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.