Divine Attributes

Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture

JOHN C. PECKHAM

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Contents

Introduction

The Covenantal God of Scripture

This book addresses some core questions about the nature and attributes of God, focusing on what we have biblical warrant to affirm with respect to such questions, in order to better understand the living God whom Christians worship and to whom Christians pray. These questions include: Does God change? Does God have emotions? Does God know everything, including the future? Is God all-powerful? Does everything occur as God wills? Is God entirely good and loving? How can God be one God and three persons?

To set the stage for the following chapters, this introduction offers an overview of some significant portrayals of and claims about God that repeatedly appear in Scripture and that are important to keep in mind throughout this book.[1] In short, Scripture depicts God as a covenantal God who

creates, sustains, and creates anew;
speaks, hears, and responds;
sees, provides, delivers/saves, and rules;
knows, plans, wills, calls, and chooses but has unfulfilled desires;
judges, acts justly, *and* mercifully and graciously forgives;
loves compassionately, passionately, and steadfastly;
grieves, suffers, laments, and relents;

1. While many other biblical depictions could be surveyed here, I have selected these because of their prominence throughout Scripture and because of their significance to the questions considered in this book.

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promises, covenants, and engages in covenant relationship;
engages in court proceedings and defeats evil; and
dwells with us and makes holy.

The God of Scripture Creates, Sustains, and Creates Anew

From beginning to end, Scripture emphasizes that God is the only Creator (e.g., Isa. 45:18). "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1 NASB), and "God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (1:31 NASB).[2] Indeed, "everything created by God is good" (1 Tim. 4:4 NASB). God is "before all things" (Col. 1:17 NASB) and "created all things," for "because of [God's] will they existed, and were created" (Rev. 4:11 NASB; cf. Ps. 33:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 11:3).

As Creator of all, God transcends creation. The God of Scripture not only creates all but "upholds all things by the word of His power" (Heb. 1:3 NASB). Amazingly, God *freely* sustains creatures even after they egregiously rebel (see, e.g., Hosea 14:4). Everything depends on God for its existence, but as Creator, God exists of himself (*a se*). There is an absolute distinction between God and creatures, the Creator-creature distinction. As Creator, God is utterly unique: "I am God, and there is no other; / I am God, and there is no one like Me" (Isa. 46:9 NASB; cf. Exod. 8:10; 9:14; Ps. 86:8). Yet given that "God created humankind in his image" (Gen. 1:27), there is *some* likeness between God and humans, though far greater unlikeness.

Because God "created all things" by his "will," God is uniquely praiseworthy (Rev. 4:11 NASB). Creatures are to "worship Him [and him alone] who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters" (14:7 NASB; cf. Exod. 20:11; Pss. 33:8; 95:1–6). Moreover, in the end, the Creator will make "all things new," including "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1, 5 NASB; cf. Isa. 65:17; 66:22), "according to His promise" (2 Pet. 3:13 NASB).

The God of Scripture Speaks, Hears, and Responds

In the act of creation, God spoke. "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3 NASB). "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made" (Ps. 33:6 NASB), for God "spoke, and it was done; / He commanded, and it stood fast" (33:9 NASB). Yes, "the worlds were prepared by the word of God" (Heb. 11:3 NASB).

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2. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

The God of Scripture also repeatedly speaks *to* creatures. In the garden of Eden, God speaks to Adam, Eve, and even the serpent. Then God speaks to Cain, Noah, Job, Abraham, Hagar, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Pharaoh, the nation of Israel, judges, prophets, kings, apostles, and many others. In speech and other manners, the God of Scripture is a God of revelation (see Heb. 1:1–2).

The God of Scripture not only speaks but also hears and responds. Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly engages in *back-and-forth* dialogue with creatures. When God tells Abraham about impending judgment on Sodom, Abraham repeatedly asks God to spare the city for the sake of even a small number of righteous in it, and God responds that he will not destroy the city if even ten righteous people may be found there (Gen. 18:26, 32; cf. Gen. 15). Later, Jacob prays to God for deliverance on the basis of his covenant promises (32:9–12), then wrestles with a "man" who turns out to be divine—clinging to him until the "man" agrees to bless him (32:24–30; cf. Hosea 12:3–4). Elsewhere God directly responds to Job's pointed questions about his undeserved suffering (Job 38–41) and engages in back-and-forth dialogue with (the) Satan before the heavenly council (1:6–12; 2:1–6).

After the golden calf rebellion, Moses persistently petitions God to relent and continue to dwell with Israel in covenant relationship (Exod. 32:11–14, 30–34). Via multiple rounds of back-and-forth dialogue, God assures Moses he will remain with Israel in covenant relationship and "make all [his] goodness pass" before Moses and "proclaim the name of the Lord before" him (33:19 NASB; see 33:14, 17; cf. 34:6–7). Indeed, "the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (33:11). Later, Hezekiah prays and God replies, "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you," and "I will add fifteen years to your life" and "deliver you and this city" (2 Kings 20:5–6 NASB). Still later, Daniel prays for his people in exile (Dan. 9), and God responds. A host of other examples appear in Scripture.

God is sometimes moved by prayer, entreaty, and lament (see, e.g., Gen. 21:17; Exod. 2:24; 2 Chron. 7:14; Isa. 30:19; Jer. 33:3). God was "moved to pity by" his people's groaning (Judg. 2:18 NASB), "could bear the misery of Israel no longer" (10:16 NASB), and was "moved by prayer for the land" (2 Sam. 21:14; 24:25 NASB). Further, Jesus is repeatedly moved by seeing people in distress (e.g., John 11:33; cf. Matt. 14:14; Mark 6:34; Luke 7:13) and models a life of petitionary prayer (e.g., Matt. 26:39; Luke 22:32; 23:34; cf. Heb. 7:25). He declares, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7 NASB; cf. Luke 11:5–13; John 16:23; Rev. 3:20). In these ways (and others), the God of Scripture responds to

creatures such that the course of divine action is affected by human activity (cf. Ps. 81:13–14; Jer. 18:7–10).

The God of Scripture Sees, Provides, Delivers/Saves, and Rules

Scripture repeatedly teaches that God "sees." God repeatedly "saw that" what he created "was good" (Gen. 1:4, 10, 18, 21, 25; cf. 1:31). Later, however, "God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth" (6:12; cf. Jer. 7:11). Here and elsewhere God sees in the sense of moral evaluation. Yet "God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7 NASB; cf. Luke 16:15).

God's "seeing" is often translated in terms of God's providing. When Isaac asks Abraham where the lamb for the sacrifice is, Abraham answers, "God will provide [*rāʾâ*, literally "see"] for Himself the lamb" (Gen. 22:8 NASB).[3] After God does so, "Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide [*YHWH yirʾeh* (from the root *rāʾâ*), "YHWH sees"]" (22:14 NASB; cf. 16:13; 1 Sam. 16:1). Repeatedly, God "sees" and acts. For example, "God saw the sons of Israel [enslaved in Egypt], and God took notice of them" (Exod. 2:25 NASB) and delivered them according to his covenant promises (cf. Gen. 31:42). Much later, "when God saw" that the Ninevites "turned from their wicked way," God "relented" (Jon. 3:10 NASB).

The God of Scripture provides for and governs the entire world, often acting providentially to save. God saves "many people" in Egypt and elsewhere from famine by sending dreams of warning to Pharaoh and giving Joseph opportunity and wisdom to interpret such dreams (Gen. 50:20). The way God repeatedly delivers Israel, in the exodus and afterward (Deut. 8:14–16), demonstrates God's sovereign rule over earthly rulers and "their gods" (2 Sam. 7:23 NASB; cf. Exod. 9:14; 12:12; Num. 33:4). Despite their cycle of rebellion, God repeatedly responds to his people's cries (e.g., Neh. 9; Ps. 78), sending deliverers and prophets, miraculously rescuing his people from foreign armies (e.g., 2 Kings 6:17–18; cf. Ps. 34:7), and otherwise working to deliver and redeem his people, for the sake of all peoples (Gen. 12:3). Despite many miraculous interventions on behalf of his people, the cycle of rebellion continues. The people eventually forfeit God's covenant protection and are given over to conquest and exile. Yet even in exile, God continues to work, manifesting God's sovereign rulership such that even King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon comes to recognize that Daniel's God is

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3. Unless otherwise noted, I gloss the noninflected verb or noun form of Hebrew and Greek terms so readers can more easily see patterns.

"God of gods and Lord of kings" (Dan. 2:47) with "everlasting sovereignty" (4:34; cf. 4:32).

The God of Scripture is the ruler of all; he "reigns over the nations" (Ps. 47:8 NASB). Ultimately, in Christ, God delivers and saves the world and sets up his "everlasting dominion" (see Dan. 7:13–14; Luke 1:33; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pet. 1:11). Christ does so first by a demonstration of God's utter righteousness and love (Rom. 3:25–26; 5:8), including the ultimate sacrifice, and later will return to fully establish his kingdom. In the end, the cry goes forth, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns" (Rev. 19:6 NASB).

The God of Scripture Knows, Plans, Wills, Calls, and Chooses but Has Unfulfilled Desires

The God of Scripture works according to his plan or purpose—willing, calling, choosing, and sending. The world exists only by God's will (Rev. 4:11), and God declares

> the end from the beginning
> and from ancient times things not yet done,
> saying, "My purpose shall stand,
> and I will fulfill my intention,"
> calling a bird of prey from the east,
> the man for my purpose from a far country.
> I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
> I have planned, and I will do it. (Isa. 46:10–11; cf. Rom. 8:28–30)

God "knows all things" (1 John 3:20 NASB; cf. Rom. 11:33) and "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11 NASB), often doing so by calling and electing people to various missions.

God calls Abraham to father a new people, the chosen people (Isa. 41:8–9) through whom God blesses all nations (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4) and through whom Jesus comes to save the whole world, including both Jews and Gentiles in God's elect (Rom. 9:24–26). God chooses Abraham's son Isaac as the child of the promise, and, of Isaac's twin boys, God graciously elects the slightly younger brother, Jacob (cf. Rom. 9). Later, God calls and elects Moses to lead his people out of slavery, affirming that God "chose" Israel "because the Lord loved [them] and kept the oath that he swore to [their] ancestors" (Deut. 7:7–8). Still later, God raises up and elects many priests, judges, prophets, and kings.

Though always unmerited, God's election is depicted as contingent on human response. In *response* to the people wickedly "demanding a king"

against God's warnings (1 Sam. 12:17), thereby "reject[ing]" God "from being king over them" (8:7; cf. 10:19; 12:12–13), God chooses Saul to be king (10:24; cf. 12:13). While God "would have established" Saul's "kingdom over Israel forever" (13:13), by repeated disobedience Saul eventually forfeits his election (13:8–14; 15:3, 9–11, 23).

To replace Saul, God chooses David, "a man after His own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14 NASB), and covenants to "establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:13 NASB; cf. 1 Sam. 13:13). This covenant promise is extended to Solomon, contingent on faithfulness; *if* Solomon remains faithful, God will establish his "kingdom over Israel forever," but if Solomon or his children "turn away from following" God, then God "will cut off Israel" (1 Kings 9:5–7 NASB). Tragically, Solomon is unfaithful, and the kingdom is divided in the next generation (11:11–13), followed by a line that includes many rebellious kings in Israel and Judah.

Though God repeatedly wanted to deliver and restore his elect people, God explains,

> I called, but no one answered;
> I spoke, but they did not listen.
> And they did evil in My sight
> And chose that in which I did not delight. (Isa. 66:4 NASB; cf. 65:12;
>   Jer. 7:13)

Elsewhere God declares,

> My people did not listen to my voice;
>   Israel would not submit to me.
> So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,
>   to follow their own counsels.
> O that my people would listen to me,
>   that Israel would walk in my ways! (Ps. 81:11–13)

Jesus comes as the new Israel, the perfectly elect Son of God and of David, unwaveringly faithful to God's covenantal will. As God chose the twelve tribes of Israel, Jesus chooses twelve apostles (John 15:16–17), but Judas forfeits his election. Further, Jesus teaches via his parable of the wedding feast that "many are called [or invited], but few are chosen [*eklektos*]" (Matt. 22:14 NASB); many are invited (*kaleō*, "called") to the wedding feast but decline the invitation. Only those who accept the invitation are finally elect. While God is "patient . . . , not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9; cf. Ezek. 33:11; John 3:16), God's desires are sometimes

unfulfilled because people reject God's calling and purpose. Luke 7:30 reports, "By refusing to be baptized by [John], the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves." Accordingly, Christ laments over Jerusalem, "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling!" (Matt. 23:37 NASB; cf. Deut. 32:11).

The God of Scripture Judges, Acts Justly, *and* Mercifully and Graciously Forgives

The God of Scripture cares deeply about justice. God "loves justice" (Ps. 37:28 NASB; cf. 33:5; 99:4) but hates evil (5:4–5). "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of [God's] throne," and "steadfast love and faithfulness go before" God (89:14; cf. 85:10). God's "work is perfect, for all his ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He" (Deut. 32:4 NASB; cf. Rev. 15:3; 19:1–2). God "is righteous in all His ways / And kind in all His deeds" (Ps. 145:17 NASB). God "will do no injustice" (Zeph. 3:5 NASB); he "is upright" and "there is no unrighteousness in Him" (Ps. 92:15 NASB). "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5 NASB). God cannot even be tempted by evil (James 1:13; cf. Hab. 1:13).

God always judges righteously (see Dan. 9:14; Neh. 9:33) but also mercifully warns and compassionately forgives. God's judgment itself is frequently an act of deliverance of the oppressed from their oppressors. God executes judgment only against evil. Even then God "does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone" (Lam. 3:33), bringing judgment only as a last resort after providing a way of escape. "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live" (Ezek. 18:32; cf. 18:23; 33:11). Although God's people repeatedly rebelled and broke covenant relationship in a cycle of rebellion (e.g., Ps. 78; Neh. 9), God

> being compassionate,
>   forgave their iniquity,
>   and did not destroy them;
> often he restrained his anger,
>   and did not stir up all his wrath. (Ps. 78:38)

God did everything that could be done for Judah (Isa. 5:1–7); God "sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of

God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the
LORD against his people became so great that there was no remedy" (2 Chron.
36:15–16; cf. Jer. 7:13, 25–26).

In all this, God's grace and mercy extend far beyond any reasonable expec-
tations. God wants to forgive and redeem; God "longs to be gracious" and
"waits on high to have compassion . . . / For the LORD is a God of justice"
(Isa. 30:18 NASB). The God of Scripture is

> merciful and gracious,
> slow to anger,
> and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
> keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
> forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
> yet by no means clearing the guilty. (Exod. 34:6–7; cf. Nah. 1:3)

Instead, God makes atonement so that he can forgive those who are guilty,
without compromising justice (see Jer. 30:11). This atonement is modeled in
the sanctuary services, which point to Christ—the one who fulfills the sanctu-
ary services as the only sufficient sacrifice, the ultimate high priest, and the
living temple of God's presence. Whereas in the OT God repeatedly looks for
and calls for intercession but often finds no one to effectively intercede (Ezek.
22:30), in the NT Jesus is found worthy (Rev. 5) and "is able to save forever
those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make
intercession" (Heb. 7:25 NASB). Through Christ and by the Spirit (Rom.
8:26–27), God himself intercedes. God himself makes atonement (2 Cor.
5:18–19). God takes on himself the consequences of evil, demonstrating his
righteousness (Rom. 3:25–26) and love (5:8). All judgment is given over to
Christ (John 5:22), "the righteous Judge" (2 Tim. 4:8 NASB; cf. 1 John 2:1;
Rev. 19:11), who will establish and rule over an eternal kingdom of perfect
justice and love.

The God of Scripture Loves Compassionately, Passionately, and Steadfastly

The God of Scripture is an exceedingly "compassionate God" (Deut. 4:31
NASB). Scripture portrays God's love as akin to the tender affection of a par-
ent who adopts and cares for a child. "Just as a father has compassion on his
children, / So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him" (Ps. 103:13
NASB). And "as a mother comforts her child, so" God promises to lovingly
"comfort" his people (Isa. 66:13). Yet God's compassion is even greater than
a mother's compassion for her newborn. God declares,

> Can a woman forget her nursing child,
> and have no compassion on the son of her womb?
> Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. (49:15 NASB)

God calls his people "my dear son" and "the child I delight in," proclaiming, "I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him" (Jer. 31:20; cf. Luke 15:20).

God also "takes pleasure in" (Ps. 149:4 NASB; cf. Zeph. 3:17) and passionately loves his people. Scripture portrays God's love as the virtuous and passionate love of a husband for his wife, though she is repeatedly unfaithful (e.g., Hosea 1–3; Isa. 62:4; Jer. 2:2; 3; Ezek. 16; 23; Zech. 8:2; cf. 2 Cor. 11:2). Among other things, God's people "provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols" (Ps. 78:58; cf. Deut. 32:21; 1 Kings 14:22). Yet God is also passionate in favor of his beloved people and against those who abuse and oppress them (see Isa. 26:11; Joel 2:18; Zech. 1:14–17; Heb. 10:27).

In contrast to unreliable humans, God's character of love is utterly steadfast. Closely associated in Scripture with God's goodness, faithfulness, justice, and mercy, God's steadfast love (*ḥesed*) grounds covenant relationship while consistently going far beyond all duties and reasonable expectations. "Abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness," God continues his steadfast love toward Israel even after the golden calf rebellion (Exod. 34:6; cf. Ps. 86:15). Indeed, God's "steadfast love endures forever" (Ps. 136; cf. 1 Chron. 16:34; Jer. 31:3; 33:11; Rom. 8:35, 39); his "mercies are great" (2 Sam. 24:14 NASB; 1 Chron. 21:13; cf. Luke 1:78); his "lovingkindnesses indeed never cease"; and his "compassions never fail" (Lam. 3:22 NASB).

Just as the God of Israel is moved with compassionate, passionate, and steadfast love for his people throughout the OT (e.g., Judg. 2:18; Isa. 30:18–19), in the NT Jesus is frequently moved to compassion, often by people in need (Matt. 9:36; 14:14; Mark 1:41; 6:34; Luke 7:13; cf. Mark 10:21). The incomparable passion and steadfastness of Christ's love is ultimately manifested in Christ's self-giving at the cross (John 15:13; Rom. 5:7–8). The God of the cross is "rich in mercy" and "great love" (Eph. 2:4 NASB; cf. Exod. 34:6–7; Luke 1:78; 2 Cor. 1:3). Accordingly, we can confidently cast our cares on God, "because he cares for [us]" (1 Pet. 5:7).
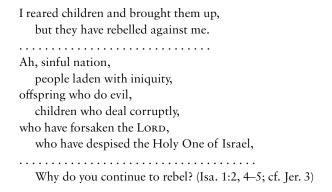
The God of Scripture Grieves, Suffers, Laments, and Relents

The God of Scripture grieves, suffers, and laments evil. According to Genesis 6:6, "The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and

it grieved him to his heart." Later, "in all their affliction, He was afflicted," and though God "lifted" the people and "carried them all the days of old," God's covenant people "rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit" (Isa. 63:9–10 NASB). Indeed, Psalm 78:40–41 proclaims,

> How often they rebelled against Him in the wilderness
> And grieved Him in the desert!
> Again and again they tempted God,
> And pained the Holy One of Israel. (NASB; cf. 1 Cor. 10:5)

After recounting extreme evils (including child sacrifice [2 Kings 21:6]), God says of his people, "They have done evil in My sight, and have been provoking Me to anger since the day their fathers came from Egypt, even to this day" (21:15 NASB; cf. Deut. 4:25; 32:16, 21; Judg. 2:12; 1 Kings 14:9; Ps. 78:58; Isa. 65:3; Jer. 7:18–19; Ezek. 8:17; 16:26; 20:28; Hosea 12:14[15]).[4] Elsewhere God laments,

> I reared children and brought them up,
>   but they have rebelled against me.
> . . . .
> Ah, sinful nation,
>   people laden with iniquity,
> offspring who do evil,
>   children who deal corruptly,
> who have forsaken the Lord,
>   who have despised the Holy One of Israel,
> . . . .
>   Why do you continue to rebel? (Isa. 1:2, 4–5; cf. Jer. 3)

Elsewhere, God laments, "Oh that My people would listen to Me, / That Israel would walk in My ways!" (Ps. 81:13 NASB; cf. Ezek. 33:11). And God proclaims,

> How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
> How can I surrender you, O Israel?
> How can I make you like Admah?
> How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
> My heart is turned over within Me,
> All My compassions are kindled. (Hosea 11:8 NASB; cf. Jer. 31:20)

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4. In this and other cases where brackets appear in citations from the OT, the brackets include the versification from the MT.

God also relents. In response to Moses's pleas after the golden calf rebellion, "the Lord relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people" (Exod. 32:14 NKJV; cf. Jon. 3:10). While God is the sovereign potter and humans are the clay, God relents from judgment in response to repentance (Jer. 18:7–10). When Israel "put away the foreign gods from among them and worshiped the Lord," God "could no longer bear to see Israel suffer" (Judg. 10:16; cf. 2:18). God is repeatedly "moved to pity by" the "groaning" of his people (2:18 NASB). Even as God grieves and laments in the OT, in the NT Christ grieves and laments over evil (Matt. 23:37) and voluntarily suffers to defeat it.

The God of Scripture Promises, Covenants, and Engages in Covenant Relationship

The God of Scripture is a promise-making God who engages in back-and-forth covenant relationship and always keeps his promises. God covenants with Noah "and every living creature . . . for all future generations," promising "never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood" (Gen. 9:11–12; cf. 6:18; 9:9–17). After the tower of Babel narrative, which some interpret as evidence of the people's unbelief in God's promise and their rebellion, God calls Abraham to leave his country, promising, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" and "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:2–3; cf. 15:17–18). This covenant blessing is not for Abraham's (natural) descendants alone but extends to "all the nations of the earth" (26:4), a promise ultimately fulfilled in Christ—the desire of all nations (cf. Hag. 2:7). In Christ, "those who believe are the descendants of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7); "if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise" (3:29 NASB; cf. 3:6–9).

God's covenant relationship with Abraham is not unilateral but requires response. God commands Abraham, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly" (Gen. 17:1–2 NASB; cf. 17:3–6). This is an "everlasting covenant" with Abraham and his offspring (17:7 NASB), but it also includes conditions. It is a grant-type covenant, which promises a faithful servant continuance of covenant blessings to future generations, but whether particular generations enjoy covenant blessings is contingent on faithfulness (17:10–11, 14). Accordingly, God says of Abraham, "I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the

Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (18:19). Later, God tells Isaac, "I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham . . . because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (26:3, 5; cf. 22:16–17; Heb. 11:17–19).

In Exodus, God keeps his promises to Abraham, extended in the so-called Mosaic covenant (Gen. 15:13–18; Deut. 7:7–8; 9:5; Ps. 105). God "heard" the people's "groaning" and "remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exod. 2:24 NASB). God identifies himself to Moses from the burning bush, saying, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. . . . I have surely seen the affliction of My people" and "have given heed to their cry" and "am aware of their sufferings," and I will "deliver them from the power of the Egyptians" and bring them to the land promised to Abraham (3:6–8 NASB; cf. 3:13–15).

After delivering the people in the exodus, God provides more specific covenant laws, with explicit blessings and curses contingent on covenant faithfulness. God promises, "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:5–6). Further, God promises that if the people are faithful, "I will make My dwelling among you" and "walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people" (Lev. 26:11–12 NASB). But if the people "do not obey" and "break My covenant" (26:14–15 NASB), covenant curses will follow instead (26:16–39; cf. Deut. 7:7–13; 29:9–25). For his part, God always keeps his covenant commitments, and God's mercy graciously extends far beyond all obligations, covenantal or otherwise (Exod. 32–34; Deut. 9:6–7)

Much later, God establishes the Davidic covenant—a grant-type covenant in which God promises David, "Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:16 NASB; cf. 1 Kings 3:6–7; Ps. 89:2–4, 26–38, 49; Acts 2:30). Yet some blessings are contingent: "If your sons are careful of their way, to walk before Me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel" (1 Kings 2:4 NASB; cf. 9:4–7; Ps. 132:11–12). Nevertheless, God proclaims, "If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night would not come at their appointed time, only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken, so that he would not have a son to reign on his throne" (Jer. 33:20–21; cf. 31:35–37; Ps. 89:33–34; Heb. 6:17–18).

While the merely human line of David tragically fails, despite God's repeated warnings (see, e.g., 1 Kings 9:6–7; Jer. 11:5–7), in Christ—the covenantal son of David—the everlasting covenant is fulfilled (see Luke 1:68–75).

In Christ, the new covenant is established (22:20; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 9:15; 12:24), and Christ is "the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises," as God promised in the OT (Heb 8:6 NASB; see 8:8–12, quoting Jer. 31:31–34; cf. Gen. 3:15; Jer. 32:38–41; Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26; Heb. 9:15). In all this, the God of Scripture is a covenantal God who always keeps his promises and engages in back-and-forth covenant relationship.

The God of Scripture Engages in Court Proceedings and Defeats Evil

The God of Scripture also engages in back-and-forth legal proceedings, some of which biblical scholars refer to as covenant lawsuits. While there is dispute over what qualifies as a *formal* covenant lawsuit, Scripture repeatedly portrays God as the cosmic judge who brings charges (lawsuits) against the nations, their gods, and sometimes his covenant people.[5] Indeed, Scripture frequently depicts a heavenly council or court including celestial creatures, presided over by YHWH, the proceedings of which affect what takes place on earth.[6]

The book of Job depicts a back-and-forth dispute between God and (the) Satan during proceedings of the heavenly council, wherein (the) Satan brings slanderous allegations against Job and against God's positive judgment of Job (Job 1:6–12; 2:1–7; cf. Zech. 3:1–7). Another heavenly court scene appears in Daniel 7, portraying a "cosmic lawsuit."[7] After Daniel sees (in a vision) four beasts representing four successive oppressive kingdoms, Daniel sees a heavenly court:

> Thrones were set up,
> And [God] the Ancient of Days took His seat.
> . . . .
> Thousands upon thousands were attending Him,
> And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him;
> The court sat,
> And the books were opened. (7:9–10 NASB; cf. 7:26)

5. See, e.g., 1 Kings 22:19–23; 2 Chron. 18:18–22; Job 1:6–12; 2:1–7; Pss. 29:1–2; 82; 89:5–8; Isa. 6:1–13; Dan. 7:9–14; Zech. 3:1–7; cf. Isa. 24:21–23; Jer. 23:18, 22; Ezek. 1–3; Dan. 4:13, 17; Amos 3:7–8; Rev. 4:1–5:14; 7:9–17; 8:1–4; 11:15–18; 14:1–5; 15:2–8; 19:1–10; see also R. Davidson, "Divine Covenant Lawsuit Motif," 83.

6. See chap. 6.

7. Louis F. Hartman comments that this is a depiction of the "celestial court" or "celestial tribunal," a picture of the "divine judge enthroned in the assembly of his angels." Hartman and Di Lella, *Daniel*, 217.

Afterward, judgment is executed against the beasts, and the Son of Man is given an "everlasting dominion" (7:12–14 NASB; cf. Ps. 82; Rev. 12–13). This scene exhibits a common biblical pattern: "Before God executes judgment (either positively or negatively) toward an individual or a people, He first conducts legal proceedings, not for Him to know the facts, but to reveal in open court, as it were, that He is just and fair in all of His dealings."[8]

Language of a cosmic lawsuit or trial also appears in the NT. Paul speaks of his ministry as an exhibit in cosmic legal proceedings: "For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world [*kosmos*], both to angels and to men" (1 Cor. 4:9 NASB).[9] Elsewhere Paul states, "The saints will judge the world" and "we will judge angels" (6:2–3 NASB). Further, Christians are repeatedly called "witnesses" who are to "testify," alongside other legal and courtroom imagery (cf. the heavenly court scenes in Revelation). Christ himself "came into the world, to testify to the truth" (John 18:37; cf. 8:44–45; Rev. 3:14) and to demonstrate God's righteousness and love (Rom. 3:25–26; 5:8), bringing judgment against the devil and his angels (John 12:31–33; 16:11), who sow evil in the world (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43). Indeed, "the Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8), and Jesus became human "so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14; cf. Gen. 3:15). Accordingly, Revelation 12:10–11 links the defeat of Satan and his accusations before the heavenly court with Christ's sacrificial death, saying, "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony" (NASB). Christ's victory at the cross renders a legal judgment against the devil, a requisite precursor to the final eradication of evil to come (Rev. 21). In the meantime, the devil "knows that his time is short" (12:12).

The God of Scripture Dwells with Us and Makes Holy

The God of Scripture dwells with creatures. God promises his covenant people, "I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people" (Lev.

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8. R. Davidson, "Divine Covenant Lawsuit Motif," 83.
9. Gordon D. Fee comments that there is "a cosmic dimension to the spectacle: He is on display before the whole universe, as it were." Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 175.

26:11–12 NASB). God not only appears to many individuals throughout Scripture (e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses) but also commands Moses, "Construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them" (Exod. 25:8 NASB).

When the sanctuary is completed, "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle," and "Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exod. 40:34–35 NASB). Likewise, God's glory fills Solomon's temple after it is completed (1 Kings 8:10–11). Solomon describes the temple as a "place for [God's] dwelling forever" (8:13 NASB), while recognizing that "heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!" (8:27 NASB).

Prior to the construction of the sanctuary, God tells Moses from the burning bush, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exod. 3:5; cf. Josh. 5:15). Here and elsewhere, Scripture identifies wherever God dwells as "holy" (Ps. 46:4). Scripture repeatedly refers to God's "holy mountain," where God dwells (see, e.g., Pss. 48:1; 99:9; cf. Ezek. 20:40; 28:14; Dan. 9:20; Joel 3:17; Zech. 8:3). God's throne is "His holy throne" (Ps. 47:8 NASB). God's temple is "His holy temple" (Mic. 1:2 NASB). The sanctuary/temple is holy, with a holy place and a most holy place, because God dwells there. The land in which God dwells with his covenant people is a holy land. The city God chooses for his dwelling is a holy city (see 1 Chron. 23:25; Jer. 7:12). God's covenant people, whom God will dwell with if they remain faithful to the covenant, are to be a "holy people" (Deut. 28:9; cf. 7:6; 14:2; Lev. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Cor. 3:16–17). And the heavenly council is "the council of the holy ones," wherein God is "greatly feared" and recognized as "awesome above all those who are around Him" (Ps. 89:7 NASB).

Scripture repeatedly praises God as holy (see, e.g., Ps. 71:22; cf. 77:13; 99:5, 9). "There is no one holy like the Lord, indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God" (1 Sam. 2:2 NASB). In Revelation 4:8, "four living creatures" around God's throne unceasingly sing, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come" (NASB). God's name is holy (see, e.g., Ezek. 20:39; 36:22; cf. Matt. 6:9), and God vindicates his holy name against being profaned among the nations (Ezek. 36:23; cf. 39:25); "the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness" (Isa. 5:16 NASB; cf. Rom. 3:25–26).

Whereas humans may be "holy" by proximity to God, God is holy in and of himself: "I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst" (Hosea 11:9 NASB). Absolutely holy, God is "a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24 NASB) such that "no evil dwells with" God (Ps. 5:4 NASB). Any evil thing coming into

unmediated contact with the holy God will be destroyed. Because God's unmediated presence will destroy sinful people, evil (partially) separates people from God.

> The Lord's hand is not too short to save,
>   nor his ear too dull to hear.
> Rather, your iniquities have been barriers
>   between you and your God,
> and your sins have hidden his face from you
>   so that he does not hear. (Isa. 59:1–2)

Accordingly, God warns, "Because the Lord your God travels along with your camp, to save you and to hand over your enemies to you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you" (Deut. 23:14; cf. Num. 5:3; Jer. 7:3).

God can go "with" the people without destroying them (Exod. 33:3) only if his presence is mediated and his glory shrouded, and this is one function of the sanctuary. Although God mediates his presence to accommodate the people, "again and again" the people "tempted God, and pained the Holy One of Israel" (Ps. 78:41 NASB) so much that, eventually, God's presence departs from Solomon's temple and from Jerusalem (Ezek. 9; 10; 11:22–23). Yet God promises to "return to Zion and . . . dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts will be called the Holy Mountain" (Zech. 8:3 NASB). Later, God's glory returns to Jerusalem and the second temple in Jesus (John 1:14), who is Immanuel—"God with us" (Matt. 1:23 KJV). As the OT calls God "the Holy One of Israel" (Isa. 30:15 KJV), the NT calls Jesus "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34; cf. 1:35; John 6:69), and the NT explicitly reveals the Holy Spirit.

In the new covenant, the resurrected Christ enters "the greater and more perfect tabernacle [in heaven], not made with hands" (Heb. 9:11 NASB; cf. 9:12, 24), and the Holy Spirit dwells within believers. Paul writes, "You are a temple of God," "the Spirit of God dwells in you," and "the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are" (1 Cor. 3:16–17 NASB; cf. 6:19; Rom. 8:9). In the future, "the holy city, new Jerusalem" will come "down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2 NASB; cf. 21:10; 2 Pet. 3:13). Then "the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (Rev. 21:3–4 NASB).

Conclusion

This introduction has offered a brief survey of some prominent biblical depictions of the covenantal God of Scripture, which portray God as relating to creatures in striking ways—speaking, hearing, willing, covenanting, grieving, relenting, responding to prayer, dwelling with them, and otherwise engaging in back-and-forth relationship with them. If theology is to be normed by Scripture, as I believe it should be, then these and other biblical depictions of God must be adequately accounted for in one's conception of divine attributes. As shall be discussed further in the following chapter, however, just how such depictions of God should be understood theologically is a matter of some dispute, particularly given what some see as significant tension between these and other depictions of the God of Scripture and the so-called God of the philosophers depicted in at least some versions of classical theism. With this tension in mind, the following chapters offer a careful theological analysis of divine attributes that seeks to account for these and other biblical depictions of God in a way that upholds the unique normativity of Scripture, in dialogue with core issues in the contemporary discussion of classical theism.

Chapter 1 begins by introducing the contemporary discussion of classical theism and the approach this book takes to the doctrine of God, an approach to the theological interpretation of Scripture that carefully attends to biblical depictions of God, seeking to affirm all that Scripture teaches about God without conceptually reducing God to the way he is portrayed in the economy. The chapters that follow address whether God changes and has emotions (chap. 2); whether he is present in space and time (chap. 3); whether he knows everything, including the future (chap. 4); whether he has all power and always attains what he desires (chap. 5); whether he is entirely good and loving (chap. 6); how one God can be three persons (chap. 7); and how the view of covenantal theism set forth in this book relates to classical theism, the Christian tradition, perfect being theology, and the issues of worship and prayer (chap. 8).

Before turning to these chapters, however, it is appropriate to pause to worship the God of Scripture:

> Praise the LORD!
> > O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
> > for his steadfast love endures forever.
> . . . .
> Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
> > from everlasting to everlasting.
> And let all the people say, "Amen."
> > Praise the LORD! (Ps. 106:1, 48)

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The God of Scripture and the God of the Philosophers

Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
     who was and is and is to come.

According to Revelation 4:8, this refrain is sung "day and night without ceasing." The God of Scripture is the holy one who alone is worthy of worship. Accordingly, much of Scripture highlights God's unique praiseworthiness as the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God to whom Christians should "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). Yet who is this covenantal God whom Christians worship and to whom Christians pray? Christians generally view God as worthy of worship because he is perfect, the one to whom it makes sense to pray because he is compassionate and responds to prayer (Dan. 9:4, 18). Yet there is quite a bit of diversity—even controversy—among Christian theologians regarding God's nature and how God relates to creation. Much of the controversy concerns whether the (so-called) God of the philosophers is compatible with the God of Scripture, "whether the so-called God of the philosophers has any real claim to being *the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or God, the Father of Jesus, or God, the object of our ultimate concern.*"[1]

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of Jesus, is the covenantal God whom many Christians envision when they worship and pray,

1. Rea and Pojman, "Concept of God," 3.

the God revealed in the story line of Scripture who creates the world, forms Adam and Eve from dust, calls Abraham, meets Moses, loves, covenants, acts, speaks, hears, responds, and saves. Yet William Alston notes a "pervasive tension in Christian thought between 'the God of the philosophers and the God of the Bible,' between God as 'wholly other' and God as a partner in interpersonal relationships, between God as the absolute, ultimate source of all being and God as the dominant actor on the stage of history."[2]

With this tension in mind, this book offers a constructive account of divine attributes, bringing biblical portrayals of God into dialogue with core questions in the contemporary discussion of classical theism, including whether God changes and has emotions, whether he is present in space and time, whether he knows everything (including the future), whether he has all power and always attains what he desires, whether he is entirely good and loving, and how one God can be three persons.[3] This chapter introduces the contemporary discussion of the (so-called) God of the philosophers and the approach this book takes to the doctrine of God, an approach to the theological interpretation of Scripture that carefully attends to the biblical portrayals of God, toward affirming what Scripture teaches about God without conceptually reducing God to the way he is portrayed in the economy (i.e., in relation to the world). Accordingly, I seek to limit my conclusions according to the standards of biblical warrant and systematic coherence while recognizing that "we see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12 NASB) and that God is greater than humans can conceive.

The God of the Philosophers?

Strict Classical Theism

While there are many different philosophical conceptions of God, when Christian theists speak of "the God of the philosophers," they typically have in mind an understanding of God called classical theism.[4] According to a *strict* form of classical theism, God must possess the following attributes (explained further below): divine perfection, necessity, *pure* aseity, *utter* self-sufficiency, *strict* simplicity, *timeless* eternity, *strict* immutability, *strict* impassibility,

2. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language*, 147.
3. For an introduction to contemporary approaches to the doctrine of God, see Peckham, *Doctrine of God*.
4. See, e.g., Rea and Pojman, "Concept of God," 3; Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, 6; Kenny, *God of the Philosophers*; and Stump, *God of the Bible*, 11. However, "traditional classical theism is not a single, monolithic position." J. Cooper, *Panentheism*, 322.

omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.[5] To differentiate them from others who self-identify as classical theists, I refer to those who subscribe to a strict understanding of these attributes as *strict* classical theists.[6]

On this view, divine perfection means that God is the greatest possible being. God exists necessarily and is who he is entirely of himself (*a se*), without dependence on anything else relative to his existence or otherwise (*pure* aseity and *utter* self-sufficiency). God "exists independently of all causal influence from his creatures"; creatures cannot impact God or his actions.[7] This is bound up with *strict* simplicity, which means (among other things) that God is not composed of parts and that there are no genuine distinctions in God.[8]

This God is timeless. For God, there is no passing of time, no "before" or "after," no past or future, no temporal succession. Accordingly, God is *strictly* immutable and *strictly* impassible. Strict immutability, meaning God cannot change in any way, follows from timelessness because change requires the passing of time—from prior state to later state. This rules out emotional change and suffering. Instead, God is strictly impassible, meaning that God cannot be affected by anything outside himself. Creatures cannot affect God, and thus God cannot become pleased or displeased by anything creatures do.

Finally, God is omnipotent, meaning God is all-powerful. God is omniscient, meaning God knows everything (typically explained in terms of God causing everything to be as it is).[9] And God is omnipresent, meaning God's power is active everywhere, sustaining everything.

Process Theology and Open Theism

Alongside numerous other strong critics of (strict) classical theism, process theology posits an alternative "God of the philosophers," rooted in the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead.[10] Characterizing classical theism as (in Charles Hartshorne's words) "metaphysical snobbery toward relativity, . . . responsiveness or sensitivity" and "worship of mere absoluteness,

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5. Subsequent chapters further discuss these attributes.
6. See Peckham, *Doctrine of God*, 4–14. Among others, Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas are often interpreted as exemplars of strict classical theism.
7. Dolezal, "Strong Impassibility," 18.
8. Thomas Williams explains that God is "in no way a composite." God "does not have a variety of features or attributes that are distinct from God's nature and from each other" (Williams, "Introduction to Classical Theism," 96). Brian Leftow adds that God is "completely without parts. Whatever has parts depends on them for its existence and nature." Leftow, "God, Concepts of."
9. However, not all strict classical theists are determinists. See, e.g., Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*.
10. See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

independence, and one-sided activity or power," process theology advocates a nearly reverse image of strict classical theism, typically denying what strict classical theism affirms and affirming what it denies.[11] Whereas the God of strict classical theism is utterly transcendent, the God of process theology is nearly entirely immanent. A form of panentheism (literally "all in God"), process theology maintains that the world (the physical universe) is *in* God such that God cannot exist without *some* world and is always in the process of changing and growing as the world changes.

While process theologians agree that God is a necessary and perfect being, many attributes that strict classical theists consider "perfections" are considered deficiencies by process theologians.[12] According to process theology, the necessary and perfect being must be (1) essentially related to some world, not self-sufficient or *a se*; (2) temporal, not timeless; (3) always changing, not strictly immutable; (4) eminently passible, not impassible; (5) the most powerful being, but not omnipotent in the sense of possessing all power, capable of "acting" only via persuasion (never coercion); and (6) all-knowing relative to the present but not omniscient in terms of possessing exhaustive foreknowledge.

Open theism, another approach that has strongly criticized (strict) classical theism in recent decades, is often confused with process theology but differs in significant respects.[13] While agreeing with process theists that God is temporal rather than timeless, neither *strictly* immutable nor impassible, and all-knowing relative to the present but lacking exhaustive foreknowledge, *most* open theists reject the view that God is essentially related to the world and affirm a more traditional concept of omnipotence.[14] Accordingly, many open theists are closer to moderate classical theism (defined below) than to process theism.

Moderate Classical Theism

Many other theists identify as classical theists (in a broad sense) but deny or qualify some tenets of *strict* classical theism. *Moderate* classical theists

11. Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, 50. Hartshorne contends that classical theism "made God, not an exalted being, but an empty absurdity, a love which is simply not love, a purpose which is no purpose, a will which is no will, a knowledge which is no knowledge." Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 31.

12. Hartshorne's view is an alternative form of perfect being theology. See Peckham, *Concept of Divine Love*, 124–68.

13. See Griffin, Cobb, and Pinnock, *Searching for an Adequate God*. See also Pinnock et al., *Openness of God*.

14. One exception is Thomas Jay Oord's essential kenosis theology, similar in many ways to process theism. See Oord, *Uncontrolling Love of God*.

affirm a common core of classical theism—divine perfection, necessity, aseity, self-sufficiency, unity, eternity, immutability (of some kind), omnipotence, and omniscience (typically understood to include exhaustive definite foreknowledge).[15] While upholding an unqualified Creator-creature distinction such that God does not depend on or need anything with respect to his existence and essential nature (aseity and self-sufficiency), moderate classical theism departs from strict classical theism by affirming that God engages in genuine relationship with creatures that makes a difference to God (contra *pure* aseity).[16] Further, moderate classical theism affirms that God experiences changing emotions (contra strict impassibility) and that God is immutable with respect to his character and essential nature but changes relationally (contra strict immutability) and therefore affirms some form of divine temporality (contra strict timelessness).[17]

The God of Greek Philosophy?

Much contemporary discussion of divine attributes revolves around the claims of strict classical theists and counterclaims of process theists, open theists, and moderate classical theists. As Eleonore Stump notes, "It is common among contemporary theologians and philosophers to suppose that the God of the Bible is radically different from the God of the philosophers," that "there is an inconsistency between the description of God given by the Bible and the characterization of God upheld by [strict] classical theism."[18] Indeed, "to many people the God of [strict] classical theism seems unresponsive" and "unengaged" and thus "seems very different from the God of the Bible."[19]

For example, Stephen T. Davis argues, "A timeless being cannot be the personal, caring, involved God we read about in the Bible. The God of the Bible is, above all, a God who cares deeply about what happens in history and who acts to bring about his will."[20] Paul Copan likewise comments, "The triune

15. Traditional theists widely agree that God is "among other things an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good, eternal and transcendent being who has created our entire universe and preserves its existence moment to moment." T. Morris, *Our Idea of God*, 17.

16. I label this "moderate" because the label "modified" classical theism (J. Cooper, *Panentheism*, 321) indicates that this is not the *classical* view, which is disputed. Some use the label "neo-classical theism" to describe this category, which they affirm. See Mullins, *God and Emotions*; and R. Campbell, *Worldviews and the Problem of Evil*, 205–6.

17. Moderate classical theists also deny *strict* simplicity but *may* affirm a qualified simplicity.

18. Stump, *God of the Bible*, 11.

19. Stump, *God of the Bible*, 18. She maintains that the "God of classical theism is the engaged, personally present, responsive God of the Bible" (Stump, *God of the Bible*, 19). Similarly, Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, 8–10.

20. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God*, 14.

God isn't the static, untouchable deity commonly associated with traditional Greek philosophy. He's a prayer-answering, history-engaging God."[21] Ronald Nash adds, "If God is [strictly] immutable, He cannot be the religiously available God of the Scriptures. But if God is religiously available, He cannot be the unchanging God of the philosophers."[22] Further, Sallie McFague avers that the "two images of God—one as the distant, all-powerful, perfect, immutable Lord existing in lonely isolation, and the other as the One who enters human flesh as a baby to eventually assume the alienation and oppression of all peoples in the world—do not fit together."[23] Likewise, James Cone maintains, "Unlike the God of Greek philosophy who is removed from history, the God of the Bible is involved in history, and his revelation is inseparable from the social and political affairs of Israel."[24]

Numerous critics of classical theism affirm the controversial Hellenization thesis, which claims that early Christian tradition was *corrupted* by importing a Greek philosophical framework, replacing the God of the Bible with the God of the philosophers.[25] As Colin Gunton puts it, "The impersonal attributes come from Greece, the Greek philosophical tradition; the personal ones come from the Bible and don't appear to be consistent with them."[26] While the Hellenization thesis is often traced to modern scholarship (especially the much-criticized work of Adolf von Harnack), Paul Gavrilyuk notes that "a version of this theory was not unknown to the early Fathers and had been around since Hippolytus of Rome (170–235), who argued that the heretics did not derive their doctrines from the scriptures and apostolic tradition, but rather from Greek philosophers."[27] As Tertullian put it, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[28]

According to Michael Allen, modern versions of the Hellenization thesis typically include three claims: (1) "a belief in monolithic Greek philosophy," (2) "the claim that the fathers of the early church borrowed from Greek philosophy *uncritically*," and (3) the "insist[ence] that this borrowing is inherently antithetical to the material content of the gospel."[29] Framed this way,

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21. Copan, *Loving Wisdom*, 94.
22. Nash, *Concept of God*, 100.
23. McFague, *Body of God*, 136.
24. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 62.
25. See, e.g., Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 22. Cf. Brunner, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 154; R. Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 83–91, 99–108; and J. Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 59–91.
26. Gunton, *Barth Lectures*, 94.
27. Gavrilyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, 3.
28. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics* 7 (*ANF* 3:246).
29. M. Allen, "Exodus 3 after the Hellenization Thesis," 181.

the Hellenization thesis is relatively easy to falsify; one need only demonstrate that early church fathers borrowed from Greek philosophy *critically* and *selectively*. Accordingly, many classical theists identify this (exaggerated) Hellenization thesis as a caricature, contending that (1) ancient Greek philosophy was not monolithic, (2) early church fathers did not borrow from Greek philosophy "uncritically" or uniformly, and (3) what was "borrowed" from Greek philosophy is not inconsistent with the teachings of Scripture.[30]

Critics and advocates agree, however, that various streams of Greek philosophy heavily influenced early church fathers. As classical theist Gerald Bray explains, there "is no doubt that the early Christians," needing "to address their contemporaries," "were influenced by the philosophical currents surrounding them."[31] Another classical theist, Thomas Williams, refers to classical theism as "the model of God we find in Platonic, neo-Platonic, and Aristotelian philosophy and in Christian, Muslim, and Jewish thinkers who appropriate those traditions of classical Greek philosophy."[32] Likewise, Katherin Rogers adds, "Both the Neoplatonism of Augustine and Anselm and the (Neoplatonic?) Aristotelianism of Aquinas provide all-encompassing frameworks within which to make sense of God and creation."[33] Similarly, Karl Barth maintains, "The idea of God . . . was shaped by a general conception of God (that of ancient Stoicism and Neo-Platonism)."[34] The primary argument, then, is not whether the early Christian theological tradition was deeply influenced by streams of Greek philosophy but whether such influence was uncritically (or sufficiently critically) received and whether it *corrupted* Christian theology. Indeed, a minimal Hellenization thesis, claiming that *some* Christian thinkers and movements were influenced by streams of Greek philosophy in a way that amounted to or supported false theological claims, would be widely affirmed, even by many critics of the (exaggerated)

30. See, e.g., Gavrilyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*. See also Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 45–55.

31. Bray, "Has the Christian Doctrine of God," 112. Cf. Castelo, *Apathetic God*, 64; Kärkkäinen, *Doctrine of God*, 40–41; and R. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 54–57. Rob Lister adds that it "is obvious to all that the Patristic theologians borrowed Greek language and made use of Greek concepts" (R. Lister, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned*, 61). Indeed, many maintain that divine impassibility's "foundation in Christian sources is probably due to direct Greek influences." *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. "Impassibility of God," 828.

32. Williams, "Introduction to Classical Theism," 95. Leftow adds, "Classical theism's ancestry includes Plato, Aristotle, Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism," which "entered Christianity as early as Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria and became Christian orthodoxy as the Roman Empire wound down" (Leftow, "God, Concepts of"). Cf. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, 6.

33. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, 6.

34. *CD* II/1, 329.

Hellenization thesis.[35] Yet the controversial question is, Which individuals, movements, and/or creeds were influenced in a way that "corrupted" their theology?

This question is complicated by the facts that various thinkers hold nuanced views and that competent scholars offer differing interpretations of the same theologians, movements, and creeds.[36] As such, claims that the Christian tradition has or has not been corrupted by the influence of Greek philosophy are complicated by questions like: (1) Which part(s) of the Christian tradition? and (2) Whose interpretation of those part(s) of the Christian tradition?[37] Given these and other complexities, I make no attempt to settle the debate regarding the positive or negative influence of Greek philosophies on the Christian tradition in general, nor do I intend what follows as a referendum on the Christian tradition.[38] While some theologians claim that their view is *the* traditional view of divine attributes, there are differing scholarly interpretations of just what various classical Christian writers meant by the language they used and assertions they made relative to various divine attributes such that various models of God might claim some support in the classical Christian tradition.[39]

Apart from this, whether some conclusion has been influenced by some philosophical system does not determine whether that conclusion is true.[40] Every theological perspective has been influenced by extrabiblical thought in some way. The question is not whether the Christian tradition appropriated elements of Greek philosophy but whether a given articulation of Christian theology is consistent with, and normed by, Scripture. As Jay Wesley Richards comments, "The problem is not simply that the classical theist employs extrabiblical or philosophical notions of divinity"; the problem is that the philosophical "intuitions" that are "fed by a pre-Christian concept of God can sometimes contradict what Christians believe God has revealed about himself in salvation history and the biblical narratives."[41] Daniel Castelo

35. While rejecting the exaggerated Hellenization thesis, Michael Horton notes, "Traces of Stoicism are evident among Christian writers in the ancient, medieval, and modern period. However, the indifferent god of Stoicism is radically different from the living God of Scripture" (Horton, *Christian Faith*, 248). Cf. Gavrilyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*; and Pannenberg, "Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God," 2:119–83.

36. See chap. 8.

37. On these two questions (which tradition? whose interpretation?), see Peckham, *Canonical Theology*.

38. Doing justice to the richness of the Christian tradition would demand dedicated attention to each thinker in their historical context, requiring multiple lengthy monographs.

39. See chap. 8.

40. To claim otherwise would exhibit the genetic fallacy.

41. Richards, *Untamed God*, 40. Cf. R. Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 101–2.

adds, "At some level the need for an accounting is obvious: the God-talk . . . of the Bible and that of the ancient church repeatedly sound at odds with each other."[42]

Yet how should one go about this accounting? In this regard, Peter Martens explains, "According to the aggravated version of the Hellenization of Christianity thesis, a teaching becomes heretical when it fulfills two conditions: it is simultaneously resistant to clear scriptural testimony and uncritically dependent upon Platonic [or other Greek] philosophy."[43] Given the complexities relative to determining whether a teaching might be *uncritically* dependent on a given philosophy, however, perhaps we might say that a teaching becomes problematic when it is dependent on extrabiblical thought *such that* it is "resistant to clear scriptural testimony." This applies not only to the influence of Greek thought but to the undue influence of any extrabiblical thought. The question, then, is not whether extrabiblical thought has influenced a teaching but whether the influence and/or resultant claim is "resistant to clear scriptural testimony."

The God of Scripture

Whether one views the so-called God of the philosophers and the God of Scripture as complementary or incompatible depends not only on what one means by "the God of the philosophers" but also on what one means by "the God of Scripture." At least two stages of inquiry are involved in the attempt to address the controversial question, Who is the God of Scripture? The first stage concerns identifying biblical portrayals and claims about God (what the text says), and the second stage concerns how to theologically interpret such portrayals and claims (what one says on the basis of what the text says). Regarding the first stage, I operate on the conviction that an adequate conception of the God of Scripture must carefully consider and correspond to biblical portrayals and claims about God that Scripture affirms.[44] Yet at the second stage, theologians interpret biblical portrayals and claims in vastly differing ways.

Many theologians emphasize that biblical portrayals and claims are accommodative—that is, biblical teachings are communicated in a manner that

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42. Castelo, "Qualified Impassibility," 57. While noting that "not every bit of dehellenization is laudatory, for not everything that the Greeks said is false," Nicholas Wolterstorff claims further, "The patterns of classical Greek thought are incompatible with the pattern of biblical thought." Wolterstorff, *Inquiring about God*, 134.

43. Martens, "Embodiment, Heresy, and the Hellenization of Christianity," 620.

44. By speaking of what "Scripture affirms," I mean what Scripture teaches as true, excluding false claims that merely appear in Scripture (e.g., the theology of Job's friends).

accommodates limited human understanding. Some theologians thus maintain that, for example, biblical portrayals of God experiencing changing emotions should not be taken to mean that God actually experiences changing emotions; rather, they teach some deeper truth about God via accommodative imagery. In this and other respects, while theologians typically agree that Scripture is accommodative, there is considerable disagreement about how accommodative language should be interpreted theologically, which I will return to below.

To engage this second stage of inquiry further, however, it is important to be mindful of biblical depictions of God. As surveyed in the introduction, Scripture portrays God as (among many other things) the covenantal God who

creates, sustains, and creates anew;
speaks, hears, and responds;
sees, provides, delivers/saves, and rules;
knows, plans, wills, calls, and chooses but has unfulfilled desires;
judges, acts justly, *and* mercifully and graciously forgives;
loves compassionately, passionately, and steadfastly;
grieves, suffers, laments, and relents;
promises, covenants, and engages in covenant relationship;
engages in court proceedings and defeats evil; and
dwells with us and makes holy.[45]

In these and other ways, the God of Scripture is consistently described as a covenantal God, not only in the sense of making and keeping formal covenants with creatures but also in the broader sense of engaging in various kinds of back-and-forth relationships with creatures wherein God makes and keeps commitments and is responsive to creatures. When I refer to the covenantal God, I mean *covenantal* in this broader sense of committed, back-and-forth relationship. As Amos Yong puts it, the God of Scripture is "not only the covenant-making but also covenant-keeping God who enters into and is involved with the history of the people of God, who seeks to accomplish what is just on their behalf, and who liberates the people of God from their plight in order to reestablish—redeem or restore—the relationship between creation and the creator."[46] Michael Horton adds, "The biblical testimony to a living

45. As John Goldingay describes the OT narrative, "God began. God started over. God promised. God delivered. God sealed. God gave. God accommodated. God wrestled. God preserved." Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:32.

46. Yong, *Spirit of Love*, 81–82. Yong draws on the work of Samuel Solivan, who notes that the OT prophets reveal a God who "is touched by our suffering . . . [and] sympathetic to our condition." Solivan, *Spirit, Pathos, and Liberation*, 74.

history with a living God in a covenant with genuine interaction resists all Stoic and Platonic conceptions of a nonrelational and nonpersonal One. In the unfolding drama there are suits and countersuits, witnesses and counter-witnesses, and God is represented as repenting, relenting, and responding to creatures."[47]

That Scripture depicts God as a covenantal God who engages in committed, back-and-forth relationship with creatures is not a matter of dispute. Disagreement typically appears at the second level: theological interpretation of such depictions. In my view, a conception of God normed by Scripture must be able to account for these (and other) biblical portrayals and claims in a way congruent with the uniquely normative authority of Scripture as canon.

Doing Theology as Canonical Theology

This returns us to discussion of theological interpretation. Rather than attempting to make a case for the soundness of my own approach here (as I have done elsewhere), I will simply outline some commitments of my canonical theological method, followed by a brief discussion of my approach to biblical language as accommodative and analogical.[48]

Canonical Theology

My approach operates on the conviction that Scripture is a unified corpus of writings that God has commissioned as the uniquely normative rule of faith and practice and the *final norm* of theological interpretation, to be understood in subjection to guidance by the Holy Spirit.[49] Canonical theology seeks to "read the Bible canonically, as one book," as "Christ's Spirit-borne

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47. Horton, *Christian Faith*, 240.
48. Regarding my theological method and the rationale for my approach in conversation with potential objections, see Peckham, *Canonical Theology*. Cf. Peckham, "Rationale for Canonical Theology," 83–105.
49. I mean "canonical" in three primary ways: first, in the basic sense of the term "canon" as a rule or standard; second, relative to the concept of "canon" as a unified, but not uniform, corpus; third, understanding the biblical canon as "canonical" in virtue of being divinely commissioned. To say Scripture is "canonical," then, is to say that Scripture rules, rules as a whole, and rules because it has been commissioned to rule by the Ruler himself. I believe the biblical canon is correctly recognized as the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, ratified and commissioned by Christ, the common canonical core recognized by nearly all Christians (including those who recognize more books). On the scope of the biblical canon, see Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, chaps. 1–3.

commissioned testimony to himself," with the conviction that "each part has meaning in light of the whole (and in light of its center, Jesus Christ)."[50]

Seeking to integrate biblical exegesis and systematic theology under the rule of Scripture, canonical theology aims at two overarching goals: canonical correspondence and coherence, which I hereafter refer to as the standards of biblical warrant and systematic coherence. Coinciding with the belief that Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16) and thus internally coherent, the standard of systematic coherence demands that theological claims be consistent with one another. Equally important, affirming the view of the vast majority of Christians that Scripture should be normative over theological claims, the standard of biblical warrant maintains that theological claims should be adequately grounded in what Scripture affirms.[51] This involves the aim of reading *all* of Scripture in a way that is consistent with the entirety of what Scripture teaches (by way of careful *and contextual* exegesis), without dismissing, contorting, divesting of meaning, or explaining away individual passages.[52]

This standard of biblical warrant is not a new standard but is consistent with Gregory of Nyssa's words, "We make the Holy Scriptures the rule and measure of every tenet; we necessarily fix our eyes upon that, and approve that alone which may be made to harmonize with the intention of those writings" such that we "adopt, as the guide of our reasoning, the Scripture."[53] Elsewhere Gregory writes, "Let the inspired Scripture, then, be our umpire, and the vote of truth will surely be given to those whose dogmas are found to agree with the Divine words."[54] In this regard, Uche Anizor notes, "Christian theologians have almost universally assumed . . . that a theological claim can be true only insofar as it is drawn from or at least coheres with Scripture."[55]

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50. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 178, 194. David Yeago writes that recognizing "the biblical canon as inspired Scripture" means approaching "the texts as the discourse of the Holy Spirit" such that "the church receives the canon, in all its diversity, as nonetheless a *single* body of discourse." Yeago, "Bible," 70.

51. Jay Wesley Richards notes, "Commitment to biblical normativity" is "the norm among Catholic and Orthodox" and Protestant theologians. Richards, *Untamed God*, 32.

52. My reading employs grammatical-historical procedures of exegesis in a way that affirms Scripture's dual authorship such that the intention *in* the text is not reduced to human authorial intent but includes the effect of the divine author's intention. I thus depart from any iterations of grammatical-historical method that foster atomism or are otherwise unduly influenced by modernistic biblical criticism, seeking instead to read the canon's parts in light of the whole canon (and vice versa) without injury to any part. See Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 203–6; Peckham, "Rationale for Canonical Theology." Cf. Voss, "From 'Grammatical-Historical Exegesis,'" 140–52; Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 110–16.

53. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (NPNF 5:439).

54. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Trinity* (NPNF 5:327).

55. Anizor, *How to Read Theology*, 60.