

Does God Have Emotions?

Written by K B Napier
Friday, 23 January 2015 15:19

As I go about my studies and researches I do so with calm resolve. That is, to interpret scripture according to its language and context. In this way I can stay true to the meaning. So, when a reader tells me they 'feel' I am wrong, I am concerned (This can apply to *any* subject I have written about; talking about emotions in this paper is only an example).

For me, 'feelings' are irrelevant to the proper study of scripture. We can 'feel' whatever we like (and human feelings can often run riot, with no regard for facts!), but a feeling is not the same as what scripture actually says. It does not mean I have no compassion or feeling, only that emotions are not relevant to a linguistic study of God's word. The subject to hand, to my mind, is just a misunderstanding of part of God's nature.

So, what do I make of such criticism against my statement that God has no emotions? The objections usually go along this line of reasoning: God made us in His own image, and so He must have given us everything He has within Himself. Surely, He would not put into a man what is not already extant in Himself?

This is flawed reasoning and is not necessarily logically true. It COULD be true, but the reasoning is not itself necessarily logical, and, in my reading of the word, there is no reason to say God has emotions. Bear in mind that what I am referring to is the *human notion* of emotions. This is not the result of a sudden whim, but a conclusion based on decades of studying God's word and seeing His character displayed in His word, from every possible angle.

I said that God has no emotions, and what I said was part of the introduction to a study of a chapter in Revelation, sent out to the mailing list of people who receive our Bible studies. The statement is not part of a biblical research piece, so it was simply one broad statement, without explanation. When a reader objected to the statement (I later had a second objection), I sent out the following explanation:

"I stand firm on my statement because it is patently true.

When compared to many statements made in scripture regarding God's attributes, we can only conclude that God has no emotions. (This is both a biblical and a theological statement). As I

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say in the text, when we attribute emotions to God (where such emotions are always described in human terms!), we lower Him to our own level. And, as a consequence raise ourselves to His Heavenly level.

Emotions are only applicable to human beings (though some insist on applying them to animals as well: see my articles on this error), but human beings like to attribute emotions to God because it makes them feel better.

When you look at what emotions are (without becoming emotional), you will find that they are subjective reactions (not fully-orbed objective responses). They rely on several factors, found in humans but not in God – psychophysiology, biology and mental state. Emotions are acknowledged to be affected by personality, temperament, mood, disposition and motivation. They are also affected by hormones and neurotransmitters (chemicals in the brain). As such, psychiatry and psychology refer to emotions as ‘labile’ – they change according to any one, or a mix of, these variables. God does not change. He is not labile. He has no ‘nervous system’ or brain chemicals – if He even has a brain as we know it.

It was said that ‘strong’ things such as love or wrath are evidence of His emotions. This is not correct, for God never reacts to human situations – He only responds, which is very different. Everything He does is determined in eternity, never changeable, and never affected by what we do on earth. That is, His responses are never labile, but fixed. If we decide He has emotions then we have a troublesome and changeable God, Who, by His own definitions, mean He cannot be God at all.

Whatever God says and does is fixed, never liable to change, and unemotional. He is perfect, pure and holy. He responds to us, but never reacts, for reactions are human traits based on a wide variety of labile factors.

His love, wrath, etc., are all pure and absolute. They are not reactions but predetermined responses based on His law, which legislate according to His character and will... which are legally fixed.

Hopefully, folks can see now why I say God has no emotions... He is superior to emotions and beyond their often destructive force. Those who have worked in psychiatry have evidenced just

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how labile emotions can be, and how they badly affect the psyche... so know that God has no emotions per se. Whatever His 'personality', it is balanced and forever perfect, and all His attributes are founded not on changeable emotions but on pure existence."

Is this not correct? Is it not biblical? Or, am I being 'somewhat legalistic', as a writer implied? (Feel free to comment; this is not just a question for the original writer: my final definition is at the end of the paper, so do not comment yet). I do not see it as 'legalistic' to adhere to the letter of scripture. Indeed, it is a qualification I have given to all readers time and again. Thus, what I am saying is that if God has emotions, then this is not conveyed in scripture as a concept.

In the interpretation of scripture I dare not stray for a moment from the exact letters and words of God! I dare not, because I am held accountable. If others wish to misread or misinterpret, it is up to them, but as a teacher called by God I must never deliberately mislead, misinterpret, or give an emotional reaction to a biblical question. Human emotion has its place, but has no place whatever when interpreting scripture.

Legal? Or Legalistic?

The writer felt I was 'missing out' on God's blessings by being 'legalistic at times' (though those times were not listed). But, what was meant by this? If I am quoting scripture, or, interpreting as I believe God leads, then how am I being 'legalistic'?

Before I go any further, let me explain something about judges... a judge looks at evidence presented in a case. He will come to a decision based on that evidence. He has a range of possible responses to the case if the person is found guilty, from severe to very compassionate, and these possible options are given by law. Now, if that judge passes a severe sentence does that make him wrong? No, because he is acting within the confines of options open to him by law.

When I study scripture I must do a number of things, and what I do depends on what the aim is. This always begins with a study of the original texts. My interpretation is bound by the range of biblical options open to me in the text itself. I never go outside those options. Then, if appropriate, I give my interpretation (if I give a personal opinion, then I say so). Again, this is always based entirely on the text and its meanings. All of this is strictly scriptural. In which way is this 'legalistic'?

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'Legalistic' is a term used to describe a person who is over-enthusiastic in applying the law to others, particularly when he is himself guilty of the same things. In this he shows no compassion. Is this really how I appear to readers? If so, I want to know how and why, because it is important (Yes, I can make a mistake of *expression*, but this is never intended).

I suspect, though, that the accusation is based on the fact that I might not agree with someone's preferred 'interpretation' of scripture, even if what they say is not found in scripture. In terms of theological and biblical study, I cannot accept any interpretation I know to be false, and/or cannot state for certain what is not defined in God's word. So, for some, this makes me 'legalistic'. But, what is the evidence? And why is it that the one who is deemed wrong is only me? Why cannot the *objector* be wrong?

In what way can I be charged with legalism, when I am very aware of God's law but also living under His grace? My heart is rooted in the grace and mercy of the Lord, so I cannot deliberately be legalistic! In my personal life, and when I counsel face-to-face, I take great care and portray God's compassion. If some think I am being legalistic, then, it is their duty to advise me instantly, so that I do not continue in (supposed) legalism. But, vague reference to being 'legalistic' is not acceptable... give me 'chapter and verse' so that I can either defend myself or admit to error. That is how it goes amongst believers.

Made in God's Image

Linguistically, *saying* God has emotions does not necessarily mean that He HAS emotions, except in the mind of the one saying it. We are certainly made in God's image, but, once we say we have everything God has, we are on very dangerous ground. Indeed, it is part of the heresies to be found in the early churches.

"So God created man in his [own] image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." (Genesis 1:27)

What does this mean? The fact that God (*'elohiym* in this text) "created", automatically means we are separate from God, and He is not the same as us. The word 'own' was inserted by the KJAV translators as a reading aid. Thus, we were "created in his image", which means the same thing. But, what does image, *tselem*, mean? It does NOT mean an exact replica, or, the exact same thing. It means a resemblance, or shadow.

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He created both male and female in His image... yet God is always portrayed in terms of maleness. Therefore, this image cannot be physical. Sadly, many Christians provide their own personal favourite meaning, which strays far from what scripture actually says. And the text simply tells us we are made in His 'image', or we resemble certain aspects of Him. The Hebrew says this image is a representation (because physical images were forbidden). This image refers to having dominion, with God's authority, over creation (also see Psalm 8:5-8).

The 'image', then, is to do with selected spiritual, intellectual and moral attributes, all of which were damaged by the fall of Adam. Thus, our image has been substantially weakened by sin. This explanation of 'image' is partly contained in verse eight. Note, too, that God made us (singular individuals) in "our" image – the image of the Trinity. If we insist that this image is total, then we are really claiming to be the same as the Trinity – God Himself.

This idea of being similar-to and not the same-as can be found in, say, Genesis 5:3, where Adam had a son (Seth), who had (like any son today) similar traits as, and perhaps looks of, his earthly father. He was not Adam nor was he an exact replica.

Therefore, we are NOT made as exact replicas of God, the same; we were given certain attributes that reflected God. Otherwise we are saying we have all knowledge, all might, all power, all authority, have power to save souls, and so on. It means we can be everywhere at once, can perform creatorial miracles, etc. Plainly, we are not made AS God, but we represent Him in selected traits, just as Seth came from Adam (and Eve), but was not Adam himself.

This, then, is not an argument for emotions in humans, nor is it an argument that 'proves' God Himself has the human attribute of emotions (which were perfect and balanced in pre-Fall Adam and Eve).

Why would He place into humans something He does not have Himself?

This argument is a non-sequitur. That is, it does not follow that because God gave us emotions, it means He also has emotions. Indeed, the statement contains illogic. Are we seriously saying that everything Man is, God also is? I do not think so! God the Father is not physical but spirit. Does He also have a heart? A brain? A leg or an arm? Are our thoughts directly comparable to His thoughts (though I hesitate to refer to them as 'thoughts' because humans tend to use such words in THEIR 'own image'). Is our spirit the same as that of God? Are our aims and paths the

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same? Of course not.

We are created beings and He is uncreated. We are not the same... we only bear His image, or likeness, in certain ways, not all. Emotions are human faculties, not divine. They are for human use, not God's. I hope you can see why the statement against my proposal is not reasonable or true, for many reasons. It appears to be essential to critics that God has emotions. Why this is so I cannot fathom.

God gave to humans whatever He wished, but He did not simply transfer to us His whole being. He selected faculties, and these faculties were damaged beyond repair by sin. The sin then continued to corrupt every part of our existence. None of this can be seen in God! Indeed, Isaiah 14:10 points this out: *"All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us?"*

Once we make God like us, even in one part (i.e. emotions), we lower Him to the earth and raise ourselves up, following the wickedness of Satan: and so we read in verse 14, *"I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High."* No true Christian will ever say this, and it is why I say the idea that God has emotions is a mistake, rather than an outright claim based on scripture.

Further Study

God indeed loves and hates etc., but this is not necessarily evidence that He has emotions. 'Emotions' are a modern way of describing the actions of our minds as they affect/are affected by feelings, and so on. But, the word *is not found in scripture*. We find indirect reference to what we call 'emotions', but not the actual concept of 'emotions' as an all-embracing entity. We only catch glimpses of *individual elements* of the whole psyche of mankind. This is because 'emotions' were not known at that time, only individual aspects of man's mind and its workings. Only in modern times have psychologists woven many strands together and called them 'emotions'.

The study of emotion is complex and involves an examination of every human faculty of mind. Jesus Christ came to this earth as man, but His human characteristics were always perfect and pure, free from sin. Thus, unlike humans, who usually react, He was able to respond perfectly, without flaw. In this sense, as a man, He was able to act more like the first Adam – with the divine imprint. And His divine character (as God) was above and beyond emotion, being the

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absolute will of the Trinity, and His divine-self defined how He responded with any emotion.

Invariably, any reference to emotions will include their prime characteristic – lability! And this prime characteristic CANNOT apply to God, for He cannot change and cannot react; He can only respond perfectly. He can respond perfectly not just because He IS perfection personified, but also because His will is the outward expression of His inner truth and holiness. And this quality is unknown to mankind, even in his original created glory (though it *reflected* divine perfection).

As far as the Father is concerned, we do not know if He has what we call a ‘mind’, though His ‘mind’ is implicated in scripture (because our definition of mind is woefully short of what God is, and is modelled on human beings). He certainly cannot have a ‘brain’, because a brain is a physical, created construct with a confined set of uses and outcomes. God’s mind is absolute and beyond anything we can define as ‘brain’, or ‘mind’. He simply IS, and His complete existence cannot ever be tracked or mapped. Everything God does is outside of human forms of thought. He is self-existent (“I AM”) and everything He does is foreknown and decided in His will. Nothing can change and He does not change His ‘mind’. Thus, He displays traits of what humans call emotion, but does not have emotions as we know them.

We are, as people, unable to define what is the ‘mind’ of God, except He tells us in specific instances. In Leviticus 24:12, for example, the “mind” of the Lord, *peh*, is a straightforward masculine noun referring to what God says. It is clear throughout scripture that the ONLY way we can know His ‘mind’ is when He tells us something. In Jeremiah 15:1 we see yet another aspect of God’s ‘mind’:

“T

hen said the LORD unto me, Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, [yet] my mind [could] not [be] toward this people: cast [them] out of my sight, and let them go forth.”

In this text ‘mind’ is *nephesh*, which can have one of several meanings. In context its meaning is God’s desire... and His desires are only known to us through His words. God uses yet another word for His ‘mind’, in Jeremiah 19:5 - *leb*. Here, it means something God had not intended, not part of His inclination or will. The same word is used in 32:35.

The ‘mind’ of man is described in several ways, and always there is the element of sin or change. We have *dianoia*, which includes ‘feeling’, good and bad thoughts, and understanding (which varies according to knowledge and spiritual state). The demoniac amongst the tombs

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had his mind returned to normality (which, in itself, tells us that our minds are not always balanced or true). In his case, he became *sōphroneō*... of sound mind. That is, he was capable of rational thought and self-control. Or, as the root adjective puts it – *sōphrōn* – sanity.

Then, when Peter heard the cock crowing the third time, he brought to 'mind' what Jesus had said. Here, *anamimnēskō* means to remember. This is another indication that our minds and emotions are nothing like God's aspects of character, for He never forgets and does not have to bring something back to mind (because He cannot forget or not be aware)... He is aware of everything in every case and always.

When Mary was told the news of her coming role by the angel, she wondered "in her mind" what it meant. Though a very young girl, she tried her best to sum up what was said, and reasoned within herself about the words of the angel: *dialogizomai*. This is part of the human experience – we come across things that require us to think and judge our actions and words. Again, human emotions can give the wrong impression and alter an otherwise rational thought. This does not happen to God.

There are other words for 'mind', such as *nous*, but I have given the gist – human minds can be affected by emotions, whereas God's 'mind', whatever that consists of, is unaffected by anything. Nothing (including emotionalism) alters His mind! (Anything we might like to refer to as His 'emotion' is never a reaction to a circumstance, but is a perfect response that is already part of His pre-ordained will). Even man's higher mind activity of *nous* can be thus affected wrongly.

In 1 Corinthians 2:16, the same word, *nous*, is used of God's mind, but here it refers to God's absolute use of His pure mind to make proper decisions according to His will. And in Philipians 2:5 we find that the mind of Christ should also be found in us... in the verb,

phroneō

: to have understanding and to be wise. While we must strive to have the mind of Christ, there is no way we can fully, constantly achieve it on this earth, because of sin and many other influences (hence, 'strive'). Thus, Christ-as-man had a perfect mind, and we must emulate it, though we can never fully achieve the desired results. In God there is no such striving and no possibility of error.

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What I am saying is that the mind of God is nothing like the mind of man. God created Adam perfect with a capacity to understand and follow the Lord's will and mind, and to display emotion-responses, but Adam was *created*; he was not God, even though everything about him was beyond anything we can know today. If we are the same as God, or He is the same as us, then it makes created beings God as well... and that is illogical and impossible. Emotions are part of our broken psyche. They were perfect at first, and then Adam and Eve damaged their psyche, and emotions became corrupt.

Today, we can try to put this right by living according to God's will, but we can never have a fully-functioning 'free' mind as did Jesus. What matters to God is that we try to live as we ought, in holiness and purity, even though we will fail many times. As I keep repeating, none of this can be found in God!

We might say that God is 'pure being'. The Father is not visible to us, and He is everywhere, so He has no body. And this suggests His 'mind' (and everything it is comprised of, including possible 'emotions') is something outside our experience, which cannot be described. Yet, because He is not like us, we can say He has no emotions (like ours). His every declaration and aspect is pure and perfect. He says and does what is forever in His 'mind' or will. That means He has no emotions, which could, if present, fluctuate and change according to one of many influences. He is "I AM", and so nothing as base as human-like emotions can be found in His character.

Some say God does have emotions because He is "slow to anger". No, this is another non-sequitur. His anger is absolute and pre-ordained. He is 'slow' in the sense that He does not strike us down immediately. This, too, is part of His will, not an emotional reaction. When humans are slow to anger, it means their anger is simmering and only just held back. Then, something is our 'final straw' and we hit back, or, we speak out justly. Either way, there is emotional lability. (It is possible for Christians to be 'slow to anger' in a holy sense, but this appears to be rare).

Final Note

On page 5 I said that God did not have the "human attribute of emotions", and, really, this is part of how I have defined the subject matter. That is, He does not have the human concept of 'emotions'. Jesus, *as man*, had perfect emotions (for He wept when Lazarus died, for example), because He was the 'second Adam'. However, calling them 'emotions' is a modern concept. As God AND man He could not have human emotions *as they were*

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found in men after Adam

. His emotions (if we must call them that), then, had to be perfect and godly, as were found in pre-Fall Adam.

My argument is that whatever God has, they cannot be 'emotions' (which is a human construct). They are higher, beyond the human sort, and should be called something else (if we need to call them anything at all). Perhaps we can refer to them as 'aspects of God's will'. Thus far in my theological and biblical studies I have never felt a need to talk about God's 'emotions'. I only do so in this paper as a word-study.

I was asked by a reviewer if this means God only uses "pure binary logic" or judgments. No, I have said that God acts perfectly and everything He does is correct, including His love, wrath, and so on. These ARE His judgments (judgment being a decision about something, and when we, as humans, react with emotions, that reaction is our 'judgment'). Thus, what we tend to call His 'emotions', are specifically His decision or judgment to act or respond in a particular way. And such judgments (e.g. to 'laugh' or 'love') are the expression of His judgment on a particular situation or person. Some may call this 'emotion', but I hold back from the word itself.

Normally, then, in everyday parlance, we might speak of God's 'emotions'. I have no problem with that as a general thing to say. But, when asked if this is a proven fact, or if scripture tells us God has 'emotions', I would have to question it (as I have). I even accept that human emotions (when first created) were perfect and a shadow of God's 'emotions'. The danger, as I see it, is to ascribe human definitions to divine character, reversing the proper order. As I have intimated, this can lead to heresy (as it already has).

So, does God have emotions? If He has, they are not in the human sense. Does He have any emotions at all? I see Him having individual responses, but I do not find the idea of 'emotions' in God in scripture. This is probably why scripture says "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and does not mention 'emotions' as such. Indeed, when we read of God's responses to mankind, it is always in terms of individual, singular attributes, and not as an indication of a system of 'emotions'. Even so, in very broad terms, we can say God appears to have what we call 'emotions' (because, as humans, we have no other touchstone to work from).

My argument is merely this – I do not adhere to the word 'emotions' when applied to God, even if certain responses of God appear to be of 'emotion'. I do not accept it because it is not given to us in scripture. Does this mean I am right and others are *absolutely* wrong? Not necessarily!

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In humans, emotions are a complex intertwined reactive faculty, blurred and often misled by countless human factors, many of which are sinful. Not all, but many. This cannot be found in God. Every aspect of His being is divine and incapable of malfunction. Of course, everything about God is also intertwined, but is never affected by anything other than His own perfection. (Indeed, they are not 'affected', but are emissions of His will). And, any response, such as wrath or love, is always known beforehand, so is part of His eternal will, does not change, and is His judgment.

It could be that He has (as a combined faculty) 'emotion', but not as we know it. Even if He has, this cannot make Him 'emotional' (which means to be led by emotional reactions). I prefer, theologically, to see what some call 'emotion' in God, as a perfect character in which every faculty is perfect. That is, we would need another word to describe His responses, so as to separate them from our own sinful emotions.

You might think this is just splitting hairs, but, theologically, 'splitting hairs' is sometimes the essence and mode of dividing truth from error. I prefer to see this article as simply posing a question as to the suitability of referring to how God responds, as the product of 'emotions'. This is because, invariably, human beings can falsely (if unintentionally) ascribe to God what humans are.

So, by all means talk in an human sense of God having emotions... but, in my capacity, I am bound to question it theologically. Am I saying that if you say God has emotions, you are wrong? As I have already said, not necessarily. I am just questioning the suitability of describing a faculty of God in human terms, when scripture has no reference to the same terms. Really, it is all in a name!

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