

# An Advertisement of a Promise: God and the Hyper-past

Tyron Goldschmidt  
Wake Forest University

Samuel Lebens  
University of Haifa

**Abstract:** Hud Hudson puts forward a hypertime theory in order to show the compatibility of contemporary science and biblical literalism. We use the theory to answer the problem of evil in a new way. This paper is a précis of a part of a forthcoming paper.

We thank the editors of the *Journal of Analytic Theology* for inviting us to take part in this symposium on Hud Hudson's *The Fall and Hypertime*. Much of what follows here is a précis of a part of a very long paper inspired by Hudson and titled 'The Promise of a New Past' (forthcoming). The longer paper expands on what follows, and develops a new theory of atonement as well as a new response to the problem of evil—all in light of Hassidic and Rabbinic traditions. The paper is indebted enough to Hudson's work that we thought a summary of some key ideas would be a fitting contribution to this symposium too. We hope that the longer paper answers some objections that will naturally come to the reader here—and that it gives rise to more objections in turn. To signal as much, we title this paper 'An Advertisement of a Promise'.

Literalism regarding the Genesis account of creation is only in conflict with contemporary science given a contentious metaphysics. This is Hud Hudson's most strident claim in *The Fall and Hypertime* (2014). He appeals to the morphing block theory of time. If the past can *change*, then multiple (apparently) incompatible histories (scientific and Biblical) can lay claim to some sort of accuracy. In an aside, Hudson also anticipates that the morphing block theory of time can give new significance to the removal of suffering, as promised by the Biblical prophets in the eschaton (Ibid: 193-4). After sketching Hudson's morphing block theory, we hope to show that there are other theories of time that preserve Hudson's central claim, but which don't hold God hostage to hyper-history.

Some accounts of the metaphysics of time—the growing block theory, the shrinking block theory and the moving spotlight theory—are dynamic. The growing block theory views time as growing. Space-time is a block of past events, along with

**Journal of Analytic Theology, Vol. 5, May 2017**

10.12978/jat.2016-5.192413122006a

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an outermost hyperplane in the direction of growth. That hyperplane is the *present*, but becomes a part of the past as a new plane replaces it as the *present*. Thus past and present states exist, but future states do not. In contrast, the shrinking block theory has time *shrinking*. Space-time is a block of future events, along with an outermost hyperplane—the *present*—which falls away into the non-existence of the past. In contrast to the growing and shrinking block theories, the moving spotlight theory contends that all times exist. Yet, they undergo change as the property of *being present* moves across them.

Dynamic theories of time might require an *external* quasi-temporal dimension, in which time can be *changing*. This is one motivation for positing hypertime. Take the growing block theory for illustration. The block is some size at hypertime<sub>0</sub> and is bigger at hypertime<sub>1</sub>. The duration of growth is measured in hypertime; time grows over the course of hypertime. Some have attempted to articulate dynamic theories of time without any appeal to hypertime (see Markosian 1993). But, as we shall see, for Hudson's purposes it is enough that hypertime is a live epistemic possibility.

Hudson points out that there has been a failure of imagination on the part of metaphysicians of time. However, they have imagined time to be changing, they have always maintained that the changes are “unfailingly uni-directional” (Hudson 2014: 81). But if the shape of space-time can change—getting longer, or shorter—with the passage of hypertime, then why can it not change in more surprising and erratic ways? Why can't space-time be a morphing, rather than a uni-directionally growing or shrinking, block?

It hyper-was the case that calendars on the outermost surface of space-time read July 31, 1492 AD. At another hypertime, the calendars on the outermost surface of space-time read May 14, 1948. At these hypertimes, space-time has *different* volumes. On the standard growing block theory, the volume of space-time at the second hyper-moment will be larger than it was at the first hyper-moment (see Hudson 2014: 82). Now, imagine hyperplanes appearing at *both* ends of the block—time starts growing into the past, *and* into the future. It might next hyper-begin to grow in only one direction. It might then hyper-begin to shrink in both directions. It might next hyper-begin to shrink in one direction. This block is morphing unpredictably. If the growing and shrinking blocks are possibilities, then the morphing block should be too.

To make sense of some of the possibilities we can be more explicit about our use of hyper-tenses: what hyper-was the case is just what *is* the case at earlier moments in hypertime; what hyper-is the case *is* what is the case at the hyper-present; and what hyper-will be the case *is* what is the case in the hyper-future. On the morphing block theory, something has not hyper-always happened just because it happened in our *past*. Our past is potentially one of many the block has had as its shape has morphed over hypertime.

Hudson's main reason for invoking the morphing block theory, is to assuage waging controversy between Biblical literalists and the scientific community about the creation of the universe. Imagine the following story. Adam and Eve were placed in a garden after God created the world in six days. He told them that they could eat of any of the fruits of the garden save but one. Lured into deviance by a talking serpent, the first homo-sapiens ate of the forbidden fruit. At that point, God said to

Himself: “Right... these human beings don’t deserve the wondrous creation I gave them. They deserve to be the product of chancy evolution. They don’t deserve to inhabit a world that was created just for them. I am going to make them much more of an afterthought. I’m going to rewrite their past, and the past of the entire universe that houses them.” At that point, God added billions of years of past to the space-time block—a past that is best described by contemporary science. There was a Big Bang. There were dinosaurs. There were billions of years of evolution. Adam and Eve had parents.

On this story, the Bible turns out to be a completely accurate account – not of how the past is hyper-*now*, but of how the past hyper-used to be. That is to say, the Bible is an accurate account of the hyper-past past. Contemporary science, on this story, can, for all we know, be a completely accurate account of how the past is *now*; of the hyper-*present* past. Furthermore, on this story, it is Adam and Eve who have a hyper-counterfactual responsibility for the world being in its fallen state. Had they not hyper-eaten that fruit, not only would our *present* look very different, but so would the far reaches of the past; in fact, *their* past would have been different.

Hudson is not a Biblical literalist. He doesn’t endorse the story we just told. Indeed, his book explores a number of much more down-to-earth readings of the account of Adam, Eve, and their fall. Rather, his point is this: the controversy between literalists and the scientific community need only emerge given the background of a certain sort of metaphysics. The morphing block theory – however strange it might sound to us—is as much of an epistemic possibility as any other theory of time that philosophers have suggested. Accordingly, for all we know, the literal account of creation, and the scientific account of the beginnings of time, could both be true. This holds as long as the Biblical account is taken to be a description of the hyper-past past, while the scientific account is taken to be a description of the hyper-*present* past.

The contribution of Hudson’s new book to the philosophy of religion is profound. Too often, religious ideas are batted away by scientific opponents, taking themselves to be tremendously enlightened, only because they haven’t sufficiently paid attention to the array of metaphysical possibilities. Likewise, too often, secular ideas are batted away by religious opponents, taking themselves to be piously motivated, only because they haven’t sufficiently paid attention to that same array of metaphysical possibilities. We wonder how often a Hudson-like strategy could be employed to discover that a seemingly empirical debate is not empirical, but metaphysical. So, not only has Hudson given us a fascinating tour of the account of the fall and an accessible account of the current state of the metaphysics of time, he has also showcased a method by which metaphysics can recast debates that were previously thought to be purely empirical.

In what follows, we seize upon a passing comment of Hudson, in order to see what his morphing block theory suggests about the eschaton. We hope to suggest a number of alternative conceptions of time that don’t deviate from Hudson’s main goals, but provide us with a more appealing eschatology—an eschatology that liberates God from the shackles of the hyper-past.

In a striking passage towards the end of the book, Hudson writes:

Although it does not now lie in anyone's future, perhaps some hyperday, every tear may be brushed away in the most permanent of ways, with pain and suffering not merely being a thing of the past but instead belonging only to hyperhistory. (2014: 193-4)

We're not convinced that this should provide us with too much comfort. Is an evil any less bad for existing just in the hyper-past? We propose that God can do better. We propose two models of time that allow for the hyper-eternal removal of evil. We develop these suggestions at length in our longer paper. There we provide our preferred account with (Jewish) theological and philosophical motivation, and rebut a number of objections to the very notion that God would want to, or *could*, change the past in these ways. For the purposes of this symposium, we merely sketch our suggested models, as possible friendly amendments to Hudson's work.

### Account 1: The Hyper-hierarchy

Imagine robust temporal becoming (the *morphing* of the block, or *changing* of the present) requires a hypertime. By parity of reason, *hyper-temporal* becoming (the robust passage of hypertime) might require a hyper-hypertime. An infinite regress looms. And yet, if hypertime is a possibility, then should not the same status be extended to an infinite hierarchy of timelines? Weirdness shouldn't prohibit possibility; the world might be much weirder than we imagined it to be.

If, at hypertime<sub>1</sub>, spacetime contains evil event E, at time  $t_1$ , then God can ensure that, at hypertime<sub>2</sub>, it no longer contains E. Although E will have been removed it will still exist in the hyper-past: at hypertime<sub>1</sub>, at time  $t_1$ . See Figure 1. Time itself is growing as hypertime extends into the hyper-future. At hypertime<sub>0</sub>, time only contains one instant,  $t_0$ ; at hypertime<sub>1</sub>, it contains  $t_0$  and  $t_1$ , and an evil event (depicted by the circle around  $t_1$ , at  $h_1$ ); by the time we get to hypertime<sub>2</sub>, there is no longer any evil in the past of  $t_2$ , although it remains in the hyper-past, at  $t_1$  at  $h_1$ .

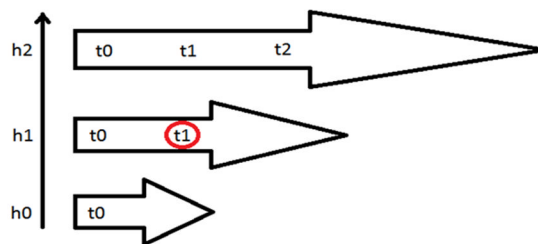


Figure 1

Ascend to hyper-hypertime. See Figure 2. At hyper-hypertime<sub>0</sub>, E exists at hypertime<sub>1</sub>, at time  $t_1$ . But, hypertime itself changes. At hyper-hypertime<sub>1</sub>, God ensures that hypertime no longer contains E, neither at hypertime<sub>1</sub>, nor at any other hypertime. But E still exists in the hyper-hyper-past; it still exists at hyper-hypertime<sub>0</sub>, at hypertime<sub>1</sub>, at time  $t_1$ . What should God do? Ascend to hyper-hyper-hypertime.

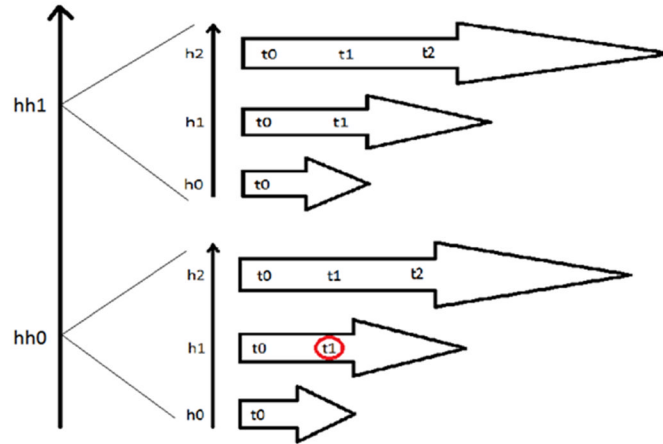


Figure 2

A proposal: God can complete an infinite sequence of tasks, deleting all traces of E from time, hypertime, hyper-hypertime, and so on. For evil to be eradicated from every level, this supertask *cannot* be undertaken *in* time or in any level of the hypertime hierarchy. The supertask *must* instead be atemporal, not in time, hypertime, hyper-hypertime, etc.

The timeline present to hypertime<sub>0</sub> is the *very same timeline* present to hypertime<sub>1</sub>, even if it has undergone changes. Compare: you are the very same person at  $t_0$  as you are at  $t_1$ , even if *you* have undergone changes. Similarly, the hypertime line undergoes changes over hyper-hypertime; the hyper-hypertime line undergoes changes over hyper-hyper-hypertime; and so on. So long as God is atemporal, if there exists an infinite hierarchy of timelines, allowing for each timeline to change within the timeline above it, then evil can be eradicated without leaving any trace in the hierarchy. The supertask would atemporally exist. The deleted evil wouldn't.

We have a morphing block embedded in an infinite hierarchy of hypertimes. Should not Hudson prefer this view over his own? It gives him everything he wants in the debate between Biblical literalists and scientists, *and* it liberates God from the shackles of the hyper-past. Indeed, it provides for a much more radical vision of the eschaton.

There is an epistemic problem, however. Even if we have stumbled upon a metaphysical and theological possibility, we have reason to believe that God never performs such a supertask in our world: If God atemporally deletes all evil in a supertask, then evil should already have vanished, even from our temporal point of view; the consequences of that atemporal action should already be manifest. They are not.

The epistemic possibility of the supertask can be salvaged. God's atemporal acts need not be manifest to us at all times. For example, God split the Red Sea for the Israelites. Even if the act was atemporal, it only became manifest to the Israelites when they needed it. In his atemporal present, God is always splitting the sea. But *we* only see that at a certain point in time. Similarly, the atemporal supertask might only become manifest in the eschaton. From that future point onwards, it will no longer be true that there was (hyper-was, hyper-hyper-was, etc) any evil.

Making sense of the atemporal supertask only becoming manifest to us in the future requires an account of how God's atemporal activity connects to our temporal experience. We have no such account, though we do not dismiss the hierarchy view outright. We instead provide a second model of time that more straightforwardly allows God to erase past evils—our *preferred* model.

## Account 2: The Scene-Changing View

We can have hyper-tenses without *hypertimes*. This frees God from the tyranny of the hyper-past. Call a “hyper-presentist” someone who uses hyper-tenses without thinking that they require talking about *hypertimes* (other than the hyper-present)—just as a regular presentist will use regular tenses without thinking they require talk about *times* (other than the present).

For a presentist, a past-tense sentence cannot be made true by the existence of some event in the past; according to presentism, the past does not exist. On one presentist proposal, what makes a past-tense sentence true is a backward looking property instantiated by the present (see Zimmerman 2008). For example, what makes it the case that Hudson published his book in 2014 is that the world *currently* instantiates the backward-looking property of being such that the book was published in 2014. On *hyper*-presentism, what makes it true that Adam and Eve hyper-ate the forbidden fruit *is not* the existence of some event in some hyper-past, but rather *our* timeline presently (and hyper-presently) instantiating the hyper-backward-looking-property of hyper-having been such that they ate the fruit.

The moving spotlight theory has all times existing, but undergoing a *change*: at one hyper-moment, one time is illuminated by the spotlight of presentness, and at another hyper-moment, a different time is illuminated. The previous present lies in darkness. But the moving spotlight theorist need not believe that *hypertime exists*; the moving spotlight theorist can be a hyper-presentist (see Skow 2015: 46).

Now for our second model for eradicating evil from the past. Imagine that the spotlight is like a theatre spotlight, and space-time the stage. At any hypertime, only the actors and props in *one* region of the stage can be seen in the spotlight. The rest of the stage is shrouded in darkness, until the spotlight sweeps towards it. Things need not stay still in the dark. In a Broadway production, while the audience is looking at the illuminated actors and props, the stage crew rearranges the rest in the dark.

On the moving spotlight theory, the only changes are those associated with moving from the dark, into the light, and then back into the dark. On our *new* Scene Changing Theory, what is past does not hyper-always hyper-have to be *past*; the stage crew hyper-sometimes changes the scenery in the dark. Our theory is coupled with hyper-presentism; we are not committed to *hypertimes* other than the hyper-present. To illuminate some of the model's features, consider these sentences.

1. It *was* the case that *p*
2. It hyper-*was* the case that *p was past*

Sentence 1 will be true if and only if  $p$  is true on the dark, past-side of the spotlight. The truthmaker is the relevant fact being hyper-presently located on the stage of time, on the past-side of the spotlight. The truthmaker of sentence 2 is quite different. The truthmaker is not the relevant fact being located in some place called “the hyper-past”. Instead, it is the timeline’s instantiating a hyper-backward-looking property of hyper-having-been-such-that-there-was-a-fact-that-“ $p$ ”-located-in-the-past.

On our preferred view, there are no hypertimes. There is no infinite hierarchy. God is not forced into a supertask. We can make sense of God changing the past, but only as of some moment in the future. The evil will disappear. Reality will be such that it hyper-used to have the evil in its past. But once it’s gone, it’s gone. God will erase evil events without leaving a trace of *evil*. The event *will* leave some mark, but not an evil one. The deleted events will be gone forever. What will remain is the instantiation of a hyper-backward-looking property describing (*de dicto*) a non-existent event that hyper-used to be.

We could propose a final model of God’s changing the past: standard presentism as well as hyper-presentism. God can change the past merely by changing what backward-looking properties are instantiated. But he must leave some trace: it must be true that the past hyper-used to be different—otherwise it won’t be true that anything changed. So God changes the past by swapping backward-looking properties with hyper-backward-looking properties. However, this view doesn’t actually allow God to *improve* the past.

On presentism, the present instantiates backward-looking properties describing evil. If past-evils are *bad*, then the properties are a bad thing for the present to instantiate. If it’s tragic for the world to instantiate certain backward-looking properties, then it’s similarly tragic for the world to instantiate otherwise identical *hyper*-backward-looking properties. But, rejecting presentism whilst adopting *hyper*-presentism allows for the following axiologically significant difference: (1) past evils are bad because they exist in the past, forever replaying the horror of what was; (2) merely hyper-past evils are not bad at all, since they don’t exist; all that exists in *their* place is a property that marks the fact that they hyper-used to exist.

God can thus *improve* the world by changing the past—exchanging evil events with mere properties. This model also gives Hudson what he wants: we can make sense of the claim that it hyper-used to be the case that the world was created in six days; six thousand years ago; that God hyper-made Adam and Eve on the sixth day, and that they hyper-sinned, etc. This is all compatible with the fact that the world is the product of billions of years of physical processes, and that human life is the product of millions of years of evolution. Our scene changing theory shows that positing hypertimes is unnecessary for Hudson’s task. Furthermore, it gets in the way because it shackles God’s freedom—binding him by the chains of the hyper-past.

We commend Hudson’s book to the readers of this journal. It is a provocative, insightful, and delightful read. It makes a truly innovative contribution to the philosophy of religion and showcases a method for recasting empirical debates as metaphysically loaded. We likewise commend to *Hudson* our two new Hudson-inspired models of the philosophy of time (which, as we said, we develop at length elsewhere). We believe that these models hold (or, at least, that our preferred model

holds) the promise to do the work that Hudson delegates to his morphing block. We believe that Hudson can make his point about the current state of the debate between literalists and scientists without infringing upon the radical eschatological promise of a new and better past. It is that promise—its explanation of Jewish traditions, and laws, and the response to the problem of evil as well as an account of atonement to which it gives rise—that form the subject of our longer paper.

## Acknowledgements

Tyron Goldschmidt's research was made possible through the support of a Thomas Jack Lynch Fellowship, and Samuel Lebens' research was made possible through the support of a grant from Templeton World Charity Foundation, Inc. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton World Charity Foundation, Inc.

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