependent on the created universe and thus at best only in possession of concurrent power.²⁴ [italics added]

More related to the matter of emotion and passions, James Renihan described of God's impassibility, "It is not simply that he is not in fact subject to the onset of passions, like a Stoic, but he is *not able* to be made to have a passion" [italics original].²⁵ This is similar to Kelly's

²¹ Take for example Jürgen Moltmann's objection and understanding of divine impassibility: "What kind of a poor being is a God who cannot suffer and cannot even die? He is certainly superior to mortal man so long as this man allows suffering and death to come together as a doom over his head. But he is inferior to man if man grasps this suffering and death as his own possibilities and chooses them himself. ... A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. ... And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either. So he is a loveless being." Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 40th Anniversary Edition. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 323–324. See John Ferrer's article that not only outlines many of the objections but also offers many arguments in favor for divine impassibility. John Ferrer, "What Help Is a Suffering God?," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 9, no. 2 (2011): 3–27.

²² John Owen, *A Continuation of the Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (London: Printed for Nathaniel Ponder, 1680), 157 as quoted in Samuel Renihan, ed., *God Without Passions: A Reader* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2015), 185.

²³ For a helpful summary on these matters as well as various definitions, see Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 4–12.

²⁴ G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, Reprint. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 7.

²⁵ James M. Renihan, "Forward," in *Confessing the Impassible God: The Biblical, Classical, & Confessional Doctrine of Divine Impassibility*, ed. Ronald S. Baines et al. (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2015), 20.

implication that “[a]lthough everything in the world is dependent upon God, God is not dependent upon or affected by anything. A corollary,... is that an impassible being cannot suffer.”²⁶ The nuance is subtle yet important. Here, the connection is one of immutability. If to suffer is to be acted upon or affected by something outside that would cause change, and God cannot change, therefore the implication is that God cannot suffer in the sense *to be made to have a passion*. As Richard Muller explained, “Strictly, an affection or passion is an acquired quality.”²⁷ If one holds to either divine simplicity²⁸ or immutability,²⁹ then divine impassibility is simply an extension and reasonable conclusion drawn from the inference of Scripture.

Along with definitions that relate impassibility with immutability, there is also the distinction between affection and passion especially as it refers to the way in which creatures are affected by passions. Dolezal helpfully explains, “Passion as passion is an undergoing, a ‘happening to,’ so to speak. Emotional experience brings to its subject a new state of actuality that was not previously present. ... In sum, ‘passion’ is a modal term denoting the manner in which affections come upon creatures.”³⁰ Therefore, if God underwent a “happening to” or experienced “a new state of actuality,” he would not be immutable, YHWH, the I AM, nor pure being. He would be “becoming.”

There is also a moral component differentiating passion and affections. As Jonathan Edwards distinguished,

[An] affection is a word, that in its ordinary signification, seems to be something more extensive than passion; being used for all vigorous lively actings of the will or inclination; but passion for those that are more sudden, and whose effects on the animal spirits are more violent, and the mind more overpowered, and less in its own command.³¹

Richard Muller carries this distinction even further elaborating,

An affection is usually favorable or positive, whereas a passion is usually negative. ... A passion, most strictly, is a form of suffering and would not have the connotation of a permanent disposition ... [and] indicate a declension from an original or natural condition that is at variance with the fundamental inclination of the individual – and, therefore, a loss of power or self-control. A virtue is, quite simply, a moral perfection – in the case of God, the perfection of his understanding and/or will.³²

²⁶ Kelly James Clark, “Hold Not Thy Peace at My Tears: Methodological Reflections on Divine Impassibility,” in *Our Knowledge of God: Essays on Natural and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Kelly James Clark (Springer, Netherlands: Springer Science + Business Media, 1992), 167.

²⁷ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 3:553.

²⁸ James Dolezal explained, “God is absolute in being, alone the sufficient reason for Himself and all other things, and so cannot in any respect derive His being from another. Because God cannot depend on what is not God in order to be God, theologians traditionally insist that all that is in God is God.” Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 40–41. Therefore, if God is simple and not composite, then he must also be impassible so as not to bring a new actuality upon what was formerly not present.

²⁹ Richard Muller wrote of the relation between passibility and mutability, “[I]nasmuch as the will and purpose of the being in question is moved by the object of its affections and, in effect, altered by the attraction or repulsion or, indeed, by the very sequence indicated in affective selection of an object.” Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:555.

³⁰ James E. Dolezal, “Still Impassible: Confessing God Without Passions,” *Journal of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies* 1 (2014): 128–129.

³¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 2, Religious Affections*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, originally 1754), 98.

³² Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:553–554.

He continues this reasoning to its necessary conclusion.

Since a passion has its foundation or origin *ad extra* and its terminus *ad intra*, it cannot be predicated of God and, in fact, fails to correspond in its dynamic with the way that God knows. An affection or virtue, by way of contrast, has its foundation or source *ad intra* and terminates *ad extra*, corresponding with the pattern of operation of the divine communicable attributes and, in particular, with the manner of divine knowing.³³

This brings the discussion full circle with Prestige's definition as "His will is determined from within instead of being swayed from without." If God only acts, thinks, wills, or knows within himself (*ad intra*), then nothing outside of him (*ad extra*) can affect him.³⁴ In this sense, if by "passion" is meant an uncontrolled emotion, one that happens to the creature whether good or bad, then such a thing cannot *ad extra* come upon God in such a way as to move him *ad intra*. He who is perfect can neither undergo something that adds more goodness nor be reduced to something bad *ad extra*.

With these explanations, those who object to an impassible God as distant and unrelatable or even emotionless have not rightly understood how orthodox Christianity has understood and confessed the concept in classical theism. However, the Arians not only believed in divine impassibility. It was a primary argument against Nicene orthodoxy. And so one must not only understand correctly the doctrine of divine impassibility, one must also place it in the argument of the Arians and Athanasius.

Athanasius' Aim at the Arians

Because "every kind of mutability was denied by the Arians in the case of the supreme God," the Arians first used the doctrine of impassibility to posit the creatureliness of the Son.³⁵ John O'Keefe explained it this way,

After the council [of Nicaea], with the Son's divine stature assured, the problem of impassibility became, if anything, more difficult. To what extent did the human sufferings of the Son touch the divine nature? If Jesus Christ is God, as Nicaea declared, and if Jesus Christ suffered, as Scripture asserted, does this not imply that God suffered in some way?³⁶

Quite similarly, the Renihans wrote,

Athanasius affirms divine impassibility with respect to the generation of the Son by the Father. If ever there was a doctrine that implied some passibility in God, it would be the Father's begetting of the Son. Yet Athanasius will not adjust the doctrines of immutability and impassibility in order to make room for any anthropomorphic notions of the Father's generation of the Son.³⁷

In other words, impassibility was one of the arguments asserted by the Arians in their denial of the eternity and divinity of the Logos. If the Son changed and underwent passions or sufferings,

³³ Ibid., 3:554.

³⁴ This is why Muller said, "Strictly, an affection or passion is an acquired quality." Ibid., 3:553.

³⁵ J. K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 77.

³⁶ John J. O'Keefe, "Impassible Suffering? Divine Passion and Fifth-Century Christology," *Theological Studies* 58, no. 1 (March 1997): 40-41.

³⁷ Renihan, et al, "Historical Theology Survey of the Doctrine of Divine Impassibility," 233.

he must not be impassible and therefore could not be eternally God nor coessential with the Father.

It is important to grasp this point in order to understand why Athanasius would even add impassibility to his arsenal against the Arians. In an effort to prove the Son as *homoousios* as the Father, Athanasius used impassibility both positively in his assertion as well as an important polemical point against the heretics. Not only were the fathers unwilling to abandon the traditional view of God, they believed it to be so Scriptural that it did not conflict with their defense of the deity of Jesus. As Gilles Emery said,

The affirmation of the Fathers at Nicaea had the merit of possessing a clarity equal to that of Arius's thought: if the Son does not possess the immutability that is proper to the one God, then he must in fact be a creature. ... the affirmation of the impassibility and immutability of the Word in his divine nature became a central tenet of orthodoxy.³⁸

Thus, they sought to turn the Arian's argument of impassibility on its head as a polemical argument against them. Rather than simply shielding themselves from the onslaught of the Arians' attack of impassibility, Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers picked up the arrows of impassibility and shot them back at the Arians. This became a powerful and convincing argument for those who were following the struggle.

To help guide the discussion into Athanasius's use of divine impassibility, Kelly Clark helpfully explained, "Although there is unanimity among the church fathers that God suffers with us in Jesus Christ, there is also near unanimity that God suffers *only* incarnationally and that the Father is incapable of suffering" [*italics original*].³⁹ It is his emphasis on "*only* incarnationally" that teases out the nuanced patristic distinction. The emphasis as it pertains to the divine Logos centers on his human nature distinctly. It is by virtue of his human nature alone that the Son undergoes suffering. However, by virtue of his divine nature, he remains impassible.

For Athanasius, we must begin with that impassible divine nature of the Logos that he argued in terms of generation. When he spoke of the eternal generation of the Son from the Father, he did so with the theological grammar of *impassible generation*. He argued,

[T]he divine generation must not be compared to the nature of men, nor the Son considered to be part of God, nor the generation to imply any passion whatever; God is not as man; for men beget passibly, having a transitive nature, which waits for periods by reason of its weakness. But with God this cannot be;... but being impassible and simple, He is impassibly and indivisibly Father of the Son.⁴⁰ [emphasis added]

Far from the Arian assertion that divine impassibility dismantles the Father generating the Son, Athanasius believed it was the way to correctly understand how the Logos can be the Son generated from the Father. It must have been an impassible generation.

Similarly, speaking of the Logos as the impassible divine Word of the Father (and after quoting Matt 3:17) he said, "And He too is the Father's Word, from which may be understood the impassible and impartitive nature of the Father, in that not even a human word is begotten with passion or partition, much less the Word of God."⁴¹ Here, rather than the Creator/creature

³⁸ Gilles Emery, "The Immutability of the God of Love and the Problem of Language Concerning the 'Suffering of God,'" in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 28–29.

³⁹ Clark, "Hold Not Thy Peace at My Tears: Methodological Reflections on Divine Impassibility," 179.

⁴⁰ *Contra Arians*, 1.28.

⁴¹ *De Decretis*, 1.11.

distinction of impassibility regarding generation, even creatures utter words without passion. How much more so then would it be true of the divine Logos? These brief examples demonstrate that Athanasius sought to leverage the doctrine of divine impassibility to his advantage.

When it came to the Arian charge of passibility of the Son, Athanasius nuanced his explanation carefully. Here it was essential that he affirmed both the passion of the Son while maintaining that he did not suffer. He admitted the tension: “And verily it is strange that He it was Who suffered and yet suffered not.”⁴² Yet he went on to explain,

Suffered, because His own Body suffered, and He was in it, which thus suffered; suffered not, because the Word, being by Nature God, is impassible. And while He, the incorporeal, was in the passible Body, the Body had in it the impassible Word, which was destroying the infirmities inherent in the Body.⁴³

Though Chalcedonian orthodoxy was not yet in place, Athanasius was already engaged with the topics of the two natures of the Son. Built upon the Logos theology mentioned above, the divinely impassible Son suffered only in his passible human nature and only because he took a passible human body. Therefore, the Son is he “who suffered and yet suffered not.”

This explanation was grounded in the divine work of redemption, for he continued, “But this He did, and so it was, in order that Himself taking what was ours and offering it as a sacrifice, He might do away with it, and conversely might invest us with what was His” and immediately follows this with quoting 1 Cor 15:53.⁴⁴ In order to affirm both the orthodox view of redemption as well as the eschatological goal of the elect, impassibility was Athanasius’s explanation for both! The Son took on passible flesh in order to suffer as a sacrifice for sin. Nevertheless, if the Logos was not impassible, then the glorification that would result for the believer would not occur. In order to do away with our bodies of suffering, the suffering Son procured for his own that which “was His,” namely a nature free of sin.

Likewise, in his explanation of the incarnation from 1 Pet 4:1, Athanasius used impassibility to bolster his view of a proper understanding of the Son in relation to the Father as well as what would later become known as the Hypostatic Union. This section began with the introduction to the matter of the impassible nature of the Logos while the human ailments are “ascribed to Him because of the flesh.” He said, appealing to Scripture no less, “For on this account has the Apostle [Peter] himself said, ‘Christ then having suffered,’ not in His Godhead, but ‘for us in the flesh,’ that these affections may be acknowledged as, not proper to the very Word by nature [e.g. divine impassibility], but proper by nature to the very flesh.”⁴⁵ He doubled down on this explanation:

Let no one then stumble at what belongs to man, but rather let a man know that in nature the Word Himself is impassible, and yet because of that flesh which He put on, these things are ascribed to Him, since they are proper to the flesh, and the body itself is proper to the Saviour. And while He Himself, being impassible in nature, remains as He is, not harmed by these affections, but rather obliterating and destroying them.⁴⁶

⁴² *Personal Letters LIX, To Epictetus, 6.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Personal Letters LIX, To Epictetus, 6.* 1 Cor 15:53 ESV, “For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.”

⁴⁵ *Contra Arians 3.34.*

⁴⁶ Correctly understanding Athanasius before Chalcedon can be difficult. However, the explanation of this passage offered by Khaled Anatolios seems to be faulty. He seemed to understand and explain this section in *Contra Arians 3.34* as very nearly a Eutychian concept. He wrote, “[W]hen the question of the unity of Christ is raised at all, Athanasius implicitly answers it precisely in terms of action—of this transforming dynamic whereby the humanity is ‘changed’

Athanasius argues that because the nature of the Logos is impassible as the Father's, therefore the only way to properly understand the incarnation is to maintain the impassibility of the divine nature all the while the Logos added a human nature which endured the passions and infirmities of the flesh.

Not only did he see impassibility as a means to explain the two natures of Jesus, but he strongly asserted impassibility against the Arians to maintain the *homoousios* doctrine between the Father and the Son eternally begotten. Athanasius argued to the bishops of Egypt that the Arians are much in line with the Manichees, as "inventors of fables." First arguing for divine simplicity, the Arians must necessarily believe that God is composite and thus like a man "speaking and then changing His words, ... For if God has a succession of words, they certainly must consider Him as a man."⁴⁷ Therefore, there can only be one divine Logos. He finds this revealed in Scripture through the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father. Athanasius explained,

If they conceive that God doth at all beget, it were surely better and more religious to say that He is the begetter of One Word, who is the fulness of His Godhead, in whom are hidden the treasures of all knowledge, and that He is co-existent with His Father, and that all things were made by Him; rather than to suppose God to be the Father of many words which are nowhere to be found, or to represent Him who is simple in His nature as compounded of many, and as *being subject to human passions and variable*.⁴⁸ [italics added]

Therefore, the Word must be of the same substance as the Father because only one divine Word can be spoken eternally. And this Logos must neither be composed of parts nor subject to human passions. If there were variation on the part of this Logos, he would not be the divine Word but one of many and therefore not eternally begotten. And neither would God be the speaker of only one Word but of successive words and therefore himself not be God. Athanasius argued that if the Arians reduced the deity of the Son, so too must they do of the deity of the Father. Therefore, his earlier assertion that "these wonderful men now joined themselves to the Manichees" is brought to bear.⁴⁹

Certainly, impassibility played no small part in Athanasius's development and understanding of Nicene orthodoxy. It would also have a profound effect on the matter of the Hypostatic Union, developed later. These are but a few examples of how he interacted with divine impassibility in order to bolster Nicene orthodoxy.

into a divine state." Later he claimed, "Athanasius is struggling [in *Contra Arians* 3.34] to reconcile the Word's divine impassibility with... the passibilities of the flesh. ... The heart of Athanasius's logic is in seeing the unity of this double predication in reference to the one act of human passibility becoming divine impassibility. Within this one act, divine impassibility remains what it is—impassible. However, this impassibility 'involves' itself in human passibility, precisely not by becoming passible but by transforming human passibility into impassibility." See Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998), 149–150. This sounds similar to Cyril of Alexandria's concept that the Word "suffered impassibly" or "suffered without suffering." However, he explained this to mean, "He suffers when the body suffers, in that it is said to be His own body. He remains impassible in that it is truly His property to be unable to suffer." Cyril of Alexandria, *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only-Begotten*, §37.

⁴⁷ *Ad Episcopos Aegypti et Libyae Epistola Encyclica*, ch. II, 16.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Athanasius's Biblical Quiver of Impassible Arrows

To prove that Athanasius asserted his view of impassibility from Scriptural grounds instead of philosophical ones is to engage in the task of exegeting and systematizing the writings of Athanasius. At times, strong inferences would seem to indicate his belief of a biblical source for the doctrine. Other times, he stated quite explicitly that impassibility was indeed a biblical doctrine, as if all those of the church catholic commonly assumed both the doctrine as well as the Scriptural foundation. These concluding pages will offer five proofs to demonstrate the biblical quiver of Athanasius's impassible arrows. Taken individually, they are not all equally convincing. But the cumulative effect of all five is that Athanasius truly believed divine impassibility to be a biblically rooted doctrine.

1) Impassibility as a Refutation of Irrational Philosophical/Theological Views

Athanasius gave himself over to much effort in order to defend Prov 8:22 from the Arians. This passage was the strongest text cited by the Arians as a Scriptural case for their view.⁵⁰ Yet in all their theological and philosophical musings, Athanasius concluded, "These are the evil sophistries of the heterodox."⁵¹ While his attack of them is partially that their understanding of Scripture was shallow, he also argued that their reasoning was irrational and theologically lacking as well. Making use of illustrations of the sun, light, and radiance, he continued with both divine simplicity and impassibility to demonstrate his logical proof:

For if in the case of these originate and irrational things offsprings are found which are not parts of the essences from which they are, nor subsist with passion, nor impair the essences of their originals, are they not mad again in seeking and conjecturing parts and passions in the instance of the immaterial and true God, and ascribing divisions to Him who is beyond passion and change, thereby to perplex the ears of the simple and to pervert them from the Truth?⁵²

The metaphor is of the sun giving off its radiance and light. The Arian equivalent was described earlier to be "'Once the sun was without his radiance,' or 'Radiance is not proper to the essence of light,' or 'It is indeed proper, but it is a part of light by division.'"⁵³ Therefore, if this is not true of the sun and light, how much more so is it not true of the immaterial God who is both without divisions and beyond passions?

The way in which this argument functions is that in order to appeal to an irrational theological or philosophical conclusion, the one refuting (Athanasius in this case) must base his reasoning on a higher authority in which to ascertain such a conclusion. Paul Hinlicky stated,

For Athanasius, the impassibility of God is a logical, analytical notion: God cannot be coherently conceived as liable by nature to any suffering that would disqualify His being as the one creator of all that is not God. In this sense, God is unchangeable qua the unique being that must be conceived to attend the One who is the only creator of all others. God does not morph into some other kind of being—the *only alternative, according to the Bible*, is creaturely being—without the universe losing its creator and all things dissolving back into nothingness.⁵⁴ [italics added]

⁵⁰ Prov 8:22 NASB, "The LORD possessed me [wisdom] at the beginning of His way, before His works of old."

⁵¹ *Contra Arians*, 2.33.

⁵² *Contra Arians*, 2.34.

⁵³ *Contra Arians*, 2.33.

⁵⁴ Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 213.

In the case of Prov 8:22, Athanasius gives a rational argument in his defense of an abused Scriptural passage under the umbrella of reason, which itself has a divine source. He will then in the next paragraph give a Scriptural explanation for this divine source of reason.⁵⁵ Therefore, he refutes bad reason and poor theology with reason itself, making use of impassibility. But it was a reason that one can only account for from creation in the image of God. And Athanasius is aware of this because God has revealed it in Scripture. It would seem then that Athanasius uses divine impassibility as a refutation of the Arians' poor reasoning and simplistic interpretation because he drew it from a higher authority – Scripture.

2) Impassibility as a Means for Anathemas

As many were like to mention, at the end of the original Nicene Creed of A.D. 325 “anathemas were appended condemning various Arian tenets.”⁵⁶ It was no small matter to invoke an anathema upon someone. The implications are massive. Yet Athanasius leveled such accusations against those who would even reject divine impassibility. In his *Expositio Fidei*, which is thought to be “a statement of faith published by Athanasius upon his accession to the Episcopate, A.D. 328,”⁵⁷ Athanasius confessed of the Son, “We believe... in one Only-begotten Word, Wisdom, Son, begotten of the Father without beginning and eternally; word not pronounced nor mental, nor an effluence of the Perfect, nor a dividing of the impassible Essence, nor an issue; but absolutely perfect Son.”⁵⁸ At the end of this paragraph, much like the Nicene Creed following the brief statement on the Holy Spirit, Athanasius added, “And we anathematize doctrines contrary to this” which certainly include the denial of impassibility. To clarify his understanding of Christology, he nuanced the impassibility of the Son only to his nature of deity while of his human nature he confessed, “Neither do we ascribe the passible body which He bore for the salvation of the whole world to the Father.”⁵⁹

The implication to draw here is simple yet profound. For Athanasius to invoke anathema on any dissent from his statement of faith, which coheres nicely with Nicene orthodoxy, this implies that he understood divine impassibility to be based from the Bible and not philosophy. Indeed, to reject a philosophical category is not worthy of anathematization. However, the great implications of denying the divine impassibility of the Son must necessarily follow – it leads to such denial as the deity of the Son of God. This is anathema!

Written later in his life, Athanasius was hopeful that his *de Synodis* would both expose enemies of Nicene orthodoxy as well as curry support from those who were in agreement.⁶⁰ In his explanation of the events of the Council of Nicaea, he explained that the Arian controversy “gave rise for an Ecumenical Council,... that the [Arian] heresy which was springing up might

⁵⁵ *Contra Arians*, 2.35. There he appealed to “the word of truth” which “confutes them.”

⁵⁶ Thomas Herbert Bindley, *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith: The Creed of Nicaea. Three Epistles of Cyril. The Tome of Leo. The Chalcedonian Definition* (London: Methuen & Company, 1899), 15. See also Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th Edition edition. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 15.

⁵⁷ Archibald T. Robertson, “Introduction to *Expositio Fidei*,” in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 4, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), 83.

⁵⁸ *Expositio Fidei*, 1.

⁵⁹ *Expositio Fidei*, 2.

⁶⁰ Archibald T. Robertson, “Introduction to *De Synodis*,” in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 4, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), 449.

be anathematized.”⁶¹ The basis for which the council agreed was not only “thus believes the Church catholic” but also what they confessed to the world. The council drew up the Nicene Creed “in order to shew that their own sentiments were not novel, but Apostolical; and what they wrote down was no discovery of theirs but is the same as was taught by the Apostles.”⁶² Therefore, in the mind of Athanasius, what the council professed in the Nicene Creed is nothing short of biblical. And those that reject major Christian doctrine such as Nicene orthodoxy (and thus impassibility) confessed to be biblically based ought to be anathematized.

Toward the end of *de Synodis*, Athanasius listed many councils held by Arians and semi-Arians. “[T]hey have convened successive Councils against that Ecumenical One and are not yet tired.”⁶³ Included in those lists are accountings and a recording of the creeds that arose from them. After each council, there seems to be a decline in the way Athanasius describes each of them. After the first one mentioned, he said “being dissatisfied with the first”⁶⁴ and later of another “thinking that their composition was deficient still, and fluctuating moreover in their own opinions, again they draw up afresh another formulary.”⁶⁵ Of the latter council and creed, he said they were yet again dissatisfied.⁶⁶

The next council that met was perhaps more legitimate and not simply to push Arian doctrine. It was there that Athanasius recorded their results at the council at Sirmium against Photinus of a new creed (the 6th by this point and the first Sirmian confession). He said of it, “There composed a faith again, not drawn out into such length, not so full in words; but subtracting the greater part and adding in its place, as if they had listened to the suggestions of others.”⁶⁷ The softer language may be indicative of what this council anathematized in which Athanasius himself would have agreed.

In the 13th anathema, Athanasius recorded them to have said, “Whosoever hearing the Only-begotten Son of God to have been crucified, shall say that His Godhead has undergone corruption, or *passion*, or alteration, or diminution, or destruction, be he anathema” [italics added].⁶⁸ The 25th anathema also mentions impassibility regarding the Son’s generation from the Father. Following this, Athanasius stated sarcastically, “Casting aside the whole of this, as if they had discovered something better, they propound another faith.”⁶⁹ It seems that there was some favorability on the part of Athanasius for this confession which, while not using the term *homoousios*, did seem to come close to Nicene orthodoxy. It is not at all surprising that other councils and creeds influenced by Athanasius stated the matter of impassibility as a core doctrine. For example, of the 12 anathemas the First Council of Toledo listed, the 6th said, “If anyone should say or believe that *the Son of God as God suffered*, let him be anathema” [italics added].⁷⁰

⁶¹ *De Synodis*, 5.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *De Synodis*, 21.

⁶⁴ *De Synodis*, 23.

⁶⁵ *De Synodis*, 25.

⁶⁶ *De Synodis*, 26.

⁶⁷ *De Synodis*, 27.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *De Synodis*, 28.

⁷⁰ As quoted in Samuel Renihan, *God Without Passions: A Primer* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2015), 20.

3) Impassibility as Stated to Be Drawn from Scripture

Perhaps this was the obvious place to start. Yet we are building a cumulative case wherein the first two points infer Scriptural foundation for divine impassibility. Here, however, Athanasius claims such openly and forthrightly. A case in point is given in his following statement, “[B]eing impassible and simple, He is impassibly and indivisibly Father of the Son. *This again is strongly evidenced and proved by divine Scripture*”⁷¹ [italics added]. The subsequent context does not cite a passage of Scripture specifically but rather draws from the idea that the concepts themselves are self-evident if indeed the Son is the Word, Wisdom, and Radiance of God, three concepts that he demonstrate at length from Scripture. Using similar reasoning, he said in a different document,

But if He be styled the Word and the Wisdom by a fiction on our account, what He really is they cannot tell. For if the Scriptures affirm that the Lord is both these, and yet these men will not allow Him to be so, it is plain that in their godless opposition to the Scriptures they would deny His existence altogether.⁷²

Twice in this quotation Athanasius appealed to Scripture.

One may include other examples of this nature. After speaking of Jesus as impassible and incorporeal while his human, passible nature was dying on the cross, he explained, “But this He did, and so it was, in order that Himself taking what was ours and offering it as a sacrifice, He might do away with it, and conversely might invest us with what was His, and cause the Apostle to say [from 1 Cor 15:53]: ‘This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal put on immortality.’”⁷³ Just prior to this, Athanasius argued that in the maturation and growth of Jesus from infancy to manhood, “[I]t was not, as some suppose, the very Essence of the Word that was changed.”⁷⁴ After citing two passages on divine immutability from Mal 3:6 and Heb 13:8, he assumes that these texts imply impassibility saying, “[I]n the Body which was circumcised, and carried, and ate and drank, and was weary, and was nailed on the tree and suffered, there was the impassible and incorporeal Word of God.”⁷⁵ His appeal to vindicate his view was not by using the rational tenets from Greek philosophy but the truth necessarily contained from Scripture.

4) Impassibility Used to Interpret Scripture

Not only did Athanasius claim that impassibility was directly from the Scriptures, but in a manner similar to his third proof, he also used it as a hermeneutical explanation for interpreting difficult passages of Scripture. This is in keeping with concepts like the *analogia fidei* and *analogia scripturae*. For instance, his explanation of Ps 110:1 is that redemption should take place “through none other than Him who is Lord by nature,”⁷⁶ speaking of Christ. He went on to make use John 12:34 as well as the passibility of the Son’s human nature to offer an explanation: “For Jews, astray from the truth, expect indeed the Christ as coming, but do not reckon that He undergoes a

⁷¹ *Contra Arians*, 1.28.

⁷² *Ad Episcopos Aegypti*, 14.

⁷³ *Personal Letters LIX, To Epictetus*, 6.

⁷⁴ *Personal Letters LIX, To Epictetus*, 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Contra Arians*, 2.14.

passion, saying what they understand not; 'We know that, when the Christ cometh, He abideth forever, and how sayest Thou, that He must be lifted up?'"⁷⁷

In his ardent support of the Nicene Council and the orthodox concept of *homoousios* which resulted from it, Athanasius returned to his biblical argument of the Son as the Father's Word and Wisdom.

Thus they have called the Father the Fount of Wisdom and Life, and the Son the Radiance of the Eternal Light, and the Offspring from the Fountain, as He says, 'I am the Life,' and, 'I Wisdom dwell with Prudence' [John 14:6; Prov. 8:12]. But the Radiance from the Light, and Offspring from Fountain, and Son from Father, how can these be so fitly expressed as by 'Coessential' [*homoousios*]? And is there any cause of fear, lest, because the offspring from men are coessential, the Son, by being called Coessential, be Himself considered as a human offspring too? perish the thought! not so; but the explanation is easy.⁷⁸

The only way in which an answer is so readily easy and available is one that is consistent with Scripture. And in this case, he used impassibility as his Scriptural hermeneutic. He continued, "For the Son is the Father's Word and Wisdom; whence we learn the impassibility and indivisibility of such a generation from the Father."⁷⁹

5) Impassibility Linked with Other Certain Scriptural Doctrines

Lastly, in support of the supposition that Athanasius drew impassibility from Scripture as an orthodox doctrine of God and the Son, one cannot help but to notice how frequently he joined this term with another attribute. This is more than simply a stylistic point of Athanasius the author. The logic is that if Athanasius conjoined one doctrine, admitted by most as Scriptural and not thought to be from Greek philosophy, with impassibility in order to establish his point, then in his mind they are *both* biblical in their derivation. If this happened infrequently, such an assertion here may carry little weight. On the other hand, the very high frequency which it occurs only bolsters the idea that for Athanasius, the doctrine of divine impassibility was on par with other biblical doctrines of God such as holiness, simplicity, eternality, immutability, and so on.

More than any other attribute, Athanasius felt comfortable speaking of impassibility alongside of divine simplicity. And many times, this would lead into a deluge of other attributes listed. Take for instance this statement: "God, being without parts, is Father of the Son without partition or passion; for there is neither effluence of the Immaterial, nor influx from without, as among men; and being uncompounded in nature, He is Father of One Only Son."⁸⁰ Shortly after, he said, "He too is the Father's Word, from which may be understood the impassible and impartitive nature of the Father, in that not even a human word is begotten with passion or partition, much less the Word of God."⁸¹ Many other similar statements are made:

- "nor a dividing of the impassible Essence"⁸²
- "[God] is without parts and passions."⁸³

⁷⁷ *Contra Arians*, 2.15.

⁷⁸ *De Synodis*, 41.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *De Decretis*, 11.

⁸¹ Additionally, the amount of Scriptural allusions is profuse in this paragraph alone!

⁸² *Expositio Fidei*, 1.

⁸³ *Contra Arians*, 1.26.

- “[God] is not composed of parts, but being impassible and simple, He is impassibly and indivisibly Father of the Son. ... why speculate they about passions and parts in the instance of the immaterial and indivisible God. ... And this Wisdom [that is, the Son] too is not a passion, nor a part, but an Offspring proper to the Father.”⁸⁴
- “For the Son is the Father’s Word and Wisdom; whence we learn the impassibility and indivisibility of such a generation from the Father.”⁸⁵
- “He is co-existent with His Father, and that all things were made by Him; rather than to suppose God to be the Father of many words which are nowhere to be found, or to represent Him who is simple in His nature as compounded of many, and as being subject to human passions and variable.”⁸⁶

Twice in his *de Incarnatione Verbi*, he tied impassibility with incorruptibility. First, regarding the resurrection of Jesus he explained, “He straightway raised it up on the third day, bearing away, as the mark of victory and the triumph over death, the incorruptibility and impassibility which resulted to His body.”⁸⁷ Later he said, “For while He Himself was in no way injured, being impassible and incorruptible and very Word and God, men who were suffering, and for whose sakes He endured all this, He maintained and preserved in His own impassibility.”⁸⁸

The following are other attributes Athanasius joined to impassibility: *immutability* (“ascribing divisions to Him who is beyond passion and change, thereby to perplex the ears of the simple and to pervert them from the Truth?”⁸⁹), *eternality* (“it also calls Him Word, Wisdom, and Radiance; to teach us that the generation was impassible, and eternal, and worthy of God”⁹⁰), *incorporeality* (“there was the impassible and incorporeal Word of God... because the Word, being by Nature God, is impassible. And while He, the incorporeal”⁹¹), *incarnation* (“though God impassible, He had taken a passible flesh; yet from the works He shewed Himself the Word of God”⁹²), and *immortal* (as a result of the Word’s impassible and immortal nature, “thenceforth the flesh [as in humans] might be made impassible and immortal”⁹³). Inasmuch as these doctrines are supposed to be orthodox and Scripturally based, it seemed to Athanasius that to couple impassibility with any one of them was not to legitimize it among Scripture but rather to assume that it was as biblically rooted as any of the other divine perfections. This kind of joining terms together, even ones not mutually dependent like impassibility with immutability or simplicity, moves well beyond arguing proof-text examples of impassibility from the Bible. To conjoin impassibility with these other attributes is to assume its biblical source without having need to state the obvious!

To carry on the marksman metaphor, a well-trained archer does not need to pause between grabbing and nocking the next arrow. He simply assumes that the quiver at his side or over his back is the correct quiver. That is how this argument works here. In the previous two points,

⁸⁴ *Contra Arians*, 1.28.

⁸⁵ *De Synodis*, 41.

⁸⁶ *Ad Episcopos Ægypti*, 16.

⁸⁷ *De Incarnatione Verbi*, §26.1.

⁸⁸ *De Incarnatione Verbi*, §54.3.

⁸⁹ *Contra Arians*, 2.34. One can also see this in the opposite truth in his explanation of creaturely or “human passions and variable.” *Ad Episcopos Ægypti*, 16. Another possible example is the statement, “[N]ot even when the Virgin bore Him did He suffer any change, nor by being in the body was [His glory] dulled.” *Incarnatione Verbi*, §17.4.

⁹⁰ *Contra Arians*, 1.28.

⁹¹ *Personal Letters LIX, To Epictetus*, 5, 6.

⁹² *Contra Arians*, 3.55.

⁹³ *Contra Arians*, 3.58.

Athanasius clearly chose the biblical quiver over the Platonic one. However, here, he assumes that he is drawing from the biblical quiver without even thinking about it, as if it was the only quiver to his side. Therefore, he is most certainly not drawing from Greek philosophy.

Concluding Bull's Eye

Those in the modern era who reject divine impassibility, for whatever their reasons, have long used as a bludgeon the hypothesis that the church fathers were Platonically-founded framers of Nicene orthodoxy. To be fair, in some cases, such as Origen and perhaps Gregory of Nyssa, that is a fair description. But the champion defender of Nicaean theology, Athanasius, cannot be left wholesale to Greek philosophy. Rather, he not only asserted divine impassibility as drawn from Scripture, but he used it as a hermeneutical tool to interpret Scripture. He wielded impassibility not as a caveman's club but as a marksman's arrow shot straight at the heart of the Arian heresy. He did not forge this arrow of impassibility in the market place of Greek philosophical ideas, but rather he drew from the biblical quiver of Scriptural truth. It is the opinion of this writer that Athanasius's aim of impassibility struck the bull's eye dead center.