

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 credal 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. Olson: My Evangelical Arminian Theological Musings* (2012), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogere-olson/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.