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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5 Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning," 10.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Nature of My Response in This Essay

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

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

Let me make two caveats about my response.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Metaphorical, "Literal," and Analogical God Language

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

42 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.13.5.

43 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.13.2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

50 Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning," 12.

Extrinsic versus Intrinsic Conceptual Frameworks for Reading the Bible

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

61 Martin, "Introduction to Reckoning," 15.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In contrast to utilizing any extrinsic conceptual framework to determine our

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

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

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

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

A Concluding Teaser—Which Is Also Serious

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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