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Contents

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Contents

God's Relationality and Eternity in the Bible: Why I Am Not a Classical Theist

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Abstract

This is the edited text of an online article by J. Richard Middleton, published as a blog post on December 8, 2022 (https://jrichardmiddleton.com/2022/12/08/gods-eternity-and-relationality-in-the-bible-why-i-am-not-a-classical-theist/). The article generated a panel discussion of three response papers at the annual meeting of the Canadian-American Theological Association on May 28, 2023. The panel was organized and introduced by Stephen Martin and was followed by Middleton's response. The introduction, essay responses, and Middleton's response are published in this issue of the *Canadian-American Theological Review*.

There is a traditional understanding of God, stretching from the Patristic period through to Modern times, which claims that God is "atemporal" (outside of time) and is "simple," in that he is pure being, transcending finitude in such a way that all of God's attributes are essentially one. Christians who are attracted to this understanding of God often appeal to Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity as the model.

I learned this understanding of God as "classical theism," although I realize that this term can be used in a broader sense. So perhaps I need to say that I am focusing here on the "classical" understanding of "classical theism."

In this view, God is thought to be unaffected by the world or anything outside of himself. Of course, proponents of this view can't outright deny that God is Creator (which implies a relationship with creation), yet they often posit that whatever sort of relationship God has with that which is not-God, *this does not affect God in any way*.

The reasoning is that if God were affected by anything outside of the divine self, this would demean God. This particular idea is central to Aristotle's understanding of the "unmoved mover" in *Metaphysics* Book 12 (I wrestled with this chapter in a graduate paper I wrote during my MA studies).

Part of Aristotle's argument is that God must be immutable (that is,

unchanging) because God is perfect; any change in a perfect God would therefore be a degeneration, a change for the worse.

Aristotle also assumed (as did his teacher, Plato) that to be the subject of "action" (to be an agent) is better than to be the object of "passion" (to be the recipient of someone else's action). Since God is perfect, he must be "impassible," in that nothing affects him. This is a more technical way of articulating the doctrine of divine immutability.

Many Christian theologians have bought into some version of this understanding of God.

My Encounter with Classical Theism

When I was working on my MA in philosophy, I had to confront the question of what I thought of this version of classical theism.

In my MA thesis I compared Thomas Aquinas and Paul Tillich on the nature of God language (the thesis was entitled "Analogy and Symbol: Contrasting Approaches to the Problem of God Language in Thomas Aquinas and Paul Tillich").

I didn't particularly agree with Tillich (though I learned a lot from him), but neither did I find Aquinas's views adequate.

I delved into primary texts by Aquinas, such as *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa contra Gentiles* (among others), exploring Aquinas's *analogia entis* or "analogy of being." This analogy of *being* (for which Aquinas is famous) grounded his theory of analogical *language*—how we are able to use language that derives from our experience of the finite world to say anything true about God who is beyond time and finitude.

I had recently taken a year-long course on the Neoplatonic philosopher, Plotinus, where we read his *Enneads* in Greek; so it was clear to me that Aquinas's *analogia entis* was based on Plotinus's metaphysics, his theory of how finite reality participated in the being of the ultimate reality (which he called the One).

It was also clear to me that Plotinus's highly abstract understanding of the divine nature (which formed the basis for the view of God in classical theism) contrasted significantly with how God was described in the Bible.

I remember one day reading a particularly illuminating Old Testament passage: Psalm 18:1–19.[1] The psalmist describes his cry for help (18:3–5) followed by God coming down from heaven to save him from the waters of chaos that were engulfing him (18:6–19).

I was particularly struck by the theophany in verses 7–15, the dazzling vision of God aroused in anger: "Smoke went up from his nostrils / and devouring fire

1 This is the English verse numbering, which begins after the superscription. The Hebrew verse numbering is one verse higher since it begins with the superscription.

from his mouth; / glowing coals flamed forth from him" (18:8). God rode upon a cherub, bowed the heavens, and came down to deliver the supplicant in cloud and thunder and lightning, parting the waters by the blast of his nostrils.

It was a breathtaking vision. This psalmist had no qualms about describing God in the most outlandish way (so outlandish that Rastafarians could come to use verse 8 as proof that JAH smokes weed); the text piles up images and metaphors to portray just how much God was affected by the suffering of his faithful servant.

That day I decided that classical theism was bankrupt. I was convinced that the "god" of classical theism is *not* the God of the Bible.

I saw (and continue to see) at least two major problems with the understanding of God in classical theism. My analysis here is from the perspective of a biblical scholar; theologians and philosophers might focus on different issues.

God's Relationality (and Adaptability)

First of all, the view of God in classical theism simply does not match the way God is portrayed in the Bible, where God enters into genuine relationships with creatures, and is significantly affected (changed) by these relationships. God changes.

I have often heard Christians object: "But the Bible says that God doesn't change; he is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

This is actually a quote about the historical Jesus, the Word incarnate. Heb 13:8 states: "*Jesus Christ* is the same yesterday and today and forever."

Furthermore, Luke's Gospel says: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in maturity [the word can mean in age or in stature] and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2:52). Jesus clearly changed.

What can Hebrews mean, then, by saying that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever?

The point is that he is consistently loving and faithful; his *character* remains constant.

This is the (distorted) truth behind the idea of divine immutability. God is loving and faithful. This unchangeable faithfulness (paradoxically) leads God to be constantly adapting to new situations in order to accomplish his purpose. God's character leads him to seek the redemption of humanity and the world. This is what, ultimately, leads God to the cross.

I could easily write an entire article on this theme in the Bible, but I won't do that here (see the recommended books listed at the end of this article).

Despite the clear depiction in the Bible of God being affected by creatures—from God being grieved in his heart at the violence before the flood (Gen 6:6) to God's "repentance" or change of mind about destroying Israel after the idolatry of the golden calf (Exod 32:14)—classical theists usually relegate such biblical language to mere metaphor or anthropomorphism.

Most crucially, classical theism is in fundamental contradiction with the central Christian understanding of the incarnation and the atoning death of Jesus.

Is God really "immutable" (= unchangeable) or did the Word actually become flesh? Is God really "impassible" (= unaffected) or has God truly known suffering in the "passion" of Christ?

This is a fundamental point for me, and also for those theologians known as "open theists," who dissent from the idolatrous, philosophical "god" of classical theism.

God's Eternity

Then there is the question of God being atemporal or outside of time.

An early articulation of this view is found in Augustine, who described God's "eternity" (Greek *aion*) as his changeless mode of being (*Confessions* Book 11). Augustine was drawing on Plotinus's treatise, "On Eternity and Time" (*Enneads* 3.7).

However, the Bible has no conception of an atemporal "eternity"—in either the Old or New Testament. No biblical texts that have the term "eternal" (in English translation) ever mean atemporality (being outside of time). This isn't just my opinion; it is the view of every reputable biblical scholar I have encountered.

"Eternity" in the Old Testament: Hebrew *'olam*

The usual Hebrew word for "eternal" or "forever" in the Old Testament is *'olam*. It has a temporal reference, pointing either backward or forward; thus, it means (depending on context) in/from the distant past (long ago) or in/into the distant future (days to come).

Some examples of *'olam* used for the *past* include Deut 32:7, which speaks of "days of *old*," and Gen 6:4, which mentions "heroes of *old*." Both Gen 49:26 and Deut 33:15 use *'olam* to refer to the "*ancient* mountains" (sometimes poetically translated as "everlasting hills").

It is often used for the *future* in Exodus and Leviticus, with the sense of a "*perpetual*" statute or observance. In Deut 23:3 *'olam* is used as a synonym for the tenth generation (that is, long into the future). In 1 Sam 1:22 Hannah dedicates Samuel to serve as a priest "*forever*" (which means, of course, for his entire life). And Ps 73:12 says that the wicked are "*always*" at ease.

There are many synonyms for *'olam* in Hebrew; one such term is *netsach* which means "enduring" or "perpetual," as in Ps 74:3, which mentions the "*perpetual* ruins" of the temple. It is sometimes translated as "forever," as in the psalmist's anguished cry: "Will you forget me *forever*?" (Ps 13:1)

But there is no concept (or term) in the Old Testament for an atemporal "eternity."

In order to understand the idea of *'olam* (the most common word rendered

"eternal" in Biblical Hebrew), it is helpful to connect it to *'olam* in Modern Hebrew. In Modern Hebrew the term *'olam* has shifted from a temporal reference to a spatial reference. It now means "world," hence the famous Hebrew motto, *tikkun olam*, "to establish (= heal) the world."

If you think of *'olam* as referring to everything you can see up to the horizon, that makes perfect sense (the "world" is everything in your line of sight, into the distance). In Biblical Hebrew, it is as if the writer is looking to the *temporal* horizon, as far as he can see/ conceptualize, whereas in Modern Hebrew, it is the *spatial* horizon.

Although *'olam* does not mean literally "forever" or "eternal," I don't think we can exclude this meaning from the way the word is sometimes used. In some contexts, it may refer to time continuing on as far as you can imagine, and even beyond that (beyond the horizon)—which would come pretty close to our sense of *forever*.

By analogy, *'olam* in modern Hebrew does in fact refer to the entire world (even beyond our vision).

What is clear, however, is that *'olam*, even in the extended sense of time (beyond the horizon), would mean "eternal" in the sense of *everlasting*, that is, *infinitely extended time*, and *not* the *lack of time* (atemporality) as in Platonic thought. It never means *beyond* time; it is anachronistic to make Old Testament texts which have the English words "eternal" or "eternity" refer to anything non-temporal.

"Eternity" in the New Testament: Greek *Aion*

The Greek *aion* (or the adjective *aionios*) is a bit different. This is the word often translated "eternity" (or "eternal") in the New Testament. I am an Old Testament scholar, so this is not my primary expertise.

But here is what I understand: The term *aion* in Classical Greek refers to life (or life-span), while in the New Testament it refers to an "age" (whether a definite or indefinite period of time).

Jesus says in the Great Commission that he would be with us even until the end of the *aion* (that is, the age). And we have the doctrine of the present age/*aion* and the age/*aion* to come (it is anachronistic to make these ages mean temporality in opposition to atemorality).

The phrase "eternal life" (that is, life of the *aion*) in the New Testament refers primarily to the new quality of (restored) life in God's kingdom. This is why N. T. Wright translates *zoen aionion* in John 6:27 as "the life of God's coming age" in his *Kingdom New Testament*.[2]

2 N.T. Wright, *The Kingdom New Testament: A Contemporary Translation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

I certainly believe that the life of the age to come will go on forever. This isn't based on the word itself, but on other biblical teaching, such as the immortal nature of the resurrected body that Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 15.

God Has Entered Time and Space

It is an open question whether prior to the creation of the space-time universe God was outside of (beyond) time (the Bible never addresses that; and I am aware of the paradox of talking about "before" time began!). However, once God created the cosmos he entered into a real relationship with creatures, which involved him entering time—*and also space*, if we take seriously the Old Testament notion of heaven as God's throne room (the phrase "heaven and earth" describes the *created* cosmos).

So, ever since creation, God has become temporal. And God is significantly affected by his relationship with creatures. The Bible affirms that the risen Jesus, even after his ascension, still has the nail prints from crucifixion in his hands. Likewise, the Creator of the universe has been unalterably changed *by being creator*—even before the incarnation.

And, contrary to Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus—*and* classical theism—this is not to denigrate God.

If I might riff off Pascal's famous statement in his "Memorial" (1654), the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God whom I worship, *not* the "god" (falsely so-called) of the philosophers.[3]

Readings on God's Relationship to the Created Order

Here are some suggestions for readings that address some of these topics:

Terence Fretheim on God's Relationship with Creation

Fretheim is the very best Old Testament theologian on God's genuine relationship to creation as portrayed in Scripture. I wrote an appraisal of Fretheim's contribution to creation theology.[4]

Fretheim and I have both been asked if we are "open theists." We have both given similar answers, admitting that there is a clear resonance between our understanding of God and the position known as open theism. The difference is that we come to our understanding of God through biblical studies, not philosophy or theology.

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3 In 1654 Pascal recorded a powerful religious experience on a scrap of paper, which he always kept in his pocket. It included the words: "GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob / not of the philosophers and of the learned." A PDF of Pascal's "Memorial" (with the original French and some Latin phrases, followed by an English translation) can be downloaded from: https://jrichardmiddleton.files.wordpress.com/2024/03/pascal-memorial-1654.pdf

4 J. Richard Middleton, "Terry Fretheim and the Renewal of Creation Theology." https://jrichardmiddleton.com/2020/11/17/terry-fretheim-and-the-renewal-of-creation-theology/

Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). This is Fretheim's first book on the subject; short and insightful.

Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005). This is Fretheim's *magnum opus*, tracing the theme throughout the Old Testament. I find his close reading of the biblical text, with his theological and ethical reflections, to be quite wonderful.

Terence E. Fretheim, *God So Enters into Relationships That . . . : A Biblical View* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020). This is Fretheim's most recent book on the subject (published the year he died).

Nicholas Wolterstorff on "God Everlasting"

Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in *God and the Good: Essays in Honor of Henry Stob*, ed. Clifton Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 181–203.

Wolterstorff's article is a classic, but the book is hard to get hold of. The article is reprinted in Wolterstorff, *Inquiring about God: Selected Essays, vol. 1* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 133–56.

Wolterstorff explains: "All Christian theologians agree that God is without beginning and without end. The vast majority have held, in addition, that God is *eternal*, existing outside of time. Only a small minority have contended that God is *everlasting*, existing within time. In what follows I shall take up the cudgels for that minority, arguing that God as conceived and presented by the biblical writers is a being whose own life and existence is temporal."

You could also check out Wolterstorff's essay, "God Is Everlasting," in *Philosophy of Religion*: *Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger (5th ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 259–65.

Other Helpful Readings

J. R. Lucas, "The Vulnerability of God," in *Philosophy of Religion*: *Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger (5th ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 294–301. A most helpful article on open theism and its implications for thinking about evil. It is in the same volume as the Wolterstorff essay listed above. One of the editors of the volume, David Basinger, is a superb philosopher and valued faculty colleague at Roberts Wesleyan University, where he has served most recently as Chief Academic Officer.

Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: An Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). This book carefully analyzes most of the

biblical texts that are debated between classical and open theists to see which position they best support.

Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001). I've listed this book primarily because of its title, which was chosen in explicit contrast to Aristotle's "unmoved mover." I first heard the term "open theism" (which was coined in 1994) from Clark Pinnock in 1996. He heard me give a presentation on the depiction of God in Genesis 1 (which became the basis for the last two chapters of my book, *The Liberating Image:*).[5] He came up to me and said, "So you're an open theist." I had never heard the term before that; I had to ask him what it meant.

Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994). The authors of this book described their position as "the open view of God," which led to the term "open theism" being coined.

David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996). Basinger uses the term "freewill theism" for the position I have called "open theism." Part of the issue is terminological; but it also represents a difference of emphasis, since Basinger's book focuses primarily on the relationship of divine sovereignty to free will. He even uses the designation "classical theism" to describe three quite different theologically orthodox positions concerning the nature of God's sovereignty (theological determinism, limited compatibilism, and freewill theism).

William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994). In this accessible book, Placher understands God as willing to risk vulnerability in order to fully love creation. He begins by explicitly examining our doctrine of God, then explores the Gospel of Mark, and concludes with implications for Christian discipleship. In chapter 2 ("The Eternal God"), he examines (and refutes) the idea that God is timeless.

God and Time: Four Views, ed, Gregory E. Ganssle (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001). This book has essays by four philosophers on different ways we might think of God's relationship to time (one of essays is by Nicholas Wolterstorff).

I am grateful to Dave Basinger and Jeff McPherson, my colleagues at Roberts Wesleyan University, for helpful feedback on and suggestions for this article.

5 Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), chaps. 6 and 7.

Introduction to Reckoning with and Reimagining "the God of the Bible": A Conversation about "Classical Theism"

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Abstract

In a recent article published as a blog post (https://jrichardmiddleton.com/2022/12/08/gods-eternity-and-relationality-in-the-bible-why-i-am-not-a-classical-theist/), J. Richard Middleton explains that he does not regard himself as a "classical theist" due to his inability to reconcile traditional philosophical categories describing God's character with the portrayal of God in Scripture. Middleton explicitly contrasts the biblical portrayal of God's relationality and adaptability with classic categories of divine simplicity and immutability. The article provoked a great deal of response, demonstrating that debates about how we understand and speak about God in Scripture and theology are far from resolved. This introductory essay expands on the concerns raised in Middleton's rejection of classical theism, seeking to capture and contextualize them in recent theology sufficient to lay some groundwork for the contributions that follow. These questions range from the narrative in which "classical theism" is situated and its assumptions about the role of cultural, political, and philosophical Hellenization in the consolidation of dogma; the relation between biblical and systematic theology, especially the metaphysical presuppositions, acknowledged and not acknowledged, that underline each discipline; and the more pastoral and apologetic concerns revisionary theism tries to speak into.

On December 8, 2022, biblical scholar J. Richard Middleton posted to his blog a reflection titled, "God's Relationality and Eternity in the Bible: Why I Am Not a Classical Theist."[1] It soon became the most viewed post on his blog and

1 J. Richard Middleton, "God's Relationality and Eternity in the Bible: Why I Am Not a Classical Theist," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (2023) 1–8.

occasioned a lengthy set of debates on social media. These debates were such that on May 28, 2023 the Canadian-American Theological Association held a special panel discussion featuring Richard and the other contributors to this issue. I was privileged to chair the discussion.[2]

Several important issues emerged from the discussions. I want to capture some of them and expand on them briefly. One concern was the relationship between the language(s) of Scripture, the creeds, and philosophy. While conceding that credal language could help keep interpretation on a faithful path, as "first order discourse" Richard asserted that the language of the Bible was where Christian thinking about God ought to begin. Moreover, it should constitute the critical norm for subsequent creedal and philosophical language. By contrast, he continued, classical theism began with a view of God foreign to that of the biblical text and articulated in the language of Greek metaphysics, to which the "metaphorical" discourse of Scripture was subordinated. Moreover, it did this in a framework that ignored the differences between the worldview within which the biblical writers operated and that of Hellenistic philosophy, especially as reflected in the works of Aristotle and Plotinus. In contrast to the biblical worldview, Hellenistic philosophy privileged being over becoming, ideal forms over contingent matter, and eternity over time. Thus, when Scripture spoke of God's eternity, classical theism understood it to mean timelessness rather than long duration. Likewise, God's unchanging faithfulness was understood within the framework of metaphysical "impassibility" rather than "covenant[al] fidelity." Such language, Richard concluded, made the God of classical theism "an idolatrous, philosophical 'god,'" rather than the God of Israel who became incarnate in Jesus. In short, "the 'god' of classical theism is *not* the God of the Bible."[3]

The latter phrase is reminiscent of Pascal's famous opposition between "the God of the philosophers" and "the God of Abraham."[4] By the twentieth century it came to be taken for granted that Hellenism had overturned the original "Jewish" understanding of God after the Apostolic period, and that dogma is "a work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel."[5] This corruption lay at the root of Christianity's assimilation to Empire, the displacing of its "transforming vision" of

2 Since Richard Middleton is a friend of many years it feels odd to refer to him with formal language. I will therefore simply call him "Richard." I would also reiterate that while I have over the past few years moved away from the open theism I learned from him, I continue to treasure his friendship and benefit from his scholarship. Hence my genuine struggle with this topic and desire to open up conversation.

3 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 3.

4 "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. Thy God will be my God." Pascal, "Memorial," quoted in David Simpson, "Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; https://iep.utm.edu/pascal-b/

5 Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1, trans. Neil Buchanan (Boston: Little Brown, 1901), 19.

creaturely life from the present to the future,[6] and the shifting of the locus of eschatological hope from earth to heaven.

The account of how we came to worship this idolatrous "God" is reiterated in an appendix to Richard's 2014 work, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*.[7] The God of the (Greek) philosophers was a God beyond change, beyond movement, beyond intervention. Not all postapostolic writers went as far as Origen in reinterpreting the biblical language of creation, fall, and redemption of creation as the ascent of the soul to the highest heaven, its ultimate destiny.[8] But the seeds for a radical shift both in the way the Bible was read and how the relationship between God and creation was conceived were planted early on. While very "earthy," millennial images could be found in works like "The Epistle of Barnabas," was the *ultimate* destiny of redeemed humanity in a material world created by an "immaterial" God? And was that destiny in *continuity* or *discontinuity* with the original, biblical task of humans to work the creation—a task situated in time in the six days of Genesis? Richard finds much ambiguity in the first three centuries.[9] Otherworldly contemplation of a transcendent divinity beyond time, who was disinterested in or even alienated from creation, eventually replaced the transformation of creation as human destiny. St. Augustine's Neoplatonism resolved, at least for him, the tensions between biblical theology and Greek philosophy, but at the expense of the holiness of this world and the care of God for it. The

6 Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984). This book was revolutionary when I first read it nearly forty years ago. Its analysis is situated within the Reformational, or neo-Kuyperian, tradition associated with the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. At its heart is a reading of history that opposes "the biblical" (identified with "creation, fall, and redemption") to the Greek "dualist" (form over matter) and the medieval "synthesist" (grace over nature) worldviews. For these categories, see Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, John Kraay, transl. (Toronto: Wedge Publishing, 1979). The Protestant Reformation represented a return to the biblical view, on this reading, and opens the possibility of a truly Christian philosophical framework, something that only began to be truly realized in the neo-Calvinist revival in the Netherlands associated with Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper in the nineteenth century and transmitted to North America (and Toronto) in the twentieth century.

It is arguable that "creation, fall, redemption" (a.k.a. "the biblical view") itself became formulaic in Reformational thought, and one of Richard's most important contributions from *The Transforming Vision* onward has been to give it exegetical nuance and texture.

7 J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 283–312. Space does not permit a detailed comparison of the story of the fall of Christian thought between its articulation in *The Transforming Vision* and in *A New Heaven*, but it would be interesting to consider, as it would be to compare these works to the story told in Reformational thought more generally.

8 Middleton, *A New Heaven,* 284–86. The key ideas that mark the difference between the Platonist Christianity of Origen and fidelity to the biblical vision are the resurrection of the body and the idea of an earthly eschatological hope.

9 Middleton, *A New Heaven,* 287–91.

theology that followed into the Middle Ages was "dualistic" at worst and "synthetic" at best. The God of the philosophers had won.[10]

Thus, we have a story of how "a traditional understanding of God" displaced the biblical view. It is the explanation for why Richard says he is "not a classical theist" in his original post. Classical theism reflects a corruption stretching "from the Patristic period through to Modern times." The God thus conceived is "atemporal" (outside of time) and "simple" ("unaffected by the world or anything outside of himself").[11] Because this "traditional understanding," this classical theism, is nothing less than a falling away from the biblical view of God and creation, for most of the church's history its reading of the Bible and its consequent understanding of God have been distorted. It is only with modern biblical scholarship and its reading of the biblical text on its own terms, in its own ancient Near Eastern and Graeco-Roman context, that this view has been challenged. Historical-critical scholarship is able to clear away the dogmatic detritus of nearly two thousand years, allowing us to see how radical the Bible's picture of God really is compared to the conventional one we have inherited. The challenge to the traditional understanding, I would add, has been bolstered by the post-Heideggerian deconstruction of any and all metaphysics as "ontotheology." The true, biblical God—and the renewal of Christian witness—lies on the other side of this deconstruction.[12]

From the mid-twentieth century, a parallel set of debates has taken place in systematic theology, especially about divine aseity and impassibility: whether God is complete "in Godself," capable of change through being affected externally, and, by extension, capable of suffering. While there are early twentieth century precursors, including the process theism influenced by Alfred North Whitehead, the experience of the *Shoah* and its impact on theodicy has been a key

10 Augustine also functions as a kind of boundary figure in *The transforming* vision, though I think Richard's treatment in *A New Heaven* is more generous in recognizing him as both biblical and Neoplatonist. But I think Richard would still maintain that Augustine gave Greek dualism its "ultimate theological legitimation" and "set the pattern for medieval thought and culture" (Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 110). While there are acknowledged differences between Augustine and Aquinas, this pattern remains as "compromise . . . a plague that still afflicts us." Their legacy "distorts our reading of The Scriptures and hampers our lives of obedience." (Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 113). While Richard finds a bit more "ambiguity" in some currents of medieval thought in *A New Heaven* (see 293–96), these are exceptions that prove the rule and the overall picture remains of a lost vision until the modern world.

11 Middleton, "God's Relationality, 4.

12 In his further reading section, Middleton singles out Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). For Richard's own engagement with a post-metaphysical and deconstructive picture of "reality," see J. Richard Middleton, and Brian J. Walsh. *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995). It is important to state that while Walsh and Middleton affirm the deconstruction of classical and modernist metaphysics as ideology critique, they are nuanced in the way they appropriate it in their reading of Scripture.

catalyst.[13] In the memorable phrase of Bonhoeffer, "Only the suffering God can help."[14] Only a God who suffers-with God's creation, a God who is profoundly affected by God's creation, can speak to the modern world. As Brian Walsh put it in a comment on Richard's original post, just as we need "to repent of heaven" so now "we need to repent of the eternal/atemporal, immutable and impassable God!"

Debates about such "repentance" have been ongoing in the evangelical world. To some extent, they have tended to map on to older questions about predestination and divine providence, though there are classical theists numbered among Arminians and challenges to classical theism coming from orthodox Calvinists and other theologians influenced by Karl Barth.[15] Readers might recall the controversy about open theism at the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) around the turn of this century sparked by Clark Pinnock's *The Openness of God* and *Most Moved Mover*.[16] Building on this, significant works by Gregory Boyd and others followed, along with more controversy. While ETS condemned open theism and declared it beyond the pale for evangelicals committed to the authority of Scripture,[17] revisionist currents among theologians with otherwise evangelical sentiments remain strong. Perhaps the best representative of such among systematic theologians is Thomas Jay Oord. Oord is especially interested in relating a processive ontology to contemporary accounts in the natural sciences, but also with deeply pastoral concerns in mind.[18] But there has been pushback too, also with a pastoral spirit. Theologian Todd Billings writes movingly about how the doctrine of divine impassibility was a far greater comfort during his cancer treatments than

13 For a concise and lucid overview, see Richard Bauckham, "'Only the Suffering God Can Help': Divine Impassibility in Modern Theology," *Themelios* 9, no. 3 (1984) 6-12.

14 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 479.

15 For examples, see Roger E. Olson, "Is Open Theism a Type of Arminianism," *Roger E. Olsen: My Evangelical Arminian Theological Musings* (2012), https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/11/is-open-theism-a-type-of-arminianism/; Nicholas. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Colin E. Gunton, *Act and being: Towards a theology of the divine attributes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) respectively.

16 Clark H. Pinnock, ed., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994); Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); Gregory A. Boyd, *Is God to Blame? Moving beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003); Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

17 Jeff Robinson, "Is Open Theism Still a Factor 10 Years after ETS Vote?" *The Gospel Coalition* (2014); https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/is-open-theism-still-a-factor-10-years-after-ets-vote/

18 For example, Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015). Not all open theists embrace process metaphysics, as Richard rightly points out in his post. See also D. Stephen Long, *The Perfectly Simple Triune God: Aquinas and his Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 201–3.

the assurance that God was "suffering-with" him.[19] Indeed, one begins to wonder precisely *how* the suffering God helps.

While earlier defenses of classical theism in the evangelical world tended to be reactionary,[20] recent philosophical and systematic theology has mounted fresh challenges to the assumption that the God revealed in Scripture is radically different from that of Origen, Augustine, or Aquinas. There is a growing consensus agreeing with Jaroslav Pelikan that the development of doctrine in the patristic period represents a "de-Hellenization" rather than a capitulation to Hellenism,[21] or perhaps "the Christianization of Hellenism," as historian Robert Louis Wilken puts it. While Wilken acknowledges in early Christianity "patterns of thought and conceptions rooted in Greco-Roman culture" those patterns are transformed "so profoundly that in the end something quite new came into being." This "something new" represents the bold extension of the biblical vision into a new context rather than its abandonment. With others, Wilken boldly urges that it now is time "to bid a fond farewell" to the Harnack thesis.[22] More importantly, recent works have displayed the constructive possibilities of a classical understanding to address contemporary questions, including the question of suffering. Like open theism, these works span the confessional world, including the Reformed, the Wesleyan and Methodist, the Anglican, the Roman Catholic, and the Eastern Orthodox.[23] Instead of a supplement to the Hellenization narrative wherein modern biblical scholarship recovers the original, non-metaphysical view of God in

19 J. Todd Billings, "Undying Love," *First Things* (December, 2014); https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/12/undying-love. See also J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015).

20 John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth, *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson, *God under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

21 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine,* vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 55.

22 Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), xvi–xvii. I'm tempted to ask whether this does not parallel what Walsh and Middleton did with deconstruction in *Truth is Stranger*.

23 For examples, see Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology 30 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015); Long, *The Perfectly Simple Triune God*; Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004). The retrieval of classical theism and metaphysics by women scholars such as Sonderegger is especially notable for challenging the assumption that classical theism and patriarchy are necessarily linked. See also Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001); Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Janet Martin Soskice, *Naming God: Addressing the Divine in Philosophy, Theology and Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). Parallel to this is the dismantling of the idea that a traditional view of God results in "pat answers" to the experience of suffering. See Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament* for one example.

Scripture, these and other works claim that such scholarship has actually distorted the reading of Scripture through a "flattened-out" historicism.[24] In other words, it has smuggled in a distinctively *modern* metaphysics. Scripture becomes one "text" alongside others. It may remain the Supreme Text among lesser texts, but it is understandable (and criticisable) on the same terms as lesser texts.[25]

This modern placing of Scripture as one text among many is paralleled in the modern metaphysic that positions God and creation in competition, a kind of zero-sum game alternating between the extremes of divine-human synergism on the one hand and hegemony of divine power over human agency on the other. This is a distinctively modern problem that requires a retrieval of the tradition that was lost, a tradition in which it was possible to consider creator and creation non-competitively.[26] One of the leading voices of this retrieval is that of Rowan Williams, who reminds us that, on both a classical and biblical view, God is not "one among others" and therefore not "an object competing for attention."[27] This makes better sense of the overall biblical narrative that envisions God as "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). It also makes better sense, continues Williams, of "Israel's God as . . . the one who gives regular, coherent, continuous unity to the distinctive life of this community" rather than one character in Israel's story.[28] The ultimate logic, says Williams, is Christological:

> God is not "in" Jesus as an element in his biography, but as what the entire biography expresses, transcribes or communicates. The divine life which is eternally realised in the Logos is not an overwhelmingly important dimension of Jesus's life, but the deepest source of that life's meaning in all the actuality of its historical and narrative detail. Thus, both the action and the passion of this life are held together as one coherent phenomenon by, ultimately, the act of God; and the presence of that act in the history of Jesus of Nazareth is not an element or moment alongside the contingencies of the history. It is the point

24 See especially Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

25 It is also worth acknowledging here a new reading of Aquinas as a biblical theologian, particularly the relationship between *sacra doctrina* and *sacra pagina*. See Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*; Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*. This is a constructive project of Levering's especially, but also of other "biblical Thomists." For a survey, see Sławomir Zatwardnicki, "What Place Does Scripture Have in Thomas Aquinas's Reasoning," *Collectanea Theologica* 94, no.1 (2024) 107–66.

26 The proto-text of such a retrieval is John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, rev. ed. (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

27 Rowan Williams, "God," in *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. David Ford, Ben Quash, and Janet Martin Soskice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 78, 77. Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* contains an acknowledgement "to Williams, who taught me theology." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, viii.

28 Williams, "God," 77.

> that is laboriously clarified in the Christological debates of the early Christian centuries and remains a focal theme in the Christology of high scholasticism.[29]

There is much to be harvested from Williams's work both for perennial questions about religious and philosophical language and for prophetic questions that speak into the debates peculiar to our time. In his contribution to this symposium, Patrick Franklin proposes such an engagement with Richard's concerns as a backdrop. With special regard to *Christ the Heart of Creation*, he argues that Williams would be sympathetic to much of what Richard expresses about divine relationality and reciprocity in the biblical picture of God. But rather than dispensing with classical theism, Williams claims that classical theism both "frames" and "safeguards" a biblical view while acknowledging that God can never be reduced to or confined within a single metaphor—including "relationality" as we understand it. Finally, he returns to Richard's more pastoral and indeed missional concerns.

Biblical Thomists follow a similar line of defense in acquitting Aquinas of charges of idolatry. It is precisely a non-competitive metaphysics that follows the biblical prescription to worship the one true God—a non-competitive metaphysics that makes theological sense of the central theophany of the Old Testament, the burning bush of Exodus 3.[30] With this in mind, it is important to understand the specific contexts of the terms used by figures in the tradition of classical theism, especially Aquinas. Terms such as "aseity," "simplicity," and "immutability" should indeed be critically assessed, not in view of how they sound to modern ears but rather how they functioned amidst the questions of Thomas's own time. What *were* the questions Thomas was addressing in his context to which these concepts provided the answer? How did he not only "use" but also "extend and deepen" the tradition he received? In his contribution, Joshua Harris claims how understanding Thomas in his context can help mitigate accusations such as Richard's about the "idolatrous, philosophical 'god.'"[31] Harris also brings us back to the first question, about metaphor and the crucial link between biblical language and philosophical discourse. It is not that Thomas supplants biblical metaphor with philosophical speculation, as if the latter is more "true." Rather, Thomas claims that scriptural metaphor provides the very grounding for philosophical

29 Williams, "God," 79. In *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), Williams focuses on how the entire tradition of Christian thinking about God and creation—from St. Paul to Thomas, from Luther to Barth to today—is a response to "the exceptional linguistic eccentricity" of the way Jesus is spoken about in the New Testament. Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 47.

30 Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*. For interaction with modern exegesis of Exod 3:14 from a perspective that similarly insists on divine simplicity as hermeneutic, see Jonathan M. Platter, "Divine Simplicity and Scripture: A Theological Reading of Exodus 3:14," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73, no.4 (2020) 295–306.

31 Middleton, "God's Relationality, 4.

language that is faithful to revelation. Thus, we can identify "immutability" and other such terms as "biblical."

The modern gulf between systematic theology and biblical studies is being challenged in other ways as well, though not always through a rehabilitation or retrieving of classical theism. Like Richard, Robert Jenson rejects classical metaphysics in favour of the story of Scripture as fundamental theology. However, in so doing Jenson does not reject metaphysics *per se*. Nor does he subject the classical tradition to the same kind of criticism as those who work within the "betrayal of the biblical witness" story. Rather, he proposes a "revisionary metaphysics" (strange as that sounds) that seeks to capture the God-world relationship and the relationship of the divine persons in narrative terms.[32] This would seem to be akin to Williams, who similarly understands the revelation of God as story—though he would stop well short of Jenson's simple identification of the way "the eternal Logos . . . simply *is* the one who appears to us as Son of God in the scriptural narrative."[33] This fails to do justice, Williams counters, to biblical language that respects *both* the integrity of the second Person of the Trinity *and* the human Jesus. But Jenson likely would counter by taking distance from residual "classical" elements in Williams, such as insisting that the triune life of God is complete in itself, as "being" apart from creation which nevertheless determines to create.

Unlike that of classical theism, Jenson's "revisionist metaphysics" is dynamic, oriented as it is to God as eternally "happening"-in-relation, rather than as static "being." Reflecting Barth's trinitarian criticism of Aquinas, Jenson insists that *de deo trino* is more fundamental than *de deo uno*.[34] This is because the God-world relation involves a kind of participation, but participation in a drama that is not simply creation's story but the story of the triune God. This story is the unfolding of God's eternal decision, to invoke Barth again, to be nothing other than for us in Jesus Christ. Again, Christology bears the burden of metaphysical load, but in a way different to that of Williams.[35] In his contribution to this symposium, Charles Meeks argues that Jenson's narrative frame not only offers a twist on the idea of divine simplicity (that God's act and God's being are one) but opens up space to engage some of the concerns put forward by Richard. More significant, in my view, is Meeks's Jenson-inspired attempt to think the God-world relation in sacramental terms, especially in terms of the Eucharist. A theology that begins and

32 Robert W. Jenson, *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

33 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 159.

34 This is also a strong difference with Sonderegger's work, who insists on the priority of *de deo uno* and the relativizing of Christology as starting point. "A repeated refrain in this work must be that not all is Christology!" Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vii.

35 For Williams's critical interaction with Jenson, see Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 157–61.

ends with the bread and wine of communion is something that brings together the concerns not only Williams and Jenson, but Aquinas and perhaps even Richard Middleton.

There can be no question that when Richard Middleton composed his blog post for December 8, 2022, he did not intend it to become the subject of a symposium at the Canadian American Theological Association (CATA), much less placed under the scrutiny of the readers of this journal. But the nerve it touched and the discussion it provoked invited this kind of formal treatment. To be fair to the informality of the original post, Richard is given the last, formal word. With all the other contributors I wish to express deepest thanks to him for being willing to engage their responses, both at the CATA conference in 2023 and here in this journal.

The God of True Conversation: Robert W. Jenson's Narrative Metaphysics in Response to J. Richard Middleton's Classical Theism Questions

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Abstract

In a recent article published as a blog post (https://jrichardmiddleton.com/2022/12/08/gods-eternity-and-relationality-in-the-bible-why-i-am-not-a-classical-theist/), J. Richard Middleton explains that he does not regard himself as a "classical theist" due to his inability to reconcile traditional philosophical categories describing God's character with the portrayal of God in Scripture. Middleton explicitly contrasts the biblical portrayal of God's relationality and adaptability with classic categories of divine simplicity and immutability. In this response essay to Middleton's online article, I seek to put his instincts into conversation with modern Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson—likewise an erstwhile philosopher—who crafted similar arguments rooted not only in the biblical text's depiction of God's self-revelation, but in the sacramental practices of the church who has inherited this text.

Introduction: Situating Jenson and Middleton Together

The work of late Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson concerning the narrative character of God's reality, in which all humans participate, was and is considered to be quite novel compared to his theological contemporaries. He shares this dogged persistence to take the story of the text at its word with J. Richard Middleton when Middleton is compared to those within his biblical scholastic milieu. The panel from which this essay originates was a welcome opportunity to bring these two scholars into a conversation that may otherwise never have happened, and to elaborate on a small but potent core idea whereby theologians and biblical scholars might work to tear down the arbitrary division that separates

many modes of "classical theism" in particular, or systematic theology in general, from serious biblical scholarship.

It is worth mentioning at the fore that there is good reason why Jenson is considered by some to be a controversial theologian.[1] Jenson cared very deeply about the reality of God's relationship with Creation as reflected in Scripture. This has two main implications: first, that God has eternally identified himself with Creation not from standing outside it and creating it, but because of how seriously he takes the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulas in asserting most completely the dual-citizenship of Christ: Christ is eternally divine and human. This is most delicately, though contentiously, reflected in Jenson's denial of the *logos asarkos*, the Word-without-flesh.[2] The second implication results from the first: when Christ has thus looked around to his disciples and said "This is my body," he was not referring exclusively to the bread, as is further clarified by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. When the church is gathered in worship, specifically around the Table, Christ has intended the world to identify that gathering *as* his body. Theologians like George Hunsinger tend to view Jenson's emphasis on this point as a disastrous move away from divine simplicity and then accuse him of heresy, troublingly.[3] Thus, by the end of this exploration we will need to consider whether or not Jenson has caused other problems by his attempts to solve the key problems with

1 For a succinct list of recent critiques, see Jonathan M. Platter, *Divine Simplicity and the Triune Identity: A Critical Dialogue with the Theological Metaphysics of Robert W. Jenson* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 104 n. 2; Eugene R. Schlesinger, "Trinity, Incarnation and Time: A Restatement of the Doctrine of God in Conversation with Robert Jenson," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 69, no. 2 (2016) 195–97.

2 Questions about Jesus' humanity "inside" or "outside" of time before his incarnation by the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem typically revolve around Jesus' identification as the *Logos* (John 1). Jenson primarily reacts strongly against assertions of *Logos* Christology that (whether implicitly or explicitly) "presumes the *Logos* as a religious/metaphysical entity [that] then asserts its union with Jesus" the man when he is born in the manger. See Robert W. Jenson, "Once More the *Logos Asarkos*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 2 (2011) 130–33. One of Jenson's final attempts at clarification is asserting that while the incarnation certainly "happened" historically, the most significant theological identification of the second person of the Trinity is not merely objective, but relational: "The Father's sending and Jesus' obedience *are* the second hypostasis in God…. *[T]his relationship itself* can indeed subsist 'before' Mary's conception, in whatever sense of 'before' obtains in the Trinity's immanent life." Jenson, "Once More," 133, emphasis original.

3 In brief, Hunsinger's main critiques are that 1) Jenson's views reduce the Trinity to "no more than mutual volition among three discrete agencies in a common narrative" rather than a more tradition understanding of three persons sharing one substance; that 2) Jenson's articulation of the realized body of Christ as the gathered church threatens to collapse the church into the Trinity; and that 3) there is no longer room for the Holy Spirit as a "person" in Jenson's formulation, similarly to Hegel. George Hunsinger, "Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*: A Review Essay," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 2 (2002) 161–200; quote from p. 195. See especially Stephen John Wright, "Sounding Out the Gospel: Robert Jenson's Theological Project," *Pro Ecclesia* 28, no. 2 (2019) 149–66 for a helpful response to the major criticisms against Jenson.

classical theism; namely, by emphasizing God's dialogic relationality with Creation, has he entirely unraveled anything essential to trinitarian theology?

With this brief word of introduction about Jenson aside, I must introduce one further caveat before exploring the intersection between Jenson and Middleton. I am not certain there is actually such a thing as "revisionary metaphysics," despite the fact that this is the label Jenson himself has used to describe his task (and which other scholars continue to use to qualify what he does).[4] For Jenson, God is not an abstraction. He may be mysterious, or beyond our finite knowledge, but never abstract.[5] All talk about God is—or ought to be—talk about the God of the Gospel, not a floating Zeus-like apparition in space. While this may be an issue of semantics, regardless this core truth places Jenson and Middleton together as allies battling against abstractions of God in both systematic and biblical studies.[6]

I arrived at Jenson from a different angle than most, not through systematic theology proper or even philosophical theology, but through a deep fascination with the sacramentology and ecclesiology expressed first in his 1978 work, *Visible Words*.[7] Jenson reflects in *Visible Words* a patristic-feeling mode of thinking in many places—not because he uncritically embraces Neoplatonic categories for God (as is often the stereotype for patristic reasoning), but because he operated with a hermeneutic of expectancy: the revelation of God *in* time and *through*

4 Robert W. Jenson, "Response to Watson and Hunsinger," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 2 (2002) 230.

5 There are two recent works concerned with Jenson's "revisionary" metaphysics: James R. Crocker's Oxford PhD thesis, "Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Reconstitution of Metaphysics" (2016), and Jonathan Platter's revised PhD thesis published as *Divine Simplicity and the Triune Identity: A Critical Dialogue with the Theological Metaphysics of Robert W. Jenson* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021). I am not aiming to replicate their arguments here, but rather to draw out of Jenson something about what is at stake with classical theism's foibles in agreement with Middleton.

6 Further, methodologically speaking, the sentiments expressed by Jenson in an interview with Crocker speaking about the dangers of starting anywhere other than the Gospel are delightfully incendiary: "…I once spent a lot of time with analytic philosophy…. It's like other philosophy, however; you don't want to take it first and build theology on it. See, people talk as if the proper procedures was: there's an array of philosophies out there, an array of ontologies, anti-ontologies, and the problem is to find the right one to build a theology on. That's exactly ass-backwards—sorry for the vulgarity. You try to think your way through the Gospel, letting the metaphysical chips fall where they may. In the process, however, they make a heap. They amount to something. They add up to something like a Christian philosophy. It won't be because you started out to make a Christian philosophy, either. It will be because you started out trying to understand the Gospel." James R. Crocker, "Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Reconstitution of Metaphysics," diss., Exeter College, University of Oxford (2016), 363.

7 References in this essay will be made not to the original, but to the updated edition: Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of the Christian Sacraments*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010). In the preface to this revised edition, Jenson notes that his sacramental approach in this early work is quite different in some ways from later articles and the *Systematic Theology*. In this work, he predominately "exploit[s] one principle: that sacraments are actions to which the word of God comes and that the word is law that anchors us in the past and gospel that promises the future." He then confesses, "I have done nothing like that since." Jenson, *Visible Words*, xiv.

promise brings about actual, real ontological change in humanity when we are joined with Christ, and thereby with each other, through baptism and the Eucharist.[8]

Moreover, this is all done in service to understanding Scripture. Peter Leithart has articulated Jenson's theological enterprise in perhaps the clearest way:

> All of Jenson's characteristic novelties—the peculiarities of his Trinitarian thought, his denial of the *logos asarkos*, his construal of beginning of end, of protology and eschatology—arise from his attempts to make theological, analytical, and metaphysical sense of Scripture. Jenson refuses the standard moves, which effectively take "classical theism" as fundamental theology and treat the idioms and descriptions of Scripture as "accommodation" or "anthropomorphism." Jenson inverts that and turns the specifics of the Bible into a critique of the presumed fundamental theology.[9]

If I have read Middleton's initial essay correctly, I see a great deal of resonance here with the narrative heart at the core of both his and Jenson's theological enterprise:

> This is the (distorted) truth behind the idea of divine immutability. God is loving and faithful. *This unchangeable faithfulness (paradoxically) leads God to be constantly adapting to new situations in order to accomplish his purpose.* God's *character* leads him to seek the redemption of humanity and the world. This is what, ultimately, leads God to the cross.[10]

I am not sure about the language of God adapting to new situations—unless the category of" newness" here purely originates from a human perspective (in the vein of Isaiah 43). I might rather say that built into God's dialogical or narrative character is the premise that because of sin, humans will constantly be surprised at what God does when interacting with those of us bound by temporality. The ultimate surprise, according to Jenson, was that the Jewish Messiah was going to

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8 I am unsure whether "hermeneutic of expectancy" is original, but by it I mean something more than just that divine-human interaction is limited to humans passively waiting for God to do things and then we actively reflect on them. I also mean something more narratival and dialogical (and less analogical) than Augustine's doctrine of divine illumination whereby the human will must be involved in some sense to apply latent knowledge of God present in humans through the enlivening of the Holy Spirit. Here I may be wading into too-deep waters, however, for the space allowed for this essay.

9 Peter Leithart, "Jenson as Theological Interpreter," in *The Promise of Robert W. Jenson's Theology*, ed. Stephen John Wright and Chris E. W. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 46.

10 J. Richard Middleton, "God's Relationality and Eternity in the Bible: Why I Am Not a Classical Theist," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (2023) 3. Emphasis mine.

ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and be murdered, only to be raised after three days by the God he claimed as Father.

Having briefly highlighted the potential synergy between Jenson and Middleton, I will respond to Middleton's post through the two primary avenues Jenson uses to help us understand who God is: 1) The way Jenson identifies the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit through his narratival reading of salvation-history; and 2) the way we thus relate to the Trinitarian God through participating in his continuing presence (and here particularly through the Eucharist).

These two categories may seem obvious to those with any amount of familiarity with the tasks of systematic theology as they are primary avenues whereby we think categorically about God and about ourselves. Even Jenson uses these two categories, in fact, to organize his two-volume *Systematic Theology*: volume one is subtitled "The Triune God," and volume two "The Works of God." However, he paves a new path by utilizing dialogue and narrative to explain these relationships as fully as they *can* be explained from our perspective, and as a link between the two volumes. In other words, God has revealed himself trinitarianly through dialogue, through conversation, and drama—not through abstraction.

Earlier, I invoked the word "promise" in the context of Jenson's sacramentology; it is worth briefly pausing to explain this. For Jenson, promise is a technical term tied into God's covenantal character that most properly defines what humans are really trying to say when utilizing—or perhaps what really lies beneath—words like "past," "present," or "future" to speak of our relationship with God.[11] He arrives at this conclusion by starting with the placid notion that the gospel, on which Christians base their understanding of the world, is a communiqué meant to bring about some change in the receiver, much like most language. A promise is a particular message meant to "pose a future to its hearer."[12] The problem is that humans often pose futures that can be easily revoked; even the most solemn promise can be broken by death. Thus, "only a promise which had death *behind* it could be unconditional. Only a promise made about and by one who had already died for the sake of his promise, could be irreversibly a promise. The narrative content of such a promise would be death and resurrection."[13]

Sacramentology does not usually enter into discussions of classical theism, so it may seem strange to rely upon it as a governing category here. However, insofar as promise draws all three persons of the Trinity together in our understanding of

11 "Christianity is the lived-out fact of the telling and mistelling, believing and perverting, practice and malpractice, of the narrative of what is supposed to have happened and to be yet going to happen with Jesus-in-Israel, and of the promise made by that narrative." Jenson, *Story and Promise* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 1.

12 Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 7.

13 Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 8–9, emphasis original.

salvation-history, so too in the event of the Eucharist promise becomes the mechanism through which humanity is likewise drawn into the divine life. The deeds of YHWH in the past (covenanting with Israel and sending the Son) are vivified for those presently gathered (actively remembering Christ's death and resurrection) as they look toward the promise of Christ's return (the final defeat of death). Thus, if one wants to understand who God is in the fullness of time, one must meet God in the lived-out practice of the sacrament. I will return to the eschatological quandaries opened by Jenson's revisionary metaphysics later.

Responding to Classical Theism through Jenson's Trinitarian Reading of Salvation-History

In the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Jenson offers a clue as to where he views the trajectory of thought on classical theism and divine simplicity by starting with an attempt to reconcile Augustinian and Aristotelian senses of what "time" is. Is it the instantaneous extension of a life in either direction (past and future) through an impossible point called the present? Or is it the horizon of all created events, the sandbox of the Unmoved Mover? Jenson says that it must be both because of the sort of God we encounter in Scripture:

> God makes narrative room in his triune life for others than himself; this act is the act of creation, and this accommodation is created time. Thus as we 'live and move and have our being 'in him, the 'distention' within which we do this is an order external to us, which therefore can provide a metric that is objective for us. Yet we are within the divine life as *participants* and so experience this metric as a determining character also of our existence as persons.[14]

So where has Augustine failed?

> Augustine's doctrine of divine simplicity made it impossible for him to acknowledge in God himself the complexity of the biblical God, and he compensated by contemplating that complexity, which as an ardent student of Scripture he could not avoid, in the created images of God. But the triune God is not a sheer point of presence; he is a life among persons. And therefore creation's temporality is not awkwardly

14 Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2: The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34. See Schlesinger, "Trinity, Incarnation and Time," 192–93.

> related to God's eternity, and its sequentiality imposes no strain on its participation in being.[15]

What does Jenson mean when he says "the biblical God"? Are all Christians, theologians or biblical scholars, talking about the biblical God? Not exactly. In two earlier books written ten years apart, *The Triune Identity* (1982) and *Unbaptized God* (1992), Jenson explains what will become the premise from which he worked the rest of his career (and certainly on which he based his *Systematic Theology*): that much of modern theology is working from a conception of God that is borrowed from elsewhere. Whether from philosophical or metaphysical constructs whose starting points are rather abstract descriptions of what God is like rather than *who* God is, much modern theology is far too tempted to start with categorical descriptions (the omni- words) rather than personality. Jenson summarizes the issue through a question that forefronts the salvation narrative in *Triune Identity*: Who is Yahweh, the God of Israel? "The one who delivered Israel from Egypt."[16] This God is identified by his relations and actions which reveal his character, not his qualities—though we may infer his qualities from his actions. Why did God deliver Israel from Egypt? One can use words like "election" or "providence," which certainly convey a sense of omniscience. However, the only fitting words—the ones that actually come from the biblical text to properly ground our understanding of God's knowledge, and is not as static as one might think—are *covenant* and *promise*. God had a conversation revolving around a promise with Abraham.[17] The second piece of identification, revealed through Christ, fleshes this out more: Yahweh is also "the One who raised Jesus from the dead by the Spirit."[18] God not only kept his promise in not letting the Israelites die in the desert, or die in captivity, but God defeated death itself—the thing that stands as the barrier between human

15 Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:35. Jenson's sentiments here build upon a well-established framework in his earlier, more philosophically reactive theological exploration of the gospel: "The gospel denies the eternity of timelessness; the true eternity is temporal liberty, from exactly such fixity. The gospel attacks the God of timeless eternity; that God is unmasked as Satan, who at once destroys us with the guilt of what we have been, and deludes us with false security in what we are.… The Father of Jesus makes that one unnecessary to whom we have fled; because Jesus' triumph is the future we do not need to defend ourselves against the future. Just and only so the triumph can be called 'God.'" Robert W. Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 110–11.

16 Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 7.

17 What is most interesting about Genesis 22, especially, is not that God makes a promise, but that integral to this promise is God's response to Abraham's obedience regarding what we might consider "omniscience" or "foreknowledge": "God presumably knows all things, but what does this passage suggest about how he knows at least some of them? Clearly our passage marks some sort of before and after of knowledge and intention, also for God, and a before and after determined by an event in the temporal story the Old Testament tells about God with his people, an event in which human actors and the Lord as Angel or Glory or Name or…are mutually implicated." Robert W. Jenson, "The Bible and the Trinity," *Pro Ecclesia* 11, no. 3 (2002) 333–34. See Leithart, "Jenson as Theological Interpreter," 51.

18 See Leithart, "Jenson as Theological Interpreter," 48–49.

finitude and the utter possibility that defines God's existence. Jesus (God) made a promise to his disciples.[19]

And so, thinking of God's impassibility is really a forced paradox. By so identifying himself as the God who raised Jesus from the dead through the Spirit, and by the Son's revelation of his identity to the world (that he is the Son of the Father and after he ascended, he gave his Spirit to us), God has also foremost identified himself as the God who suffers. But he does not suffer like you and me. Jenson articulates this candidly in an interview with James Crocker: God "does not suffer the fact that he suffers. He suffers, that's true, and that's the main proposition. But he doesn't do it in such fashion, as to suffer the fact that he suffers." God's impassibility has traditionally been argued in terms of "lacking"—that suffering indicates an imperfection in God such that he is either influenced by external events, at best, or at worst that some weakness is revealed (as, for instance, a human immune system might be seen to be vulnerable to cancer). Rather, Jenson would say that God is "impassibly committed to this sort of suffering," which reveals *pathos* instead of lacking.[20] *Pathos* does not reveal that God is tempted toward actions that defy his character, or that he does *not* possess all of the various "omni-" qualities attributed to him, but that by forming a covenant ultimately defined by rejection and loss (which has certainly never been the intent or expectation in any human-to-human covenant made in the Ancient Near East), God has defined impassibility *for us* rather us defining it for him.[21] God's *pathos* reveals his *ethos*, and as Abraham Heschel has helpfully expressed, God is inherently "concerned about the world, and shares in its fate. Indeed, this is the essence of God's moral nature: His willingness to be intimately involved in the history of

19 Another way of looking at God's identity by his activity, in the words of Platter: "God is a lively event." See Platter, *Divine Simplicity and the Triune Identity*, 114–18.

20 Crocker, "Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Reconstitution of Metaphysics," 374–75. He begins by mentioning Origen and Cyril: "I think that the famous statement from Origen, *ipse pater non es impassibilis*... even the father is not impassible. With the double negative! He's right on. Or, Cyril's 'God suffers insufferably'. Now that comes out wrong in English, in Greek *apathos pathoi*. The ruling verb of the sentence says that God suffers. The Son, that is. But then there's an adverb. It's an adverb mind you, it's not a conjoined verb, it's an adverb. It modifies the whole sentence." Further, if we want to engage with other Greek categories, Jenson will play with the language and stretch its semantic boundaries: "God is omniscient. He knows everything—[but] that doesn't prove how he finds it out. Maybe he consults our prayers." In this interview, Jenson is essentially reiterating points made in Robert W. Jenson, "*Ipse Pater Non Est Impassibilis* (2009)," in *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation*, ed. Stephen John Wright (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 96–99, which is itself a recapitulation of Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 125–9. See also Platter's discussion in Platter, *Divine Simplicity and the Triune Identity,* 114–18.

21 In the words of Nicholas Wolterstorff, not only does the biblical text reveal to us that God has made himself vulnerable to loss or being wronged, but by making "fundamental to the biblical presentation of God … the declaration that God forgives," we must presuppose "that God is vulnerable to being wronged by us—and not just *vulnerable* to being wronged, but in fact wronged." Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 107, emphasis original.

man [*sic*].”[22] One thus cannot say something about God that is not also a confession about his other-directedness.[23]

If Jenson’s hermeneutic rooted so strongly in narrative, dialogue, and relationship seems at this point to completely undermine the tendencies of Western classical theism, it may be helpful to retreat several steps to directly consider how Jenson reads Genesis. Referring back to the second volume of the *Systematic Theology*, Jenson reminds us that “the world God creates is not a thing, a ‘cosmos,’ but is rather a history. God does not create a world that thereupon has a history; he creates a history that is a world, in that it is purposive and so makes a whole.”[24] A careful reader of the biblical text can scarcely move beyond the first two chapters of Genesis to see this: you can say that God made the universe by divine fiat, and certainly the text could have said that if that were its most important essence; instead, we are told that the “beginning” in which God created the world lasted six days. Jenson calls the loss of this sense of pace and movement—of storytelling at its finest—in modern theology “the great historical calamity of the doctrine of creation.”[25]

If a child or theology student ever asks, then, why Jesus “had” to be born and live and die in order to accomplish our salvation, you must point to Genesis. You can certainly say God *could* do things in an instant, but if you are really aiming to reveal the depths of such a difficult truth by pointing toward God’s *character as the centre of his simplicity*, you are forced to say that God creates narrative.[26] Humanity is healed because of Christ’s sanctification of the human life, which is defined by its time-fulness, not because he pointed his heavenly mouse at our DNA and clicked on “justified” rather than “damned.” The only “instantaneous” thing is how, according to Jenson, “initial creation and redemption and fulfillment were dramatically united moments of God’s one creative work, shaped and moved

22 Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 290–91.

23 This is not to say, in the critical accusation of Thomas Weinandy, that Jenson thinks God “actualizes himself…through his actions within history.” Jenson, “*Ipse Pater Non Est Impassibilis* (2009),” 93. It seems to me that the opposite of this should also be true: that through history God can be de-actualized. Scripture does not seem to allow for this, even in the way it depicts God’s relationship to covenant. The whole reason God *can* make a covenant is because of the way *he* relates to time. Thus, the language of *mysterion* utilized by Paul is the most applicable answer: God’s actions within history do not make him real; they reveal for us what reality actually is—hence Paul’s theology of the upside-down Kingdom.

24 Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:14. See Robert W. Jenson, “What if it Were True? (2001),” in *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation*, ed. Stephen John Wright (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 26.

25 Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:14. Jenson draws attention to this being a predominately patristic insight that has been lost along with the advent of modern historical-criticism, citing Irenaeus and Basil the Great.

26 For a more thorough tracing of how Jenson arrives at this position, see Stephen John Wright, *Dogmatic Aesthetics: A Theology of Beauty in Dialogue with Robert W. Jenson* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 61–81.

by his one intent to save." If creation is thus proper to God, then so is redemption.[27]

Responding to Classical Theism through Jenson's Sacramentology

The sacramental life is thus crucial for Jenson's conception of theism, and I believe helps round out the implications of some of Middleton's greatest suspicions by connecting divine participation with eschatology. The sacraments not only initiate Christians into a certain part of the story through baptism, but allow them to somehow reify Jesus's humanity, which has been taken into the Godhead, through the Eucharist. And we will dramatically celebrate this until "the end"—which we must define as whenever God, in Jenson's words,

> will fit created time to triune time and created polity to the *perichoresis* of Father, Son, and Spirit. God will deify the redeemed: their life will be carried and shaped by the life of Father, Son, and Spirit, and they will know themselves as personal agents in the life so shaped. God will let the redeemed see him: the Father by the Spirit will make Christ's eyes their eyes. Under all rubrics, the redeemed will be appropriated to God's own being…. The point of identity, infinitely approachable and infinitely to be approached, the enlivening *telos* of the Kingdom's own life, is perfect harmony between the conversation of the redeemed and the conversation that God is. In the conversation God is, meaning and melody are one. The end is music.[28]

Jenson is not being cute here. Music becomes the most potent imagery for his scheme, indeed the only fitting analogy for his thoroughly Cyrillian Christology, in trying to convey how it is we continue to relate to God in this life up until the eschatological conclusion.[29] No human life can escape God—but each individual is still, in a sense, given a choice to either play their violin in the Great Orchestra of the Triune God, or in the alley behind the theatre. So, baptism is our uniform: we take off the civilian clothes, we put on the black slacks and the button-up shirt and the shiny shoes. And the Eucharist keeps our bodies, and the instruments of our souls, in tune with the conductor sitting in the chair of the principal violinist, the concertmaster: Jesus Christ.

The primary question needing to be answered here, then, is as follows: does classical theism offer the church a robust theology of the Eucharist (to take just

27 There is an obvious significant corollary issue here: how do we discuss sin in this Jensonian framework? "The only possible *definition* of sin is that it is what God does not want done . . . . [H]istory's only entire tedious smorgasbord of sins presents only various ways of *not* being one thing, righteous." Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:133. See the further discussion below.

28 Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:369.

29 See Jenson, "What If It Were True," 29–30.

one sacrament) that cannot be oversimplified into an "-ism" or otherwise erase the grand mystery of Christ's identification of himself with the living church? Here Augustine partially fails us again; the Eucharist simply is not a game of Three Card Monty involving part *res*, part *signum*, and part us (or nothing at all, depending on one's affinity for Zwingli). The Eucharist must be, in fact, all three in a perichoretic dance. The problem is in how we take Christ and then Paul: either the bread and wine just "are" the body and blood, or they are not. Our clue is in Paul's response to the Corinthian gatherings, which meld the profane with the holy in their syncretistic appropriation of Greek practices with Christian. As Jenson says, "the body of Christ that the Corinthians culpably fail to discern is at once the gathered congregation, which is the actual object of their misbehavior and to which Paul has just previously referred as the body of Christ, and the loaf and cup, which are called Christ's body by the narrative of institution he cites in support of his rebuke."[30]

Jenson next points to John of Damascus for patristic support in locating the significance of the Eucharistic meal primarily in the dramatic event of the gathering of people rather than merely the signs and symbols present therein: the Eucharist is "called 'communion' and truly it is. For through it we both commune with Christ, and share in his body as well as in his deity, and commune and are united with one another. For as we all eat of one loaf we become one body and one blood of Christ and members of one another. Thus we may be called co-embodiments of Christ."[31] There is simple but frightening algebraic proof to account for here: if this (the Eucharistic elements taken together) *is* Christ's body (implied: also the blood), and also if we *are* Christ's body (see: Rom 12, 1 Cor 11–12; Eph 4–5; Col 1; Heb 13), then perhaps we might say: in the event of the Eucharist—the narrative telling of salvation-history—Christ is present in and with and through us by the power of the Spirit, reflecting the character of the Father.[32]

Having established that the gathered church is Christ's presence on earth, a necessary balance must be struck—earth is not the *only* "place" where Christ is. Jenson relies on the vision of Hebrews 8 to assert that "all sacramental *koinonia* is some aspect of the fact that the church on earth is the embodiment of the Christ

30 Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:211.

31 John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith* 4.13, quoted in Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:212.

32 I find an earlier statement of this principle helpful, although Jenson has not yet started to work out a fully trinitarian way to frame it: "The basic proposition about Jesus' presence must be: the occurrence of the gospel-word, as a word binding men [*sic*] together, is the occurrence of Jesus' present-tense reality. Where this binding occurs, is the place where he is to be found." Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 159. Jenson does make this slightly clearer in *Visible Words*: "All Christianity's talk of the Spirit unpacks one simple but drastic experience and claim: the spirit of the Christian community and the personal spirit of Jesus of Nazareth are the same." Jenson, *Visible Words*, 53.

who is in heaven."[33] Which is to say that we must not only consider Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection as the fullness of his human-divine experience, but must also hold that his experience continues actively in his divine priesthood. The risen Christ, present in the church, simultaneously "now offers himself and his church, the *totus Christus*, to the Father. This offering anticipates his eschatological self-offering, when he will bring the church and all creation to the Father that God may be 'all in all.'"[34]

Significantly, because Christ simultaneously fills the office both of High Priest and Offering, humans may be found in God both now (imperfectly) and at the end (perfectly). Classical theism, which has inherited the Christology of the Tome of Leo,[35] however, ultimately undermines this point. Chalcedon's misstep was not to proclaim that Christ has two natures; but a Christology

> that does not transgress Leo's principle that 'each nature' is the doer or sufferer only of what is naturally proper to it cannot affirm the actuality of the human Christ in God's transcendence of space. Therefore it cannot itself account for the presence of the human Christ at once in heaven and in the church. That means it cannot account for sacramental reality, for identity between a reality being present only as signified and a reality being availably present so as to signify. And that means it cannot account for a chief feature of any catholic understanding of the church: that Christ is embodied for and in it.[36]

As Jenson goes on to say, standard Western Christology does not properly offer a way for us to reckon with the fact that in our doing anything "churchly," it is Jesus of Nazareth's priesthood in which we participate—not a disembodied *Logos* or set of attributes. And if it is not Jesus of Nazareth's priesthood in which we participate, we will meet a different end than the one that involves complete union with God.

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33 Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:253.

34 Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:253.

35 The Tome of Leo is a letter from Pope Leo I to Flavian of Constantinople setting out what would become the Christological definition canonized by the Council of Chalcedon in 451: that Christ possesses two natures, human and divine, that are simultaneously present "without change, without division, without separation." Unfortunately, this formulation came in the fallout of a reactionary conflict between parties ultimately misunderstanding precisely what the other party was trying to say. On one side, Eutyches, following after Cyril of Alexandria, was emphasizing Jesus's divinity, and his opponents Jesus' humanity; much of the argument centred on the actual meaning of the Greek word *physis*—whether it translates best the Latin *persona* or *natura*. Jenson's primary contention is that, ultimately, the decision of Chalcedon categorized some aspects of Jesus as being "proper" only to one or other of the two natures, which is contrary to the way Scripture seems to speak of Jesus—who simply just "is" one person who is both human and divine. See Robert W. Jenson, "Jesus in the Trinity," *Pro Ecclesia* 8, no. 3 (1999) 308–18 for the clearest explanation of Jenson's position.

36 Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:254.

Conclusion

Now we must return to our primary unanswered question: have we solved a problem of classical theism—the tendency to see God as aloof and abstract—with Jenson, only to allow Jenson to create a larger problem? I will venture toward a negative response by returning to two subsidiary questions passed on earlier.

First, in granting such a relational formulation of humanity's participation in God's reality as Jenson sees it, do we admit that Christ sins if we are the body of Christ when gathered at the table and we sin? Perhaps a few analogical questions may help here: when all the instruments play the same note, do they become the same instrument? If a handful of members of the orchestra play the wrong notes during the concerto, does the concerto cease to be? It seems to me that many of the problems classical theism has attempted to solve are not really problems once certain ideas are reconfigured. Classical theism's balking at a Jesus who brings humanity—and thus, at worst, sin, and at best, imperfection—into the Godhead is due to, at times, utilizing a map that seems incomplete. Is sin predominately described in Scripture as a substance, or as idolatry? As lust? As injustice? As despair?[37] Hence, I do not think Jenson's discussion of sin is deficient. I believe it is entirely biblical, as he is prone to consider sin narratively and not systematically—and I think Middleton would agree.

On the eschatological question regarding the fullness of time, has Jenson eradicated Christian hope by insinuating that all Christians, in this reconfigured metaphysics, can simply enjoy God's full presence in the here and now (as we reckon time) by being united to Christ in the Eucharist? I have demonstrated how Jenson utilizes the sacraments to draw Christians toward whatever will happen at "the end"; however, I admit that Jenson does not innovate much beyond the eschatology of the prophets when it comes to the mechanisms employed by this dialogical God who is so concerned with human time. "The fulfillment of the Lord's promises must be the end of the way things go now and the reality of a whole new way for things to go. The New Testament adds no new content to this."[38] But precisely because the New Testament adds no new content to the eschatological promises made to Israel, "expectation of the Old Testament's fulfillment, of the Grand Transformation of the conditions of being there promised, is not a detachable or optional item of Christian faith."[39] It is evident that we have not been translated fully into God's Kingdom, into his "omni-" self, just by looking around. Our wills and our activities are not united in the way God's are. Paul, James, Peter, and the

37 See Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:133–52.

38 Robert W. Jenson, "The Great Transformation," in *The Last Things: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Eschatology*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 34.

39 Jenson, "Great Transformation," 34.

writer to the Hebrews already noticed as much within several decades of Jesus's ascension. And this, to return to an earlier theme, is because death is not behind us as it is for Christ.

It may sound daft to say, by way of conclusion, that Jenson's critique of classical or modern theism, as much as Middleton's, is an attempt to simplify theology. This is not to say that Jenson is trying to peel back all analogy and metaphor and encourage all to become biblical literalists. Rather, he is attempting to help us look at the major doctrinal pillars and think about the propositions at their core. Jenson asks a question that perhaps sounds too risky to many. Referring first to the core proposition that "the Lord raised Jesus from the dead," Jenson asks:

> What if it and propositions like it were…antecedently *true*? That is, true in the dumb sense, the sense with which we all use the word when behaving normally, and which just therefore I cannot and do not need to analyze further, true in the sense that folk are likely to demand when they hear academic theologians and their academically trained pastors begin to talk about 'deeper 'meanings and the spiritual experience that so and so was trying to express, and the religious tradition carried by the text, and so on. [40]

Perhaps a helpful way to think about this is through the lens of worship and prayer, which I have but briefly scratched the surface of in bringing up the church's sacramental life. We do not worship abstractions! And if you contend that there is a difference between doctrine and worship—between what is learned in seminary and what is proclaimed on Sundays—I will ask in return, "Why is this self-evident to so many?" With Jenson, I say: "If God knows his own being as an essence or force or *ousia* or *hyperousia*, it makes little sense to talk to him, and particularly it makes no sense to try to persuade him of something."[41] The things we say and do as his living community are not foreign to him; indeed, if we have been invited into this drama by sheer act and will, then the things we intend and do in relation to him are essentially constitutive of those abstract qualities that make us feel better. Rather than serving as barriers between our finitude and God's infinitude, we can dismantle the alienness of the "omni-" words by considering how the conversation between God and humanity goes: "Then our cries for help are not alien to his absolute freedom but rather constitutive of it…. Then my telling him of my situation is not alien to his omniscience; rather this conversation between us is constitutive of his omniscience. Then his presence where two or three are gathered is not an instance of his general everywhereness but just the other way around."[42]

40 Jenson, "What If It Were True," 24.
41 Jenson, "What If It Were True," 34.
42 Jenson, "What If It Were True," 34.

Thus concerning creation, Jenson throws a pie in the face of much of modern and post-modern world-building: "If the doctrine of creation is true in the dumb sense, then—and this is the offence—any and all accounts of reality other than the biblical story are abstractions from the full account of what we actually inhabit, that is they are abstractions from the story of God with his creatures."[43] Which is not to say that science is lying to us about the mechanistic bits; but that really many of the ways humans have attempted to grapple with the "how" of creation has blinded us to the "who" of creation. Abstractions may be true in their abstraction, but when divorced from the God revealed in Scripture, "they will lead us away from reality."[44]

So much of Jenson's theological enterprise has to do with, again, actually attempting to simplify the way we have divorced God-as-God-knows-himself, from God-as-revealed. Again, I do not think Jenson is being cute in what he proposes:

> God…does not know and intend himself as a divine essence, but as a particular, a specific someone, and indeed as someone whom we also know, and indeed as the man of the Gospels and the prophets, the man of sorrows acquainted with grief, the proclaimer of the Kingdom in which the last will be first and the first last, the fried of publicans and sinners, the enemy and participant of human suffering, Mary's boy and the man on the cross.[45]

This sounds an awful lot like the theological playground in which Middleton has found himself, despite entering through a different gate; I think Middleton and Jenson would make excellent companions, had Middleton the time as a biblical scholar to dive head-first back into a more analytical space.

43 Jenson, "What If It Were True," 26.
44 Jenson, "What If It Were True," 26.
45 Jenson, "What If It Were True," 31.

God is not a "Thing" in our Universe! Reflections on "Classical Theism" Inspired by Rowan Williams

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Abstract

In a recent article published as a blog post (https://jrichardmiddleton.com/2022/12/08/gods-eternity-and-relationality-in-the-bible-why-i-am-not-a-classical-theist/), J. Richard Middleton explains that he does not regard himself as a "classical theist" due to his inability to reconcile traditional philosophical categories describing God's character with the portrayal of God in Scripture. Middleton explicitly contrasts the biblical portrayal of God's relationality and adaptability with classic categories of divine simplicity and immutability. In this response article, I engage the work of Rowan Williams on Chalcedonian Christology in order to seek clarity on what "classical theism" entails—and does not entail—with respect to divine immutability, simplicity, impassibility, and other divine attributes. Properly understood, the "classical" view safeguards against inadequate theological portraits of both God's transcendence (conceived via abstraction) and God's immanence (conceived via the projection of human experience). "Classical theism" seeks to preserve the deep mystery of God's being, thus applying its insights contextually requires wisdom and precision.

In December 2022, J. Richard Middleton posted a blog entry that expressed his uneasiness with what he calls "classical theism" (a term he acknowledges to be variously understood and represented).[1] His summary of "classical theism," from

1 J. Richard Middleton, "God's Relationality and Eternity in the Bible: Why I Am Not a Classical Theist," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (2023) 1–8. My thanks to Richard Middleton for prompting (provoking?) this exchange about "classical theism." I regard this as a welcome opportunity to bring two disciplines together, biblical studies and systematic theology, in a reciprocal, interdisciplinary dialogue that creates the opportunity for deeper understanding and sharper clarity on these issues.

which his criticisms arise, is approximately as follows.[2] This theological view asserts that God is *atemporal* in the sense of being "outside of time" and *simple* in the sense that God is pure being, transcends finitude, and thus all of God's attributes are essentially one. In this view, further, God is thought to be unaffected by the world or anything outside of himself, because such influence would seem to "demean God." Thus, classical theism holds that God is *immutable*, a notion which Middleton believes is indebted to Aristotle's depiction of "God" as the Unmoved Mover who cannot change in any way because change would imply movement either away from Perfection or toward unrealized Perfection.[3]

Finally, classical theism's account of God's infinite nature leads it to conceive of God in abstract and indirect ways, which in the process leads it to distort, displace, or replace the concrete, more direct and simpler (sometimes even "outlandish") language of the Bible. Classical theism, Middleton claims, tends to relegate biblical language to "mere metaphor or anthropomorphism."[4] It thus champions an analogical view of biblical and theological language, as represented by Aquinas who, impacted by assumptions going back to Plotinus, worried about "how we are able to use language that derives from our experience of the finite world to say anything true about God who is beyond time and finitude."[5]

Middleton raises important issues and concerns about 'classical theism,' especially his insistence that theological language must remain faithful to biblical language (in all its diversity of expression and depiction) about God. I am grateful for this reminder and challenge. In this response, I will seek to pursue clarity on some things, offer some critical pushback on others, and pose some difficult questions that complexify and problematize any simple or unnuanced description of 'classical theism' and its associated ideas (e.g., divine simplicity, aseity, immutability, infinity, atemporality).

Rowan Williams on Classical Theism and Divine Simplicity

One contemporary theologian who prompts us to think more carefully about classical theism is Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, noted historical theologian and one of the most prolific and creative theological thinkers writing in English today. Williams is an interesting dialogue partner, also, because while he shares some of Middleton's concerns—including some expressed in the blog post

2 I have placed the term "classical theism" in scare quotes, to acknowledge its contested status as an accurate and useful term, since it was created by critics rather than the advocates of the tradition. As Sonderegger notes, "Process theologians seem to have coined the category *classical theism*, now so widely used as to seem self-evident," in order to critique a particular conception of divine omnipotence. See Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 165.

3 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 1.

4 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 3.

5 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 2.

(e.g., the relational nature of God, God's love for creation, reciprocity in God's relationship to creation, the importance of the Bible) but also others expressed elsewhere (e.g., the goodness and integrity of creation, the "becoming" of the world eschatologically as intrinsic to God's redemptive work, the non-competitive and non-triumphalist character of God's action and mission in the world)—Williams believes that classical theism, far from rejecting or distorting a genuinely biblical account of things, instead properly frames and safeguards such an account.

Williams's book *Christ the Heart of Creation* is a profound and dense theological and historical work.[6] I make no attempt here to represent its argument as a whole, account for its detail, or wrestle with its potential problems.[7] Instead, I will draw out some key insights that are relevant to the present discussion of classical theism.

Williams centers his discussion of classical theism and divine simplicity in Christology.[8] His account is grounded not in abstract speculation, but in the Person of Jesus Christ, the divine Word who became human. Williams follows the theological instinct of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (whom Williams engages often in the book), for whom all thinking about God begins with silence before the Word (the Logos) because divine speech always precedes, confronts, enables, and transforms human speech about God.[9] In locating his thinking about God in Christology, he also follows the biblical-theological pattern of God's economic and temporal missions disclosing or revealing God's immanent and eternal being (being-in-relation). As a representative remark, Williams writes,

> The God whose *quid* [i.e., "what-ness," identity] is revealed in Christ is the God who is strictly unspeakable by finite beings but who speaks himself in and as an entirely finite subject, wholly flesh and blood, mortal and vulnerable. This is why we can never speak of the nature of God as an object in anything like the ordinary way: we speak because God has given us (literally) a Word: God has invited us into the life that is his self-expression.[10]

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6 Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

7 For insightful responses, offering penetrating critical and constructive feedback, see: Katherine Sonderegger, "Christ as Infinite and Finite: Rowan Williams' Christ the Heart of Creation," *Pro Ecclesia* 30, no. 1 (2021) 98–113; and Jordan Daniel Wood, "Against Asymmetrical Christology: A Critical Review of Rowan Williams's 'Christ the Heart of Creation,'" *Eclectic Orthodoxy*, Personal Blog (August 4, 2019); online: https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2019/08/04/against-asymmetrical-christology-a-critical-review-of-rowan-williamss-christ-the-heart-of-creation/

8 He comments throughout his book on related concepts, such as aseity, impassibility, immutability, and other classical attributes.

9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin:1932–1933*, vol. 12 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins, and Douglas W. Stott, ed. Larry Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 300. For reflections on theological implications of this, see my article, "Bonhoeffer's Anti-Logos and its Challenge to Oppression," *Crux* 41, no. 2 (2005) 2–9.

10 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218

Moreover, Williams seeks theological clarity and biblical faithfulness by grounding his reflections in the ecumenical tradition of Chalcedon. The Chalcedonian Definition is best understood not as an abstract, Hellenistic intrusion into a purportedly pure, biblical Christianity, but an attempt to clarify what the church *means* and *does not mean* when it confesses that Jesus Christ is "fully God" and "fully human."[11] Its cataphatic (or positive) content includes four basic affirmations: Jesus is fully God (consubstantial with the Father in divinity, thus refuting Arian and Ebionite heresies); Jesus is fully human (consubstantial with us in humanity, thus refuting Docetic and Apollinarian heresies); Jesus is one person (thus refuting Nestorianism); and Jesus has two distinct natures (thus refuting Monophysite and Eutychian heresies).[12] As a contextual and historical document, arguably the definition's unique contribution is apophatic (or negative) in nature, seeking to negate or rule out theological language that describes Christ's Person in ways that are inadequate to the biblical witness and to divine revelation (Jesus Christ as God's Speech-Act, as narrated in Scripture): Christ's two natures, divine and human, are united in such a way that they are *un*confused, *un*changed, *in*divisible, and *in*separable.[13] As such, the definition seeks to guard the tradition *against* the uncritical and inappropriate intrusion of "unbaptized" Hellenistic philosophy into Christian doctrine, yet without simply refusing to engage missionally in questions and assertions urgently in need of response. As such, the Chalcedonian definition works best not in delineating Christological content exhaustively but in establishing the theological grammar (or framework or substructure) for thinking and talking about Christ in biblically-theologically faithful and philosophically adequate ways.[14] As Williams puts it, "Chalcedon—notoriously—offered a neat outline of the agenda rather than a full resolution."[15]

Since Chalcedonian Christology inherently considers the nature of divinity (uncreated being) in relation to and interacting with the nature of humanity (created being), Williams draws implications for how Christology both frees and constrains our theological thinking and speaking about the relationship of the

11 https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.iv.i.iii.html

12 See the discussion in Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 299–318.

13 Some might object that referring to ontological matters ("natures") already takes us well beyond a "purely biblical" view of things. For a recent critique of this notion, along with a constructive proposal for a "biblical" conception of divine ontology, see Michael F. Bird, *Jesus Among the Gods: Early Christology in the Greco-Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2022).

14 Concerning the relation of metaphysics to the Bible and theology, Williams helpfully writes, "Christology, while it is never the instrument of any metaphysical scheme, inevitably poses metaphysical questions, in the sense that it requires us to think about the grammar of our talk about finite being and what might tentatively be said about its relation to infinite being"; and, "metaphysics is never a matter of something to which an argument concludes: it is to do with what is presupposed as the ground of any discourse" (Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 122, 218).

15 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 68.

Creator and the creation/creatures. I will touch briefly on three of these. First, Williams proposes that Christology helps us to reflect theologically on the relationship between the Infinite and the finite. The hypostatic union does not create a third type of being beyond Creator and creature, a demigod or demiurge sort of being (like Heracles or one of the Gnostic emanations). This is not a new insight, but what Williams seeks to show is that we must not envision the Infinite as simply the ultra-superlative of the finite.[16] The latter view is essentially a form of idolatry; it amounts to a "theology" that tries to speak about God by speaking about humanity (and/or the cosmos) in a loud voice, to paraphrase Barth (or we picture the stern, powerful, and distant old man in the sky, to allude to Monty Python).[17] The Infinite is both more radically transcendent—and more intimately immanent—than that! The Infinite is "truly the source, the ground and the context of every limited, finite state of affairs."[18] The Infinite is not the projected teleological perfection of anything at the ultimate end of a chain of being, or the final effect in a long progression of natural (or supernatural) causes, or the most ideal form of any object in its ultimate idealness (or the sum of all such objects); the Infinite is not a "thing," an effect, or an object at all. "God does not belong in a genus . . . God is not a case or instance of anything."[19]

Williams expresses this in several different ways. For example, "Divinity and humanity together cannot *add up* to anything. But an individualized humanity united to a divine principle of distinct agency, what we would call an 'actualizing' presence united with it, poses no such problem."[20] Or, "theology has taken a very decisive step away from any residual idea that divine nature or agency is a vastly magnified version of finite agency."[21] Or, with respect to divine and human natures in Christ, we must recognize "the difficulties of treating divine and human nature as comparable, coexistent clusters of predicates attaching to the individual."[22] And finally, "The classical negatives about divine nature, the insistence on what cannot in any circumstances be predicated of God, are meant to clarify the impossibility of representing God and God's action as any kind of circumscribed presence within the world, and thus the impossibility of

16 "As theology labors over its terminology, what comes into focus is that the life of the infinite is eternally relation and gift—not a bare limitlessness, but the endlessness of a mutual outpouring of life and bliss; so that the infinite Word taking flesh embodies itself as a source and agent of undefended and unconstrained welcome in our world, opening up access to its own relation to its infinite Source" (Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218).

17 Similarly, "*God is not humanity freed from frustration*. The divine life is what it is; the eternal and necessarily existing ground of all, a life that is simply the conscious everlasting generativity we can only call love" (Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218).

18 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, Preface (no page number).

19 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 113.

20 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 15.

21 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 63.

22 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 87.

representing the divine in Jesus as a complementary or additional item in the composition of his identity."[23]

Second, since the Infinite (and every expression of the Infinite) is not a "thing" in the finite universe of physical objects (or even in the spiritual world of finite yet immaterial objects), the Infinite does not "compete" for space, time, resources, causal influence/agency, or anything else. The Infinite thus relates to the finite in a non-competitive or non-rivalrous way.[24] More of God does not necessarily entail less of something else. The Infinite is not a god-of-the-gaps![25] Drawing from Christology, Williams writes, "Creation's relation to God . . . is grounded in the Son's relation to the Father. And since the Son's relation to the Father is not that of one thing to another thing but an unimaginably intimate existence in the other, a non-duality that is not a simple identity, we are steered towards a similar model of the relation between Creator and creation."[26] This has important implications for how we understand God's speech and action in the world. For example, God's revelatory action is "not an interruption of the finite sequence, but a particular configuration of finite agency such that it communicates more than its own immanent content."[27] Moreover, as applied to salvation and reconciliation, "just as the Trinitarian God lives eternally in a relation to the created order that is free from conflict and competition, so the finite self united with the infinite reality of the Word is able to live in reconciled communion with other human persons and to overcome the various life-denying divisions that characterize the fallen finite world."[28]

Third, properly distinguishing between Infinite and finite and thus recognizing the non-competitive relationship between Creator and creation allows us to

23 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 85.

24 This does not entail that the finite does not set itself up in opposition to the Infinite, but that there is nothing inherently rivalrous or competitive between God and God's good creation as finite and created (and contingent).

25 Contemplating such things in his prison cell (May 29, 1944), Bonhoeffer writes, "we shouldn't think of God as the stopgap . . . for the incompleteness of our knowledge, because then—as is objectively inevitable—when the boundaries of knowledge are pushed ever further, God too is pushed further away and thus is ever on the retreat. We should find God in what we know, not in what we don't know; God wants to be grasped by us not in unsolved questions but in those that have been solved . . . . We must recognize God not only where we reach the limits of our possibilities. God wants to be recognized in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering, in action and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. God is the center of life and doesn't just 'turn up' when we have unsolved problems to be solved." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Kraus, and Nancy Lukens, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 405–6.

26 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218.

27 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 5.

28 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 108. Williams notes even political implications: "Christology posits limits to human *logos*, in politics as elsewhere—not to de-realize or dissolve the solidarity of the finite but precisely to ground its finite nature, its density and temporality and locatedness" (p. 192).

give adequate theological expression to the integrity of creation *as finite creation*. God's non-enmeshment with creation points not to God's aloofness or abstractness, but to God's loving nature and God's correlative decision to allow creation the *space* and the *otherness* to be creation.[29] But this requires that we also give adequate theological expression to the integrity of God *to be God*. As Williams expresses it, "If we are to hold to the doctrine that creation is a free or gratuitous bestowal of life, not a necessity for God, we must hold to the integrity of the system of finite causes and interactions. And thus, in such a world, God can act only from the centre of finite life, not as an intruder; otherwise the divine act dissolves the integrity of what is made."[30] Williams argues not on the basis of what must be true 'abstractly,' but in light of how the two natures of Christ are inseparably united yet remain *other*, distinct (unconfused, unchanged, indivisible). Since Christ's infinite otherness is not in competition with the world, but is rather its ground and eschatological telos, he who is Infinite and Other is also present as the one who is "*perfectly creaturely*" and who activates and encourages the world's own being and agency.[31] Drawing on Bonhoeffer's Christological ethics, Williams exclaims, *'In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of the world'*: the event of Jesus Christ is the place where the unconditional eternal reality of God's life coincides with the life of the finite world, not displacing it or 'conquering' it but penetrating and suffusing it in such a way that it is now the case that I may participate *in the world*, since God has committed Godself to that world in all its aspects."[32]

In light of this brief engagement with the thought of Williams, one is prompted

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29 I avoid the word "autonomy" here, in light of its connotations in modern society, politics, and law, which tend place the atomistic individual in the centre over-against others and having "rights" expressed as freedom-from others. The word "autonomy" could work if understood within the framework of a participatory and sacramental cosmos and with the understanding that freedom is also freedom-for-God-and-others.

30 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218.

31 Thus, "Christology is a key to the 'logic of creation' because Christ appears as the *perfectly creaturely*: the unlimited, unconditioned reality of the divine Word animates within creation the active, energetic interweaving of intelligible life that makes finite reality a *universe*, not a chaos; and that interweaving is focused upon the life in which the Word is uninterruptedly active as the determining form of a human identity, realizing what humanity itself is called to be." (Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218.)

32 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 200. Bringing these themes together, Williams writes (p. 11): "Christology, so far from requiring a rethinking of the classical account of divine perfections (impassibility, immutability and so on), actually provides the fullest possible rationale for them. And conversely, the classical modes of characterizing divine life, so far from being abstract and alien importations into a properly scriptural and/or experientially grounded theology, allow created existence its own integrity and dignity, and deliver us from a theology in which God is in danger of being seen simply as a very important or uniquely powerful agent in the universe competing with other agents in the universe for space or control. That God is in no imaginable sense the rival of humanity, that the relation between finite and infinite agency can never be one in which more of one means less of the other, and (crucially) that God can therefore have no 'interests' to defend over against the interest of the creatures God has made out of unconstrained and selfless love."

to provide pushback on some of the claims Middleton makes. For example, he asks, "Is God really 'immutable' (= unchangeable) or did the Word actually become flesh? Is God really 'impassible' (= unaffected) or has God truly known suffering in the 'passion' of Christ?"[33] I wonder: does Middleton mean to imply that the Word was transmuted from its divine nature into a human nature, or that the divine and human natures of Jesus combined into a mixture amounting to a new, third kind of nature, or something else? Or does the rhetorical force of his question only succeed by evading the interrogation of ontological assumptions upon which any specific understanding of "the Word becoming flesh" must necessarily rest? (I will return to the question of divine suffering below). As a second example, Middleton writes, "Luke's Gospel says: 'And Jesus increased in wisdom and in maturity [the word can mean in age or in stature] and in divine and human favor' (Luke 2:52). Jesus clearly changed."[34] Of course, all agree that "Jesus" changed; but does this passage prove that the pre-existent Word—the eternal, second person of the Trinity—changed in these respects? Did the eternal Word—the One for, through, and in whom all things were created and the One in whom all things continue to hold together and cohere—really undergo a process of learning everything that Jesus learned from childhood onward? This seems doubtful, to say the least.

Before moving on to my own reflections on the "classical view," in light of my reading of Williams, it is important to note the pushback Williams has received from other theologians on his more insistent and idiosyncratic proposals. Specifically, Williams is at pains to emphasize the "asymmetrical" (almost unidirectional) relation between the divine Word/Son (the eternal, second person of the Trinity) and the historical, human Jesus. For example, Williams asserts, "We have to find a way of saying that the animated, 'Word-embodying' human substance that is Jesus is a composite reality in which created agency is real and distinct, while *not* claiming that this human substance contributes anything to what the Word eternally is by definition." This is because, such a claim "would undermine the entire structure of the fundamental distinction, the non-dual separation, of infinite and finite on which Christological doctrine rests."[35] Elsewhere, he says that while it is true to say that "one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh," nevertheless, "it would be wrong to say that the Word suffers 'in his divine nature'; not—as I have been trying to argue—simply because of squeamishness about the appropriateness of speaking of God as suffering but because something would then be admitted into the definition of what it means to be God that would

33 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 4.
34 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 3.
35 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 89–90.

be dependent on how things stood in the world, and this would be a fundamental confusion of categories."[36]

Critics charge Williams with an uncharitable reading of certain theological figures and discussions within the great Tradition, including, for example, Luther and the historical discussion of the *communicatio idiomatum* (the communication or interaction of attributes between the divine and human natures of Christ) and nuanced accounts of the hypostatic union which differ from that of Williams (including from Aquinas).[37] This is not the place for me to enter into the technical details of this debate. My suggestion is that this ongoing conversation *within the "classical theist" tradition* points to an awareness of mystery concerning how precisely the divine and human natures interact and affect each other in the one Person of Jesus Christ. This being the case, it seems wise and fitting to acknowledge that the tradition has room for mystery—because there is much we do not know—with respect to the precise details concerning the reciprocally "impacting" relationship between God and God's creation.

Reflections on the Contributions of the "Classical View"

The Central Insight of the "Classical View"

The strengths of the "classical view" largely arise from what is arguably its central insight, which is that the Being we name *God* is utterly transcendent in his essence. Williams is very effective in emphasizing this truth: God is not a "thing" *of any kind* in our finite, material universe; God is not the ultimate superlative of anything (or everything) finite. God is God. This means that all human language about God is inadequate, contingent, partial, and thus tentative and in constant need of qualification and revision. Human beings can never give the last word about God. Genuine human language is always human speech about God's own Speech; human speaking is always a *speaking-after*, followed by constant correction, clarification, and transformation. Anything we say about God must immediately be qualified; for example, we pray to God as Father, and "Father" he is, but not like any father we know from our own limited experience. Human thought and language about God simply fails.[38] It's rather like trying to talk about spiritual or immaterial realities (e.g., consciousness, goodness, dignity,

36 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 98–99. It should be noted that Williams's concern is not to protect some Platonic notion of divinity, but rather to protect the finite, "natural," and embodied integrity of humanity and of God's good creation: "If Jesus suffers, it is a human self that suffers. This means that *it is the affirmation of unequivocal divinity for the Logos that mandates the affirmation of unequivocal humanity for Jesus*. The solution to the conundrum of their unity cannot be found by blurring the definition of either element." (p. 63)

37 Sonderegger, "Christ as Infinite and Finite," 109–13.

38 Particularly within the confines of the fallen world marred and distorted by sin. Whether pre-fallen creation is inherently sacramental such that human language is capable of participating in the divine thought and speech is an important, and different, question.

the "soul," divine action in the world, etc.) within the confines of scientific language. We might point or gesture toward such realities, but we cannot adequately describe them in scientific terms: we can refine our comparisons and metaphors, but there will always be an unbridgeable gap between scientific description and theological language. While in the case of finite existence the gap is not actually ontological but merely epistemological and thus methodological, in the case of God our descriptive challenges go beyond the epistemological and methodological: simply stated, *God is ontologically Other*. As Kierkegaard put it, there is an infinite qualitative difference between God and human beings. God is not simply another dimension of finite reality that one particular method, or set of methods, cannot penetrate to describe (as with one scientific discipline in relation to another, or the sciences in relation to other human disciplines of knowledge and inquiry). God is in God's own category; God is, in fact, *beyond categories altogether*.

This would seem to spell the end for theology, rendering all God-talk impossible and perhaps even ridiculous, especially within the dualistic and desacralized worldview of modernity (or the post-Enlightenment period), which has the tendency of turning *methodological* naturalism into *ontological* naturalism and materialism (and hence "scientifically" positing atheism or at least agnosticism). But assuming the impossibility of theology is not a necessary consequence of recognizing the Infinite; in fact, such an assumption makes the same kind of mistake as the view it seeks to deny, but in the opposite direction—it is a negative (and negating) form of idolatry rather than a positive (asserting) one. Such an assumption rightly discerns that we cannot adequately talk about "God," but it quickly moves on from this, progressing on the presumption that we can therefore adequately talk about "not-God." But both "God" and "not-God" are human constructions that inherently summarize assertions or negations of what exists or does not exist within our finite universe. True apophatic theology does not begin with speculative philosophical assumptions about "what must be true" abstractly, but with a revelatory awareness of the infinite, overwhelming, and unnameable Reality and Presence that is God (and even here, "Reality" and "Presence" are redefined—because (re)constituted—by the disclosure and unveiling of God's active and inexhaustible Being and Act).

Theology can be true and genuine not because human beings grow in their mastery of philosophical language and in their creativity in using religious metaphor and symbolism, but because God efficaciously speaks to us and enables our *speaking-after* God's own Speech. We are incapable of ascending to God through language. Every human attempt to describe the Infinite—however brilliant and profound—amounts to a linguistic tower of Babel. Yet God is more than capable of descending to us in the form of God's own Word and

thereby indwelling, because first creating then *assuming* and *animating*, our conceptual and linguist forms, patterns, and references and, crucially, *transforming them in the process*. Our language on its own is inadequate, yet God is present to us in and through language. Since God is universally present and active, the cosmos is not abandoned to be inert and meaningless; it is "sacramental," full of God's presence and God's speech (e.g., Ps 19:1–6; 24; 139:7–12) which we encounter and apprehend by faith. The Father speaks with his Word and his Breath—and the cosmos comes into being and has meaning, coherence, life, and dynamism. And by the Spirit creation is drawn up into the Son where it is cleansed, purified, redeemed, realigned, healed, enlightened—in short, transformed—in order to offer fitting (and in the case of humans, intelligible) praise and holistic worship (heart, soul, mind, strength) to the Father.

In light of this confession of faith, true and genuine theology is possible (*made* possible) but must necessarily also be responsive, dynamic, contextual, and ongoing; the truth it seeks to express is not inherently inaccessible, but it is *inexhaustible*. Thus, genuine theology is an active and intentional spiritual *practice* of paying attention to God and aligning one's heart, mind, body, and speech to God's own speaking, doing, and willing. Thus also, genuine theological language is analogical, not merely in a philosophical or conceptual or linguistic sense, but in a sacramental and participatory sense. This is why we seek to discern God's Word *in the words of Scripture*—even when interpreting figuratively or typologically—not *in spite of or apart from* the words/narrative in either a kernel-husk abstract kind of way or in a "gnosticizing" allegorical interpretation that completely detaches content from form.

I suggest that it is against this kind of backdrop that the genuine theological meaning of words like omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, and infinity—as describing the divine perfections—should be understood and expressed. The same is true of the divine attributes, including "classical" notions of aseity, simplicity, impassibility, immutability, and so on. The primary point is not to say that God is *incapable* of experiencing certain things finite beings

experience (it's not that God is to be conceived as simply "not-creature"),[39] "suffering" for instance, but that human experience is inadequate and distorting when attempting to describe God's own experiences.[40] We simply have no idea what it's like for God *to be God*. I suggest that this point holds not only because of the nature and limitations of theological language, but also because of the inherently contextual nature of theological language. Words such as "impassibility" and "immutability" did not simply fall from the sky abstractly, nor were they imported from Hellenistic thought in some simplistic and unidirectional kind of way; rather, they were commandeered and employed with specific theological intentions in mind, within particular historical settings, in order to accomplish contextual theological work (both polemic and constructive, both negating and asserting).[41] The following two quotations from Williams are helpful in illustrating this point.

> The classical theological and Christological scheme does not mean *either* that God stands aloof from the suffering of the human instrument he has assumed or any other human individual, *or* that his divine

39 Surely fundamental human experiences must be grounded ultimately in something that is "real" in God (what else would they be grounded in?); in fact, in God, they are *more*—not less—real (in an ultimate sense). Human experience participates in the Real, but in ways that are necessarily finite, partial, divided, myopic, limited, temporal, and – due to our fallenness – distorted and misaligned. For example, T. F. Torrance argues that while God does not experience "time" in a human way (subject to decomposition, having a beginning and an end, etc.), God must experience something like the succession of moments within the divine life, if relationality within the divine life is to make any meaningful sense. See, for example, Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 241.

Or (drawing from Stan Grenz), while God should not be conceived as a sexual being, human sexuality (which embodies our physical "incompleteness" and yearning for union) might be something that is partial, incomplete, and distorted now as a human experience yet also a sign that points beyond itself eschatologically to something it cannot actually fulfill (even in marriage): union with Christ and the Father by the indwelling Spirit (the Spirit who is "in" us—individually and together—places us "in" Christ who is "in" the Father; see John 14–17). Thus, sexuality is a finite and physical reality that acts as a sign of something that is real in God (perichoretic union) but in ways that human language fails to describe adequately (there is both continuity and radical discontinuity between the sign and *both* its human fulfilment in the new creation community *and* its transcendent reality in the triune God). See Stanley J. Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self: Toward a Theology of the *Imago Dei* in the Postmodern Context," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24, no. 1 (2002) 50–57.

40 Similarly, to say that all biblical language is, in some sense, metaphorical is not to suggest that its content is less than factual, but rather to suggest that it is more than merely factual.

41 One could cite many examples of this. One that Williams mentions is the importance of the doctrine of divine simplicity as a critical response to the Gnostic cosmogonies/theogonies, asserting "God's absolute independence of any narrative of change, necessary emanation, division and so on" which is "inseparable from the idea of a creation that is unified and good in itself" (Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 69). I borrow the image of "commandeering" from Alan Torrance (in a class lecture at Regent College, Vancouver): as a police officer commandeers a vehicle and thereby "enables" it to do things it usually cannot do (go through red lights, travel well beyond the speed limit, etc.), so God "commandeers" human language in order to render it efficacious for his purposes.

> "subjectivity" is somehow immersed in and identified with a human psyche, in an extreme instance of intersubjective empathy. The presence of God in or to the sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth is literally immeasurably more intimate than any intersubjective exchange of feeling; but this is not necessarily to qualify in any way what the doctrine of divine impassibility affirms, which is that God is not passive in relation to other agents on the same level, not part of an *interactive* system.[42]
>
> "Ubiquity," the belief that God's presence is not spatially limited, is here [improperly] treated as if it were some sort of positive predicate, the ability to be in every place rather than in only one. But insofar as it can be called a distinctive doctrine in early theology, it is much more an aspect of the *denial* that spatiality is an appropriate category for speaking of God. There is a difference between unlimited spatial "reach" and the denial of spatiality as a mode divine presence.[43]

It seems that "classical theism," at least as Williams represents it, succeeds primarily not by giving us exhaustive and abstract definitions of theological terms, but in providing frameworks that both enrich and constrain the use and ongoing refinement of such terms as they apply to the triune God of Scripture and the Christian Tradition and as they relate to the church's missionary context.

Analogical Language and the Bible

In his blog post on "classical theism," Richard Middleton worries that the classical emphasis on the analogical nature of theological language (for example, in Aquinas) leads to ways of understanding God that do not match the ways in which God is depicted in the Bible. This is a valid and important concern.[44] For example, Middleton writes,

> This psalmist [Ps. 18] had no qualms about describing God in the most outlandish way (so outlandish that Rastafarians could come to use verse 8 as proof that JAH smokes weed); the text piles up images and

42 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 9.
43 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 139.
44 The next line of the blog post is much more puzzling: "Most crucially, classical theism is in fundamental contradiction with the central Christian understanding of the incarnation and the atoning death of Jesus." This seems odd, given that "the central Christian understanding of the incarnation" arose within the framework of classical theism, an understanding which unites all major sub-traditions of the historic Christian Tradition: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant.

> metaphors to portray just how much God was affected by the suffering of his faithful servant.[45]
>
> Despite the clear depiction in the Bible of God being affected by creatures—from God being grieved in his heart at the violence before the flood (Genesis 6:6) to God's "repentance" or change of mind about destroying Israel after the idolatry of the golden calf (Exodus 32:14)—classical theists usually relegate such biblical language to mere metaphor or anthropomorphism.[46]

In response, I would like to make two points. First, I do not think that classical theism must necessarily deny that words like "grief" or "anger" name an experience that is real for God.[47] The point it would make instead is that we really have no idea what it is like for God to "grieve" or "be angry" (in an emotional or existential sense). Certainly, God does not simply *react* in an instinctual kind of way, whereas, for us, many of our emotional responses are grounded in instinct and in social conditioning. Moreover, human experiences of emotion are intrinsically *embodied* in deep and pervasive ways. What would fear, for example, *feel like* to a being who does not sweat, or experience an increased heart rate, or wrestle with flight-fight-freeze reflexes, which are not cognitive but embodied responses embedded in the "primitive" parts of our brain stemming from our evolutionary history? We don't really know. *There is both continuity and radical discontinuity when we think about such words in relation to God*. Much damage has been done (and continues to be done) when Christians read Scripture in ways that do not consider the discontinuity between God's anger and ours (but also God's love and ours). Perhaps what Scripture leads us to do, all things considered, is not to reflect

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45 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 3. E.g., "'Smoke went up from his nostrils / and devouring fire from his mouth; / glowing coals flamed forth from him' (Psalm 18:8). God rode upon a cherub, bowed the heavens, and came down to deliver the supplicant in cloud and thunder and lightning, parting the waters by the blast of his nostrils."

46 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 3.

47 This suggestion is substantiated by the detailed work of Thomas Weinandy, in his book *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), who identifies similar suggestions in Patristic writers of the east and west (Justin Martyr; Aristides, Athenagoras, Theophilus; Irenaeus; Tertullian; Novatian; Lactantius). As one representative example, citing Tertullian: "This does not mean that God is without emotion. Rather it means that God possesses emotions in a divine manner. It is not that God possesses human emotions, but rather that man possesses divine emotions. It is 'palpably absurd of you to be placing human characteristics in God rather than divine ones in man, and clothing God in the likeness of man, instead of man in the image of God. And this, therefore, is to be deemed the likeness of God in man, that the human soul has the same emotions and sensations as God, although they are not of the same kind; differing as they do both in their conditions and their issues according to their nature.' . . . Moreover, unlike us, God's anger is subsumed into his happiness. 'God alone is truly happy, by reason of his property of incorruptibility. Angry he will possibly be, but not irritated, nor dangerously tempted; he will be moved but not subverted.'" (Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 102, citing Tertullian.)

speculatively about "how God feels" but rather to notice and contemplate *how God acts* in response to human suffering, evil, injustice, and so on?

We can reflect similarly on the question of whether or not God suffers. I am not sure that a "classical view" (especially as a *living tradition*) requires us to say that God cannot empathize with God's creatures and especially with human beings.[48] Even the word "suffering" could be permissible, so long as we do not imply (as the word often seems to) that God is *passive* in suffering or simply *at the mercy* of forces outside of God's own being. Within human experience, most suffering is not directly sought out; most suffering *comes upon* humans, *subjects them*, completely beyond their control and outside of their will. Some suffering comes about because of sinful human choices. Some suffering afflicts us apparently randomly within a seemingly chaotic and unpredictable world (e.g., natural disasters). Some suffering comes by way of spiritual affliction or oppression. And sometimes, human beings enter into suffering willingly and actively, perhaps in pursuit of a greater good or in solidarity with others (perhaps here human suffering is most like God's response to suffering or even God's "way of suffering"?). In any case, to be human is to suffer. Can we say "to be God is to suffer" in the same way or without significant qualifications?

The human experience of suffering is also deeply intertwined with our experience of time. Getting a vaccine, for example, involves experiencing minor pain and discomfort for a second or two; most would not call this "suffering." But if the temporal experience of feeling a needle's injection were to be drawn out and extended for days, we would likely call this "suffering." The experience of a present crisis, for instance a break in a relationship or the loss of a loved one, can involve intense suffering; but the passing of time changes our future experience of that event. Applied to God, we do not even need to posit an abstract notion of "atemporality" or "existing outside of time" to realize that we simply do not know how infinite eternality (whatever it is) impacts God's experience of our finite present (remembering that "infinite eternality" does not merely mean *a really, really, really—to the ultimate superlative—long time*, but something beyond linearity as we know it altogether). If one were to experience 1 second of pain and 23 hours, 59 minutes, and 59 seconds of bliss, we probably would not find this "suffering" to be too severe. Whereas a year of pain would be much more difficult

48 "Repentance" or "changing one's mind" seems different to me; it seems more likely to me that instances of God changing his mind or "repenting" reflect the human perspective of the biblical authors, not a sustained and analytical reflection on how it is that God makes decisions. Without even getting into abstract debates about God's foreknowledge, if we simply assume that God has access to all possible information (including the depths of peoples' hearts and thoughts), what would be left to persuade God that God has not already known and considered? Are we really to believe that God is swayed simply by our rhetoric or the passion with which we offer our pleas? This would seem to put us on a very slippery slope toward prosperity or word-of-faith thinking.

to bear. However, if we were beings that lived for millions of years, our sense of time and thus of suffering might be quite different and one year of pain might not seem like "suffering" to us.[49]

There are, of course, limits to this analogy. My point is simply that we do not really understand what we mean when we ask whether or not God "suffers." I do not think that it is problematic, within a "classical" view, to believe that God can empathize with human suffering. But can God experience trauma, that is, something that is inherently incapacitating? If not, can God empathize with those who experience trauma (i.e., if we accept he premise that if God does not experience something we experience, then God cannot sufficiently empathize with us)? It seems to me that too little empathy would inhibit God's capacity to love, while too much empathy would inhibit God's capacity to do everything else.[50] This is because empathy tends to make the present and immediate context all-absorbing and our perspective myopic.[51]

Second, in the passages Middleton quoted, while we should not dismiss what is depicted as *mere* metaphor, surely we do still have to distinguish metaphorical language (and anthropomorphisms) from more "literal" statements. Most of these are rather obvious: God does not literally have a heart, nostrils, have smoke coming from his nostrils and mouth, and so forth. Sometimes, though, scriptural language that should not be taken literally is not obviously metaphorical (specifically within the narrative world of Scripture itself). For example, Scripture generally depicts God as male: the imagery for God is predominantly masculine, the personal pronouns for God are male, many of the Bible's major symbols and titles for God are culturally masculine (e.g., King), and Jesus characteristically refers to

49 The equivalent ratio applied to one million years amounts to 11.57 years. To us, 11.57 years of intense suffering might seem unbearable, but it is the same ratio as one second in one twenty-four-hour day.

50 To provide a personal example, in the midst of writing this paper, we faced a family crisis that was potentially devastating (my seventeen-year-old son had to be taken to the hospital by ambulance with to symptoms very similar to those caused by a stroke). Thankfully (praise God!), the problem turned out to be relatively minor (an atypical migraine causing neurological disruptions). But, in my love and concern and worry for my son—in short, my empathy—I was completely incapacitated from doing anything productive in a creative, scholarly, or compositional sense. Whatever it means for God to experience "empathy," it cannot mean this. Otherwise, the universe would fall into chaos and destruction! Similarly, for those who care for others professionally (counsellors and therapists), empathy is important but also very limited and potentially counter-productive for good practice (e.g., dual relationships, transference, etc.). A client needs another human person who is present, but also one who transcends the present context (offering some distance and perspective) and is not absorbed by empathy.

51 For a fascinating and evidence-based treatment of this topic, see Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2016). The capacity to empathize is important and helpful, especially on an individual basis, but empathy alone—or apart from other capacities such as reasoning—can be disastrous, especially at larger scales (e.g., at the level of professional, societal, or legal policy-making). It bears both the strengths and weaknesses of anecdotal experience and evidence.

God as "Father." To be sure, Scripture also uses feminine imagery to talk about God (this is very important!), but it does not refer to God directly as "Mother" or as "she." On this basis, some argue that the Bible's masculine language points to something direct or "real" about God, while its feminine language is a metaphorical way of talking about something else about God (God's character, or the manner of God's actions, or God's care for his creature, and so forth).[52] For the record, I do *not* think that God *is* male.[53] I am just pointing out that the Bible has "no qualms about describing God in the most outlandish[ly male] way" (to quote Middleton out of context) *over and over again*. So much so that many feminist theologians regard the Bible to be a thoroughly and inescapably patriarchal text. The correct response, in my view, is not simply to point out that the Bible also envisions God as female (so that God is, what, some kind of androgenous or intersexual being?) but that sex and gender are created categories describing procreative creatures and God is not a created (and procreating) being; *God transcends sex and gender altogether* (though perhaps the unique experiences of women and men point to something that is real but transcendent and indescribable in God?). In order to make this kind of qualification, however, we cannot but appeal to the analogical nature of theological language for God and to categories such as divine infinity and simplicity.

Theological Reflection and the Bible

I have often noticed that biblical scholars and theologians ask different kinds of questions. As a result, sometimes their proposals can seem to point to different, mutually exclusive conclusions, when in fact this is not necessarily the case. A good recent example of this is the debate concerning whether or not human beings possess a "soul" that is distinguishable from their body (as an immaterial "thing" or "substance"). Recently, some biblical scholars have argued against the "classical" view of the soul, namely some version of dualism, and instead promoted a purportedly "biblical" view which is more closely aligned with physicalism (e.g., non-reductive physicalism or "holism," perhaps bolstered by emergence theory). This newer view often combines insights from "neuroscience" with biblical scholarship that attempts to show that the "classical" view of the soul is not a biblical

52 Simon Turpin, "Is God Male or Female? An Overview of God Revealed as Male in Scripture and a Critique of Feminist Biblical Revisionism," *Answers in Genesis*, online: https://answersingenesis.org/who-is-god/god-male-female/

53 See my blog post, "Is God Male?" on the *Junia Project* website (incidentally, the post was inspired by my reading of Aquinas, specifically his discussion of substantive and adjectival predication of the divine names): https://juniaproject.com/is-god-male/

idea but a philosophical one.[54] The essence of the argument is that the Bible does not support the notion of the "soul"; one does not arrive at the classical notion of the "soul" as a legitimate deductive application of biblical exegesis. When the Bible uses words traditionally translated as "soul," it typically refers to the whole person (Gen 2:7 is a good example) and perhaps sometimes to the interior dimension of the human person holistically conceived, not to a distinct and potentially separable spiritual substance or essence. We might say, exegetically, that the Bible's view of the "soul" is, at the most, underdetermined (perhaps like its view of the afterlife more generally).

The problem with this kind of argument, however, is that it does not account for how Christian philosophers and theologians arrive at the notion of the "soul" (if not minimizing or evading philosophical and theological concerns altogether). Granted, if one begins with the Bible and simply seeks to deduce what it explicitly teaches, one does not on that basis conclude that substance dualism is a "biblical" idea. (Of course, this is true of lots of things that are not strictly "biblical" but real nonetheless, such as DNA, protons, bacteria, etc.).[55] However, if one poses the question differently, things become more complicated. For example, is it possible for a human being to exist consciously without their body, even temporarily? If so, how do we explain that? What precisely *is* this non-physical or non-material aspect of the person that retains some level of agency and consciousness in a disembodied state? And might the Bible shed any light on these questions at all,

54 I place scare quotes around "neuroscience" because, properly speaking, no scientific method can tell us whether or not an immaterial object or substance exists: its conclusions on this matter are predetermined not by Reality but by method. For a profound and insightful critique of currently fashionable strains of scientistic reductionism (what the author calls "parascientific" views and literature), see Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). I say that some biblical scholarship "attempts to show" that the 'soul' is not biblical because some passages remain at least suggestive concerning the existence of an immaterial "part" of the human constitution. See, for example, the treatment offered in Joshua R. Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology: Humans, Both Creaturely and Divine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 19–50. A good example of a biblical scholar arguing against the classical view of the soul is Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 81–85; see also Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

55 Similarly, in response to the "classical" view of God's atemporality, Middleton writes, "the Bible has no conception of an atemporal "eternity"—in either the Old or New Testament. No biblical texts that have the term "eternal" (in English translation) ever mean atemporality (being outside of time). This isn't just my opinion; it is the view of every reputable biblical scholar I have encountered." (Middleton, "God's Relationality," 4.) But this settles nothing, because the Bible has no understanding whatsoever of "space-time" as we know it (or how relativity impacts our experience and understanding of time). The Bible's view is inadequate (or under-developed) in this respect, both scientifically and philosophically. This is not a weakness of the Bible, as the Bible is not primarily trying to do science or philosophy; at the same time, scientific and philosophical matters not addressed in the Bible are still important! I am not arguing here that the "atemporal view" is correct, just that the so-called "biblical view" is neither necessarily exhaustive nor fully determinative in understanding finite "time," much less eternal "time" (whatever that might be).

however underdeveloped? Here is where the philosophical notion of the "soul" becomes useful. It names something that, while not a conclusion from biblical exegesis, is potentially true about human beings on the basis of other things we know (or suspect) to be true from Scripture and from human experience.

Other questions bolster the philosophical appeal of the "soul"; for example, how do we account for the continuity of the person (*who am I?*) on the basis of the physical body alone when we know that our future bodies (e.g., twenty years from now) will be totally different from the bodies we presently possess (I mean this literally: our current cells will have expired and those we will have in the future will be copies via genetic replication—with minor changes and mutations along the way—and then copies of copies, and so on). How can I say that the "me" who exists twenty years from now (or twenty years ago) is the same 'me' who exists presently? What precisely is the entity I refer to as me/I? What about the continuity of my personhood over the course of my existence: is the embryonic 'me,' the toddler 'me,' the teenaged 'me,' the adult 'me,' and the senior 'me' the same person? I imagine we would respond, 'yes and no,' but to the degree that our answer is 'yes,' what allows us to say that, ontologically? Perhaps we would appeal to memory (embodied in the brain) to explain the continuity of the person, but what then becomes of the person who suffers memory loss or dementia? Are they the same person, ontologically, or not? If so, how so?[56] Can the person really be reduced to the physical or the material (however physically complex)? Arguments for non-reductive physicalism tend to appeal to notions such as emergence to explain the qualitatively different states that arise as the result of increasingly biological complexity, but even emergence cannot fill the gap that remains between scientific description and spiritual (and nonmaterial) realities and entities (no scientific term can). The answers to these kinds of questions are complex; they are not reducible to a narrow and naïve biblicism or scientism.[57]

My intention here is not to offer a robust argument for the existence of the soul but to point out that on this matter the disciplines of theology and biblical studies ask different kinds of questions and thus come to use language and concepts in different kinds of ways. Conclusions that appear, on the surface of things, to be incommensurable and/or mutually exclusive are *not necessarily so*. Theological language does not seek to erase, displace, or replace the Bible's narrative or its

56 To appreciate the philosophical complexity of such questions, see Richard Swinburne, *Are We Bodies or Souls?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

57 Not to mention mystical experiences, near-death (or death and resuscitation) experiences, or the sense that a dying person lingers and then dissipates gradually upon death, or the rare cases of sudden lucidity in patients with severe dementia or memory loss right before death, and so on. For a fascinating account of such things, which is both open yet also quite cautious theologically, see Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Encountering Mystery: Religious Experience in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).

use of language; rather, in dialogical engagement with all language games, thought forms, speech patterns, and disciplines of knowledge and inquiry, it draws us *back to the biblical narrative in different, enriched ways*. It helps us to exhaust human thought (not cheaply, but in good faith) and opens us to engage divine revelation and its written codification in fresh and contextual ways. Moreover, the Bible itself does this kind of theological work as its narrative progresses, taking up, recapitulating, and transforming formerly received revelation and tradition within the context of its present readership and audience.

Conclusion

In closing, I suggest that classical theism does not offer the last word on definitive and exhaustive definitions concerning God's being and attributes, or on concepts such as infinity, immutability, impassability, aseity, and the various "omni" attributes. Rather, what the classical view does best, especially when reading Scripture well and in close dialogue with biblical scholars, is *to interrogate critically what we mean when we use human language for God*. It rests on the insistence that God is Transcendent and Self-Sufficient in God's eternal triune life and we, as finite, temporal, contingent, limited, and perspectival creatures, have absolutely no idea what it is like for God *to be God*. What we confess about God's being, character, inner life, and will, we confess by faith on the basis of divine revelation and we try to make educated guesses and "faithful improvisations" on the implications of divine revelation in response to new questions posed by philosophy, science, and all the various disciplines of human learning and experience.[58] Here we must progress both by way of tentative constructive proposals and (perhaps with a higher degree of certainty) with negations, constraints, and deconstructions in response to human conceptual overreach concerning God (i.e., idolatry). Does "God" "suffer"? Perhaps yes *and* no. It depends very much on what we mean by "God" and what we mean by "suffer." Does God "change" and is God "affected" by human beings? Again, it depends on what we mean by these terms, what specific misconceptions we might need to correct, and how such terms apply to God and to human beings in both continuous and radically discontinuous ways.

Furthermore, acknowledging the critical function that classical theological language for God plays can help us think contextually and missionally as we do constructive theology in the present. For example, reflecting critically on God's immutability might find practical application in one of two directions. At times when God is perceived to be distant and transcendent while human suffering is

58 In referring to "faithful improvisation," I am alluding to Kevin J. Vanhoozer's *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). The term "faithful improvisation" was used earlier by J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1995), 182–84.

severe and its need for God's presence in suffering great, then divine immutability might actually serve to critique false notions of transcendence.[59] However, in cultural settings where God is perceived to be too similar to human beings, or where divine immanence is overemphasized—such that God's love, compassion, personal presence, and even casual familiarity to us are emphasized to the neglect or even exclusion or denial of God's holiness, justice, invisibility, and otherness/transcendence—then the relevance and utility of theological witness to God's immutability intensifies.[60] Without such theological reflection equipped with adequate conceptual categories, many seem vulnerable to simply assimilate the Bible's simple and straight-forward language about God into their preconceptions and culturally-formed worldview and/or social imaginary.

And so, may the dialogue continue, may the church's witness be ever clarified and unified, and may we not succumb to the temptation—on any side of any issue—to resolve the mystery and the tension of Scripture, divine revelation, and human experience prematurely, uncritically, or unreflectively!

59 I think, for example, of the context in which Julian of Norwich did her theological reflection and work. See Patrick S. Franklin, "Julian of Norwich: Her Life, Contribution, and Contemporary Significance," in *Between the Lectern and the Pulpit: Essays in Honour of Victor A. Shepherd*, ed. Rob Clements and Dennis Ngien (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2014), 18–21.

60 It seems to me that contemporary North American culture struggles with both forms of the distortion. In many ways, we see the effects of "moral therapeutic deism" impacting peoples' lives, hence the need for God's immutability in the service of critiquing overly abstract and depersonalized views of the divine. But in other ways, we see the effects of sentimental, self-focused, pop-spiritualities, whether in the "Jesus is my boyfriend" worship in some evangelical circles or the more self-actualizing (and God/the universe is always on my side) focus of much of our culturally popular forms of spirituality.

Sub Similitudine Corporalium: Scripture, Metaphor, and the "Classical" Synthesis in Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

In a recent article published as a blog post (https://jrichardmiddleton.com/2022/12/08/gods-eternity-and-relationality-in-the-bible-why-i-am-not-a-classical-theist/), J. Richard Middleton explains that he does not regard himself as a "classical theist" due to his inability to reconcile traditional philosophical categories describing God's character with the portrayal of God in Scripture. Middleton explicitly contrasts the biblical portrayal of God's relationality and adaptability with classic categories of divine simplicity and immutability. This brief intervention is something of a qualified apologia for classical theism. I have two main points to make: (1) that classical doctrines such as divine immutability are most fundamentally answers to questions; to understand them, we have to understand the questions to which the doctrine is an answer. And (2) metaphor in general—and scriptural metaphor in particular—is not just failed literal speech; rather, it has a positive, generative role to play in philosophical and systematic theology. Once we appreciate these two points, I think it becomes easier to see what classical theists are on about when they affirm such doctrines in light of Scripture.

I'm grateful to be participating in this wonderful discussion, and for Richard's graciousness in engaging all three of us. It takes considerable generosity—intellectual and otherwise—to allow one's work to be subject to such scrutiny (a blog post, no less!). And so we are all indebted to him. This brief intervention is a response to some core claims Richard makes about why he's not a classical theist. As you might imagine, I don't see things quite the same way.

I have two main points to make: (1) that classical doctrines such as divine immutability are most fundamentally *answers to questions*; to understand them, we have to understand the questions to which the doctrine is an answer. And (2) metaphor in general—and scriptural metaphor in particular—is not just failed

literal speech; rather, it has a positive, generative role to play in philosophical and systematic theology. Once we appreciate these two points, I think it becomes easier to see what classical theists are on about when they affirm such doctrines in light of Scripture. I'll resource the work of Aquinas to this end—not just because Richard mentions him as a paradigmatic instance of the sort of thinking he rejects, but also because I think he has a differentiated, insightful account of precisely this issue.

My paper goes like this: first, with a brief rundown of key points in Middleton's post; second, with a brief accounting of Aquinas's "erotetic" systematic method and its importance for grasping what is at issue in these classical doctrines; and finally third, a discussion of Aquinas's account of the metaphoricity of Scripture and its necessary role in the development of these sorts of doctrines.

Middleton's Position

Richard mentions two "major problems" with the concept of God that emerges from classical theism. For brevity's sake, I'll focus on the first:

> The view of God in classical theism simply does not match the way God is portrayed in the Bible, where God enters into genuine relationships with creatures, and is significantly affected (changed) by these relationships. God changes."[1]

The relevant view of God here is, of course, the classical doctrine of immutability, which in the Thomistic idiom is a straightforward implication of God's being Pure Act, without any intrinsic potencies.[2] According to Richard, there is a "clear depiction in the Bible of God being affected by creatures—from God being grieved in his heart at the violence before the flood (Gen 6:6) to God's 'repentance' or change of mind about destroying Israel after the idolatry of the golden calf (Exod 32:14)."[3] As far as I can tell, for Richard these passages feature "literal" descriptions—at least to the extent that they imply changes in God's mental and/or emotional states (e.g., the change from having a destructive intention to a non-destructive one). By contrast, he continues, "classical theists usually relegate such biblical language to mere metaphor or anthropomorphism."[4] And although he doesn't say so explicitly, it seems clear that Richard thinks classical theists are *wrong* to "relegate" such language. After all, to relegate is to downgrade, and to downgrade scriptural language should not be the business of the theologian.

Now it is this very point—that classical theists are guilty of "relegating"

1 J. Richard Middleton, "God's Relationality and Eternity in the Bible: Why I Am Not a Classical Theist," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (2023) 3.
2 See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.9.1.
3 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 3.
4 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 3.

scriptural language to "mere" metaphor—that betrays what I take to be the mistake to which my paper is principally responding. My view is that Richard is correct to say that classical theists are wont to read such passages metaphorically (or otherwise figuratively), but that he is wrong to suggest that this implies some sort of "relegation" of scriptural language. In other words, what Richard sees as a *relegation* I see as a *proper ordering*—an ordering in which such metaphors play a necessary, generative role in philosophical and systematic theology. To see the point, we need some introduction to Aquinas's methodology.

Aquinas's Erotetic Methodology

Aquinas is well-known for his writing in the so-called "disputed questions" genre.[5] What is less well-known—and what I think is important for our discussion here—is that such this genre is also indicative of Aquinas's more philosophically interesting commitment to what contemporary philosophers of science today call an "erotetic" account of explanation.[6] The idea here is that explanations—theological explanations included—are best thought of as *answers to questions*.[7] The point is simple enough to grasp, but in my view its implications are rarely appreciated in contemporary classical theism debates: to have understood a doctrine is to have understood the *question*(*s*) to which it is an answer.

Let's consider Richard's remarks on the doctrine of immutability with this in mind. Here is an extended quote from his blog post:

> The reasoning is that if God were affected by anything outside of the divine self, this would demean God. This particular idea is central to Aristotle's understanding of the "unmoved mover" in *Metaphysics* Book 12 (I wrestled with this chapter in a graduate paper I wrote during my MA studies).
>
> Part of Aristotle's argument is that God must be immutable (that is, unchanging) because God is perfect; any change in a perfect God would therefore be a degeneration, a change for the worse.
>
> Aristotle also assumed (as did his teacher, Plato) that to be the subject of "action" (to be an agent) is better than to be the object of "passion" (to be the recipient of someone else's action). Since God is perfect, he must be "impassible," in that nothing affects him. This is

5 This genre involves the statement of an (either-or) question, objections, a "sed contra" usually featuring some authority, a response, and replies to objections.

6 This term was popularized by Bas C. van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980).

7 For an erotetic approach to theology, in particular, see Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, vol. 3 of *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Fredrick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, 5th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

> a more technical way of articulating the doctrine of divine immutability.

Many Christian theologians have bought into some version of this understanding of God.[8]

So, on Richard's view, the classical view of immutability is motivated by the conviction that God would be "demeaned," made imperfect, etc., were he subject to change. But here's the thing: as a classical theist, I don't know if I agree or disagree with this characterization of the doctrine, because I'm not sure which questions Richard takes the doctrine to be answering.

Here's how I would characterize the doctrine of immutability—if nothing else, to get my point about the importance of an erotetic model of explanations.

1. Why do we speak of things "changing" at all? What are we referring to when we speak of change?

This is a question that Aquinas thinks we need to understand and answer if we are going to understand immutability. And, as it happens, the classical tradition he represents has some rather precise answers.

Aquinas thinks that it's a matter of correct intuition to be able to distinguish two fundamental ways things in the world can be present to us: (a) as something that *actually is*; and (b) as something that *could be* (but is not yet).[9] For example, Steve *actually is* human, roughly 6 feet tall, agreeable, etc., but he is *not* actually feeling the excitement of being a fan of the 2024 World Series champion baseball team. This is because, among other reasons, the 2024 World Series has not occurred. But Steve *could be* (but is not yet) feeling this excitement. For Aquinas, we can speak of Steve changing because we can identify differences across time when it comes to what Steve *actually is* and what he *could be*. When Vlad Jr. gets that historic walkoff hit in early November, Steve's feeling of excitement will no longer be a matter of what *could be*; rather, it will be what *actually is*. Steve will have undergone a change.

But obviously this question alone is not going to suffice if we want to understand the doctrine of immutability. For all we know, there is no reason that God should be any different from Steve when it comes to the ability to change. We need to follow up:

8 Middleton, "God's Relationality," 1–2.

9 I am riffing off of Aquinas's *De principiis naturae* here, the most accessible account of change in Aquinas's corpus. See Aquinas, *The Principles of Nature* in *Aquinas: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nature*, ed. R. A. Kocourek, (St. Paul, MN: North Central Publishing Co., 1948).

2. How is change possible in the first place? What is it about the world that makes it possible for things to change?

There are some obvious things to note here, and then some non-obvious ones. First: if Steve's emotional state is going to change in the abovementioned way, he must first *lack* the excitement that he will later enjoy when Vlad gets the hit. If Steve had always enjoyed this excitement, then it would not make sense to say that he has undergone a change. Second: it must be the case that there in fact *could be* such an excitement in the first place. If baseball were never invented, then again this change would be impossible on account of a relevant extrinsic factor (i.e., there would be no such thing as a "World Series win"). Finally, third obvious thing: if Steve himself were not materially disposed to the experience of excitement, then again this change would be impossible—this time on account of an intrinsic factor (Steve's having the relevant brain states, for example). If Steve suffers brain damage in the relevant areas, it won't happen.

For Aquinas, a world of change is a world of things in which these conditions are satisfied: (1) an initial *lack* of the end state of change; (2) the *very possibility* of the end state of change; and (3) the material disposition to the end state of change. These three necessary conditions are what Aquinas calls "principles of generation" (privation, form and matter)[10]; they have to be in place if there is going to be any change at all, whether Steve is involved or not.

But there is a fourth principle that is perhaps not as obvious—one that is especially important for the doctrine of immutability. What *actually is* is explanatorily prior to what *could be*—not the other way around. And this makes some sense if we think about it. Just because the abovementioned conditions hold in Steve's case does not mean that the relevant change will occur! Vlad Jr. *actually has to get the hit*. Steve's parents *actually have to have met*. Baseball *actually has to have been invented*. Steve's brain *actually has to be intact* (etc.). And the point generalizes: "before" any change at all occurs, there must be some explanation in terms of some actually existing "agency."[11] Let's ask our question now:

3. Does God change?

Some readers may already recognize that we have the basic logic in place for Aquinas's "First Way," the argument (for God's existence) from motion. A serious

10 "Therefore there are three principles of nature: matter, form and privation. One of these, form, is that by reason of which generation takes place; the other two are found on the part of that from which there is generation." Aquinas, *The Principles of Nature*, c. 2.

11 "What is in potency cannot reduce itself to act; for example, the bronze which is in potency to being a statue cannot cause itself to be a statue, rather it needs an agent in order that the form of the statue might pass from potency to act." Aquinas, *The Principles of Nature*, c. 3.

analysis of the argument is beyond my purposes here.[12] But perhaps we can see the point: If every change—that is, every transition from what *could be* to what *actually is*—occurs in virtue of some actually existing prior agency, then we have to wonder about those actually existing prior agencies. Is their agency a product of change or not? If it is, then there are further prior agencies. A causal chain of prior agencies emerges—the only possible explanation of which is an agency that is not itself a result of change.[13]

Now of course there is lots that could be said at this point about the First Way itself. But it is more important for my purposes is to appreciate *what it would mean* for Aquinas to say that God changes. Let's take Exodus 32 (God's "repentance") as an example, and our aforementioned "principles of generation" as our guiding framework. First, we would be saying that God in his "initial state" *lacks* (privation) some form, presumably the emotional state of gentleness that is the end state of this purported change. For classical theists, this is bizarre in itself, but perhaps not as bizarre as the idea that God has some sort of *material disposition* (matter) to be able to change in the relevant way. Unless we are willing to countenance divine limbic systems, it's hard to know what could possibly count as the relevant factor here.[14] But arguably worst at all (from a classical theist perspective, at least) is another straightforward implication: since change is always explicable in virtue of a prior agency, any change in God would have to be explicable in terms of an agency prior to God. But of course the whole point of speaking of God in the first place is to speak of that to which nothing is prior or more fundamental.

This is why Aquinas and so many other classical theists in the history of Christian (and non-Christian, for that matter)[15] philosophical theology have affirmed the doctrine of immutability in some form—the upshot of which is really just the conviction that the world is explained in virtue of God's creativity, not God in virtue of the world's.

But let me emphasize something here: I am *not* saying that it is blindingly

12 For a lucid presentation of the argument, see Edward Feser *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 17–68.

13 "If that by which something moves is itself moved, then this thing must itself be moved by another, and that by another again. But this cannot proceed unto infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover, since subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are moved by the first mover, as the staff moves only because it is moved by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, moved by no other." Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.2.3. All translations from the Latin are mine unless otherwise noted.

14 Perhaps the non-classical theist should suggest the possibility of emotions without material substrate. But it's important to note that we know of no such emotions, and that our notion of what counts as an emotion is intimately material. If God has emotions, they are very unlike human emotions.

15 For a rundown of the doctrine of simplicity in non-Christian religious traditions, see David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 134–42.

obvious that God doesn't change, or that critics of classical theism are just spouting nonsense. Rather, what I am saying is that immutability is (somewhat) obvious *when we understand the questions to which it is an answer*. In other words, if we ask and answer the questions about "change" in the way that Aquinas does, we can see rather easily that it doesn't make sense for God to change. God is not a subject of privation of form to which he is materially disposed, on account of some prior actuality's agency. If we ask different questions, though, we may well get different answers. None of us are obliged to ask the same questions that Aquinas and other classical theists have asked about change in the past. For all I've shown, there might be available to us some other set of questions that could lead someone to utter the sentence, "God changes."[16] In fact, in a way, I want to offer a defense of such sentences, from a classical theist perspective.

But let me insist on this: when we fail to ask the questions to which classical doctrines are answers, we cannot say for ourselves that we have achieved a genuine disagreement (or agreement, for that matter).

Scripture, Metaphor, and the Systematic Task

At this point, we might wonder: even if we do ask the philosophical/systematic questions that Aquinas asks, though, there is a lingering question: what are we to make of the scriptural passages that Richard identifies in his post? What are we to make of God's "nostrils" in Psalm 18? Are they "mere metaphors or anthropomorphism," or is there more to say here? As it happens, I do think there is more we can say, but not because God has nostrils.

Now this much is certainly true: for the classical theist who is interested in philosophical or systematic theology, such passages definitely *do* involve metaphorical ascriptions—a point with which Richard himself seems to agree.[17] But there is another point—one that I think is crucial, and often missing from these debates: scriptural metaphors are not simply failed philosophical or systematic theology. On the contrary, as Aquinas himself and many other classical theists have argued, such scriptural metaphors are not only fitting but necessary for the task of theology.[18] To see the point, let me turn to Aquinas's most famous treatment of this question.

In *Summa theologiae* 1.1.9, Aquinas considers the question of whether Scripture should use metaphors. He answers in the affirmative, of course, citing Hosea

16 I am skeptical of the theoretical fruitfulness of such lines of thought, of course. But I think it's an important implication of my argument here that this is possible.

17 "The text piles up images and metaphors to portray just how much God was affected by the suffering of his faithful servant." Middleton, "God's Relationality," 3.

18 "The poet uses metaphors for representation, for men are naturally delighted by representation. But sacred doctrine uses metaphors *by necessity and utility*." Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.1.9 ad 1. Emphasis mine.

12 as an authority. As Aquinas's Latin Vulgate has it, God reminds his people: *ego visionem multiplicavi eis.* ("I have multiplied visions to them"). Important here is that it is the prophetic *vision*—not intellectual *concepts*—that is God's preferred medium. In other words, God's way of addressing his people is "from the bottom up," as it were, by forming sensory, imaginative, memorial, and indeed experiential dimensions of human cognition—the very dimensions that metaphorical or otherwise figurative language principally addresses. Over the course of the article, Aquinas gives two main reasons why this visionary/imaginative manner of speech is more fitting for Scripture than some sort of divinely inspired philosophical or systematic theology.

The first and perhaps most obvious reason is that Scripture is for everybody, and not everyone has the capacity (intrinsic or extrinsic) to complete the arduous study that is required to do high-level philosophical or systematic theology.[19] But there is another reason that is more interesting for my purposes.

The second reason that Scripture ought to use metaphorical language pertains to the nature of human cognition *as such* (i.e., not just the non-studious among us). For Aquinas, what is ultimately *intelligible* is first *sensory*, as all knowledge comes through the senses. We mentioned before that Aquinas adopts of an erotetic method of investigation in the sciences, i.e., one that emphasizes the primacy of questions. But questions don't come from nowhere; rather, for Aquinas, questions can only come from *experience* (and experience from memory, memory from imagination, and imagination from sense).[20] His view of human cognition involves our encounter with a rich, heterogenous range of data—the testimony of sense, imagination, etc.—before there can even be a question (much less an answer) in the first place.

The philosopher of science Susan Haack argues in a Thomistic spirit when she says that a metaphor "prompts thought in a *specific direction*."[21] Physicists speak of "frictionless planes," chemists imagine molecular structure with connected "balls and sticks," biologists describe plants and animals as "investing" in offspring (etc.). And the reason they do so is that such language clears new ground

19 "It is also fitting for sacred Scripture, which is offered to everyone, without distinction of persons (Rom. 1:14: 'To the wise and to the unwise I am a debtor') that spiritual things be offered under the similitudes of bodily things, so that thereby even the simple who are unable by themselves to grasp intelligible things may be able to grasp them." Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.1.9c.

20 "In men science and art come from experience, . . . for when an inexperienced person acts rightly, this is by chance. But the way in which art comes from experience is the same as that already mentioned, in which experience comes from memory. For just as one experiential knowledge comes from many memories of a thing, so does one universal judgment of all similars come from the apprehension of many experiences. Thus art has this [unified view] more than experience, since experience concerns only singulars, whereas art is about universals." Aquinas, Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, trans. John P. Rowan (St. Augustines Dumb Ox Books, 1995), I.1.

21 Susan Haack, "The Art of Scientific Metaphors," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 75.4 (2019) 2049–66.

for reflective questions—questions that would not have been possible otherwise. And these scientific metaphors wield a powerful form of authority, since the questions we ask determine the range of possible answers. But nobody thinks that there "really are" frictionless planes, that molecules "really look like" balls and sticks, that plants and animals "invest" in anything.

On Aquinas's view, scriptural metaphors work similarly. When God is described as angry at the suffering of his servant—so much so that smoke and divine nostrils are involved—these are metaphors. That is, it's probably not going to be especially illuminating for a systematic theology to affirm that God has literal nostrils, nor that he literally gets angry in any sort of recognizably human sense, etc.

But it is not a "mere" metaphor; for it is a powerful image indeed that should cause a Christian philosophical/systematic theologian to ask questions that would not have occurred to her otherwise. What is truly first and last when it comes to the seeming catastrophe that is human history, such that the cries of a single sufferer shake the foundations of the world? What would it be to be liberated accordingly? For things to have been finally made right?

As it happens, Aquinas does in fact have a detailed lecture on these very passages in this psalm, which he prefaces with the following remark: "But the effect of divine power is maximally manifest in bodily things, since we know spiritual things in a lesser way; and that is principally what men wonder about."[22] It's not my task to defend any one of Aquinas's interpretive choices, or indeed those of any particular classical theist. But surely this much is correct. God makes himself known to us "from the bottom up," as it were—and we are sensitive, imaginative souls before we are intellectual. What little knowledge we have of spiritual things is quite appropriately mediated by that which is bodily, and it is the irreplaceable effect of scriptural metaphor to lift us accordingly.

Conclusion

This brief intervention is unlikely to convince anyone on its own, of course. But, at least to the extent that it is successful, perhaps these two observations can reorient our ongoing classical theism debates in helpful ways. To reiterate: I think that Richard is correct to say that classical theists often opt for metaphorical interpretations of the sorts of scriptural passages, and that they do so for systematic reasons. But I think that he is wrong to suggest that such interpretations amount to a relegation of Scripture. On the contrary, scriptural metaphors are critically important for philosophical and systematic theology *qua* metaphors. God is not a body, but we are. Therefore, it is fitting that we know him *sub similitudine corporalium*.

22 Aquinas, *Comentario al Libro de los Salmos*, trans. and ed. Carlos A. Casanova, ed. of the Latin text Enrique Alarcón (Centro de Estudios Tomistas of the Universidad Santo Tomás–RIL Editores, 2014–2020).

God Language, Conceptual Frameworks, and the Bible: Why I Am (Still) Not a Classical Theist

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Abstract

This essay is my response to a panel discussion organized by Stephen M. Martin, with Charles Meeks, Patrick Franklin, and Joshua Harris as panelists, each of whom interacted with my online article (published as blog post) on why I am not a "classical theist" (https://jrichardmiddleton.com/2022/12/08/gods-eternity-and-relationality-in-the-bible-why-i-am-not-a-classical-theist/). The article explained my difficulty in reconciling traditional philosophical categories describing God's character (often called "classical theism") with the portrayal of God in Scripture. I focused on the Bible's portrayal of God's relationality and adaptability in contrast to classic categories of divine simplicity and immutability. I also suggested that the Bible never portrays God's eternity in terms of existence outside of time, an idea that is usually associated with classical theism. Both the blog post and the response essays are published in this issue of the *Canadian-American Theological Review*. This response to my respondents engages select themes from their essays, explaining why I am still not a classical theist.

In December 2022 I wrote a blog post called "God's Relationality and Eternity in the Bible: Why I Am Not a Classical Theist."[1] My long-time friend Steve Martin (theology professor at the Kings University) read the blog and raised some theological questions about what I had written. I suggested that if he was coming to the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences the following year, he and I (and any interested others) could have a conversation about these matters over a meal or a drink. Well, Steve went one better. He proposed a panel discussion on the topic of classical theism and the depiction of God in the Bible.

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1 J. Richard Middleton, "God's Relationality and Eternity in the Bible: Why I Am Not a Classical Theist," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (2023) 1–8.

I am immensely grateful to Steve for organizing the panel and to Patrick, Charles, and Josh for their in-depth interaction with my somewhat hastily written blog post. I very much looked forward to the original panel presentations in 2023 and to our ensuing conversation; I was not disappointed. Now, reading the panelists' expanded responses in the form of the essays included in this issue of the *Canadian-American Theological Review*, I am even more deeply honored by the attention they have given to my work.[2]

The three essays, along with Steve's programmatic introduction, make it abundantly clear that there has been a great deal of thought over the past decades on the topic of the understanding of God in the classical theistic tradition. Further, these essays make it clear that each respondent is committed to the Bible's own depiction of God; all are careful not to deny or relativize this depiction in the name of classical theism.

In his introductory essay, Steve lays out a framework for understanding my own dissent from classical theism, while beginning to engage certain aspects of my argument.[3] He locates my thinking in the philosophical tradition of the Institute for Christian Studies (where we have both done graduate degrees), sometimes called the "Reformational" or (Neo)Kuyperian tradition, influenced by the statesman Abraham Kuyper and the philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd.[4] He further suggests that this tradition (of which I am a part) buys into the so-called Hellenistic thesis of Adolf von Harnack, whereby authentic biblical faith has been corrupted by Greek thinking.[5] After these framing comments, Steve briefly introduces the essays by Patrick Franklin, Joshua Harris, and Charles Meeks, summarizing the focus of each.

Clearing the Ground: How I Frame My Own Critique of "Greek" Thinking

Before I begin interacting with the essays by Patrick, Josh, and Charles, I think it might be helpful to clarify where I stand vis-à-vis both the Reformational tradition of the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) and the Hellenistic thesis that Steve mentions.

First of all, although I was significantly impacted by the overall perspective and rigorous Christian scholarship of the ICS, I did not derive my understanding

2 Given the collegiality between all of the contributors to this panel (despite our disagreements), I will follow Steve Martin's lead in calling each contributor by their first name.

3 Stephen M. Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning with and Reimagining 'the God of the Bible': A Conversation about Classical Theism," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (2023) 9–18. The theme of the 2023 Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences was "Reckonings and Re-imaginings," which is alluded to in the title of Steve's paper.

4 Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning," 11, n.6.

5 Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning," 10.

of the contrast between the worldviews of the Bible and the Greek philosophical tradition from the ICS. This was something I had already come to discern as an undergraduate theology student in Jamaica. As I have explained elsewhere (including in my 2021 presidential address to the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies), reading the Bible theologically in the Majority World forces one to critically evaluate the inherited conceptual framework of the Western theological tradition.[6]

I decided to attend the ICS because I had *already* come to the basic position that there was a significant contrast between biblical theology and Platonism on the question of the goodness of creation and its final redemption.[7] What the ICS provided was serious reflection on the complexity of the created world and the academic disciplines, grounded in a critically aware biblical worldview.

Although Dooyeweerd's systematic philosophy was a significant component of the research and teaching of the ICS, I was never particularly attracted to the details of this approach (perhaps because my interest lay in biblical studies). However, I did find Dooyeweerd's schematic framing of the biblical, Greek philosophical, and medieval worldviews (or "ground motives" as Dooyeweerd called them) helpful—though we would need to add the fourth, which Dooyeweerd also proposed, namely the *modern* freedom/nature dialectic. I found the three conceptual frameworks of form/matter, grace/nature, and freedom/nature illuminating in my study of the history of philosophy for discerning recurring patterns in philosophers of a given period (while still recognizing their diversity of perspectives and arguments). And although I affirm the general validity of a creation-fall-redemption paradigm for the Bible, anyone who knows my work will recognize that this is only the starting point for a deep dive into the complexity of the Scriptures.[8]

Finally, while I found some aspects of the Reformational tradition helpful, I never bought into the "story" (as Steve calls it) that the Protestant Reformation was "a return to the biblical view," which opened up the possibility for a genuine Christian philosophy, which "only began to be truly realized in the neo-Calvinist revival in the Netherlands."[9] My hesitancy to buy into this narrative may have been due to my Wesleyan theological orientation. Indeed, I have come to call

6 J. Richard Middleton, "Beyond Eurocentrism: A Future for Canadian Biblical Studies," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 10.1 (2021): 1–24, esp. 4–9.

7 See J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 11–14.

8 I am, therefore, grateful that Steve recognizes the nuance in my work on Scripture, which goes beyond such schemas. See Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning," 11, n.6 and 12, n.12.

9 Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning," 11, n.6.

myself a Kuyperian Wesleyan, where *Kuyperian* is the adjective that qualifies my being a Wesleyan theologian.[10]

On the issue of the biblical tradition being compromised by "Greek" thinking, let me be clear that I don't subscribe to the generalized Hellenistic thesis from Harnack that Steve describes. In this view, Greek metaphysics corrupted the Jewish approach to the Bible after the early Patristic period, such that the history of dogma is a departure from biblical faith. From the days of my undergraduate studies, when I read books like Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, which tried to argue for an essential contrast between biblical and Greek thinking, I viewed that distinction as spurious.[11] And I continue to do so.

In each of the cases that Steve cites of my own writing (*The Transforming Vision* and *A New Heaven and a New Earth*), where I critiqued aspects of "Greek" thinking, I was not advancing a generalized thesis of the contrast between biblical (or Jewish) thinking and Greek metaphysics. Rather, in each case I made a very specific argument about what the problem was. I remain open to discussing the validity of those specifics (which are, of course, debatable) and would prefer not to be tarred with the broad brush of the "Harnack thesis." So let me clarify the specifics.

In *The Transforming Vision*, Brian Walsh and I argued that the conceptual inheritance that the church received from Plato and Aristotle led to the devaluation of created realities and an aspiration to transcend this world for another, which ended up deforming the shape of Christian life and ethics. We were not critiquing the fact of "Greek" influence, but the *value dualism* that ended up constricting many Christians from full-orbed discipleship in God's good (but fallen) world.[12]

In the Appendix to *A New Heaven and a New Earth* (titled, "Whatever Happened to the New Earth?"), I traced the church's loss of the biblical hope for a new creation by citations from the works of various Church Fathers and later Christian thinkers. My point was that as theologians drew on the conceptual inheritance from Platonism (and NeoPlatonism), Christian hope began to be focused on an

10 For an account of how I navigate the Kuyperian and Wesleyan traditions, see Middleton, "Reflections of a Kuyperian Wesleyan" (https://jrichardmiddleton.com/2019/06/12/reflections-of-a-kuyperian-wesleyan/). This blog post includes the English version of the Preface I wrote ("Uma Jornada Cultural e Eclesial: Reflexões de am Wesleyano-Kuyperiano") to a volume of Portuguese essays on a Christian worldview from an Arminian-Wesleyan perspective, written by Brazilian scholars: *Cosmovisão Cristã: Reflexões* éticas *contemporâneas a partir da Teologia Arminio-Wesleyana*, ed. by Vinicius Cuoto (Sao Paulo: Reflexão Editora, 2019), 19–25.

11 Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (London: SCM Press, 1960).

12 Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), chap. 6: "The Problem of Dualism" and chap. 7: "The Development of Dualism."

immaterial afterlife, rather than earthly renewal and transformation in the eschaton—with negative implications for ethics.[13]

In both of these cases, the contrast between biblical and unbiblical views was quite specific; in neither *The Transforming Vision* nor *A New Heaven and a New Earth* did I employ a generalized contrast between Greek and biblical views.[14] It should also be noted that while in these works, I certainly critiqued particular Greek philosophical ideas for their unbiblical character, prior to my blog post on God's relationality and eternity I don't recall ever addressing the specific question of whether classical theism was faithful to the Bible's depiction of God. This was a new topic for me to write about, though—as I noted in the blog post—I had been thinking about the topic from as far back as my MA thesis on the nature of God language.

I should also make it clear that don't fault the views I evaluate as contravening Scripture simply because they have their origin in Greek philosophy. Although I want my readers to understand the origin of certain ideas, the fact of having an origin in pagan philosophy has never been the basis of my critique. I don't subscribe to the genetic fallacy, that the origin of an idea automatically disqualifies it. In each case, I have tried to give reasons for my critique.[15]

To see just how much Steve is right that the supposed contrast between Greek and biblical thinking is misguided, all we have to do is look at the New Testament, which is written in Greek, and to remember that Paul was a Hellenistic Jew, who nevertheless affirmed the reality of the resurrection and the new creation. Indeed, as N. T. Wright points out in his book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God,* the Greek Septuagint has even more references to the resurrection of the body than the Hebrew Bible. The resurrection had become an important Jewish doctrine (held by all but the Sadducees) by the time the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek; the translators could easily make ambiguous passages clearer and in some

13 The Appendix (Whatever Happened to the New Earth?") was a historical overview of the loss and partial return to a holistic eschatology in the church. My explanation of the problem itself was summarized at the beginning of the book; Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, chap. 1: "Introduction: The Problem of Otherworldly Hope."

14 It is clear to me that the generalized category of a "Greek" viewpoint cannot be sustained historically. Philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus represented only one stream of Greek thinking and values, which included other philosophical traditions such as the Stoics and the Epicureans, the religion of the classical Olympian gods, and the newer mystery religions. It would be reductionistic to use the broad term "Greek" to describe only one stream of this tradition. I remember attending a lecture (during my Master's degree) by a Classics scholar on "The Greek Worldview," which focused on the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. I objected that this was only one among a variety of worldviews in ancient Greece.

15 At one point, Steve seems to say that the story I tell of how a "traditional" view of God displaced the biblical view is my "explanation" for why I am not a classical theist (Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning," 12). That's not how I think about things. My explanation has to do with the adequacy (or inadequacy) of the language for describing God and how it coheres with Scripture.

cases could even make resurrection appear in some new places where it did not figure previously. Wright thus aptly titled his discussion of this point, "Resurrection in the Bible: The More Greek the Better."[16]

But Steve's introductory essay goes beyond framing my argument to actually addressing some of my explicit claims, by anticipating some of Patrick's discussion of Rowan Williams. Instead of responding to Steve directly, perhaps it is now time to engage the essays by Patrick, Charles, and Josh (while bringing relevant aspects of Steve's argument into the discussion at appropriate points).

The Nature of My Response in This Essay

Whereas Patrick draws on the work of Rowan Williams, especially his notion that God is not simply an item in the universe, Josh delves into Aquinas's account of the nature of God and language about God. Both attempt to show that the understanding of God in classical theism is not only true, but also helpful in interpreting biblical God language. Charles, by contrast, suggests that the work of Robert Jenson, who dissents from significant aspects of classical theism, has an important connection with my own agenda.

Given the expertise of each author in their respective areas, I have eagerly desired to become better informed about classical theism and to learn how I may appreciate its theological value. I therefore come to these essays with an open mind—and an open heart—willing to learn from each of my brothers in Christ, who I regard as true dialogue partners. However, that does not exclude me asking critical questions or even pushing back (as appropriate).

Let me make two caveats about my response.

First, I am quite out of touch with much of the content—and especially the mode of discourse—found in these essays. I did my MA in philosophy at the University of Guelph (where I compared Aquinas and Tillich on God language for my thesis) and my PhD coursework and comps were primarily in continental philosophy. However, my dissertation was in biblical studies (specifically, Old Testament) and I have taught in that disciplinary area of for nearly thirty years. Recently, I've even been dipping into Jewish textual study of the Tanakh/Bible, both *peshat* (that is, exegetical study) and *midrash* (more homiletical interpretation); I've even been introduced to immersive Talmud study—the Mishnah and the Gemara—along with Baraita texts (that is, further subsidiary works in Rabbinic Judaism relevant to topics in the Talmud).

This all has put me in a very different conceptual world from the one that Patrick, Josh, and Charles regularly swim in. To put it mildly, I am not sure if I can even tread water in their pond—indeed, their ocean of discourse. I used to swim

16 N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 147–50.

tolerably well in those swells. In fact, I was able to do a decent job of supervising a master's thesis on Aquinas in 2015 by drawing on my previous studies; so maybe I won't exactly drown. But I am a bit out of practice with the required strokes to keep up with our three intrepid swimmers.

Another caveat is that I can't address every point that each essay makes; that would make for an inordinately long response. What I primarily want to do is to step back and reflect on some aspects of the (perhaps naïve) perspective that underlies my online article, while explaining the rationale for the positions I articulated in that article. As I go along, I will try to connect with important points that Patrick, Josh, and Charles make in their articles. In some cases, I will affirm their point (or some aspect of it); in others, I may push back a bit and raise critical questions.

The topics or areas I would like to address are: First, the importance of apophatic (negative) theology and the unknowability of God's essence (which is a function of God's transcendence or otherness) as the ground of kataphatic theology—our positive statements about God. This will lead, in the second place, to a discussion of the relationships between metaphor, supposedly "literal" God language, and Thomistic analogy; these are all aspects of kataphatic or positive theological depictions of God. Finally, I will address the more general question of the conceptual frameworks we use to understand the Bible and (especially) the biblical depictions of God.

The Unknowability of God's Essence as the Ground of Positive God Language

I understand (and value) the basic thrust of Patrick's essay as attempting to safeguard God's transcendence. He understands the categories of classical theism (aseity, immutability, simplicity, etc.) as conceptual guardrails for preventing simplistic, literalistic (that is, univocal) interpretations of biblical depictions of God. This is the basis of the title of his essay, "God is Not a 'Thing' in Our Universe!" This emphasis is central to the writings of Rowan Williams, so it is no wonder that Patrick appeals to Williams in his essay.

However, this affirmation, which I share, leads Patrick to makes some rather extreme statements about God's unknowability, which I find problematic. Take, for example, his statement that, as finite creatures, "We simply have no idea what it's like for God *to be God*."[17] The italics convey emphasis and suggest this is an important statement. If Patrick means that we have only our human, limited perspective and don't understand how God experiences his own deity, then that

17 Patrick S. Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe!: Reflections on 'Classical Theism' Inspired by Rowan Williams," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (2023) 34–54, here 45.

seems obvious to me. All we ever have is a human (finite) perspective—by definition. But when Patrick applies this point about our fundamental unknowing of the divine essence to the positive statements we make about God, we get a sort of theological Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), which treats all positive statements about God as somehow tainted and in need of conceptual purification (indeed, he even implies such statements don't actually tell us anything about God).

For example, in his discussion of what we mean when we call God "Father," Patrick says: "Anything we say about God must immediately be qualified."[18] At another point he notes, "we really have no idea what it is like for God to 'grieve' or 'be angry' (in an emotional or existential sense)."[19] And later he says, "My point is simply that we do not really understand what we mean when we ask whether or not God 'suffers.'"[20] Perhaps his most radical statement on this theme is that, "Human thought and language about God simply fails."[21]

Now I don't want hold Patrick to an extreme version of these statements. If, on reflection, he no longer feels the need to immediately qualify everything he says about God, then I am glad he is over this theological OCD. I can imagine Adrian Monk or Professor T as a theologian having to spray every statement about God he makes with an antibacterial lotion, in order to wipe it clean of creaturely contamination. The trouble is that this would erase *all* theological statements!

Now, if by his claim that we really can't know anything about God, Patrick means to say that there are no univocal statements we can make about God (or that we can't know God in his essence, as God is in himself), then I am fully on board. However, the implication I take from this is almost diametrically opposite to Patrick's point. For him, God's fundamental unknowability *seems to* lead him to downgrade all statements we make about God, focusing on their failure to convey genuine knowledge about God. I say *seems to*, since I am not sure that is his consistent position; but going by many of his statements, it looks like the *via negativa* dominates.

I go in the opposite direction. The apophatic claim that God is, in an ultimate sense, fundamentally unknowable by any univocal depiction, frees me up to embrace the multiple depictions of God found in the Bible. The amazing range of biblical images and descriptions leads me to affirm that God is my rock, my fortress, my father, a mother eagle, the one who grieves over sin, who judges, who delivers from calamity (especially from sin and death), who does a new thing, who hardens Pharaoh's heart, who changes his mind in response to Moses's

18 Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe," 42.
19 Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe," 47.
20 Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe," 49.
21 Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe," 42.

prayer, who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, who snorts fire from his nostrils, who parted the Sea by the breath of his mouth, whose voice the people heard (or didn't hear) at Sinai, whose form was seen (or not seen) on the mountain (depending on which Pentateuchal source we follow). And I could go on.

Far from feeling any need to try and purify these depictions of God by applying a philosophical or theological cleansing agent (whether Thomism or any other conceptual system), I am emboldened to glory in the multiplicity of biblical depictions of God—knowing that none of them on their own is adequate. Indeed, even in combination, we don't get an understanding of the divine essence *in se*. But that's okay. To paraphrase the subtitle of the movie "Dr. Stranglove," I have learned to stop worrying about "pure" theological language and love metaphor!

Metaphorical, "Literal," and Analogical God Language

Both Patrick and Josh raise the question of the status of metaphorical descriptions of God in the Bible. In my blog post, I noted that the Bible depicts God being affected by creatures and I gave a few—out of many possible—examples; then I suggested that "classical theists usually relegate such biblical language to mere metaphor or anthropomorphism."[22] I want to be clear here that my use of the descriptor *mere* before metaphor is meant to communicate that I think (by contrast) that biblical metaphors are significant vehicles of cognition—they convey genuine knowledge of God. I agree with Josh that metaphors are "not just failed literal speech."[23] We should not downgrade them to *mere* metaphor. I gather that Josh agrees with this point.

Yet when it comes to language about God changing his mind, it looks like Josh misreads me. He says: "As far as I can tell, for Richard these passages (concerning God changing) feature 'literal' descriptions."[24] Patrick also seems to think that I am treating such statements literally (in the sense of univocally), which he finds problematic. He is ready to admit some (limited) validity to the idea that God suffers (in that God empathizes with our suffering), but is hesitant to believe that the idea of God changing his mind (traditionally, God's repentance) is acceptable; he suggests that it reflects "the human perspective of the biblical authors, not a sustained and analytical reflection on how it is that God makes decisions."[25]

22 J. Richard Middleton, "God's Relationality," 3.

23 Joshua Lee Harris, "*Sub Similitudine Corporalium*: Scripture, Metaphor, and the 'Classical' Synthesis in Thomas Aquinas," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (2003) 55–63, here, 55–56. Or as he puts it later, "Scriptural metaphors are not simply failed philosophical or systematic theology" (61).

24 Harris, "*Sub Similitudine Corporalium*," 56.

25 Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe," 48, n48.

Charles, likewise, is hesitant to embrace my language of God adapting to new situations—unless, he adds, this refers to "a human perspective."[26]

But even a sustained, analytical reflection on how God makes decisions (as is found in classical theism) is inevitably from a human perspective (just one that is different from that of the biblical authors). There is simply *no* God language that is not from a human perspective, whether concrete biblical depictions of God or the more abstract affirmations of classical theism. My response to Josh's suspicion that I seem to take passages about God changing as literal is that I don't take *any* God language as literal, if this means univocal.

It may be significant that both Josh and Patrick sometimes put "literal" in quotes when they use the term.[27] I wondered about that. It may suggest an implicit uncertainty about what exactly the term means when we speak of "literal" language for God. If literal means univocal, then I don't take *any* depictions of God literally. But if literal means that I think the metaphors (or analogies) actually convey knowledge of God, then I do read them literally.

Part of my MA thesis clarified a conundrum about interpreting Paul Tillich's statements about God language. On the one hand, Tillich claims that all language about God is symbolic (this is his term); there is no literal God language.[28] Yet in a few places, Tillich makes a statement for which he is famous, namely, that God as Being Itself is the sole non-symbolic (that is, literal) statement we can make about God.[29] This seeming contradiction had puzzled Tillich interpreters. I proposed, based on a close, contextual reading of Tillich (similar to the way I have come to read biblical texts closely), that he was using *non-symbolic* (or *literal*) in two different senses. When Tillich denies that there is any literal God language, he means literal in the sense of univocal; when he affirms that there is a literal statement that we can make about God he is affirming that our God language is not illusory, but that God really is the referent of the language.

It is the difference (to use Aquinas's categories) between the *modus significandi* (the mode of signification, which is taken from creaturely descriptions and thus cannot be literal in the sense of univocal) and the *res significata* (the thing signified; that is, the language actually does tell us something about God; it really

26 Charles Meeks, "The God of True Conversation: Robert W. Jenson's Narrative Metaphysics in Response to J. Richard Middleton's Classical Theism Questions," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (2003) 19–33, here 22.

27 Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe," 49; Harris, "*Sub Similitudine Corporalium*," 56.

28 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 180.

29 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *Reason and Revelation; Being and God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 238–39.

does have God as its "literal" intended referent).[30] Tillich was trying to affirm the reality of God as that to which the symbols point.[31]

So when it comes to the biblical metaphors of God changing or repenting (represented by the Hebrew verb *naham*), or of God suffering, or of God being impacted by human actions and decisions, or of God being emotionally distraught over Israel's sins, I take these as actually telling us something true about God (the *res significata*, to use Aquinas's term).

Yet there is a potential problem with using the term *res* ("thing") here; Tillich adamantly refused to apply this term to God. His refusal and my problem are the same: such language may end up reducing God to the status of an existent in the realm of finite things. Here I note that Josh used the term *thing* a number of times, to probe in what sense God might be thought to change. He asked, "Why do we speak of things 'changing' at all?"[32] And, "What is it about the world that makes it possible for things to change?"[33] We can certainly ask such questions about created realities; but I don't see how these questions help us understand how *God* might change, unless the term *thing* can be applied to both God and creatures univocally.

I agree with Patrick (and Tillich, and Rowan Williams) that God is not (literally, univocally) a *thing* at all—that is, an entity within the realm of other created entities. I thus sense an implicit tension between Josh's attempt to clarify how God might change via questions about how *things* (creaturely realities) change and Patrick's claim about God's radical transcendence. I fully agree with Williams's statement, which Patrick quotes: "God is not a case or instance of anything."[34] The God-creation distinction is central to my own worldview and is part of the reason why I hesitate to apply the conceptual categories of classical theism to God.

Despite the radical affirmation of God's transcendence that both Patrick and Williams make, it seems to me that classical theism ends up sneaking in something like the idea of univocity in God language. It does this by claiming to be

30 For Aquinas's distinction between *modus significandi* and *res significata*, see *Summa theologiae*, 1.13.3, 8, & 12.

31 In a number of places Tillich paradoxically notes that there is a symbolic *and* a non-symbolic element in God. These elements are equivalent to *our language* about God (symbolic) and God as *the referent* of our language (non-symbolic). Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 46; Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2: *Existence and the Christ* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1957), 9; Tillich, "The Nature of Religious Language," in Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 61; Tillich, "The Religious Symbol," in *Religious Experience and Truth: A Symposium*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 315.

32 Harris, "*Sub Similitudine Corporalium*," 58.

33 Harris, "*Sub Similitudine Corporalium*," 59.

34 Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe," 38; quoting Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 113.

able (by analytical philosophical reflection) to clarify what more naïve biblical depictions of God *really* mean (or ought to mean). Classical theism thus functions as a meta-discourse about God that is not itself subject to the limitations of first-order God language.[35]

Since classical theism, at least as understood by my respondents, is rooted in the theological proposals of Thomas Aquinas, it may be helpful to clarify what Aquinas means by analogy—especially Aquinas's distinction between analogy and metaphor. Since Josh's essay centers on Aquinas, Josh's comments on metaphorical God language provide a point of entry to this topic. Although (as I noted) Josh suggests that I view language of God *changing* as "literal" (in quotes), he later affirms that I take other passages, such as Psalm 18 (which has God coming down from his heavenly dwelling, riding on a cherub, snorting fire from his nostrils) as metaphorical. He says that passages like Psalm 18 "definitely *do* involve metaphorical ascriptions—a point with which Richard himself seems to agree."[36] What are we to make of this distinction between literal and metaphorical?

Here I intuit that Josh is dependent on Aquinas's distinction between *metaphorical* and genuinely *analogical* God language. Although Josh doesn't go into a systematic analysis of the distinction (and so I may be reading him wrongly here; I am open to correction), this is an important distinction *in Aquinas*. For Aquinas, metaphors are similitudes or likenesses taken from the realm of materiality or corporeality and applied to God. They take the form of an analogy of "proportionality," where x is to y as a is to b (often rendered as x:y :: a:b). For example, Aquinas explains, "the name *lion* applied to God means only that God manifests strength in his works, as a lion in his."[37] The underlying analogy is of the form, *God's strength: God's works :: lion's strength : lion's works*. For Aquinas, the analogy is improper or extrinsic, since he is quite clear that comparisons involving inexpungable connotations of matter (and thus defect) are "not literal descriptions of divine truths."[38] Metaphors, therefore, cannot tell us anything

35 If the metaphorical nature of classical theism were itself recognized, this would require another meta-discourse beyond that, and one beyond that, which would result in an infinite regress of such discourses.

36 Harris, "*Sub Similitudine Corporalium*," 61.

37 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.13.6. All quotations from *Summa theologiae* are taken from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd ed. (1920), Christian Classics (repr. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1981). The full text of this edition may be found online (https://www.newadvent.org/summa/).

38 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.9. ad 3. See also *De veritate*, 2.11.

genuine about God (that is, about God's essence); they involve, only extrinsic attribution.[39]

By contrast, genuinely analogical language for God involves intrinsic attribution. For Aquinas, the extrinsic/intrinsic distinction refers to the ontological status of the predicate attributed to God, whether it really is in God or only said to be so.[40] Genuinely analogical God language tells us something true about God's *essence* or *substance* since it is based on the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being.

Now, I don't want to get into too much detail here, because it could hijack the discussion; but understanding the relationship between the analogy of being and analogous God language in Aquinas was central to my MA thesis. There are a number of different ways that Aquinas articulates the relationship between the being of God and the being of creatures. Most basically, he understands this relationship as that between two forms of perfection—*per essentiam* (God has the perfection in question essentially) and *per participationem* (creatures have the same perfection—if they do at all—by participation).[41] Aquinas also explains that God has (or better, *is*) the perfection *simpliciter*, whereas creatures have the perfections *multipliciter*. Although creatures are the effect of God's causal agency, God and creatures are not of the same order (language about them is not univocal); this means that the creature "receives the similitude of the agent not in its full degree, but in a measure that falls short; so that what is divided and multiplied in the effects resides in the agent simply, and in an unvaried manner." In other words, "all perfections existing in creatures divided and multiplied pre-exist in God unitedly."[42] This is the conceptual basis of the doctrine of divine simplicity.

Aquinas makes his conceptual framework (the *analogia entis*) even clearer in the following quote:

> God prepossesses in Himself all the perfections of creatures, being Himself absolutely and universally perfect. Hence every creature represents Him, and is like Him, so far as it possesses some perfection: yet not so far as to represent Him as something of the same species or genus, but as the excelling source of whose form the effects fall short, although they derive some kind of likeness thereto.[43]

The overall model of *analogia entis* proposed by Aquinas consists in the

39 The idea that Thomistic analogy is of the form x:y :: a:b (sometimes called "proportionality") derives from Cajetan's mistaken interpretation in *De nominum analogia*, based on Aquinas's early views on the subject; Aquinas's mature understanding of the formal structure of analogy is that it consists of two terms not four. Aquinas typically calls this the "proportion" of one to another (*unius ad alterum*), that is, of the creature to God.

40 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.13.2 & 6.

41 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.13.1 & 2.

42 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.13.5.

43 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.13.2.

relationship of an *Exemplar Cause*, which possesses all perfections in an absolutely simple and thus eminent manner, to its *inferior effects*, which possess these same perfections by way of division and composition. God's primary and *per se* causation of creatures thus results in their imitation or representation of his simple unity, though in a refracted, multiple manner, which falls short of the divine perfection. God's causality here is not efficient causality (to use Aristotle's category); it is what some scholars have referred to as "causal participation."[44] It is a Christian version of what Plotinus viewed as emanation—the divine and perfect simplicity of the One flows into the multiplicity of lower reality.

For Aquinas, then, our language about God can be *metaphorical*, which does not tell us anything intrinsic about God. Or God language can be *analogical*, giving us genuine knowledge of God as the absolutely simple and unified perfection in which creatures imperfectly participate.[45] My own position is that creatures don't participate in the being of God; they have their own integral identity as creatures—brought into being and sustained by God's word. And so I can't accept Aquinas's account of analogical God language. I am quite prepared to use the terms *analogy* and *metaphor* as overlapping terms for non-univocal language about God, so long as we disentangle *analogy* from the specific Thomistic metaphysical system in which it is embedded.

Of course, Aquinas affirms the biblical distinction between creator and creature. But his *analogia entis* ends up, perhaps against his better intentions, treating God precisely as (to use language Patrick quotes from Williams) "the ultra-superlative of the finite."[46] Patrick is adamant (channeling Karl Barth) that God is not humanity (or creation) said "in a loud voice."[47] Yet when judged against the standard of biblical faith, classical Thomistic metaphysics softens the Creator-creature distinction and ends up viewing God as the perfected version of

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44 George P. Klubertanz, *St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy: A Textual Analysis and Systematic Synthesis* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1960), 63.

45 Besides metaphor and analogy proper, Aquinas lists two other ways we may speak about God. These are the *via negativa*, where we use negations such as "immutable" or "incorporeal" to describe God (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.13.2; *Summa contra gentiles*, 1.30), and language that names the extrinsic causal relationship of God to creatures, which would hold if we called God "good" or "wise" simply because he is the cause of goodness or wisdom in creatures (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.13.2 &6). Whereas negations give us no positive knowledge of God's essence (they do not signify God himself, but only his distance from creatures), language that names the extrinsic causal relation of God to creatures does give us positive knowledge of God (that he is the cause of the various qualities named), but provides no intrinsic knowledge of God's essence.

46 Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe," 38.

47 Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe," 38. Barth's point counters Ludwig Feuerbach's claim that the idea of God is only a projection of all perfected human qualities Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 29–30.

creaturely existence. No wonder Barth famously said, "I regard *analogia entis* as the invention of Antichrist."[48]

But there is another problem with the metaphysical framework that grounds Thomistic analogy, which is a direct implication of the first—but from the other direction, so to speak. This framework diminishes the goodness and integrity of creation by comparing creatures (unfavorably) to the Creator. Aquinas's *analogia entis* has definite affinities with Plotinus's ontological framework, and specifically his concept of the privation of being (or the ultimate Good), where the finite is the deficient form of the Infinite. For Aquinas, this *analogia entis* is the ontological ground of analogical God language.

Before Aquinas, Augustine explicitly derived the notion of the privation of being/the good (*privatio boni*) from Plotinus's *Enneads* and championed it as a helpful way to think of sin. The problem is that *privatio boni* was originally an account of finitude. Thus, against Augustine's better judgment, his use of this category ended up equating finitude with ontological deficiency (hence the value dualism that Brian Walsh and I objected to in *The Transforming Vision*). This problem carries over into Aquinas's metaphysics, which ends up putting God and creatures at two ends of a scale of being, with God as the perfect Exemplar by comparison with whom which the being of creatures inevitably falls short. But the comparison is spurious. There simply is no *ontological* or *metaphysical* basis for comparing God and creatures; they cannot be subsumed under the same categories at all. Here I am in fundamental agreement with Patrick: "God is in God's own category; God is, in fact, *beyond categories altogether*."[49]

Steve suggests that my non-metaphysical view of God is "bolstered by the post-Heideggerian deconstruction of any and all metaphysics as 'ontotheology.'"[50] Perhaps; but my reasoning (which predates the deconstructive turn) is that metaphysics or ontology is a particular form of second order discourse, which tries to explain the structure of reality (that is, created reality); hence the impossibility of a metaphysics or ontology *of God*. God is ultimately mystery, beyond formal, systematic categories or philosophical analysis. Our knowledge of God comes not from metaphysics (which is a human construct), but from revelation, which inextricably uses the language of metaphor or (non-Thomistic) analogy.

48 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Part 1, ed. Thomas F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975; paperback 2004), xiii (from the Preface). Barth was here responding to the analysis of the analogy of being proposed by the Catholic theologian Erich Przywara.

49 Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe," 43.

50 Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning," 12.

Extrinsic versus Intrinsic Conceptual Frameworks for Reading the Bible

Finally, I want to turn to the issue of the conceptual frameworks we use for reading the Bible (and especially for interpreting biblical depictions of God). A fundamental claim that underlies my essay is that there is no need to turn to an extrinsic conceptual framework, whether classical theism (derived from Aquinas) or some more recent alternative framework (like process theology) to guard against misreadings of biblical God language. Indeed, when Scripture is read through the framework of extrinsic conceptual frameworks (whether ancient or modern), we are in danger of distorting the intrinsic biblical message—including the depiction of God in the Bible.

A central example of this problem is the classical doctrine of divine immutability or impassibility, which I continue to maintain flies in the face of what Scripture actually says about God changing prior courses of action in response to human agency. I have tried to be attentive to all my respondents for their various attempts to explain what it might mean, from the perspective of classical theism, for God to "change." I commend their intent to protect the transcendence of God. Yet I find these conceptual gymnastics unnecessary.

I also take to heart Josh's point that in order to understand Aquinas's doctrine of divine immutability we need to understand the questions he is trying to answer—which he calls Aquinas's "erotetic" method.[51] This is certainly a legitimate point. However, the particular questions that Josh cites in order to explore what we might mean by God changing (and especially the way he answers these questions) are dependent on categories from Greek philosophy. These include the Platonic-Aristotelian categories of *form* and *matter* and the Plotinian category of *privation*, along with the notion of *prior agency* (which is the basis of Aristotle's critique of Plato's idea that the Forms could be the cause of the material realm; this is why Aristotle postulated the Unmoved Mover, who is Pure Act). These categories predetermine the conceptual framework to be utilized and therefore the conclusion about whether or not (and in what sense) God changes.[52]

Aquinas might *think* that drawing on these categories was a matter of "correct intuition," as Josh puts it;[53] but I don't live in that conceptual world and so I feel no obligation to draw on those categories. In fact, Josh himself admits: "None of us are obliged to ask the same questions that Aquinas and other classical theists have asked about change in the past."[54] Indeed, when Josh reflects on the rather

51 Harris, "*Sub Similitudine Corporalium*," 57.

52 Josh explains that Aquinas's doctrine of divine immutability "is a straightforward implication of God's being Pure Act, without any intrinsic potencies." Harris, "*Sub Similitudine Corporalium*," 56.

53 Harris, "*Sub Similitudine Corporalium*," 58.

54 Harris, "*Sub Similitudine Corporalium*," 61.

extreme metaphorical depiction of God in Psalm 18, he asks some truly illuminating (non-Thomistic) questions.[55]

Like Steve and Patrick (and Rowan Williams), I affirm that God is not simply an entity in the universe, but is genuinely transcendent. But whereas I understand this as fully compatible with the biblical portrayal of God, they take this to imply that we cannot simply accept the biblical portrayal of God at face value, but must translate it in terms of classical theistic categories in order to purify it of unacceptable meanings.[56]

One of those unacceptable meanings involves the idea that God is an entity "in competition" with other entities in the finite world. According to Patrick, "Since Christ's infinite otherness is not in competition with the world, but is rather its ground and eschatological telos, he who is Infinite and Other . . . activates and encourages the world's own being and agency."[57]

Steve explains that for Williams, "on both a classical and biblical view, God is not 'one among others' and therefore not 'an object competing for attention'"; rather, Israel's God is "'the one who gives regular, coherent, continuous unity to the distinctive life of this community' rather than one character in Israel's story."[58] Yet in the Bible, *pace* Steve, God is portrayed precisely as a *character* in Israel's story.[59]

God speaks to Abraham and Moses (and many others), sometimes appearing in visible form, in a particular location, using understandable human speech. God speaks with them and they respond, and he responds to their response. Sometimes, as at the Golden Calf and at Kadesh-Barnea, Moses's intercession for the people leads God to change his course of action in response to the human dialogue

55 Josh inquires what it is about "the seeming catastrophe that is human history, such that the cries of a single sufferer shake the foundations of the world? What would it be to be liberated accordingly? For things to have been finally made right?" Harris, "*Sub Similitudine Corporalium*," 63.

56 I acknowledge that there are times when it is appropriate to speak of God in ways that go beyond the idea of God as an agent interacting with other agents. This is especially appropriate when speaking of God's "causal," sustaining work as Creator, which is of a different category from the scientific examination of causality within the created order (this is meant to exclude a God-of-the-gaps approach, where God is simply one element in the causal chain). I also find it compatible to understand (something of) the biological processes for the birth of a child and yet say that God gave my wife and myself a son. This leads me to wonder if we need two ways of thinking of divine action (and thus two sorts of God language), one corresponding to the medieval notion of concurrentism, applicable to a scientific understanding of reality, and the other resembling in some respects open theism, which would be applicable to God's interaction with persons (and sometimes with the non-human world), as portrayed in the Bible. But both sorts of discourses have their own integrity and one cannot be reduced to (or reframed in terms of) the other. This is the topic, perhaps, for a separate essay.

57 Franklin, "God is not a 'Thing' in our Universe," 40.

58 Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning," 15. Quoting Rowan Williams, "God," in *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. David Ford, Ben Quash, and Janet Martin Soskice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77.

59 Indeed, *pace* Williams, God is in competition with Baal and other deities for Israel's attention—and allegiance.

partner.[60] As Psalm 106:23 puts it (in reference to the Golden Calf episode), "Therefore he [God] said he would destroy them— / had not Moses, his chosen one, / stood in the breach before him, / to turn away his wrath from destroying them." This is just the tip of the iceberg of ways in which God is portrayed in the Scriptures as an agent interacting with other agents in the context of the created world.

In contrast to this picture of God, Steve and Patrick (citing Williams) describe God in somewhat abstract terms as the transcendent ground of creation and history, who gives unity to, activates, and encourages the life of Israel and the world. They also express their shared worry that the biblical portrayal—if taken at face value—would put God in competition with creaturely agents. This is a particularly modern worry. In dissenting from my dependence on modern biblical scholarship, with its supposed flattening of the biblical text, Steve suggests that my personalistic understanding of God's agency has affinities with "the modern metaphysic that positions God and creation in competition, a kind of zero-sum game."[61]

But I dissent from this modern metaphysic. I do *not* assume that finitude necessarily involves competition (a zero-sum game). While finitude by definition involves limits, I take finite creaturely existence as good (indeed, very good). But human agency, when grounded in love, is the very opposite of zero-sum. Jesus himself taught a theology of abundance, not scarcity: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Lk 6:38)

Whereas Thomistic analogy downgrades finite existence in accordance with certain ancient and medieval metaphysical assumptions about materiality as lack or defect, our contemporary temptation may be to accept the legitimacy of the "modern metaphysic" that scarcity and competition (and thus violence) are essential to finitude.[62] The hesitancy to embrace the biblical picture of God's as an interactive agent in the world because we think it would involve competition suggests that we have allowed our interpretation of Scripture (indeed, our imaginations) to be controlled by this misguided modern metaphysic.

Given the Bible's testimony to the goodness of creation, along with the

60 For my analysis of these two events, see Middleton *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), chap. 2: "God's Loyal Opposition" (41–63), esp. 43–48, 53.

61 Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning," 15.

62 For a brilliant critique of this modern (really, postmodern) metaphysic, along with an argument for a biblical inspired alternative vision, see James K. A Smith, "A Logic of Incarnation" (63–92), in Smith, *The Nicene Option: An Incarnational Phenomenology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021).

impossibility of univocal God language (not even classical theism can escape this impossibility), I am free to receive the Bible's (undoubtedly metaphorical/analogical) portrayal of God as a personal agent interacting with other agents in the created world as genuine revelation.

I am intrigued by Charles's discernment of "resonance" or "potential synergy" between my approach to the biblical depiction of God and that of Robert Jenson, who also dissents from classical theism.[63] According to Charles, Jenson emphasizes "God's dialogical relationality with Creation," as I do.[64] He quotes Jenson as saying, "God is not a sheer point of presence; he is a life among persons."[65] Charles further explains that for Jenson, "much modern theology is far too tempted to start with categorical descriptions (the omni- words) rather than personality."[66] With Charles (and Jenson), I agree that "much of modern theology is working from a conception of God that is borrowed from elsewhere."[67]

A central example of Jenson's approach to taking what Scripture says seriously, is his answer to the question of the identity of the God of the Bible (Who is YHWH?). Jenson's answer derives directly from Scripture. YHWH is "The one who delivered Israel from Egypt" and "the one who raised Jesus from the dead by the Spirit,"[68] I applaud this attempt to understand the identity of God from Scripture, rather than lapsing into theological abstractions; but I would want to go beyond these two basic affirmations of God's core redemptive actions. God's identity (character) is revealed both in his actions and his speech in the unfolding narrative (and in non-narrative texts too) throughout the entire Bible.[69]

Although I applaud Jenson claim that biblical statements of God's identity (like the ones he mentions) are rock bottom theological statements that are fundamentally true, I wonder about his claim that their truth means that "I cannot and do not need to analyze [them] further."[70] I think we can legitimately analyze any biblical statement further—but *not* by drawing on extrinsic (that is, etic) categories, which translate the biblical statements into some philosophical or theological discourse. Rather, given the rich complexity of the Bible, which contains not just a multiplicity of conceptions of God and reality, but even some conceptions that are (at least on the surface) in tension with each other, we are obliged to think

63 Meeks, "The God of True Conversation," 22, 23.
64 Meeks, "The God of True Conversation," 20.
65 Meeks, "The God of True Conversation," 24. Quoting Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2: *The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35.
66 Meeks, "The God of True Conversation," 25.
67 Meeks, "The God of True Conversation," 25.
68 Meeks, "The God of True Conversation," 25. Quoting Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 7.
69 I admit that Charles's explanation of what Jenson means is better than these two bare statements.
70 Meeks, "The God of True Conversation," 32. Quoting Jenson's essay, "What if it Were True? (2001)," in Robert W. Jenson, *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation*, ed. Stephen John Wright (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 24.

theologically about questions of coherence in biblical theology—including our understanding of God. But we need to do this by means of the Bible's own categories (that is, emically).

I also have a significant hesitation about Jenson's project of a "revisionary metaphysics," which envisions God differently from classical theism. My hesitation is based on what is implied by the term *metaphysics*, since I don't think we can account for God in any metaphysical or ontological system—except by pointing to God as being outside of the system. My suspicion that even Jenson's revisionary metaphysics might share some of the assumptions (and thus unpalatable outcomes) of classical theism is confirmed in Charles's account of Jenson's "sacramentology," which I find too speculative.[71] Given the biblical teaching of the integrity and goodness of creation, why would redemption require us to be "appropriated to God's own being"?[72] I don't see why we need the category of deification at all ("God will deify the redeemed"[73]), unless created reality (including our humanity) is somehow deficient to begin with—which would contradict the biblical witness.

In my attempt to be an equal opportunity critic—it's not just classical theism that I have problems with—let me cite another outcome of Jenson's revisionary metaphysics that I find perplexing. In his fixation on the incarnate Christ, Jenson denies the *Logos asarkos*, that is, the pre-incarnate Logos.[74] But this is hard to make sense of, given John 1:1–13, which describes (or narrates) the pre-incarnate role of the Logos in creation and in revelation to Israel. By contrast, John 1:14–18 focuses on the incarnation (the Logos becoming flesh), which is where the historical name "Jesus Christ" is first used (John 1:17). That the Prologue of John up to verse 13 is about the pre-incarnate Logos clarifies the distinction between two sections of the Prologue that refer to John the Baptist (1:6–8, 15). Whereas many biblical interpreters have wondered why the testimony of the Baptizer is separated into two units, it makes perfect sense to view 1:6–8 as referring to John (as the last of the Old Testament prophets) testifying to the revelation of God ("the light," the pre-incarnate Logos) coming to Israel prior to the public ministry of Jesus, while 1:15 summarizes his testimony to the historical Jesus, the incarnate Word, which is recounted in more narrative detail in John 1:19–35.

This denial of the Logos *asarkos* is one place where it seems that Jenson has *not* taken the direct testimony of the Scriptures for what it actually says, but has allowed his "revisionary metaphysics" to take precedence over the text.

In contrast to utilizing any extrinsic conceptual framework to determine our

71 Meeks, "The God of True Conversation," 28–30.
72 Meeks, "The God of True Conversation," 28.
73 Meeks, "The God of True Conversation," 28.
74 Meeks, "The God of True Conversation," 20.

reading of Scripture, I recommend we heed the famous comment by Abraham Joshua Heschel, the brilliant Jewish theologian, which he directed to Christian theologians: "It has seemed puzzling to me how greatly attached to the Bible you seem to be and yet how much like pagans you handle it. The great challenge to those of us who wish to take the Bible seriously is to let it teach us its own essential categories; and then for us to think *with* them, instead of just about them."[75]

Of course, no one simply reads the Bible without assumptions, without their context, their prior formation, and some conceptual framework, however inchoate. I am not naïve about that. Yet I suggest that we do not treat our conceptual frameworks as normative for reading Scripture, but rather the reverse; we need to bring our interpretive assumptions into genuine dialogue with Scripture, seeking to learn its own intrinsic categories; then we might be formed (actually re-formed) and thus corrected by our immersion in the text—which is the non-negotiable revelation of God.

Any attempt to communicate what Scripture says will inevitably be not a "pure" biblical language, but a creole—a hybrid of some sort, combining biblical categories with our contextualized attempt to understand the text's normative claims. The point is not primarily to get our theology correct, but that we might *embody* the claims of Scripture in our faithful response to God (as living letters/epistles, as Paul puts it in 2 Cor 3:2–3)—in worship and prayer, in family and civic life, in the sacraments, in teaching and scholarship—in every dimension of life.

A Concluding Teaser—Which Is Also Serious

There is much more that could be said in response to my intrepid interlocutors. Although I formulated initial responses to many other interesting points they made, I need to forgo them in the interest of bringing my essay to conclusion.

I was particularly intrigued by Patrick's quotation of Rowan Williams about "the impossibility of representing God and God's action as any kind of circumscribed presence within the world."[76] This is, of course, an aspect of the laudable attempt of classical theism to guard God's transcendence.

But in deference to the explicit claims of Scripture, I need to dissent.

Of late, I have been working on the biblical theme of the coming of God's *kavod* (the glorious divine presence) into the world, such that we can say (truthfully) that God dwelt in the tabernacle, in the Holy of Holies—that is, in a particular circumscribed location (Exod 40:34). When the *kavod* rose and started moving in the wilderness, the priests and people were to pack up the tabernacle and follow the *kavod*, which led them to the promised land (Num 9:15–16). This suggests

75 Heschel quoted in Albert C. Outler, "Toward a Postliberal Hermeneutics," *Theology Today* 42 (Oct. 1985):290 (emphasis original).

76 Quoting Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 85.

that while God is, indeed, the creator of all things and certainly not one creaturely entity among others, nevertheless the Creator has chosen to enter (and dwell in) the world he made—this "circumscribed" created reality. And this predates the incarnation of the Word (John 1:14).

Indeed, God's *kavod* (Greek *doxa*) was ultimately incarnate (and visible) in Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14). Given that the divine presence was embodied in a male Jewish peasant from Galilee, we can go further than saying that God can be represented by a circum*scribed* presence within the world. We could say that God can be represented even by a circum*cised* presence within the world!

That is the scandal—and the wonder—of the gospel.

BOOK REVIEWS

Gregg Davidson and Kenneth J. Turner. *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One: A Multi-Layered Approach*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2021. 210 pp. ISBN: 9-780825-44544-6. $30.99 (CDN) $18.99 (USD) paper.

The first chapter of the Bible's first book (Genesis) lays the theological foundation for all that follows in Scripture. All-too-often, however, "the richness and beauty" of the creation account is "overwhelmed by acrimony" (3). Gregg Davidson and Kenneth J. Turner, authors of *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One: A Multi-Layered Approach*, are persuaded that much of the conflict derives from the erroneous desire of many interpreters to "betroth" themselves to the "one true meaning, forsaking all others. Borrowing from Tolkien, the faithful seek to find the One Interpretation to Rule Them All" (4). In contrast to this, the authors propose that the most effective method of interpreting Gen 1:1–2:3 (hereafter Gen 1) is to look for "*layers* of truth, each complimenting and expanding on the others" (4 – italics original). To this end, they query: "Is it possible that more than one angle or emphasis or theme could be simultaneously valid?" (4). Upon reading *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One*, the answer is an unequivocal 'Yes!'

While some may accuse Davidson and Turner of trickery or some sort of clever ruse to dismiss the "historical veracity of the Bible" and/or "merge the Bible with modern scientific theories of origins," the authors insist that though they have already published material about the "intersection of science and the Bible, this book approaches Genesis free of any obligations or deference to science. There are no scientific arguments or assumptions in these pages" (12).

In addition to this, Davidson and Turner make clear that while certain observations in God's natural creation did cause them to "raise questions" that drove them to look more deeply at God's written Word, the "richness" that they have discovered (so the authors claim) is contained in the Bible itself "independent of the truth or falsehood of any scientific theories. Ultimately, consistent with the Chicago statement on Biblical Inerrancy, the defence of each layer relies on Scripture to understand Scripture" (12).

The primary thesis for *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One* is simple: "Genesis 1 contains layers of truth" (7). Davidsons and Turner's overarching objectives are quite admirable:

> Our hope for this book is twofold. The first is that it will contribute to

> your appreciation of the grandeur and beauty of the creation story. The second, by virtue of recognizing that the proper understanding is not limited to a single perspective, is that the church will experience greater unity, dropping unhealthy squabbles that undermine its mission. Our hope is that Christians will spend more time in discussions about their *favorite* layers (plural) and less time bickering over which view (singular) should kick all the others out of the theological nest (12 – italics original).

Prior to offering a full-scale review, though, it is prudent to first offer a general orientation to the book as a whole. Aside from a brief acknowledgments section, the introduction, conclusion, two appendices (*An Unbroken Covenant with Nature* and *Excerpts from Ancient Near East Origins Myths*), and a so-called "model approach" ('What Can Be Learned from a Genealogy?'), *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One: A Multi-Layered Approach*, is arranged according to seven concepts or 'layers' (each of which constitute a single, roughly-equal-in-page-length chapter): (1) Song, (2) Analogy, (3) Polemic, (4) Covenant, (5) Temple, (6) Calendar, and (7) Land.

Davidson and Turner take great pains to underscore the idea that each separate layer is meant to be understood *complementary* to one another, i.e., no one layer should be viewed in *competition* to any other layer (see pg. 7). In the same way, the authors also highlight that the "manifold beauty of the text, should be apparent even if only a subset of the layers is embraced. In a similar vein, we make no claim that the layers we represent exhaust all possibilities" (7).

A ten-page bibliography and three relatively thorough indices (author, subject, Scripture) round off the volume. One quibble involves the fact that none of the literature of the ancient Near East, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Enuma Elish, for example, is explicitly noted in any of the indices, despite the authors relatively extensive usage of such texts. A welcome bonus is that many 'key' original language words, like *berit* (covenant), *hekhal* (temple), *shabat* (cease, rest), and *tob* (good), appear in (non-academic) transliteration in the subject appendix.

Pedagogically speaking, *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One* is exceptionally user-friendly. There is no shortage of stimulating and informative graphic material. The book abounds with charts, tables, maps, diagrams, and even some 'mind-teasers,' such as "My Wife and My Mother-in-Law" by William Ely Hillor. Regrettably, however, no 'listing' or 'catalog' of visuals is included in the volume. The typography is also superb. There is a good use of white space and ample margins. The numerous headings/subheadings make for easy argument tracking and 'big idea' connections (the effective use of boldface type is also appreciated). The writing is lucid and clear with Davidson and Turner pitching things just right.

That is to say, the book is written 'popularly' enough so as not to drown its audience in a sea of varied layers (though some uninitiated readers may yet feel overwhelmed) yet, even so, it still retains its 'academic feel.' An excellent combination for any introductory textbook. The length is also a boon. No student would feel overburdened in reading this volume even alongside multiple other books at a time.

The examples and analogies are poignant and (quite often) unusually enlightening. The mineral analogy concerning fluorite crystal is especially notable (see pp. 5, 53, and 172–73).

> If held under shortwave ultraviolet light . . . the pink crystal suddenly glows blue! . . . It is still fluorite. But under the new light, another layer of truth about this mineral becomes evident. It is an understanding we could never have discovered without looking for it. The example could be extended even further, for varieties of fluorite exhibit even more colors under longwave ultraviolent light, and may even display yet another color when heated (thermoluminescence). Each represents a different layer of truth that expands our understanding and appreciation of this mineral (5 – italics removed).

In addition to the above, one notes that each chapter ends with a set of thought-provoking "Discussion Questions" (between three and seven in total). This unique provision makes accommodating the book to some sort of group study particularly easy for busy pastors, church leaders, ministers, and/or teachers, and is a particularly welcome aspect of the book.

The ability of the authors to disentangle some rather 'knotty' matters is also exceptionally notable. For example, some people maintain the (erroneous) idea that an analogical view of the days of creation week (cf. Exod 20:11) is based on "circular (thus, false) reasoning in which (1) God's creation days are patterned after a human work week (Gen 1), and (2) human's days are patterned after God's" (50). With respect to this, Davidson and Turner assert: "A genuinely circular argument would indeed be problematic, for if A is the basis for establishing B, and B is the basis for establishing A, then the whole argument is effectively floating without a logical foundation. But an unjustified assumption is made . . . that conflates *bi directional analogy* with *circular reasoning*" (51 – all emphases original). Knowing this explanation may, perhaps, leave some readers still 'scratching their heads,' the authors elaborate even more by way of analogy:

> When a small notch is carved into the top of an earthen dam, a trickle of water begins to flow. A small flow has limited erosional power, so the channel grows larger slowly. As the channel deepens, the water

> flows faster and more energetically, resulting in faster erosion and enlargement of the channel, allowing water to flow and erode still faster. Faster flow contributes to enlarging the channel, and enlarging the channel contributes to faster flow. It is a bidirectional, positive-feedback cycle. In a comparable fashion, my experience as an earthly father enhances my understanding of God as father, and examples of God acting in the role of father in Scripture improves my understanding of what it means to be a *good* earthly father. The flow of information and understanding goes both directions (50 – italics original).

Such well-articulated argumentation is a rare treat to read and proves immensely persuasive.

Another thorny issue involves the parallel structure of the days of creation. To be clear, "some . . . have challenged the existence of a parallel structure (days 1–3 aligned with days 4 – 6) arguing that the luminaries of day 4 were placed in the heavens of day 2 (not day 1), and fish from day 5 were placed in the seas of day 4 or the water made prior to day (not in the "waters below" of day 2)" for instance (38). In response to this, Davidson and Turner maintain:

> If attention is only given to the *placement* of the luminaires in day 4, then perhaps an argument can be made against a parallel with day 1 because of the expanse (*raqia'*) into which the luminaires were placed was made in day 2. If we are considering *purpose*, however, the parallel is strong. Day 1 and day 4 both serve to separate light from dark and day from night. The objection of aligning the water of day 2 with the fish of day 5 is that the seas (*yammim*) are not named until day 3. But if we again give attention to *purpose*, the expanse (*raqia'*) in day 2 was made in order to separate the waters on the earth from the water above the dome (or expanse) of the sky, giving rise to the realms of ocean and sky. This is consistent with the structure and word choice of the fifth day. Day 5 begins with fish filling the waters (*mayim*) and birds flying across the surface of the heavens (*shamayim*). The parallel structure thus proves to be robust (38 – italics original).

This argument is fair and cogent. In fact, it is the most robust explanation that I have read yet!

Note: details become even more clear when combined with the numerous tables (pp. 29, 31, 38).

Davidson and Turner are also to be commended (for the most part) on how they handle various 'contrarian' positions. The authors maintain a gracious and

even conciliatory tone throughout the book. There are no *ad hominem* attacks, no 'straw-man' arguments, and no undue appeals to authority. Rather, the authors systematically and courteously delineate the various reason(s) why they respectfully disagree. Notably, this often includes thorough engagement with the actual argumentation of opposing viewpoints by means of clear citations to relevant sources.

For instance, with respect to genre and Gen 1, the authors do not side step that some scholars, mostly young-earth creationists (hereafter YEC), tend to downplay the significance of poetic elements in Gen 1 by emphasizing sundry features that are common in Hebrew prose and are generally lacking in poetry (for example, the use of the definite article and direct object marker alongside extensive use of the *waw*-consecutive). To this end, it is only after the authors have thoroughly engaged with each of the different viewpoints (using the *crème de la crème* of the contrarian position's works on the subject, by the way) that they then elaborate on why they believe Gen 1 to (most likely) be *sui generis* (see pp. 33–35). To be specific, the authors state: "No other Hebrew text . . . is quite like Genesis 1– it is *unique*. The fact that it does not fall neatly within the form of either traditional Hebrew poems or historical narratives should make us hesitant to declare that it must be understood strictly as one or the other" (35 – italics original).

In some cases, however, this even-tempered, congenial disposition might actually prove to be a hindrance and could, possibly, lend itself to the *ad temperantiam* fallacy. By way of example, Davidson and Turner opine: "if there is reluctance to accepting a formal covenant with Adam or the creation, you may nonetheless appreciate the rich use of covenantal language and its implications moving throughout history" (93). Though some may quibble, the idea of a preexisting covenant with either creation or humanity is not necessarily 'negotiable' since it potentially impugns the very nature of 'covenant' as a whole. As Mark J. Boda states:

> A ברית (covenant) is not necessary within a family unit, that is, a parent does not need a covenant with a child, nor a sibling with another sibling. These are natural, trustworthy relationships. No covenant is necessary in the original creation since Yahweh God is identified as a parent producing child, as the 'image/likeness of God' language makes clear (see Gen 5:1–3). Once the human couple is banished from the garden in Gen. 3, this family status is annulled, and a covenant is now necessary to structure the relationship between humanity and God . . . this covenant makes possible a renewal of the kinship relationship. The Noachic covenant forms an important bridge between creation and redemption, as God reestablishes kinship relationship with

> humanity and all of creation. By placing the Noachic covenant in canonical position before Israel's redemptive story and its relational agreements . . . we are reminded that the redemptive agreements with Israel were part of a much larger story of redemption that would impact not just all nations (Gen. 10) but also all creation. The relational agreement with Noah is thus key to understanding humanity's function as vice-regents over all creation and God's desire through a redeemed humanity to see creation realize its full potential.[1]

The significance of this is also highlighted by Genesis' reiteration that it was through Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the three sons of Noah (and the only other men who came off the ark), that the earth was "populated/scattered" (נפצה) after the Flood (Gen 9:18–19; 10:1–32).[2]

In a related way, though the authors earnestly wish to bridge the divide between various positions and perspectives, Davidson and Turner (naïvely?) betray a severe lack of understanding concerning YEC. To be specific, the authors lament: "Unfortunately, what is obvious and most practical often gets muted when we get bogged down in debates over secondary issues" (see pg. 122). Accompanying this, they also opine that (in their estimation) "the date of the creation events in earth history" is an example of a "secondary issue" (122). "What exactly though," one might wonder, "is wrong with these assertions?" To begin, let us note C. John Collins thoughts:

> The argument for a young earth . . . goes like this: the phrases 'from the beginning of creation' (Mark 10:6) and 'from the beginning' (Matt 19:4, 8) do not refer to the beginning of mankind [sic] but to the beginning of creation itself. Therefore, Jesus was dating the origin of mankind [sic] to a time very shortly after the initial creation of Genesis 1:1. If there is any kind of time very shortly after the initial creation and the beginning of the creation week, or if the week itself lasts much

1 Mark J. Boda, *Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 100, MT pointing for all of the Hebrew characters removed. Cf. Catherine L. McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden: The Creation of Humankind in Genesis 2:5–3:24 in Light of mīs pî, pīt pî, and wpt-r Rituals of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt*. Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures 15 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015) and Brian Lima "צלם and דמות: Their Kinship Meaning in Genesis" (PhD diss., McMaster Divinity College, 2015). As another scholar puts it: "a covenant was a way of making kin out of non-kin." Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 73. Cf. Dustin G. Burlet, *Judgment and Salvation: A Rhetorical Critical Reading of Noah's Flood in Genesis* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022) 4–7.

2 For a thorough grammatical analysis of this verse's unique phrasing (cf. Gen 11), see the NET Bible.

> longer than an ordinary week, then we must conclude that Jesus was mistaken (or worse, misleading), and therefore he can't be God.[3]

Collins goes on to clarify:

> If this argument is sound, I'm in trouble, because . . . I cannot follow this reading of Genesis 1. On the other hand, I firmly believe in the traditional Christian doctrine of Christ, and tremble at the thought of doing anything to undermine it. But the argument is not sound. It finds its credibility from the way the English "from *the* beginning" seems so definite; but the Greek is not fixed in meaning.[4]

What is clear from the above is that Collins does not dismiss the question of the age of the earth as a secondary issue. Instead, he (rightly) ties a proper understanding of these matters to biblical authority via connecting them to the doctrine of Christ (cf. John 18:37).

Whether or not one agrees with this conclusion or even his argument(s), in general, it is clear that Collins gets the 'heart' of YEC. In sum, I believe that Davidson and Turner's failure to fully appreciate the YEC position seems to indicate an unnecessary (gross?) misunderstanding and, in my estimation, potentially undermines their hope that "this work can serve as a balm on the open wounds that Christians have inflicted on other Christians" (176).

A final criticism involves the sustained lack of engagement with non-English literature as well as the odd absenteeism of many fine commentators. Another notable non-attendee is Mark S. Smith's *The Priestly Vision of Genesis* (Augsburg, 2010).

Irrespective of these infelicities, however, *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One: A Mult-Layered Approach* by Gregg Davidson and Kenneth J. Turner is a stimulating addition to the ever-increasing library of books concerning this not insignificant portion of Scripture. While not everyone, of course, will agree with all of their interpretations, as Daniel L. Block states: "all should welcome this invitation to conversation and reflection on a rich text that has engaged scholars and ordinary people for thousands of years" (no number, endorsements page).

Its primary readers will likely be the invested layperson, pastors/ministers, Christian educators and leaders, and Bible College/Christian university students. Highly recommended!

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3 C. John Collins, *Science & Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 106.
4 Collins, *Science & Faith*, 106. Italics original.

Denis O. Lamoureux. *The Bible and Ancient Science: Principles of Interpretation*. Tullahoma, TN: McGahan, 2020. Pp. 216. ISBN: 978-1-9512-5205-2. $19.74 (CDN) $18.80 (USD) paper.

What is the relationship between the scientific method and religion, particularly between modern science and the Christian faith? Are there any principles of biblical interpretation that may help to shed light? Veteran author, Denis O. Lamoureux, invites readers to lean into this controversial yet not insignificant topic in *The Bible and Ancient Science: Principles of Interpretation*.

Lamoureux's goal for this volume is modest. He states: "My hope and prayer for this book is that it helps you to be more mindful of your hermeneutical principles. In this way, you will make informed decisions about the interpretation of biblical passages referring to nature and origins and become better interpreters of the Word of God" (13). The main question, though, of *The Bible and Ancient Science* pertains to whether or not the Bible is a book of science. To be specific, Lamoureux seeks to demonstrate that the Bible has an 'ancient science.' That is to say: "During the inspiration of Scripture, the Holy Spirit came down to the level of the biblical writers and allowed them to use the science-of-the-day as a vessel for delivering life-changing, inerrant spiritual truths" (back cover). Though some might complain that such terminology is, perhaps, anachronistic, the author (rightly) contends that "ancient people were enthralled by nature and they certainly attempted to understand its origins, operation, and structure" (208).

Unlike any of the author's other works, *The Bible and Ancient Science* is arranged via a series of twenty-two "Hermeneutical Principles," each of which constitute a single chapter of the text. There is also an acknowledgments section, an introduction (which contains an enlightening biographical 'backstory' of the origins of this book), conclusion, and three appendices ("Christian Positions on the Origin of the Universe & Life," "The 'Waters Above' & Scientific Concordism," and "Do Isaiah 40:22 & Job 26:7 Refer to a Spherical Earth?"). Regrettably, there are no indices.

Many of the author's hermeneutical principles are (relatively speaking) quite simple. For example, the author stresses the need to read all literature in its context and according to its genre. This is because "the literary genre of a passage dictates how it is to be interpreted" (22–italics removed). Elsewhere Lamoureux ably points out that "non-literal accounts can deliver life changing messages of faith" and heavily emphasizes "Hermeneutical Commandment #1: Thou shalt not believe that the Bible is 100% literal!" (18). He also states: "it is critical . . . we do not confuse and conflate . . . ancient and modern phenomenological perspectives" (41).

Connected to this is one of the most important (and most nuanced) principles

that Lamoureux delineates. This concerns the 'scope' of 'cognitive competence.' To be clear:

> The term 'cognitive scope' depicts the mental or intellectual tools through which everyone sees and understands the natural world. An implication of the scope of cognition is that our perception and knowledge of nature have limits and boundaries. This is similar to the margins of a visual field when using the optical scope of a scientific instrument . . . Thanks to telescopes and microscopes our modern scope of cognitive competence is much wider and greater than that of ancient people (90).

Lamoureux contends that a discrete knowledge of this important principle can function as a type of "hermeneutical brakes" that can effectively stop one from "sliding down the so-called 'slippery slope' that can lead to a loss of faith" (95). In an excursus, Lamoureux makes explicit:

> The miracles of Jesus and his bodily resurrection after his physical death on the Cross are foundational truths of Christianity. First century men and women would have been well-equipped with the intellectual tools to see and know that these miraculous events had actually taken place. In other words, it was well within their scope of cognitive competence. Therefore, this hermeneutical principle acts like a set of 'hermeneutical brakes.' It stops anyone from sliding down the so-called 'slippery slope' and doubting the testimony recorded in the Bible of those who saw and experienced Jesus' miracles and resurrection (97).

A related concept to this is the "Message-Incident Principle." Lamoureux explains this idea: "The Message-Incident Principle states that the ancient science in Scripture is *incidental* because God's central purpose in the Bible is to reveal messages of faith, and not scientific facts about his creation" (46 – original emphasis). For example, Lamoureux maintains: "In Philippians 2:9-11, the Holy Spirit allowed the apostle Paul to use the ancient notion of the 3-tier universe as an incidental vessel to deliver an inerrant message of faith. As a result, Paul and his readers would have fully comprehended that Jesus is the Lord of the whole world, because from the ancient phenological perspective, the 3-tier universe was understood to be the entire universe" (47–48).

Lamoureux is to be commended for his detailed, pedagogically sensitive, analysis. In fact, the "Message-Incident' principle may, perhaps, be the most important interpretive concept in developing a non-concordist interpretation for statements about nature in Scripture (see p. 194).

In a related way, Lamoureux also opines: "Young earth creationists are quick

to use the Sabbath Commandment [Exod 20:8 and 11] to defend their literal and scientific concordist interpretation of Genesis 1 . . . However, there is a subtle and fatal problem with this argument. It fails to identify the ancient science in the Sabbath Commandment. When Exodus 20:8 and 11 point back to Genesis 1 and the creation of 'the heavens and the earth, the sea,' it was referring to the *de novo* creation of a 3-tier universe" (166). While one can, perhaps, appreciate the intent of the author, the only citation of Young Earth Creation (YEC) scholarship in his brief appendix on "The 'Waters Above' and Scientific Concordism" (see pp. 199–202), comes from Whitcomb and Morris' *The Genesis Flood* (Presbyterian & Reformed Press, 1961). Given that Lamoureux explicitly states that "the best evidence for ancient science in the Bible is the firmament" (134), would it not have behooved the author to have ensured that he was refuting the most contemporary YEC position(s) on this topic, especially in light of scholarly advancements?[1]

Regrettably, a similar type of situation occurs elsewhere in the text wherein the author accuses both Young-Earth creationists and progressive creationists as embracing a view of God's Word that could be termed "biblical Docetism/Arianism" (190), yet does not directly engage his opponents' actual argumentation pertaining to such matters *vis-à-vis* direct quotes/other citations.

Another criticism involves the lack of linguistic precision that Lamoureux offers concerning Leviticus 11:13-19 and the Hebrew terms for "flying things" (עוף) and "the bat" (העטלף). Pointedly, Lamoureux asserts: "One of the best examples of ancient biology in the Bible is the categorization of bats as birds" (42). To be candid, this is not so. Cline's *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew,* a tool the author claims to have employed in his writing (208), makes explicit that 'bats' are not 'birds' but that they do fall under the same category of "flying things."[2] In other words, Lamoureux seems to engage in a kind of

> 'bananas are berries' approach to scientific terminology that mistakes the map for the territory. 'Bats' are not 'birds,' but this is because we

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1 For example, one prominent YEC scholar states: "Several creation scientists have reconsidered the *rāqîaʿ*. The *rāqîaʿ* being interstellar space is necessary for Humphreys' white hole cosmology. Hartnett attempted to explain the abundant water in the solar system by his identification of the *rāqîaʿ* with the space of the solar system. Separating the waters above and below by the earth's surface is an integral part of Brown's hydroplate model with the *rāqîaʿ* being the primordial surface of the earth . . . I have proposed here that *Genesis 1:1* contains an example of introductory encapsulation and that *Genesis 1:6–8* ought to be understood primarily in terms of the creation of what we now call space (or sky)" (٦٥ ,٥٧). Danny R. Faulkner, *Answers Research Journal* 9 (2016) 57– 65. Regrettably, however, as noted above, Faulkner's work (and many others) does not appear in the bibliography. Cf. Terry Mortenson, "The Firmament: What Did God Create on Day 2?" *Answers Research Journal* ٣٣–١١٣ :(٢٠٢٠) ١٣.

2 Further lexical details may be found in *HALOT* 1:800–01, 814; *NIDOTTE* 3:381, 837–39; *TWOT* 2:655. Cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus* (AB), ٦٤–١:٦٦٢; John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC), ٦٠–١٥٩. For an exhaustive analysis, see Peter Altmann, *Banned Birds: The Birds of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14* (Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

> choose to define the category 'bird' in a certain way, and the category 'bat' in a certain way. We didn't 'discover' that bats aren't 'birds' since Lev. was written, rather we changed the meaning of 'bird.' The sentence 'bats are birds' does not necessarily assert incorrectly that bats have feathers, if the person stating it intentionally means a different thing by the category 'bird' than you do.[3]

This truth is also not undermined by any particular renderings of these two specific Hebrew terms into English (cf. EVV). In brief, "Meaning is Different Than Translation." This exegetical fallacy is discussed at length elsewhere and need not be belabored.[4]

Another quibble involves Lamoureux's assertion that "the Holy Spirit inspired author of Genesis 1 never intended to offer a list of the divine creative acts in a chronological order" (165).

This assessment, however, tends to break down upon further analysis as the sequential order of events seems to be internally quite crucial to the "structured writing" of Days 1-3 and Days 4-6 that the author advocates for elsewhere (see p. 163). To be clear, Lamoureux maintains that the first three days of creation neatly correlate with the last three days of creation, i.e., "in the first three days of creation, the Creator responds to the formlessness by setting up the boundaries of the universe. During the last three creation days, he resolves the emptiness through filling the world with heavenly bodies and living creatures" (163–64). The difficulty is clear. Do not the waters of "Day One" need to exist prior to them being able to be separated on "Day Two" and for the events of "Day Three" to occur? Likewise, is it not logical to assume that in order for humanity to rule over the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea (Gen 1:28), at least some of these things would need to have been chronologically created earlier? Although one may, perhaps, argue that not everything in the Creation week is necessarily sequential since "light" is created before the traditionally accepted sources of the light (i.e., the heavenly bodies; cf. Gen 1:3–6, 14–19), it remains evident that at least some kind of ordered, chronological sequence is still 'a given' by the biblical scribe(s) elsewhere in Scripture (cf. Exod 20:11). To conclude, most attempts to de-chronologize and/or rearrange the sequence of the days of creation week tend to force impossibilities or reduce them into absurdities.

Another (minor) irritant includes the fact that though the author leverages a wide variety of translations (such as the KJV, NRSV, NASB, NIV, etc.), it is not

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3 I am indebted to Rick Wadholm Jr. and Tyler Huson (via private communiqué), and Steve Jessop for this insight. See https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/10373/are-bats-described-as-birds?noredirect=1&lq=1.

4 Benjamin Baxter, *In the Original Text It Says: Word-Study Fallacies and How to Avoid Them* (Energion, 2012).

always clear what version, precisely, he is quoting as no default translation is given and not all citations have references. Some readers may also feel that the author's criticism(s) of certain Bible renderings could stand to be nuanced at times (see pp. 75–77, 126, 209, 210). The same, perhaps, could also be said of Lamoureux's 'recasting' (stretching?) of certain passages of Scripture (see pp. 73–74, 188).

The primary problem, however, with this volume is how little original content is actually contained in *The Bible and Ancient Science*. That is to say, though Lamoureux maintains that he has chosen to update certain aspects of his nomenclature, i.e., he leverages the more relational term "correspondence" over and against the word "concordism" (see pp. 28 and 208), there is very little that is truly 'new' here. That is to say, for the most part, almost everything within *The Bible and Ancient Science* has already been discussed in either *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution* (Wipf and Stock, 2008), *I Love Jesus and I Accepted Evolution* (Wipf and Stock 2009), or *Evolution: Scripture and Nature Say Yes!* (Zondervan, 2016). Plainly speaking, having read each of the author's previously published books and having used some of his other material in my own classroom over the years, in certain ways I would have been more pleased to have seen Lamoureux provide an update (second edition), of *Evolutionary Creation* over the publication of what seems to be largely a re-hashing of his already published material.

Interestingly, even some of Lamoureux's most contemporary material in *The Bible and Ancient Science* is repeated verbatim (cf. principle 17, endnote 3, p. 212 with principle 21, endnote 5, p. 215). The book also feels unnecessarily 'inflated' due to the author's tendency to consistently repeat (or, at least, heavily reemphasize) certain points in more than one chapter.

One might also have wished for a more rigorous overarching methodology to bolster the author's assertions and/or supplement his insights since the compilation of so many different 'hermeneutical principles' tends to make the overall interpretive exercise rather unwieldy. Perhaps it would also have benefited the author to have lumped together some of the different principles under main groupings/headings so as to divide them into more manageable chunks.

That being said, however, *The Bible and Ancient Science* retains many of the same fine elements that exemplify this author's other works. These include superb typographical editing throughout the text and well-written, engaging, prose that is free from technical jargon and unnecessary verbiage. The length, too, should also be considered a boon as no student would feel onerously burdened with reading this volume in its entirety even if other books were required.

It should also come as no surprise that Lamoureux's work is replete with an impressive amount of stimulating and informative graphic material (charts, tables,

diagrams, etc.). There are numerous high-quality, high-resolution illustrations and/or facsimiles, such as reproductions of an Ancient Egyptian 3-Tier Universe, Ancient Mesopotamian Astronomy, Ancient Egyptian Creation of Humans, Ancient Egyptian (and Mesopotamian) Geography, and the like. One wonders, however, why there is no 'list' of visuals (unlike many of the author's other works) as finding any one given graphic is fairly difficult. This problem is, most regrettably, acutely exacerbated by the fact that there are (simply) no indices, making it that much more challenging to find specific reference(s) to a particular author or biblical text. A related quibble is that none of the many excursuses – "Are the Messages of Faith merely Ancient Human Beliefs?" (50–52), "Hermeneutical Brakes" (95–97), "The God of the Gaps" (151–54), or "Jesus, Adam, and Genesis 1-2" (175–77) – are labelled in the table of contents. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of many of these things (especially indices) would have served a number of readers quite well.

Such matters notwithstanding, *The Bible and Ancient Science: Principles of Interpretation* by Denis Lamoureux is a notable addition to the ever-increasing library of books that concern the inter-relationship of the biblical text and the scientific method. Its primary readers will likely be the invested laypersons, pastors, Christian leaders, apologists looking for more details on Evolutionary Creation, and/or Bible College/Christian university students.

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David W. Bebbington, ed. *The Gospel in Latin America: Historical Studies in Evangelicalism and the Global South*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2022. Pp. xii + 243. ISBN 978-1-4813-1722-1. $49.99 (USD) hardcover.

As an edited volume, *The Gospel in Latin America* presents a wide range of information and perspectives on the rise of evangelical strains of Christianity in Latin America. The book provides essays from several authors who are Latin American, and also from outsiders who are American, English, and even French. The book begins with one section of general studies in Latin American evangelicalism and then progresses to more geographically specific studies. Bebbington's edited volume presents an excellent picture of the past century of religious evolution in Latin America.

In compiling a cohesive collection of perspectives on evangelicalism, at least one issue immediately arises for the editor: what is evangelicalism? In the introduction, a very basic definition is presented. In compiling a cohesive collection of perspectives on evangelicalism, the editor is clear from the beginning that he is focusing very broadly on "the movement associated with the spread of the gospel"

(20). The first chapter, written by John Maiden, addresses specifically the charismatic renewal movements which began in the United States and the United Kingdom and later spread to Latin America. He spends time discussing the rise of Pentecostalism within this area and the "web of influence US Christians wove — or found themselves woven into" in Latin America in the 1980s and the way that it "exemplified the transnational connectivity, shared evangelistic goals, and extensive reach of the global evangelical community" (25).

Following this, J. Daniel Salinas discusses the way that the Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana (the Latin American Theological Fellowship) developed and began to have an impact both in Latin America and beyond. Next, Virginia Garrard presents a chapter on various theological movements including Dominion Theology and the New Apostolic Reformation in Latin America. Specifically, concerning Dominion Theology, she discusses the way it caused, and perhaps even demanded that Christianity become political so that there might be a way to resurrect a godly culture from the destruction secular liberalism has wrought. Moving toward more practical ramifications, Philip Jenkins discusses the effect of rising evangelicalism on the birth rates in Latin America. Ending this section, David C. Kirkpatrick gives a broad historiography of the subject of Latin American evangelicalism. He ends his chapter, and the section by encouraging his readers to "allow Latin American evangelicalism to display its own agency, one of negotiation, resistance, adoption, and local construction" (115).

In the second section of the book, Pedro Feitoza opens by giving a history of the evolution of evangelicalism in his home country of Brazil. Key to the growth of this sub-movement was an adapted Liberation Theology that prioritized justice in the life of the church. Joseph Florez follows this by sharing more personal accounts of the rise of Pentecostalism in his home country, Chile. In addition to his narrative approach, he provides an abbreviated explanation for why he thinks Pentecostalism has found such success in his country — it works well with the indigenous worldview already present.

Matt Marostica presents a similar argument regarding Argentina, where the fall of dictatorship provided the perfect situation for evangelicalism to find identity and success independent of the foreign influence that had previously dominated it. In a slightly different way, in discussing Peru, Véronique Lecaros presents an evangelicalism that was not brought by political change, so much as it brought about political change. Finally, Matthew Reis connects the Western origins of Latin American evangelicalism with a discussion of how it has come, full circle, back into the United States through undocumented immigration.

The book offers a range of perspectives as diverse as evangelicalism in Latin America. It does not fixate on any one branch of evangelicalism, like Pentecostalism. It does not center around one theological perspective like dominion or

liberation theology. Perhaps most significantly, it does not overly emphasize the political impact of evangelical movements. Instead, it almost leans into the heterogeneity of the practices, beliefs, and emphases of Latin American evangelicals. The diversity in unity found in the movement seems to be the driving force. This theme comes through in the voices and subjects of the various authors represented, but they are arranged in an order that is logical and well-flowing.

As an anthology of essays, the book is a little difficult to follow and is at some points far more engaging than at others. While it provides excellent scholarship, it is a dense and difficult read. Likewise, while the wide spectrum of perspectives and topics offered is wonderful for a reader looking for a glimpse into the diversity of Latin American Christianity, one wonders if the definition of evangelicalism is too broad. Using the definition provided by Bebbington, certain branches of Roman Catholicism could be considered just as evangelical as the Protestant movements described, yet only the latter is discussed. *The Gospel in Latin America* is likely best utilized as a small reference work but is a valuable resource for any student of Latin American Christianity or Christianity in the Global South as it provides well-articulated perspectives on a variety of issues.

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Sarah J. Melcher. *Prophetic Disability: Divine Sovereignty and Human Bodies in the Hebrew Bible*, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability, eds. Amos Yong, Sarah J. Melcher, and John Swinton (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022). Pp. 145. ISBN: 978-1-4813-1024-6. $39.99 (USD) hardcover.

It can likely be said that the function of the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible in modern society is a contested issue. Do the political, theological, and socio-economic critiques of the prophets against ancient Israel/Judah hold modern relevance? If so, in what way, and how is this attained? One aspect that remains relatively constant by those who see modern import in such critiques is the role of the prophetic in empowering the marginalized in the presence of oppressive power structures. Marginalized groups such as women, immigrants, the poor, and racial minorities all bring their own unique perspectives to the interpretation of the prophetic literature and have drawn much comfort and support from it. Yet, what place does the prophetic literature have when seen through the lens of disability? Sarah Melcher seeks to address this question by exploring the tension between the role of disability metaphor within the prophetic literature and the theme of divine sovereignty in her work, *Prophetic Disability*, which constitutes the first ever

treatment of the intersection of disability and the prophetic literature covering the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and The Twelve.

Consisting of four chapters with an introduction and conclusion, *Prophetic Disability* first begins by outlining the methodology of the study in the introduction. Here, Melcher focuses upon Tom Shakespeare's critical realist approach to disability, arguing that "[m]aterial things have an existence independent from what they are called" (2). Put differently, the experience of disability is different from what is typically believed about it. Combining this approach with Martha Nussbaum's list of values for quality of life, Melcher then explores Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve across four chapters. These chapters principally explore how disability functions as metaphor within the prophetic material and how the sovereignty of God is also held as a theological reality. At the end of each of these surveys, Melcher briefly expounds upon the surveyed material, synthesizing theological implications and insights from the books. Finally, Melcher concludes the book by highlighting some of the recurring themes found throughout the material while utilizing the aforementioned work of Nussbaum.

With a title such as *Prophetic Disability*, one could be forgiven for thinking the subject would focus upon prophets with disabilities, or possibly how the subject of disability is treated within the prophetic corpus. However, it is clear early on in the book that the focus is upon the identification of disability metaphors within the prophetic literature. More specifically, Melcher's analysis addresses the interaction between such metaphors and the central theme of the sovereignty of God within the prophetic literature. It is related to this focus that Melcher is largely critical of the prophetic usage of disability metaphors in conveying deep distress and vulnerability, seeing it as problematic and disparaging. This is especially the case when the material seems to represent moral impurity or sinfulness through disability metaphors. As Melcher notes, an "issue raised early in the book of Isaiah and repeated in other prophets is the use of the metaphor of the wounded body to connote unfaithfulness. Disobedience to YHWH is manifested in the prophetic literature often as a wounded body, such as in Isaiah 1, for example" (105). While Melcher's analysis is quite generalized—especially in identifying said metaphors—this is still a valid concern in my opinion and one that deserves further reflection.

One especially positive insight of Melcher's work here is her chapter on Jeremiah, particularly the section on theological implications. Utilizing the work of Deborah Beth Creamer, Melcher highlights the importance of limitation, stating that "we all have limitations before the sovereign and providential God. Jeremiah's description of God's sovereignty and providence means that all persons are limited before God, but that our limitations do not prevent God from

disciplining us, caring for our needs, or nurturing the divine/human relationship" (61). Thankfully, many insights such as this one can be found throughout Melcher's work.

However, despite these insights, there are aspects of the book that warrant criticism. First, while the introduction establishes Shakespeare's critical realist approach as foundational to Melcher's analysis, the methodology never truly emerges throughout the book's examination of the prophetic literature. Rather, it is the tension between disability metaphor and the affirmation of divine sovereignty in the prophetic literature that encompasses the focus of the book. As such, I am uncertain as to the importance of the critical realist approach throughout the book as it seems to hold little impact upon the overall exploration. Unfortunately, what results from this is a general lack of cohesion to the book.

Second, in her attempt to find disability metaphors throughout the prophetic material, Melcher often stretches these beyond reasonable interpretation. For example, this emerges when Melcher includes any and all mobility imagery, whether it be walking, running, or the marching of an army in her analysis. If God is said to stop an army, this is then seen as an inappropriate disability metaphor. Another especially striking example can be found in Melcher's parameters for analyzing disability metaphors, where she includes feminine imagery in her analysis. Her reasoning rests upon the connection between the two, as feminine imagery is often argued to be used to signify spiritual or moral issues just like disability metaphors. Melcher also suggests, in line with the work of Carole Fontaine, that "feminine gender was a disability in the ancient world" (41). Within the context of Isaiah, Melcher notes that "women and people with disabilities share a reduced status in the perspectives of the Isaianic authors. This may reflect a cultural situation in ancient Judah where women were considered second-class citizens" (41). However, while Melcher is right to note the marginalized place of women in ancient Israel, as well as the broader ancient Near-East, it is not apparent that this was seen as a disability in antiquity, nor is it apparent that marginalization is entirely synonymous with disability. This is a leap in logic that seems to stretch the usage of feminine metaphors beyond what is reasonable.

Ultimately, it must be recognized that *Prophetic Disability* has many shortcomings. Yet there are also many important insights, such as Melcher's analysis of the tension between how disability is reflected in the prophetic materialversus the reality of divine sovereignty. Unfortunately, the relatively short length of the book does not allow for all the aspects of Melcher's approach to emerge, such as the impact of Shakespeare's critical realist approach. Despite these critiques, Melcher is certainly to be commended for initiating this important study, as the prophetic corpus constitutes promising ground for future disability work. Whether one agrees with all of the analysis and conclusions, it serves as a vital step forward in

the examination of disability in the Hebrew Bible. Though it is tragic that such studies are only now emerging, one can hope that they will continue to emerge and bring forth new and impactful insights.

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S. Lily Mendoza and George Zachariah, eds. *Decolonizing Ecotheology: Indigenous and Subaltern Challenges*. Intersectionality & Theology Series 3. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022. Pp. 312. ISBN 978-1-7252-8640-5. $40 (USD) paper.

Over the last number of decades ecotheology has deepened our understanding of how theology and philosophy have justified the domination of nature. Ecofeminists and ecowomanists, for example, have noted the entanglement of patriarchy and racism in the process. The essays in *Decolonizing Ecotheology* seek to deepen further the analysis of displacement and domination. Edited by S. Lily Mendoza, from Oakland University in Michigan, and George Zacharia, from Trinity Methodist Theological College in Auckland, New Zealand, the chapters were part of the "Earth" stream of the Discernment and Radical Engagement Global Forum held near Taipei, Taiwan, in 2019.

As the editors admit, the voices are diverse and use different methodologies – whether anthropological, sociological, historical, biblical, or theological. Nevertheless, they are united in the conviction that mainstream ecotheology is still "embedded in colonial and neo-liberal epistemologies" (1) and therefore a "creation theology of conquest and displacement" needs to be dismantled (3). In practical terms, "ecotheological ministries that initiate campaigns on simple living, vegetarianism, planting trees, and reduce-reuse-recycle" do not go far enough (6). To help remedy this, this collection provides a "robust polyphony of reportage, wonder, analysis, and acumen seeking to open the door to a different prospect for a planet under grave duress and a different self-assessment for our own species" (15).

After the Introduction, the book is divided into four parts. "Part One: Earth Words: Revelation and Flow in the Bible" contains three essays. The first by James Perkinson seems to argue that the preaching of Jesus at times reaches back behind established Israelite religion to a more nature-friendly Canaanite view that was not hampered by monotheism and monoculture. This is a bold thesis. Unfortunately, the fast-paced style of the writing undercuts the clarity of the argument and the patient unfolding of the evidence needed. The second essay by Barbara Rossing is more convincing. She draws out the themes of God's water of life and undrinkable water in the book of Revelation and suggests the relevance of this for

the struggle for water in Palestine and Standing Rock. In the third essay, Enolyne Lyngdoh reads Psalm 104 in light of the sacredness of nature found in Khasi belief of Northern India. Since most Khasi today are Christian, this is certainly a valuable exercise.

Part two of the book, "Earth Rites: Ritual Transgressions and Transformations", also has three essays. The first by Ferdinand Annon examines the Podong rite of the Igorot people in the Philippines. The rite serves as a form of protest and resacralization in the face of damming, logging, and the assassination of indigenous leaders. The Igorot worldview, moreover, suggests a "just egalitarian ecosystem" that is "radically embedded in the consciousness, lifeways, and traditions of the Igorot" (81). The second essay by Faafetai Aiavā recounts a creative "ceremonial rearrangement" when the character Eleele, a Gaia-like character from a Samoan creation story, is inserted into the Genesis narrative. He recounts how this was effectively used in different contexts. In the third essay, Kathryn Poethig examines the miracle stories of Cambodian and Vietnamese Buddhists recovering statues of Roman Catholic saints that were lost during the Khmer Rouge regime. In these stories rescuers receive "epiphany dreams" that for Poethig suggests the anthropological concept of a "oneiric ecumene, a multidimensional dream world inhabited by entities who traverse the 'inside' and 'outside' of the dreamer" (109). This is a fascinating piece though less connected to ecotheology than other chapters.

Part Three, "Earth Politics: Practices and Movements on the Ground", has two essays from North American, one from Africa and one from Palestine. E. Sheryl Johnson wonders if the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada could inspire a similar process for climate justice. She focuses on the importance of climate debt found in "the historical trajectory of colonialism and globalization" (135), especially between the Global North and the South. In "Where Earth and Water Meet" Sophia Chirongoma summarizes how dam projects have been devastating for indigenous Karanga communities in Zimbabwe—especially given the connection between animals, land, rituals, and ancestors. She argues that proper consultation would have allowed for better resettlement that included the survival of livestock and the inclusion of religious rituals. The chapter by Yousef Kamal AlKhouri, an Arab evangelical theologian teaching in Palestine, explicates the connection between eschatology and creation care in the Israeli colonization of Palestine. He demonstrates how Christian Zionism justifies and finances this to the detriment of Palestinians. The last chapter of this Part by established Lutheran theologian and ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda addresses a North American audience in order to "foment moral-spiritual agency" (175). She first diagnoses the problem and then outlines wide-reaching practical suggestions. We eagerly await

the full version of her paradigm in book form. These last two chapters are certainly important for North American readers of CATR.

The last four chapters are under "Earth Uprisings: Decolonization and a Return to the Commons". George Zachariah notes that for many in India 'Poromboke' is a derogatory term referring to unclean or unused lands, which can easily be appropriated by the state or corporations. However, for local subaltern communities this land is a source of subsistent living, so Zachariah calls for a Poromboke ecotheology that calls into question caste and class. From Brazil, Nancy Cardoso's provocative essay draws an analogy between pornography and current monocrop agriculture, both of which are based on patriarchal views of control and abuse. As an alternative she points to practices of appreciating the land and sharing local farming knowledge. In James Perkinson's second essay he turns to the Cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the myth of Quetzalcoatl in Mexico. He suggests they provide sites of resistance and for the recovery of a more fully animated world. The last paper by S. Lily Mendoza is an excellent piece that narrates the author's own struggle of growing up in an American form of Christianity, both in the Philippines and then America, which separated her from indigenous connections to the land. The tension becomes too much to bear and so she explores shamanistic traditions of the Philippines through the Center of Babaylan Studies, of which she is the Executive Director. This chapter illustrates very well the tensions between Christian faith, identity, nationality, and indigeneity.

The chapters in *Decolonizing Ecotheology* are invaluably rich and such brief summaries do not do them justice. They cover a diversity of indigenous and subaltern perspectives throughout the world and demonstrate the problems with colonization, both past and present. They often highlight the importance of land and animals for local communities and how this has been neglected by Christian communities. The editors do well to introduce the problem and then allow the different voices to speak for themselves. This is a rich resource for scholars working in ecotheology and many of the chapters could serve as course readings though they would have to be paired within something that more clearly introduces readers to the basic concepts and problems.

However, given the diversity of methods there is no clear definition of what counts as theology, and in fact many of the authors don't seem to view themselves as theologians. In other words, not all of the essays are exercises in postcolonial ecotheology, though most present postcolonial critiques of ecotheology. Another issue is that there is no attempt to theorize on a larger scale the relation between theology and colonization – though the essays by Perkinson point in that direction. For example, none of the authors engaged Willie James Jennings' book *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale, 2010). This work narrates and explicates the categories of displacement and translation that could

be applied in various contexts, even while being concerned with a constructive theological response. Such an approach would enable someone who confesses a traditional trinitarian theology (as with this reviewer) to begin the constructive task of not only affirming God as the creator of nature but of diverse cultures, languages, and places as well. This would include an affirmation of indigenous ways of experiencing and relating to nature. Nevertheless, constructive theology is not the aim of this collection and it certainly succeeds in presenting a polyphony of voices for the future of ecotheology.

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Andrew C. Witt. *A Voice Without End: The Role of David in Psalms 3–14*. Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement 20 (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021). Pp. xii + 242. ISBN 978-1-64602-111-6. $34.99 (USD) paper.

Has contemporary psalm scholarship properly grasped how the figure of David is utilized within the book of Psalms? is the question driving Andrew Witt's ground-breaking work, *A Voice Without End* (2). According to Witt, ambiguity still lingers in relation to the figure of David especially within Pss 3–14, a cluster of psalms which has received limited consideration in contemporary psalms scholarship. Witt therefore endeavors to fill this lacuna by examining the relationship between the speaking voice of David and that of the figure of David in Pss 3–14. By so doing, Witt argues that the multivalent figure of David still speaks in the present and the future (2). Additionally, by juxtaposing Psalms 2–3, Witt argues that one can already begin to observe the failure of the covenant through David's rebellious son Absalom (Ps 3), and the success of the covenant through David's son Solomon, and thus the hope of God's faithfulness in keeping His covenant with David (Ps 2).

To demonstrate his point, Witt divides his monograph into six chapters. In the first chapter, he relies on the works of Brevard Childs and Gerald Wilson as he outlines his methodology of canonical criticism. This he believes fits best with his interpretive approach to the literary figure and voice of David within Pss 3–14.

This is followed by the history of interpretation, both pre-modern and modern, in relation to the speaking persona(e) in chapter 2. Here, Witt divides the pre-modern interpreters into two exegetical categories: prosopological (Origen and Augustine) and typological (Aquinas and Calvin). Since his work employs elements present in both exegetical categories, Athanasius serves as Witt's fifth conversational partner. While one does observe an overlap between prosopological and typological exegesis, the fundamental difference lies in how "One construes the

original utterance of the psalm and its later use" (49). In prosopological exegesis, "The prophet David speaks in the voice of another, with no need for correspondence between the experience of David and the one who actualizes his words" (49–50). In typological exegesis, however, "The correspondence between David and Christ is of utmost importance, as the speech of the anti-type brings the type's words to their fullest and truest expression" (50).

For the modern interpretation of the speaking persona(e), Witt converses particularly with W. M. L. de Wette who observed incongruities between the historical claims of the superscriptions attributed specifically to David (since the majority are ascribed to David) with the life experiences of David. In this light, it is hardly surprising that he recommended viewing the superscriptions as suspicious (73). Motivated by this pessimism, de Wette thus proposed that one should view the speaking persona of David simply as a generic "Everyman," that is, "someone who is difficult to place historically but has appeal for readers in any age" (75).

For the remainder of his monograph, Witt examines the shaping of the figure of David in the Psalms in chapter 3 before exploring the figure of David in Pss 3–6 and Pss 7–14 in chapters 4 and 5 respectively. By observing that Pss 1–2 serve as an introduction to the first cluster of Psalms (3–14) and the entire Psalter in its canonical or final form, Witt endeavors to show that the central figure of Pss 1–2 is a psalmic David and should thus be distinguished from the narratival David of 1–2 Samuel. As such, from chapters 3–5, Witt demonstrates how the David that is nascent in Pss 1–2 and developed in Pss 3–14 emerges as a fourfold multivalent figure:

i. A Biographical David. This David is known to the reader specifically from his life experiences recorded in 2 Sam 15–18 (154).

ii. A Typical David. This David is representative of all pray-ers down through the centuries (158). One therefore prays these predominantly lament prayers in Pss 3–14 alongside this David, identifying with his struggles and continued hope in YHWH to rescue him out of his distress (159).

iii. A Typological David. This David holds in tension the exemplary "Blessed Man" (1:1) and anointed Son (2:7), with the expectation of a future Davidic heir who would actualize the promises made to David (2 Sam 7) and rule over the nations in accordance with Ps 2:7–9 (161). Therefore, in light of the entire biblical canon, this David is a type of the Messiah whom Christians identify as Jesus Christ, the anti-type (161).

iv. A Didactic David. This David is known to the reader specifically from his life experiences or ongoing troubles with the Benjamites and

> therefore stands as a representative model for all those who face injustice (176). This David reflects on the course of his life and subsequently instructs the reader to petition YHWH for justice in light of the nature of YHWH's righteous judgments (177).

In the conclusion (chapter 6), Witt summarizes: "When taken together, Pss 3–14 provide the Psalter's initial exploration of the themes presented in Pss 1–2, as well as our first introduction to the figure of David, who will remain present with the reader throughout the book" (206). In this way, far from being static or ancient, the figure of David's literary voice still speaks today. Herein lies the potency of Witt's argument, which will benefit not only scholars, but all Bible teachers across the board, and especially those who tend toward polarizations, that is, to either reject the superscriptions, on the one hand, or more so, to conform the David in the psalms to the David in the 1–2 Samuel narratives.

That said, a couple of issues do arise from reading Witt's monograph. First, while he makes repeated mention of editorial work in relation to the superscriptions, he does not proffer any substantial evidence for arriving at such a conclusion; this is simply assumed. Second, Witt avers that the biographical information in the headings of Pss 3 and 7 should be viewed as the contextual setting for Pss 4–6 and 8–14 respectively since the latter two clusters contain no biographical information. However, if the biographical information of Ps 3 stands as the contextual setting for Pss 4–6, should the biographical information of Ps 7 not stand as the contextual setting for Pss 8–33, especially since Ps 34 is the next Psalm that contains biographical information (even if some have observed a chiastic structure to Pss 15–24)?

Furthermore, in light of למנצח plus optional prepositional phrases originally serving as *postscripts* rather than superscripts to the psalms preceding them (see Bruce Waltke's "Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both," *JBL* 110.4 [1991]: 588–89), one does wonder what theological insights might emerge from reading *backward*, that is, Pss 1–2 in light of Ps 3 and Pss 4–6 in light of Ps 7.

All things considered, far from being left behind, Witt has cogently demonstrated that the literary voice of David is truly a "voice without end" (203).

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Rick Wadholm Jr. and Megan D. Musy, eds. *Community: Biblical and Theological Reflections in Honor of August H. Konkel*. McMaster Biblical Studies Series 9. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022. 272 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5326-3928-9. $53.86 (CDN) $39.65 (USD) paperback.

With joy-filled adoration, the psalmist celebrates the unique relationship the LORD has with his faithful community, summoning worshipers to praise Yahweh for his faithfulness and imploring them to "serve" (עבד) God with "gladness" (שׂמחה) and to "come before him, singing with joy!" (Ps 100:2 NLT). Similarly, Dr. August "Gus" H. Konkel has joyously dedicated himself to spurring the community of faith vis à vis his tireless commitment to astute theological reflection (faith seeking understanding) in both the Church and the academic community.

Community provides a constructive collection of thirteen essays offering biblical and theological reflections on the title theme in honor of Konkel's seventieth birthday. As such, *Community* follows the trajectory of Konkel's own myriad contributions to scholarship that have been intentionally engaged both on behalf of and as a lively and constructive member of such community. These essays present forays across the spectrum of biblical and theological studies that intersect with the many contributions of Konkel's life work (see back cover). Rick Wadholm Jr. (editor) hopes that this volume, *Community*, "blesses Gus for his astute work on behalf of the Christian community, blesses that community, and above all, blesses the Lord, the center of this community" (xx–xxi). Incontrovertibly, *Community* succeeds in this (rather modest) endeavor.[1]

Aside from a brief introduction that offers a short biography of Konkel's life, some personal reflections on "Gus" and community, and a brief overview of the different contributions to *Community* as a whole (along with a bibliography of

1 For full disclosure, I had the privilege of studying full-time under Dr. Konkel while earning my MDiv (biblical languages) at Providence Theological Seminary where I took (for credit) Hermeneutics, Old Testament Text and Interpretation, Psalms, and Old Testament Theology alongside (as an audit student) Job and some select classes on Qumran. Gus and I also worshipped together (along with our families) during my time in seminary at St. Pierre Bible Fellowship (MB, Canada). Notably, Gus also officiated our wedding (Rebecca and Dustin) at the same home church. In the course of time, Dr. Konkel became my first advisor at McMaster Divinity College (MDC) where I earned my terminal degree (and took several Bible-related courses with Gus!). During that period, Gus also chaired the first paper I ever presented at a theological conference (fittingly published in Providence's journal, *Didaskalia*, my first article!) and was president of the first academic guild that I ever became a member of (and now serve on the executive council for) namely the Canadian American Theological Association (once CETA). Gus and I also co-taught a one-week modular course (Hermeneutics) at Providence and I am proud to have been a graduate assistant of his as well at MDC. Lastly, Gus also wrote the forward to my book, a form of my 2019 dissertation entitled "Cosmos to Chaos—Chaos to Covenant," revised for publication as *Judgment and Salvation: A Rhetorical-Critical Reading of Noah's Flood in Genesis* (Pickwick, 2022). I have never tired of learning from this remarkable individual!

Konkel's own published work) the book is comprised of thirteen different essays from various scholars. As Wadholm judiciously asserts:

> The tone and content of the individual chapters reflect the diversity of its contributors, because this is the nature of a *Festschrift*, a collection of essays in honor of a scholar. These chapters were written to honor Gus, as a former student, professor, scholar, colleague, and friend; they reflect a diversity of aims, overall, and writing styles (xix).

The topics covered in the text vary quite widely. By way of example, several biblical books, such as Isaiah, Job, Zechariah, and Judges, alongside the Synoptic Traditions of the Old Testament, i.e., Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, are all covered in-depth. This is not to mention the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Old Greek/Septuagint (LXX), and certain theological matters (such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the intersection of Pentecostalism and the Mennonite tradition). That said, the distinct quality of the contributors themselves, i.e., Mark J. Boda, Mary L. Conway, Paul S. Evans, Daniel K. Falk, Patrick S. Franklin, Rick Wadholm Jr., Randall Holm, David H. Johnson, Martin W. Mittelstadt, Stanley E. Porter, Gary V. Smith, H. G. M. Williamson, and Albert M. Wolters, is exceptionally notable as each author is a world-renowned, recognized expert in the field and each essay markedly furthers the discipline of that specific guild. The unique combination of pastoral sensitivity and relevant application points alongside the broad range of academic disciplines covered therein make *Community* a remarkably impressive text.

Perhaps the crown jewel of the volume (given his role in various key aspects related to the LXX) is "Where is the Study of the Septuagint Going, and Should It?" by Stanley E. Porter. Within this article, Porter (judiciously) asserts that "the issue in reading the Septuagint (in Greek or translation) is to appreciate it as a living scriptural document for the worshipping community and profitable for spiritual instruction" (129). Elsewhere Porter (rightly) argues:

> We can see that . . . Septuagint studies are generally orientated in a particular direction. To summarize, this orientation is to rely upon an eclectic text, emphasizing the Semitic character of the Septuagint Greek language, and be translator-centered in nature as reflected in the interlinear paradigm . . . there is [however] no compelling reason why Septuagint studies should continue to be headed in this direction. There are in fact good reasons. . . why it should not, if for no other reason than to provide a balanced and complimentary approach" (139).

The unbridled admiration, respect, and love that people have for Gus is palpable throughout *Community*. This is, perhaps, most evident through the words of Gary V. Smith:

> I knew from the very beginning of my association with Dr. Konkel, when he was one of my students at Winnipeg Theological Seminary (now Providence Theological Seminary), that I was dealing with an exceptional overachiever with an infectious laugh. His joy for studying God's word was very evident and his enthusiasm for understanding Hebrew in an intensive summer class demonstrated his determination. Some years, [sic] later after leaving that ministry, I gladly recommended that he take my teaching position, and I have marveled at how God has multiplied his ministry since that time (57n1).

Rick Wadholm Jr. also (quite poignantly but also quite accurately) writes:

> Gus Konkel is the consummate pastor with the insight of a prophet (though I dare say he would not self-claim this latter). In his classes and personal interactions, he takes pastoral concern for students, friends, and co-workers seriously. As one of his students, I observed that he would lead classes of students to discern for themselves (in community) in what ways they might faithfully hear and obey the Scriptures within their respective church communities. This contextualization was pastoral for those communities and also provided space for prophetic witness *within* (sometimes *against*, but always ultimately *for*) those church communities (43 – all emphases original).

Given these strengths, it is difficult to find fault with this book. Some minor irritants include the somewhat odd combination of un-pointed Hebrew characters alongside a vocalized text (sometimes, rather oddly, even in the same essay!). In addition to this, certain evangelicals (and also, perhaps, the individual to whom this book is dedicated) may also take umbrage with the predilections of one contributor's viewpoint on a fairly sensitive subject (see pg. 98– 99). One may also have wished for a clearer delineation of Konkel's rather extensive leadership to both the church/parachurch community at large and the academic guild beyond certain (select) officially published works (for example, committee boards, dissertation supervisions, etc.).[2]

Lastly, a more thorough biography of different aspects of Konkel's home and personal life, including the not-insignificant import of his family's Mennonite background and their (not without plight) trek to Canada from Ukraine, would not have been disappointing had they been included. Arguably, such detail(s) would

2 A relatively up-to-date exposé of some of these matters can be found via the McMaster Divinity College website, https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/faculty-and-administration/august-h-konkel/.

have offered further texture/nuance to the full scope of Gus' theological underpinnings and, perhaps, some aspects of his evolved sense of community.[1]

These infelicities aside, there is much to commend within *Community: Biblical and Theological Reflections in honor of August H. Konkel*. Editors Rick Wadholm Jr. and Megan D. Musy should be commended for their fine effort(s) in honoring this unparalleled scholar. I stand in (hearty!) agreement with Mark J. Boda who maintains: "Gus Konkel has spent a lifetime grappling with . . . texts . . . and has consistently displayed his commitment to guiding contemporary readers, young and old, gently but firmly, to understand more accurately the biblical texts. I, for one, am thankful for all his work in the past and in the years to come" (41).

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Julie Faith Parker. *Eve Isn't Evil: Feminist Readings of the Bible to Upend Our Assumptions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023. Pp. 204. ISBN 978-1-5409-6539-4. $22.99 (USD) paper.

Eve Isn't Evil: Feminist Readings of the Bible to Upend our Assumptions by Julie Faith Parker is an excellent introduction to feminist interpretations that falls short of its intent to be a widely accessible introduction that requires no prior knowledge of the Bible, due to its uneven and at times dishonest presentation of trends and consensus of thought in biblical studies. Julie Faith Parker is a visiting scholar at Union Theological Seminary and biblical scholar in residence at Marble Collegiate Church.

Parker begins her book with a brief introduction in which she anecdotally shares with the audience the story of how she came to write *Eve Isn't Evil* as well as her methodology and her working definition of "feminism". In each of the chapters of the body of the book (chs. 2-9) Parker picks a book or section of books from the Hebrew Bible, except for chapter nine which examines the Gospels and

1 As Dr. August H. Konkel himself relates: "My mother was a refugee from Ukraine in 1926 when she was three years old. Her parents, Jacob and Elizabeth Berg, came with two children, Jacob and Aganeta (my mother) through Latvia to London, then Liverpool to Montreal, eventually settling in Rhine, on a farm near Yorkton, quite isolated from their Mennonite Brethren heritage. My parents met at the Springside Baptist Church after the war. My dad was born here near Springside in 1911, struggled through the depression and then the war. Marriage became possible in 1947. Their children (in order) were August, Jacob (deceased Oct. 2021), Melvin (pastor at Moosomin), Verna (husband Peter pastors in Winkler), Ben (on the home farm), David, Stanley, Clarence and Martha. The youngest four now all live near Springside. For the record, I grew up in the best possible home and became a preacher I am sure only because that was the prayer of my parents. They made no secret of telling me that was their prayer and I made no secret of the fact God would not answer that prayer as they thought. I was an engineer. But prayer changes things. The transition detail from engineer happened after a summer of camp work with CSSM (now Hope) when I was invited to pastor an AGC country church where I pastored a year before going back to theological studies." Private communiqué.

the life of Jesus, and through a mixture of personal storytelling and biblical scholarship she seeks to show how the Bible has been misinterpreted and wielded to ostracize and oppress women as well as other minorities, but can be redeemed to provide good, constructive meaning. This mixture of personal experience and biblical scholarship results in balanced and in many ways spiritually devotional chapters that introduce their audience to the often-empowering result of a feminist reading. Parker in her work takes a very open view as to what "feminism" is. Instead of attempting to position herself among one of the waves of feminism or aligning herself with a set of specific scholars, she simply defines feminism as, "liberty and justice for all". (5) The book then ends with a chapter in which she recapitulates her previous chapters while removing the anecdotal material and presenting it with a more traditional academic approach. *Eve Isn't Evil* then also contains two helpful appendices at the end. The first appendix provides a crash course in how to understand the Bible and its intricacies. Parker briefly covers the questions of "Who, what, where, when, why, and how" in regard to the formation and purpose of the Bible. She also provides helpful charts that briefly cover the key themes and characters of each book of the Bible including the deuterocanonical books. The second appendix is a helpful annotated bibliography that is intended to point her readers to further resources on feminist interpretations.

There is a lot to be positive about when considering *Eve Isn't Evil*. Parker is engaging, accessible, and makes reading her book a joy. Her vulnerability as she shares parts of her life story garners trust and will connect with many of her readers as they consider their own life stories and how the Bible speaks to those. Parker also makes feminism something accessible. She does not engage in discussions regarding historical movements, waves of feminism, or the impact of key feminist thinkers. Parker instead simplifies feminism to be about fair and inclusionary practice for all. This simple, yet powerful, definition makes a space of welcoming and self-reflection. Lastly, Parker should also be applauded for her ability to make the nuanced and often complicated world of biblical interpretation accessible. She notes in her introduction that she wrote *Eve Isn't Evil* with the goal that no prior knowledge of the Bible was necessary. Parker partially succeeds in this lofty goal of creating an accessible introduction to feminist readings.

Parker in *Eve Isn't Evil* attempts to write in a way that both introduces feminist readings and the broader world of biblical scholarship. She notes in her introduction that the reader will, "increase your knowledge of the Bible and be introduced to cutting-edge scholarship" (7-8). However, this is one area in which Parker seems to do a disservice to her audience as she seems to represent the interpretive possibilities of a text often poorly in favor of her feminist readings and interpretations. One example of this is when Parker discusses Job's wife and the interpretive claim translators often make when they translate *Barekh* as "curse" as opposed

to its more common meaning of "bless". Parker asserts that this is due to interpretive choice that directly villainizes Job's wife. However, she only notes in passing that *Barekh* is a common euphemism for "curse".[2] Parker seems to purposefully underplay the common understanding that *Barekh* in this instance is a euphemism so that her feminist reading is stronger. This seems like a disservice to Parker's audience who may not be oriented to the world of biblical studies and/or know any Hebrew. The reader is now left with a skewed understanding of what scholars have regarding a usually common consensus concerning this passage.[3]

Another poignant example of this is when Parker asserts that Gen 1:26 indicates that there is a fluidity of gender and a spectrum of possibility. Her interpretation hinges on the idea that when God states "let us make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness" (original emphasis) in Gen 1:26 that the uncertainty of *our* must indicate an unknown plurality which she interprets to mean that gender is non-binary. Now this is not a critique regarding Parker's stance on gender or sex, but it is misleading as she mentions no other interpretive possibility. She does not mention the "royal we" or other interpretive possibilities that are often more accepted in the broader field of biblical studies. Despite Parker's excellent feminist readings, *Eve Isn't Evil* does not represent the world and broader literature of biblical studies well which is a disservice to her readers when one of her expressed goals is to introduce her audience to biblical scholarship as well as feminist readings.

In conclusion, *Eve Isn't Evil* by Julie Faith Parker is a step in the right direction. Her mixture of personal storytelling and biblical scholarship is both generally informative and well-written. Parker also has a gift for making the world of biblical studies and feminism both relevant and easy to grasp. However, it is only tentatively that I can recommend this book. As noted above there are several times in which Parker seems to undervalue or omit common consensus in biblical scholarship so as to better support her feminist readings. For the beginning students or those with no academic training in biblical studies this may leave them with a misinformed picture of biblical scholarship. Despite its positive qualities, *Eve Isn't Evil* may not be the best or most suitable introduction to biblical studies from a feminist lens for the beginning students due to this consistent and troubling interpretive choice.

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2 See Emmanual Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 250–251, for further discussion of Hebrew Euphemisms.

3 See David Clines, *Job 1-20* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1989), 50–53, for an interpretation that both takes seriously the understanding that *Barekh* is a euphemism and does not villainize Job's wife.

Reinhard Müller and Juha Pakkala. *Editorial Techniques in the Hebrew Bible: Toward a Refined Literary Criticism*. Resources for Biblical Study 97. Atlanta: SBL, 2022. Pp. xii + 598. ISBN 978-1-6283-7403-2. $87.00 (USD) paper.

Reinhard Müller and Juha Pakkala (hereafter MP) build on their well-established expertise in the scribal changes evident in the compositional history of the Hebrew Bible[1] in their new monograph, *Editorial Techniques in the Hebrew Bible* (hereafter *ETHB*). Their introduction clearly identifies their approach and major claims. They seek to use the evidence provided by the variant readings in the ancient versions of the Hebrew Bible to establish models for how scribes intentionally altered the text over time. Because of the frequency of places where the Old Greek (hereafter OG) preserves earlier readings than the Masoretic Text (hereafter MT), they reject the assumption of MT priority and insist that the most original reading must always be determined by weighing all possible witnesses on a case-by-case basis. MP argue that these editorial modifications were "unevenly and unsystematically distributed" (9), thus placing their framework in opposition to models that favor "comprehensive redactions of entire books" (11). MP also part ways with current streams of scholarship that focus chiefly on the final forms of biblical books due to the supposed hopelessness of reconstructing compositional layers and their dates with any certainty. They instead suggest that their empirical method can provide a reliable foundation from which to conduct these investigations.

The main body chapters of this book consist of collections of case studies that document different types of editorial activity. MP first cover different cases of additions. Successive chapters handle "Single Words and Short Phrases," "Single Sentences and Expressions" (by far the longest chapter), "Small Sections, Scenes, and Clusters of Connected Sentences," "Larger Passages," and "Results." Following these, MP provide chapters gathering cases of "Omissions," "Replacements," and "Transpositions." The case studies are conducted with a consistent format. Helpful charts illustrate the exact variant readings in an accessible way, alternative explanations are considered, the type of change is discussed, and MP reflect on whether the change could be detected in the absence of documentary evidence.

For example, one of the case studies is the passage present in the MT but absent in the OG in Jer 25:1, הִיא הַשָּׁנָה הָרִאשֹׁנִית לִנְבוּכַדְרֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל ("it was the first year of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon"). MP note that this clause is

1 Reinhard Müller, Juha Pakkala, and Bas ter Haar Romeny, *Evidence of Editing: Growth and Change of Texts in the Hebrew Bible* (RBS 75. Atlanta: SBL, 2014); Reinhard Müller and Juha Pakkala, eds., *Insights into Editing in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East: What Does Documented Evidence Tell Us about the Transmission of Authoritative Texts?* (CBET 84. Leuven: Peeters, 2017).

clearly intrusive in its context, since the next verse begins with a relative pronoun that clearly points back to material prior to this clause. In this case, MP observe that MT Jeremiah contains many more references to Babylon than does OG Jeremiah. They consider arguments for this material being deliberately omitted from the OG and find them unconvincing. They conclude that this clause is "a typical expansion of chronological detail, and is also part of a wider revision that increased the importance and involvement of the Babylonians throughout Jeremiah" (185). This conclusion is particularly interesting since it runs counter to their general tendency to be skeptical of systematic changes made throughout a text.

The conclusion chapter begins with MP's contention that the MT contained more editorial activity than the translations, and that the scribal changes they categorized are consistently found through the variety of ancient witnesses. They also reinforce their major conclusion that the most common type of scribal change involved piecemeal additions, as opposed to popular redactional models that seek to identify large-scale "layers" throughout a text. MP assert that the "conservative attitude" and "principle of avoiding omissions" (536) taken by the scribes who copied the Hebrew Bible make its transmission and resultant "multilayered" (538) nature unique in world literature, and that this process of expansion cannot be illuminated by comparison with any other ancient texts. Regarding the question of whether their findings would lend themselves to the detection of editorial activity not documented in the extant textual record, they conclude that while "omissions, replacements, and transpositions" (540) cannot be identified with certainty, additions to the text that function by "introducing new ideas" (540) "*could be detected and reconstructed with reasonable accuracy*" (541, italics original). MP then reiterate their optimism about the viability of the task of historical criticism when approached using their empirical method, advocate for the use of textual criticism as a starting point for source criticism, and call for the creation of a "synopsis and its commentary for the main textual traditions of the Hebrew Bible" (548) to aid scholars in gathering the necessary preliminary data for such studies.

The model proposed in *ETHB* substantially challenges many of the dominant critical paradigms in current research. But does it successfully offer a viable alternative? The crucial assumption adopted by MP is that the variant readings available in the extant ancient versions (particularly the OG as compared to the MT) serve as a reliable guide for how earlier scribes edited texts,[2] to the exclusion of other patterns of editing evident in ANE literature more broadly. Their confidence in their ability to uncover earlier, undocumented glosses in the text is

2 In their words, ". . . there is little to suggest a fundamental difference between changes documented in text-critical evidence as variant readings and (mostly earlier) changes not witnessed as variants but that are postulated by literary criticism" (3).

notable when compared to the stances of previous scholars who have pursued this avenue of inquiry.[3] Additionally, their mode of argumentation may lead some readers to suspect that they have not fully grappled with the evidence advanced by scholars more positive towards models derived from ANE scribal activity (their short critique of Ziemer on pp. 18–19 notwithstanding). For example, Person and Rezetko compile examples from both ANE works and the Hebrew Bible to argue that scribal editing, by its very nature, tended to wipe out the evidence of such editing along the way, making further reconstructions futile.[4] Similarly, van der Toorn documents the logistical problems inherent in the kind of constant, piecemeal insertions envisaged by MP, arguing that such "expansion" could only take place "as an activity in the context of a new edition."[5] Van der Toorn also challenges MP's contention that the perception of the Hebrew Bible as "holy" by its scribes resulted in it being transmitted in a different way than other ANE texts (see p. 18), as he documents similar conceptions of revelation in Mesopotamia.[6]

In conclusion, *ETHB* is an important work that will be essential reading for all serious students and scholars interested in the question of the compositional history of the Hebrew Bible. The case studies alone are a treasure trove of examples of textual criticism in action, and much valuable information is contained in the theoretical sections as well (such as the arguments against current models of transmission based on orality on pp. 23–27). While it will inevitably receive pushback from advocates of alternative approaches, the difficulty of such dialogue between vastly different paradigms should be a spur for all involved to better support their respective positions with demonstrable evidence.

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3 For example, William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (ICC. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1986), gives a detailed explanation of his model of scribal composition. He likewise uses the longer readings in the MT as compared to the LXX to identify scribal expansions in the stages of the Hebrew text earlier than that preserved by the LXX. However, when he lists his proposed interpolations that lack manuscript evidence, he admits, "These results rest on nothing more than my judgment and critical acumen; on my nose for secondary processes of expansion which have been superimposed on a shorter, more original, Hebrew text" (li).

4 Raymond F. Person Jr. and Robert Rezetko, "Introduction: The Importance of Empirical Models to Assess the Efficacy of Source and Redaction Criticism," in Raymond F. Person Jr. and Robert Rezetko, eds., *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism* (AIL 25; Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 1–35 (23, 35).

5 Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 126.

6 van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 205–206.

Clair Linzey. *Developing Animal Theology: An Engagement With Leonardo Boff*. London: Routledge, 2022. Pp. xii + 205. ISBN 978-1-0320-7157-2. $53.00 (USD) hardcover.

There is much talk about "cosmic redemption," a divine "plan to restore all things," and "creation, fall, redemption" in Christian theology. Strangely, this entire discourse usually excludes any concern for trillions of sentient creatures known as "animals." Over the past half-century, the seminal work of Andrew Linzey has unfolded these problems and offered new discourses, reinterpretations of texts, and ethical and theological models that critically engage this issue. Continuing and developing in this tradition is Clair Linzey's recent, scholarly and engaging work *Developing Animal Theology: An Engagement With Leonardo Boff*.[1]

Boff is a highly influential, progressive-leaning Catholic thinker in Brazil who was interviewed by Linzey—along with a variety of persons and groups in Brazil regarding their views of Boff, animal theology, ethics, and ecology. The book sets out to (a) evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Boff's ethics in light of a more critical, informed, and forward-looking perspective, and (b) provide an animal-friendly theological reconstruction.

The first chapters look at several of the typical issues surrounding this topic—animal "souls," the implications of the Genesis account and creation theologies in church history, the scope of moral reasoning, animal suffering and sentience, and the looming problem of anthropocentrism. In chapter 2 and the following chapters that form the heart of the book (chs 3-5), Linzey finds a continual pattern throughout not just Boff's work but in countless theologians and thinkers, and the pattern largely consists of either (a) pure ignorance or negligence (e.g., animals and animal suffering has no place or mention in the framework) or (b) continual dismissal or downplaying against the priority of human existence (i.e., endless "but…" qualifiers). In a variety of Catholic thinkers and otherwise (see chs 2-3), humans are elevated because of their consciousness—as if conscious animals were not conscious. Human superior intelligence/sentience is frequently twisted into a legitimation for violence against animals instead of a moral obligation to take care of the vulnerable (11, 32). "Again," Linzey writes at one point, "here the underlying argument is that treating animals well is good for humans but that animals' welfare can be secondary to issues of human justice" (34). "Respecting nature" (65) is found in the Catholic tradition, but it never seems to terminate in a call for the obvious implication: vegetarianism and/or veganism. And so on it goes. Contrary to how many frame such pro-animal scholars, Linzey's

1 Both Clair and her father Andrew currently operate the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics.

expectations for at least *some* engagement and *some* consistency are a rather low bar that few have apparently tried to cross.

As one reads through the book it becomes apparent that the specter of Aristotle's philosophy ceaselessly haunts the western and Christian religious world through the commanding influence of Augustine and Aquinas. It frequently squashes any concern of humans to intentionally protect the well-being of non-human creatures. Anthropocentrism rules the day; a superior soul and "rational" nature simply subordinates animals to humans in every way, or at least limits the boundaries of human compassion. The predominant model ultimately says, "love no further." "Salvation," "sin," "peace," "love"—all the central aspects of traditional Christian theology and soteriology are developed to exclude concern for animals. Even in progressive liberation theology, animals find little to no place—despite the obvious fact that "Animals are in need of liberation as well as humans… [meaning] freedom from pain, suffering, oppression, and indeed predation itself" (56; cf. 68). And this problem goes beyond religious language. "Humanizing the world'," for example, "is a double-edged notion, since it implies an extension of human power rather than its renunciation" (69). Readers learn that ecology, too, serves to undermine any concern for mass animal suffering and exploitation because ecology sacrifices individual experiences of suffering in search for a "balanced" whole.

Like any Christian theology engaging in its tradition, Linzey offers a compelling revisitation of Trinitarianism in chapter 7. But it is more than a reflection; it is a full-scale remodeling similar to the approach of Sallie McFague's *Models of God* (where God is proposed to be Lover, Savior, Friend, in light of the ecological and nuclear age). Linzey's proposal is to think of God as particular *hypostases* (a better and older term than "persons" she says) of Gentleness, Solidarity, and Fraternity.

> Given that theology is … born of a context, the first task of the theologian must be to open her eyes to the reality around her, the reality for the marginalized, including the marginalized in God's nonhuman creation. This is possible only with the help of Fraternity guiding our sight. In terms of animals, we ought to begin first by seeing them as God's creatures and second by seeing the reality of their lives. (159)

Given how the current world operates—especially after five-hundred years of colonialism—this is a real challenge of sight indeed: to see abnormality in what most people consider normal, and to see dignity in what people regularly commodify and consume without thinking. But this Trinitarian model is not just for the sake of theology, for "religious attitudes towards animals underpin general ideas about animals. Instrumentalist and anthropocentric thinking about animals cannot be

overcome without confronting the underlying Thomistic theology that grounds that thinking" (161). Thomism, of course, is just one model among others and, because it has been so destructive for so long, deserves continual interrogation.

Developing Animal Theology is a real challenge for people in Brazil (and beyond) where the society and culture is very meat-centered and animal suffering is exceptional (including sacrifice; see Appendices), and the book's theses extend wherever theology functions to order society and animals are exploited. It was also challenging for me by having family members in the industrial livestock industry, raised on a farm and ranch, and ultimately shaped by what James Blaut calls "the colonizer's model of the world"[2] (the world, which is "outside," exists for my conquering—land, animals, people, etc.) Linzey inquires whether this dominant perspective is either necessary or good, even for humans. The Golden Rule of Jesus, when expanded to include non-human persons or creatures, seems radical and pertinent. To quote the revolutionary slogan, "The war isn't over until we're *all* free."

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2 James Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993).

Ryan C. Lambert. *The Weird Apostle*. North Haven, CT: Ryan Lambert Forum, 2024. Pp. 234. ISBN 979-8-2183-6900-2. $22.99 (USD) paper.

Until fairly recently, both Christian and Jewish scholarship has almost uniformly understood Paul as being primarily responsible for the creation of "Christianity," understood as a new religious phenomenon whose defining characteristics are found in the ways that it has wholly transcended Judaism. Accordingly, Paul—so it has been confidently asserted—left behind Judaism, his Jewish identity, and, of course, the law (i.e., Torah) for Jesus Christ, through whom he received the "grace and mercy his soul never found in Judaism" (6).

Taking his cue from the title of the first chapter of Matthew Thiessen's *A Jewish Paul*, in *The Weird Apostle* Ryan C. Lambert sets out to "make Paul weird again" (6), by which he means interpreting him and his mission in their original sociohistorical context, with the result that his Jewish identity is seen as thoroughly informative to his apostolic mission and teaching contained in his letters. Lambert writes, "Historically, Paul has been made to appear like a Western-minded, modern Christian. In this book, I challenge those largely uncontested ideas, suggesting Paul was a Torah-observant Jewish man who functioned entirely within Judaism as the apostle to the Gentiles" (7).

Written for a popular audience, Lambert's argument unfolds over 10 chapters, with each of the first 9 chapters representing an aspect of Paul that has been

largely misinterpreted in the Christian tradition, and thus requires a more accurate, contextually-sensitive ("weird") lens for properly understanding him.

In chapter 1, Lambert puts the lie to the notion that the Pharisees were rigid, "legalistic" hypocrites that represented as a group and in their teachings the antithesis of the Christ movement. Paul did not abandon his Pharisaic upbringing and identity. It remained, rather, instrumental to his apostolic career and convictions regarding Jesus Christ and the implications of his coming.

Lambert argues in chapters 2–3 that Paul was foremost "called" to be an apostle of Jesus Christ to the gentiles; he was not converted from Judaism to Christianity. His mission was to take a Jewish gospel to non-Jews, with the result that these gentiles—while retaining their ethnic identity as distinct from Jews—would nevertheless adopt a worldview shaped by the Judaism of Paul's time. Moreover, instead of representing independent groups consisting of adherents to a new religious movement called Christianity, the communities of Christ followers that Paul founded "were likely still synagogue subgroups" (60).

This decidedly Jewish movement's prohibition against idolatry would inevitably marginalize the gentiles who joined it, as they were not afforded the same social exemptions provided Jewish communities throughout the Empire (e.g., abstention from cultic activities deemed by them as idolatrous), leaving them vulnerable to persecution for failing to honor the gods to the perceived detriment of the greater civic communities of which they were also a part.

In chapter 4, Lambert introduces some of the key findings of the New Perspective on Paul, pointing out that Paul's gospel had nothing to do with opposing the supposed "works-righteousness" system of Judaism or the Torah in general. Rather, it had everything to do with transforming pagan idolaters into "holy ones" of God and status equals, then, with God's covenant people Israel (88). Lambert also points here to the eschatological pilgrimage tradition contained in prophetic texts like Isaiah 2:1–4 as shaping Paul's vision of his mission to the gentiles.

In chapter 5, Lambert delves into the interpretive distance necessary in understanding Paul's instructions in light of his "apocalyptic" worldview (101), including preeminently Christ's imminent return, which informs such teaching. Given this temporal context (i.e., "Paul's weird view of time") along with the fact that Paul's historical expectations went unmet, his readers must appreciate "that he did not write his letters for you, me, or any generation beyond his own" (107). Caution, then, needs to be exercised when interpreting his instructions as normative for contemporary communities of faith. Lambert poses, "Perhaps Paul would have thought differently about certain topics if he felt he had more time" (108–109).

I would briefly suggest, however, that Paul's belief in the imminent return of Christ conforms to an ancient Mediterranean view of time that understood past,

present, and future more fluidly. The reality of Christ's own resurrection would necessarily mean for Paul that the general resurrection, final judgment, and other concomitant eschatological events were *already* on the horizon, regardless of the actual amount of time that might transpire between them. While appropriate hermeneutical distance and sociohistorical contextualization is always warranted, in my opinion, nothing Paul teaches in his letters is fundamentally affected by the failure of the Parousia to happen in his generation.

Chapters 6–7 represent a two-part exploration into "Paul's weird lifestyle," whereby Lambert points out that while Paul opposed full Torah observance for gentiles in Christ, which would mean their proselytism to Judaism, he in no way suggested that Jews should not continue in such practices. Further still, Lambert argues that Paul himself remained a Torah-observant Jew who maintained a positive view of the Jerusalem Temple as well.

Chapters 8–9 are a two-part explanation of "Paul's weird rule" contained in 1 Cor 7:17–20. According to this text, a central and consistent feature of Paul's teaching to the Christ communities he founded was that persons should remain as they are—that is, in Christ, Jews should remain Jews, and gentiles should remain gentiles. The implication for Lambert is that Paul supported "difference without discrimination" (181).

Chapter 9 focuses on the Jerusalem council recorded in Acts 15, in which it is decided by the leadership that gentiles did not have to proselytize to Judaism to enter the Christ movement. However, there still was an expectation for them to observe a limited number of Torah ordinances to be members in good standing. Importantly here, that Jews in Christ would continue to live as Jews, including of course their full Torah obedience, is assumed as a given.

Lambert explains in chapter 10 that his objective in this book is to make a modest "1-percent improvement" (200) in the perception of Paul for both Christian and Jewish audiences, in the conviction that with more work done in this area a series of small changes will eventually add up to a quite significant one in the interpretation of Paul, leading to, among other things, improved Jewish—Christian relations.

In a postscript, Lambert promises a follow-up volume on this topic.

I do not believe I am exaggerating to say that *The Weird Apostle* is in my estimation one of the most important books on Paul written at the popular level in the modern era. I have encountered few works that have been able to articulate in an entirely accessible and quite entertaining fashion such critical matters for properly understanding the thoroughly Jewish orientation of Paul's gospel and teaching (along with that of the Christ movement in toto), as well as Paul's own continuing Jewish identity as the apostle to the gentiles, the general importance he places on the integrity of both Jewish and gentile identity in Christ, and thus

the significance of unity and equality amid diversity within the Christ movement.

As such, there is much to agree with in this book, and very little to dispute. In addition to my qualified objection above regarding Paul's view of time, one area in which I would have preferred greater clarity is on the question of the relationship between Paul's gospel and the Jewish people. While Lambert does suggest that the gospel of Jesus Christ is no less intended for the Jews than for the gentiles, the rationale presented for its necessity seems obscured, namely, that Israel too is in bondage to sin and death and requires the liberation only found in Christ Jesus. Readers might infer instead that something along the lines of a soft two-covenant soteriology is being advanced, in which Jews should embrace Jesus as the Messiah but failure to do so is nevertheless of no real threat to their place in the covenant. I do not believe Paul thought or taught that (cf. esp. Rom 2:9, 25–29; 3:9–20; 9:2, 6; 9:30–10:4; 11:17–24). Rather, he is in my view quite clear that failure to embrace the climax of God's love and faithfulness in Jesus Christ ultimately disqualifies one—whether s/he is Jewish or gentile—from the renewed covenant and creation.

Another area where I find disagreement concerns Paul's use of the second person plural in his letters. As argued by John Gager and Lloyd Gaston, Lambert suggests that when Paul speaks of "we" in certain contexts, he is intending to identify with his gentile converts to the gospel (132). On the contrary, I think Paul is identifying with members of the covenant, be they Jewish or gentile. In this way, on the one hand, Paul can speak inclusively to both Jews and gentiles about the realities of God's past dealings with his historic covenant people, Israel, prior to the coming of Christ. And, on the other hand, he can fully assume that Israel, while having possessed a provisional status of righteousness in the prior age, are finally "righteoused" and therefore find the life that Torah promises—just as with gentiles—exclusively in the Messiah *now* that he has come, and the promises to Israel and all creation are being fulfilled.

Paul's supposed "anti-Torah" statements disappear not by removing Jews from the picture, but when one takes seriously the salvation-historical contrast that Paul is drawing between the ages (e.g., "under the Torah" vs. "under grace")—with the former age understood as co-opted by sin and death and thus the live threat of Torah's condemnation of death for failure to observe it. He is not, then, speaking here to Torah-informed praxis, which is still clearly relevant for him—indeed, fully empowered—in the new Messianic age characterized by the Spirit (cf., e.g., Ezek 36:24–32; Jer 31:31–34; Isa 44:1–5; 59:21; Deut 30:1–6), whether in terms of a full submission for Jews or limited one for gentiles.

Again, notwithstanding these small criticisms, *The Weird Apostle* is simply an excellent book that is fully capable of meeting Lambert's desire to inspire a

reversal of popular perceptions of Paul as a denouncer of Judaism. It is highly recommended for anyone interested in Christianity or Judaism, the New Testament, or Pauline Studies specifically, and could even serve as a companion text for the formal study of Paul at the undergraduate or seminary level.

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