

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://richardmiddleton.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 atemporality).

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.

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.