

UNDERSTANDING GOD: GOD AND TIME

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After deciding to address the issue of God and time, I soon regretted my choice, especially after seeing William Craig's comment, "Apart from the idea of God, I know of no concept so profound and so baffling as that of time. To attempt an integration of these two concepts therefore stretches our minds to the very limits of our understanding" (TE 11).

This made me want to throw in the towel before embarrassing myself, especially after I saw that Dr. Craig has discerned "philosophical naivete" in Gregory Boyd's work (MK 57). I confess up front to a large measure of philosophical naivete.

The issue here is to explain how God relates to time. As Christian theologians we accept that God is infinite, and therefore infinite with respect to time. This is called God's *eternality*: God is eternal. The Bible¹ calls him "the eternal God" (Gen 21:33 [NIV]; Deut 33:27; Rom 16:26; see Isa 40:28; Rom 1:20; 1 Tim 1:17). Though we all agree about this, we do not agree as to what this eternality means. It has been interpreted in two distinctly different ways. In one view, "God is eternal" means that he exists everlastingly, on a time line that has no beginning and no end. On another view, "God is eternal" means that God exists outside of and apart from time as such; the categories of time do not apply to him at all. These views are at opposite ends of a spectrum; some position themselves between these extremes and attempt to combine them in various ways.

What is at stake in this matter of God and time? Obviously the very *nature of God* is at issue. How we understand God's eternality will affect how we interpret his omniscience, his immutability, his simplicity, and his sovereignty (Geisler, BG, chs. 2, 4, 5, 8). Also at stake is *how God relates to the world*. For example, one's understanding of how God relates to time affects his understanding of creation, the incarnation, and God's providential intervention into the world. A final specific thing that is at stake is the status of *God's foreknowledge*. How does God's relation to time affect his ability to know the future--if indeed there *is* a "future" from God's perspective?

At this point let me explain that I understand time to be that characteristic of existence according to which the relation between events may be described in terms of *before* and *after*, or *earlier than* and *later than*. It involves a sequence or succession of moments which may be described as past and future in relation to a present or now.

The two main views of God's relation to time in this sense are quite simple. Either this characteristic of existence applies to God, or it does not. Either God is in the flow of time, or he is outside of it. Either his being and experience pass through a succession of moments, or they do not. I.e., God is either temporal or atemporal.

Here I will briefly present these two main views, then I will look at some attempts to combine them. My own view is in this last category.

I. GOD IS TIMELESS

The view that God is timeless is called atemporalism and eternalism. It is associated with classical theism, an approach that is traceable to ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Plotinus, and to early and medieval Christian theologians such as Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas. Modern representatives of this view are Paul Helm and Norman Geisler (see bibliography).

A. Explanation of Divine Timelessness

In this view God is timeless in the sense that he totally transcends all categories of time and exists outside the flow of time altogether. The concepts of succession or sequence of moments, before and after, past/present/future, simply do not apply to him. In his *being* God exists in an eternal, unchanging NOW of "infinitely extended, pastless, futureless duration" (Stump and Kretzmann, 225). He exists in a beginningless, endless, eternally enduring present.

¹ Unless noted otherwise Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Bible (1995 ed.).

This applies not only to God's being, but also to his *knowledge*. The timeless God knows all things in a single, self-contained moment of cognition. This would mean, says Feinberg (429), "that God always has the same thought," that "he is always thinking everything, and that there is never any variation in what he thinks." As Geisler affirms, "What he thinks, he has forever thought" (GKAT 73). His knowledge is changeless, eternally all-inclusive, and non-extended. Created history is neither past nor future in God's perception; its whole scope is present before him in one eternal NOW.

This also applies to God's *actions*. Though his actions occur sequentially within the creation, from God's own perspective they are not sequential but simultaneous. Everything that God does is performed at exactly the same time in the one eternal NOW. This means that they are never not occurring, i.e., God never begins to do anything or never does anything for the first time, and he never ceases to do whatever he does. His "one timeless act" is forever the same; "it never begins or ends" (Feinberg, 402).

Thus for a timeless God there exists nothing except the single, eternal, changeless, frozen *present*. The key concept is *simultaneity*. As Boethius said, "Eternity is the complete possession of an endless life enjoyed as one simultaneous whole." An eternal being "grasps and possesses simultaneously the entire fullness of an unending life" (cited in Hasker, 6-7).

Time itself is regarded as altogether a created phenomenon. "Time began with the space/time universe," says Geisler (CBF 110). Since time is an essential part of the creation, "then it cannot be an attribute of the uncreated" (CBF 111-112). Since (according to modern science) space and time necessarily co-exist, time could not have existed before space itself. Thus "time began with the universe" (Geisler, BG 70,73).

B. The Basis of the Divine TimelessnessView

Upon what is the concept of divine timelessness based? Geisler and House (BG 66-70) say it is clearly taught in the Bible. Craig agrees that "certain New Testament passages also seem to affirm a beginning of time" (TE 19). E.g., God is described as being "in the beginning" (Gen 1:1) and thus "beyond time" (Geisler, BG 66). He is described as existing "before the world was" (John 17:5), and "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4; see Ps 90:2). He is "the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity" (Isa 57:15, NKJV). God's grace "was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (2 Tim 1:9, NKJV; see 1 Cor 2:7). God promised us eternal life "before the beginning of time" (Titus 1:2, NIV), literally, "before eternal times." Jude 25 attributes glory to God "before all ages, now and forevermore" (NIV). Through his Son God "made the world" (Heb 1:2), or literally "framed the ages" (Geisler, BG 67). He is the timeless "I AM" (Exod 3:14; see John 8:58). There are of course many texts that depict God in temporal terms, but atemporalists say they are all anthropomorphic (Geisler, GKAT 73; BG 71).

Besides being based on these specific biblical texts, divine timelessness is also said to be logically inferred from other attributes of God (see Feinberg, 384-387). For example, the attribute of simplicity, which means that God cannot be divided into parts, must imply timelessness, because a temporal God's existence would be separated into an endless succession of moments (Geisler, GKAT 67; see Feinberg, 326-327; Morris, 121-124). Also it is said that immutability implies timelessness, since a God proceeding through an endless succession of moments would be constantly changing (Geisler, BG 73,80-81; see Feinberg, 387-388; Morris, 127-128). Likewise, according to Anselm, God's perfection (i.e., God defined as "the greatest conceivable being") implies timelessness, since timelessness is greater than temporality (see Feinberg, 384-385; Morris, 129-130). Such conclusions as this last one, says Helm, are grounded ultimately upon our intuition (DTE 29-31).

C. Problems with Divine Timelessness

Critics of the atemporal view of God see a number of problems with it. One is that the supposed biblical basis is inconclusive, since the passages usually cited in its support can be understand in terms of temporal eternity (i.e., everlastingness; I will discuss this later). This leads Paul Helm, an eternalist, to say that even though the teaching of Scripture is consistent with God's timeless eternity, this teaching is nonetheless "somewhat underdetermined," i.e., "the language of Scripture about God and time is not sufficiently precise so as to provide a definitive resolution of the issue one way or the other. So it would be unwise for the eternalist to claim that divine timeless eternity is *entailed* by the language of Scripture" (DTE 31). Nicholas Wolterstorff, a temporalist, likewise asserts that "the scriptural passages traditionally cited as supporting divine timelessness provide no such support whatsoever" (190). His attempt to show that this is so is very weak, though.

In reference to the texts cited above which allegedly establish God's timelessness, the basic alternative interpretation is that they are referring to God's priority to *this world's* time, not to time itself. God is the Creator of this universe and its history; thus he obviously existed "in eternity" before all the past aeons of this creation. But these texts in themselves do not explain the *nature* of the "eternity" in which the Creator existed "prior to" the beginning of this universe. More will be said about this below.

The second problem with the timelessness view is that its other basic foundation is also shaky. Not only is its alleged biblical basis questionable; so also is the atemporalist version of the other divine attributes from which it is logically derived. This is true especially of the two principal such attributes, simplicity and immutability. As they are taught in classical theism, both of these attributes are victims of philosophical extremism.

Regarding the doctrine of simplicity, I have earlier warned against carrying this to an extreme (GC 37-40), as does Frame in his recent work (225-230). Frame argues that simplicity does not rule out complexity (705). Feinberg questions the whole concept of simplicity, saying that the Bible does not explicitly teach it (329) and concluding that it is not a divine attribute (335, 337) and should be abandoned altogether (433). At the very least, as Morris has shown (113-118, 121-124), one can hold to spatial simplicity without holding to temporal simplicity.

Regarding the doctrine of immutability, I argued in 1987 (GRe, ch. 8), that the classical view is an unwarranted extreme and must be modified. I pointed to an "emerging consensus" that God is unchanging in his essence and character, but changes in his states of consciousness and in his activities (GRe, 476). Such a view of immutability, which is itself established by Scripture, in no way entails absolute divine timelessness. Feinberg agrees that "immutability needs a more nuanced definition," one that is "consistent with God being in time" (404, 431-432). Morris argues that, contrary to the classical theistic view, not all changes must be either for the better or for the worse. Some changes are *value-neutral* (127-128). Temporal changes may well be in this category. Frame says he sees no reason to say that immutability entails atemporality (551).

The third problem with divine timelessness is that it seems to present a view of God that is *just the opposite* of the biblical picture. This is the sense in which Stephen Davis declares that "a timeless being cannot be the Christian God" (11), i.e., "a timeless being cannot be the personal, caring, involved God we read about in the Bible" (14). From beginning to end the Bible portrays a God who personally interacts with his creatures in ways that presuppose and exhibit temporality. He acts upon the world at certain specific points in its history, and he reacts and responds to events that happen in the world. Especially in his mental life is God's relation to the world described in personal terms: he remembers, deliberates, anticipates, decides, intends, is grieved, becomes angry, and rejoices (see Hasker, 150). Likewise his actions and reactions are personal and presuppose temporal sequence: he plans for and sends a Redeemer, he forgives sins in response to repentance, he answers prayers, he issues warnings, and he punishes the wicked.

All such activities naturally involve temporal sequence, not just for the creatures who observe them but for the divine subject himself (Davis, 14). As Feinberg says, these are "things that an atemporal being cannot do, and Scripture does portray God as doing those things" (399). As Reichenbach puts it, "Remembering and forgiving are acts which are meaningless without the rememberer or forgiver experiencing a before and after" (113). Attempts to explain the whole phenomenon of divine response in atemporal terms are especially strained (Feinberg, 396-398).²

Divine actions that are most difficult to explain on the atemporal model are major events such as the creation, the incarnation, and the cross. If what appear to us to be distinct, separated-by-time divine acts are actually for God one

²Craig takes the view that an atemporal God could have the *capacity* for all such personal activities and relationships, but once he actually engages in them, he becomes temporal (TE 84).

eternal, non-extended, simultaneous act, then God is never not creating, never not incarnate, and never not dying on the cross. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* becomes meaningless (Craig, TE 210-215; TO 65; see Davis, 11-13). If God was truly incarnate in Jesus Christ, how could the time-sequenced actions of Jesus--God the Son--not also be time-sequenced actions for his divine nature? (See Wolterstorff, 209-210.)

The point is that this is the consistent biblical picture of God and his personal, time-oriented activities in relation to the world. Atemporalists say this is all anthropomorphic. But as Reichenbach says, if this is so, "there is little left in revelation to inform us about the character of God himself since most properties which Scripture ascribes to God are time-related" (113). He concludes, "Timelessness is inconsistent with the scriptural God" (114).

The fourth problem with the view of timelessness is that the very concept of simultaneity, which stands at its heart, seems incoherent (Plantinga, 176) and even bizarre. The idea of a timeless being is "probably incoherent," says Davis, especially in requiring "that for God all times are simultaneously present" (14-15). The following illustration shows the outrageousness of such a notion. In response to the above objections related to creation and the incarnation, Paul Helm (an atemporalist) declares that the universe may well indeed be eternal and without a "first moment of creation" (DTE 49). "There was no time when the Creator was not, any more than there was a time when the creation was not" (52). Likewise for the incarnation, there is no time in the existence of God the Son "when he was not incarnate," says Helm (54). "There was no time when the eternal God was not Jesus of Nazareth" (54).

No wonder Feinberg says that "it is hard to make sense of the notion of atemporal eternity" (428).

II. GOD IS TEMPORAL

The other main view of God and time is that God is *temporal*. This means that God is in some sense "in time," i.e., that God in his very nature and not just in his relation to the world experiences the flow of time in terms of past, present, and future. Craig says, "God is temporal if and only if He exists in time, that is to say, if and only if His life has phases which are related to each other as earlier and later. In that case, God, as a personal being, has experientially a past, a present, and a future" (TE 15).³

A. Biblical Data

How does this relate to the Bible's clear teaching that God is eternal, i.e., *infinite* in relation to time? It means that God is *everlasting*. He has a past, but that past has no beginning. He has a future, but that future has no end. Thus instead of timelessness a temporalist speaks of everlastingness. God's time is quantitatively infinite. He experiences the succession of moments on an infinite time line. Another term applied to this concept is *sempiternity*. "The fundamental idea of sempiternity is existence at all times. God never had a beginning, nor will he die, but his existence extends backwards and forwards through every moment of time" (Feinberg, 255). It is the concept of infinite, everlasting duration.

Temporalists point out that this is the most natural way to understand the many Bible texts that describe God as eternal. It should be noted that the relevant Greek and Hebrew terms (e.g., *aion* and *'olam*) in themselves conclusively support neither the temporal nor the atemporal view (Feinberg, 263). However, these terms most certainly *can* refer to "endless duration through time," as Frame says (545). Frame also agrees that the passages that speak of God as having no beginning and no end most likely "say only that God is *everlasting*--persisting through time, rather than transcending it" (554).

The fact is that the biblical teaching about God's eternity almost always refers to his originless, unending duration. He is pictured as existing from eternity past. He is the one who is "enthroned from of old" (Ps 55:19): "Your throne

³Since my own view includes much of what is said below, for the most part I am presenting divine temporality as a valid concept.

is established from of old; You are from everlasting" (Ps 93:2). "Are You not from everlasting, O Lord?" (Hab 1:12). He is "the Ancient of Days" (Dan 7:9,13,22).

God's existence is also projected into eternity future. He is the one who "lives forever" (Isa 57:15; Dan 12:7), "abides forever" (Ps 9:7; 102:12), and is "on high forever" (Ps 92:8). God's own oath is "as I live forever" (Deut 32:40). But he is not God just "forever"; he is "our God forever and ever" (Ps 48:14). "The LORD is King forever and ever" (Ps 10:16); "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever" (Ps 45:6). He is worshiped as "Him who lives forever and ever" (Rev 4:9-10; 10:6; 15:7). He is "the everlasting King" (Jer 10:10). His righteousness is everlasting (Ps 119:142), as is his lovingkindness (Ps 118:1-4; 136:1-26).

Many texts combine God's everlasting past and his everlasting future. He is "from everlasting to everlasting" (Ps 41:13; see Ps 106:48). "Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God" (Ps 90:2). "Of old You founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure. . . . But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end" (Ps 102:25-27; Heb 1:10-12). God's glory is "before all time and now and forever" (Jude 25). God is the one "who is and who was and who is to come" (Rev 1:4,8; see 4:8). God declares, "I am the first and the last" (Isa 44:6; 48:12); "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev 21:6; see 1:8). As the infinite Creator his essence is incorruptible (Rom 1:23) and immortal (1 Tim 6:16). No wonder he is "the Everlasting God" (Gen 21:33; Isa 40:28). "The number of His years is unsearchable" (Job 36:26).

The concept of eternal duration specifically affirmed in all these texts is the key to our understanding of Ps 90:4, "For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by"; and 2 Pet 3:8, "With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day." There is no hint of timelessness here; time passes for God, even as it does for us. But for one who is everlasting, one finite period of time (e.g., a thousand years) is no more significant than any other finite period (e.g., a day). Even a thousand years is quite short when compared with eternity.

This abundance of texts affirming God's everlastingness, combined with the consistent biblical picture of God as personally acting in and interacting with our history (as discussed above) seem to support the view that God is temporal.

B. Time as an Attribute of God

To say that God is temporal means that in some sense he exists "in time." Does this mean that God is *subject to* time, that time is somehow a higher or more fundamental force to which God must bow? No, it means simply that time, in the sense of a succession of moments and the experience of past/present/future, is a part of God's own essence or being. As Pinnock says, "Time, in a certain sense, must be a property of God," i.e., an attribute of God (MMM 97).

He adds, "Time is the concomitant of God and of personal life. It exists because of God's nature" (98). Also, "I suggest God knows the passage of time as a dimension of his own endless existence" (99).

This means that in its most general sense, time is not a created reality, and is not exclusively associated with our space/time universe.⁴ Stephen Davis has adopted this view, that "time was not created; it necessarily exists (like numbers); it depends for its existence on nothing else" (23). Most temporalists would agree with the first part of this affirmation, but not necessarily the second part. They would say rather that time depends for its existence on God, in the sense that it is a part of his nature. Davis goes on to present this as a possibility: "Time, perhaps, is an eternal aspect of God's nature rather than a reality independent of God" (23). This is a much better way of thinking. But still, as Davis notes, "the point is that God, on this view, is a temporal being" (23).

When viewed thus time is an attribute of God in the same way that logic is. Frame affirms that "God acts and thinks in accordance with the laws of logic. This does not mean that he is bound by these laws, as though they were

⁴This is contrary to the view I took in *God the Creator* (250, 264), though I was somewhat ambivalent about it (251, 263).

something 'above' him that had authority over him. The laws of logic and rationality are simply the attributes of his own nature" (511). The temporalist thinks of time in a parallel way. It is not "above" or "over" God, but is an attribute of his own nature.

Thus God's thoughts and actions are not locked into one single, unchanging, ever-frozen now, but are experienced by God in an ever-flowing now. His past is past, and his future is future. This is contrary to Frame's judgment, that "God does not sense one moment of his own transcendent consciousness flowing into another" (556, n37).

C. Advocates of Divine Temporality

Representatives of this view are spread across the whole spectrum of theology. From earlier times William of Ockham (Hasker, 12) and the Socinians (Frame, 546) rejected God's timelessness. In more recent times divine temporality has been included in process thought, and in less-than-evangelical theologians such as Oscar Cullmann (63). Nicholas Wolterstorff defends this view in *God and Time* as "unqualified divine temporality" (187ff.). Frame says, "At present one may speak of a consensus among theistic philosophers that God is in time" (548). The Christian philosopher Stephen Davis is clearly among them (23).

Geisler points out that "extreme Arminians teach that God is temporal" (CBF 111). By "extreme Arminians" he means Neotheists, his name for openness theologians. It is true that temporality is a major characteristic of openness theology (Sanders, GWR 319, n78; Pinnock, MMM 32-33,96-97). But it is not limited to "extreme Arminians," or even to Arminians as such. The Reformed theologian J. O. Buswell, Jr., was a temporalist (42, 47), as is John S. Feinberg.

III. GOD IS METATEMPORAL

A. Combination Views

Some have attempted to combine temporality and atemporality, and to say that God partakes of both in certain ways. Frame, for example, develops the view that God is (most likely) atemporal in his transcendence and temporal in his immanence (549). "He really exists in time, but he also transcends time in such a way as to exist outside it" (559).

Another example is Craig, who says that God was timeless before the moment of *ex nihilo* creation, and temporal afterwards (TE, 233,235). Prior to creation the categories of time (e.g., past/present/future) did not apply to God, but the act of creation brought time into existence and brought God into a temporal relation with the world (TE 235-236,241).⁵

In his essay in *God and Time* Alan Padgett also attempts to present a hybrid view, one he calls "relative timelessness." He offers this as an alternative to both the atemporal view and everlastingness (92). He says God himself exists as pure duration that is relatively timeless in the sense that his duration is infinite but immeasurable, contrary to the measured time of creatures, of which he is the source and Lord (106-108). Padgett believes his view "has the coherence of the everlasting view but respects the intuition of the traditional notion of timeless eternity, by pointing to several ways in which God 'transcends' time" (108).

B. Two Kinds of Time

My own understanding includes the essence of temporality but attempts to combine it with atemporality in some ways (see GRe 485). My view is closer to Padgett than to either Frame or Craig, since I believe that God was temporal in his essence prior to creation, and that he is temporal in his essence even in his transcendence. His very essence is temporal; time is an attribute of his being, as described above. Thus I refer to God as *tempontological*.

⁵Pinnock leaves a door open to Craig's view: "The really important thing to say is that at least from the moment of creation, God enters into temporal relations with his creatures. One might speculate that God is timeless without creation and temporal subsequent to creation" (MMM 98).

Not only does God's *being* exist along a time line; so also do his consciousness and his actions. God's consciousness passes through the succession of moments, both in his non-relational life and in his relation to his creatures. His consciousness dwells in the ever-flowing now; he looks back on the past and looks ahead to the future. Likewise his actions are always oriented to specific points along the time line, according to the location of the now. God and his creatures share the same now; when God acts in the now of this world he is acting in his own present. Even for God, some of his actions are now past, and some are yet to come.

God's time line is infinite, of course, in the sense that it is eternally everlasting. This is the point of the many Scripture references given above, in our discussion of the temporal view. Thus I accept almost everything that was presented above as the temporal view.

This is not the whole story, however. God is temporal, but he is not *merely* temporal. He is *metatemporal*. He both exists in time, *and* transcends time. The latter is true in reference to his creation. When God created our world *ex nihilo*, he brought into existence this whole universe of both space and time. God did not create time as such, but he created *our* time. God's own time is infinite; created time is finite. God does not transcend his own time, but he transcends created time.

The difference between uncreated and created time is not just quantitative, but also qualitative. I.e., God's time is infinite in the sense that it has no beginning and no end; ours is finite in that it had a beginning. But God's time is infinite in a qualitative sense also. The divine dimension, even in its aspect of time, qualitatively transcends every created dimension. Just as God is outside of our space, so is he outside of our time; yet he interacts with us in reference to both. Our time is not his time, yet it is *not unlike* his time. God is qualitatively different from man, yet we are made in his image. In a similar way there is a qualitative difference between our finite time and God's infinite time, yet our time is made "in the image of" God's time.

Thus I agree with Craig and others who insist that "time" had its beginning when God created the world *ex nihilo*, but I believe this applies *only* to finite, created time, not to God's metatime. Thus I regard Craig's argument--that since God existed "before" the moment of creation and thus "before" the beginning of time, he "must therefore be atemporal" (TE 20)--to be a non sequitur.

In what sense does God transcend created time? Not in the sense that he is outside of time altogether, and therefore in a dimension of timelessness. I reject the concept of timelessness, and especially its concomitant of ontological simultaneity. Nevertheless God transcends our created time in the sense that his consciousness, i.e. his knowledge, is not limited to its now. Though the created now corresponds to the divine now, so that God's history coincides with our world's history, it is nevertheless true that God is still outside of created time just as he is outside of created space, and he is not bound by the flow of created time. From the perspective of the infinite divine dimension, God clearly sees the entire scope of created time from its beginning into its unending future. As Nash well observes, "A defender of the view of God as everlasting may insist, quite consistently, that God is still Lord over time and can still behold all time simultaneously" (81). Herein lies the basis for God's comprehensive foreknowledge, which I regard as a non-negotiable biblical doctrine. God knows our past and our future, as certainly as he knows our present.

C. Arguments Against Divine Temporality

Though God is metatemporal, existing in his own transcendent, infinite dimension of time, he still exists *in time*, along a quantitatively everlasting time line. Several arguments have been raised against such a view; these will now be considered.

First, it is argued that divine temporality cannot be true because it is inconsistent with other divine attributes, especially simplicity and immutability. It is true that temporality contradicts these attributes as they are understood by classical or Thomistic theists; but I agree with those (as discussed above) who say that the classical understanding of divine simplicity and divine immutability is wrong, and that these attributes need to be redefined along less absolute lines. (I believe this is true, by the way, totally apart from any connection with the question of God and time.)

Second, do not both science and Scripture say that time had a beginning? But surely God's existence did not begin when time began. Therefore God's existence must be apart from time, i.e., atemporal. In response to this argument I will simply invoke the distinction explained above between created time and uncreated metatime. It is true that this space/time universe had a beginning. This is the point of all the Scripture references that refer to "the beginning" (e.g., Gen 1:1; John 1:1) or that refer to God's existing "before the ages," i.e., before the earliest aeons of this created universe.

All of the texts cited, for example, by Geisler and House (BG 66-70) can easily and fairly be understood in this way. E.g., when Heb 1:2 says that through his Son God "framed the ages," it is indeed declaring that God created the "unfolding temporal periods" of this universe (BG 67). But this is referring *only* to the temporal periods *of this universe*, not to the divine temporal dimension. Or, to say that "before the world was" in John 17:5 means "before time began" (BG 69) is true, but only in reference to *this world's* time. The same applies to Eph 1:4, 2 Tim 1:9, and Jude 25.

A third argument is closely connected to the preceding, namely, the contention that time is inseparable from space and (some say) even from matter. Thus if God is temporal, he must also be spatial and even material (Geisler, CBF 112; BG 73). This is clearly a false assumption, as can be shown by a moment's reflection upon the life of *created* beings who are pure spirit. Angels are temporal beings, yet they are distinct from our visible universe with its space and matter. Likewise our own disembodied spirits during the intermediate state will be separated from this space/time universe, but will be quite temporal. Purely mental activity need not be connected with either space or matter. The transition from one mental state to another, an activity which surely is true of God, involves the succession of moments. As Craig says, "The events which serve to generate time need not be physical events; a sequence of mental events would suffice" (TE 66). Hence this argument is completely without merit. (See Feinberg, 416.)

A fourth argument is that temporal existence is a less-than-perfect existence; and since God is perfect, he cannot be temporal. In what sense is such existence less than perfect? The contention is that if one exists along a time line, then his life exists only in the moment of the now; therefore all the goodness of past moments is forever lost to his experience, and all future goodness can only be anticipated. But it would surely be more desirable and therefore greater to be timeless, so that all the goodness of the divine life can be experienced at the same time and without beginning or end. Therefore since God is the greatest conceivable being, he must be timeless. Craig calls this the argument from "the incompleteness of temporal life" (TE 67). Helm calls it the argument from divine fullness, and presents it as his basic rationale for timelessness (DTE 29-35). He points out that it was a major argument of the earliest Christian defenders of divine timelessness, i.e., Augustine, Boethius, and Anselm (DTE 33-34).

There are three main responses to this argument. First, how do we *know* that simultaneous experience is a greater or fuller life than sequential experience? Helm basically appeals to intuition (DTE 29-31). Wolterstorff well asks, "What epistemological status does this 'intuition' have?" (70). Surely this is a judgment call, one with which not everyone need agree. Second, Craig responds that "considerations of divine omniscience mitigate the argument's force" (TO 64). I.e., "When we recall that God is perfectly omniscient and so forgets absolutely nothing of the past and knows everything about the future, then time's tooth is considerably dulled for Him" (TE 72). Third, some of God's experiences are far from pleasant, e.g., the grief he felt upon viewing the pre-flood world (Gen 6:6), and the infinite suffering of God the Son on Calvary. One could well argue that a temporal experience of such events is better than a timeless one.

The fifth argument against divine temporality is the one I consider to be the most difficult to answer. It is the philosophical argument that an actual infinite is logically impossible. Ironically this is an aspect of the *kalam* (or *kalaam*) cosmological argument for the existence of God; it is used to prove that the *universe* cannot have existed from eternity past and therefore must have had a beginning. When applied directly to God, it is said to likewise prove that God himself cannot have existed temporally from eternity past; therefore he must be timeless.

The argument basically states that a series increasing toward infinity can exist, since it is just getting started; but an *actually* infinite series cannot exist, because it can never be completed. I.e., an actual infinite can never come to exist, since this could happen only through successive addition to any series of units; but to any series of units it is always possible to keep adding "just one more," thus never completing an actually infinite series (see Craig, TE 226-229).

This is said to rule out the existence of a temporally infinite God. I.e., if an infinite series of moments were to exist prior to now, this series could be formed only by adding one moment after another. But if the series (i.e., the life of God as divided into temporal units) were infinite, this present moment would never have arrived. But this moment *has* arrived. Therefore the past cannot have been temporally infinite, not even for God (Geisler, CBF 111).

In other words if God has existed for eternity past, then an infinite number of moments must have elapsed prior to the present moment. But the key problem is that "it is impossible for an infinite number of events to have elapsed" (Helm, EG 38).

How may we respond? Feinberg, a temporalist, leaves the argument hanging by saying it raises problems for both temporalists and atemporalists (389-391). This is hardly sufficient, though. I will offer three observations. First, I

contend that the argument is nonsense because in effect it makes an actually infinite series of time-units no different from a series of no units at all (i.e., infinity = nothing). This can be seen as follows. The key idea is that an actually infinite series of moments prior to the present would never arrive at the present. Let us think of a moment, then, that occurred ten years before the present. Would the actually-infinite series ever have reached *that* moment? The argument says no. Let us retreat further into the past, then, to ten thousand years ago. Would the actually-infinite series ever have reached *that* moment? The argument says no. Let us retreat further, to ten billion years ago. Would the actually-infinite series ever have reached *that* moment? The argument says no. How far back, then, would we have to go, before we finally "meet up with" the advancing actual infinite? The argument implies that it would never happen--even if we kept going back *infinitely* (in the sense of a potential infinite). But surely this is absurd--as absurd as any of the problems faced by the manager of Hilbert's Hotel.

My next observation is that the argument from no actual infinite quite possibly does not apply to time at all. I base this conclusion on Craig's reference to the French philosopher Henri Bergson's distinction between "real duration" and mathematical time. Craig (TO 118) says,

Bergson held that the analysis of time on the model of a geometrical line composed of points (in this case instants) is a mere conceptual construct that we impose on time, whereas time itself is not composed of instants but is an uncomposed flowing or duration. The "mathematization" of time is a convenient fiction for scientific purposes, but the metaphysician should not take literally the concept of time as a point-set of instants. . . . I think that Bergson is, in fact, correct

In other words, time is unique. We cannot apply to *time* the properties of numbers, which this argument attempts to do. But if Bergson is indeed correct, does this not make the "no actual infinite" argument inapplicable to God's temporal eternity?

My last observation is that, even if this argument were applicable to time itself, what is true of finite, created time is not necessarily true of infinite, uncreated time. I have already suggested that God is not just temporal, but metatemporal. Though his existence involves the experience of the passing of time, it is still qualitatively different from our space/time continuum. This may well be the point of 2 Pet 3:8, "With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day." Thinking of his everlasting past in terms of "moments" or "units in a series" may be presumptuous. As Morris says, "Thus, it is not the case that, on the temporalist view, God is the sort of being to whom this sort of argument clearly applies" (126).

The sixth argument against a temporal God is the puzzle of divine inactivity. I.e., if God had existed for eternity prior to the creation of the universe, why did he wait so long--infinitely long--to do it? What was he doing before this? As Craig puts the question, "Why would God delay for infinite time the creation of the universe?" (TE 25). Why did he not create the world sooner? Why endure "an infinite period of creative idleness" (TE 229-230)? Craig's own view is that before creation God was timeless and thus "changelessly alone" (TE 236). Padgett's answer is very similar: before creation God's time was nonfinite and immeasurable, therefore no actual *amount* of time passed. We may "consider all of the infinite past before the first change [creation] as a single 'moment' of eternity" (108-109).

In my judgment, it is an unwarranted assumption to think that God was doing nothing prior to the creation of this universe. For one thing, there was some kind of communion among the three persons of the Trinity. For another thing, why should we assume that our universe is the first one God ever made, or that the creation of our world is the first and only thing he ever did? Helm declares that, as far as we know, "there is only one universe" (PIDF 489). As far as we *know*, yes; but we cannot rule out a countless number of prior universes. See Morris' remark (124):

But the worrisomeness of the alleged delay is surely dealt with to some extent by the possibility that God has always, or very frequently (to put it mildly) been creating and bringing into existence good things prior to the creation of our universe. Nothing in the Bible or in the fundamentals of Christian faith requires us to hold that the bringing about of our universe is the only creative endeavor in which God has ever engaged. Thus, we need not live with the specter of an infinite delay in God's creative impulses, if we endorse the temporal interpretation of divine eternity.

I conclude that none of these arguments is strong enough or conclusive enough to force us to look for some non-literal interpretation of the Bible's abundant affirmations of God's temporal everlastingness.

D. Foreknowledge and the Metatemporal God

A final question is this: how does the question of foreknowledge fit into this portrait of a metatemporal God? Most of the issues regarding foreknowledge cannot be discussed here, e.g.: How is it possible? Does it preclude free will? How does it facilitate providence? All I am seeking to do here is to explain how I believe foreknowledge relates to God and time.

In *God the Creator* (1983) I explained what I thought was a reasonable logical order of God's pre-creation counsels, thus (182):

- 1) Decision to create a universe.
- 2) Decision to create a universe with free-will creatures.
- 3) Knowledge of all possible futures of all possible universes with free-will creatures.
- 4) Decision to create this particular universe.
- 5) Foreknowledge of the real future of this particular universe.
- 6) Decision to include redemption in the plan.
- 7) Creation.

At that time I was still quite uncertain as to exactly how God relates to time, so I was careful to suggest that the sequence of these counsels was *logical*, not *chronological* (GC 180,181,183). I have now modified this list of counsels, and have changed my thinking as to the *nature* of the sequence; I now believe that the sequence is indeed *chronological* and not just *logical*.

Today I think the sequence begins with God's knowledge of all *possible* futures of all *possible* universes. This includes a knowledge of all possible acts by all possible free-will beings, as well as a knowledge of all God's own possible responses to such acts. This may include a knowledge of how he will actually decide to respond to any such acts, if they ever become realities. (Sanders calls this the "knowledge of all possibilities view" [GWR 196].) Ware refers to the last part of this knowledge as a divine "contingency plan" and disparages it (DEB 204), but I have no problem with God's having a "contingency plan."

All of this knowledge of possibilities is simply an aspect of God's omniscience, which includes a knowledge of all reality as well as all possible reality. He has had this knowledge of all possibilities for eternity.

The next relevant item in the sequence is God's decision to create this particular universe. But if this decision is part of a *chronological* sequence, does this mean that there was a time in God's eternity past *before* this decision was made? Yes, it does. This raises a question I have been thinking about quite a bit frequently: CAN GOD THINK A NEW THOUGHT? I have concluded that he can. But since he has eternally known all possibilities, the only kind of thoughts that can be new for God are his own personal *decisions* to *do* something new. His decision to create this particular world was such a new thought, made at some point along his eternal time line. (The question of "When?" is irrelevant, as is the question of "Why now and not sooner?" See 2 Pet 3:8.)

This of course is a rejection of classical immutability, since it means the content of God's consciousness changes. But I have never had a problem with the concept of change in God's consciousness (GRe 486). It also means that at no point is God's knowledge absolutely all-inclusive, since he at no point knows all of his own future decisions, including the realities that will actually spring therefrom. This in effect places a limit on God's foreknowledge, since I cannot affirm that "God has complete and infallible knowledge of the future," as Hunt words the "traditional doctrine" (65). I must disagree with Hunt when he says, "Then since God foreknows *everything*, his own future actions are among the things he foreknows" (93).

On the other hand, this helps to solve the problem of the divine *freedom*. Feinberg says the traditional doctrine of foreknowledge raises "a dilemma about *divine* freedom. Of all the beings in the universe, one would think that God would be free, but if God knows all things, including whatever he will do in the future, then there seems to be no way for him to avoid doing those things. And if this is so, how can he be free?" (391). Rice agrees that "the concept of absolute foreknowledge renders meaningless any notion of divine freedom," if he indeed foreknows "everything he is ever going to decide" (126).

I reject the common fallacy that God's foreknowledge of a future act, whether it be divine or human, rules out its free-will character. But even if that were true, since God does not know all his future decisions and acts, he is indisputably free. His own future is open.

We return now to the new thought in question, i.e., God's decision to create this particular universe. A key element of it is his decision to create free-will beings, including both angels and the human race, though we will focus only on the latter. Since God has determined to create free-will beings who themselves will make decisions that determine their own futures, God's decision to create does not include a divine predetermination of every detail of this

universe. If free will means anything, then in its details God must leave the future open to wherever his free-will creatures will take it, within the limits of his own creation purposes, permissive will, and providential intervention.

In this sense I am fully comfortable with the concept of divine risk. In *God the Creator* I said, "God's purpose to bestow love on and receive glory from free moral creatures involved a risk, but it was a risk he was willing to take" (181). But this should not be surprising, since (as Ware notes) *all* nondeterminist models of creation involve some degree of divine risk (GLG 48). Sanders correctly states the other side of the coin, that only absolute determinism avoids risk altogether (GWR 171,195).

Thus I fully agree with Sanders that a God with simple foreknowledge is no less a risk taker than a God with present knowledge only (GWR 203). I even agree with Sanders that God's risk includes the fact that he does not know in advance how things will turn out (a notion of risk that the Arminian Picirilli rejects [AR 490]). But I *do* disagree as to the extent of this risk. To me the risk exists only prior to and in connection with the initial decision to create this particular (free-will) universe; once the decision has been made, the risk is off-set by what happens next.

The next event in the temporal sequence of God's experience is that the entire future history of the planned cosmos is completely unfolded to God's consciousness, with the result that from this event forward he has a total foreknowledge of the realities and actualities (and not just a knowledge of possibilities) that will come to pass in the new universe. Craig acknowledges that such an approach to foreknowledge is possible, but labels it "exceedingly strange" and "peculiar," and declares that it "diminishes the role of God's wisdom in creation" (OWG 134-135). Sanders acknowledges that this view exists, but his equation of this view with "simple foreknowledge (Arminianism)" is a mistake (BWW 225-226; see GWR 196), as Picirilli rightly points out (AF 471). As Picirilli notes, for most Arminians God's foreknowledge is immediate, intuitive, and eternal (AF 471), and not derivative as I have described it here.

As I now understand God's foreknowledge of this creation, it is not eternal. I no longer can say, as I did in 1983 (GC 285), that God's "knowledge is eternally the same"; nor can I say that he "at all times" has a complete knowledge of time's eternal scope (GRe 485). I cannot agree with those who say that "God has always been as certain about the future as he is about the past" (as Boyd [13] describes non-openness views). But neither do I agree with openness theology's main tenet, that God *never* has true foreknowledge of contingent events. Though his foreknowledge is not eternal, it is nevertheless absolute and complete with regard to our universe prior to the act of creation. Thus I would modify Hunt's summary (65) of the doctrine of divine foreknowledge--"God has complete and infallible knowledge of the future"--to read as follows: "Once God has made his decision to create this universe, he has complete and infallible knowledge of its future."

I have modified my understanding of foreknowledge in another way. I formerly described it as instantaneous, or as registering in God's mind in a single, simultaneous act. In *God the Creator* I said that God's "consciousness embraces the whole of time in a single act of knowing" (255), and in *God the Redeemer* I said that "once God in his pre-creation counsels had determined to create this particular world, he immediately foreknew its entire history in one act of cognition" (493). I now think of God's foreknowledge as registering in his mind progressively or incrementally, with the future of the intended universe unfolding in his consciousness in accord with its sure historical sequence. This is how Sanders describes what is to him a view that others (not himself) might hold, a view he calls "incremental simple foreknowledge" (GWR 201-202). However, whereas in his description of the view the unfolding of the future is only logical and atemporal, I regard it as happening in a temporal sequence in God's experience.

How fast does the future universe's history unfold? How long does it take? This is completely unknown, and in view of 2 Pet 3:8 it is irrelevant. Though time passes, from God's perspective it makes no difference if it is equivalent to our ten seconds or our ten billion years. It could happen almost instantly, to be sure, in view of the infinite power of God's mind. This leads me to picture what is happening in God's mind in this preview of our history as something equivalent to science's portrayal of the "big bang." Just as the universe (supposedly) began at a single point of space and almost instantaneously exploded to form the massive universe we now observe, so did God's *foreknowledge* of the entire history of the universe begin at a single point of time and then expand in a kind of noetic "big bang." This noetic "big bang" or explosion of foreknowledge was an event in the life of God, an event that occupied "X" amount of time. Before this event, God had no knowledge of this actual world; after this event he knows its entire history. Since the knowledge occurs prior to the actual creation of the world, it is true foreknowledge.

We should stress that what God foreknows is not the unfolding history of a self-contained universe, with God himself being just an observer of what created causal forces (e.g., free will) will bring about. Rather, this is the time when God makes his decisions and plans regarding his own intervention into the unfolding historical process, or else regarding his deliberate permission to allow the created causal forces to proceed unhindered. The history that unfolds in God's mind is not just the world's history; it is his own history too.

In this event of the noetic "big bang," as God is determining when and how he will intervene in our history, in a sense he is thinking more new thoughts, i.e., making new decisions concerning his own actions. In another sense they are not really new, since from all eternity he has had a complete knowledge of all possible worlds and all possible contingencies, and has eternally known his own potential responses to whatever contingencies will ever arise. So during the "big bang" process God does not have to ponder or weigh possible courses of action. He simply has to convert them in his mind from possible future acts to certain future acts.

How is it *possible* for God, given his temporality, to know the entire future of a world not yet created? I really do not know. We should remember that God's time is not just quantitatively but also qualitatively different from created time. His time is infinite, and he transcends the time line of creation in ways we as finite creatures cannot understand. Even if he transcends our created time in no other way, he at least transcends it with respect to his *knowledge*.⁶

It is legitimate to leave this in the realm of mystery. Hunt admits to being agnostic on this question of how foreknowledge is possible (67), as was William of Ockham (see Hasker, 15). Other views have their own versions of mystery. E.g., in Molinism (the "middle knowledge" view), how God can know the counter-factuals of freedom is no less mysterious than how God can know future contingencies (see Crabtree, 438).⁷ Crabtree, a determinist, says that "an appeal to divine 'mystery' is a common but suspicious move" (438). But his fellow determinists do not hesitate to make such an appeal. In defending timelessness Paul Helm (DTE 38) declares that

it is surely not a reasonable requirement for a satisfactory articulation of a doctrine such as timeless eternity that one must be able accurately to describe what it is like to be timeless. Part of what it means to say that God is incomprehensible is to say that though we believe that God is timeless we do not and cannot have a straightforward understanding of what his timeless life is.

Robert Strimple says that the question of how God's timeless decree and knowledge relate to our free and responsible choices is "an ultimate *mystery*." Contrary to openness theology, "it is not *God's* knowledge but *our* finite human understanding that is limited. The ultimate mystery exists for our limited minds" (147).

What follows the "big bang" explosion of foreknowledge is the actual creation of this universe. God implements his decision to create, and thus initiates his own pre-planned involvement in its history. As the history of this universe

⁶Davis (24) says, "He can still have complete knowledge of all past, present and future events. (If he 'transcends time', it is only in the sense that he has this power--a power no other being has.)"

⁷Craig suggests that seeing God's foreknowledge as conceptual (innate) rather than perceptual (derivative) explains how such knowledge is possible (MK 133-134), but his presentation of this idea is an assertion rather than an explanation, and is quite unsatisfying.

passes, God not only stands above the created time line but also exists along with it and acts within it. All that he foreknew and foreplanned now unfolds in reality, and God experiences the actualities of the world as they happen.

Of course, because of foreknowledge, none of these actualities is totally *new* to God; no event or no human choice takes him by surprise. All the so-called "surprises" occurred during the foreknowledge event as the preview of history was unfolding within God's mind. But even then nothing was a total surprise, because of God's eternal knowledge of all possible futures.

Does such foreknowledge mean that God's participation in the actual course of history is not genuine but is instead impersonal and robotic, as openness theologians claim (Rice, 133-134,137)? Hardly. Even on the human level, the anticipation of future events of which we are fairly certain in no way negates the pleasure (or pain) of the actual experience itself. Thus with God, the foreknown confrontation with the "unexpected," the foreknown feelings of regret and frustration, and the foreknown testing of individuals like Abraham in Gen 22:12 (Boyd 23-33) are all experienced in reality with genuine interpersonal interaction. God is not simply *re-living* the "big bang" explosion of foreknowledge; he is *living* it for the first time with all the attendant feelings.

In conclusion, I see this view of God as metatemporal as lying between the classical view of God and the openness view. By including temporality within the nature of God it is more like the latter than the former, but it nonetheless preserves the crucial element of the classical view which openness rejects, i.e., a comprehensive pre-creation foreknowledge of our world. At the same time it posits a genuine openness for God in his temporality. I.e., his own future remains open, as he is free to think new thoughts and make new decisions about possible new universes in his infinite future.

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