

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

Joshua Lee Harris
The Kings University

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 "erotic" 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, heterogeneous 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), 1.1.

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).