

# **Response to William Abraham, “God as an Agent”**

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**Dabar 2017 Conference  
Affirming the Doctrine of Creation in an Age of Science  
June 14-17, 2017**

Let me start by thanking Billy Abraham for this lucid piece of analytic theology (or is it analytic philosophy? I’m not always sure of the difference). I have no basic quarrel with his primary point, namely that we can and should think and speak of God as an intentional agent. Indeed, I want to affirm, with him, that this is a *sine qua non* of appropriate and orthodox Christian discourse about God (what we need to say if “we stand inside the canonical heritage of the Church” [p. 9]). So my response is not (strictly speaking) a critique of this claim.

However, I do want to raise a number of questions that arise from what I perceive to be lacunae in his discussion of divine action or that derive from my wondering about implications of his account. These questions arise from my study of both philosophy and Scripture.

## **1. How Should We Speak of God’s Agency vis-à-vis Natural Processes?**

Given that one of the issues of interest for this conference is the relationship of a doctrine of creation to scientific understandings of the world, I am interested in Billy’s reflection on how God’s agency relates to the ordinary workings of nature. I agree that the notion of a “causal joint” (p. 6) is a false start altogether, since God’s (creative and providential) action in the natural world is not on the same plane as the secondary causes that science studies. However, this still leaves open an account of *how* God acts vis-à-vis such secondary causation. I am wondering if stretching the concept of personal agency to refer to divine agency [p. 6] is enough.

I do think that God often does act like a personal agent in his relationship to human agents in the Bible. This can be seen in reported dialogues between various individuals and God, such as

when Abraham and God discuss the justice of God’s judgment on Sodom in Genesis 18. The back-and-forth character of the dialogue suggests that God’s action in this case is on the plane of human action, such that some account like that of Open Theism makes sense. This is clear also in texts like Zechariah 1:15, where YHWH says of his use of the nations to judge Judah: “I was only a little angry; they made the disaster worse.” The implication is that God simply nudged the nations toward a particular goal, but in their freedom/agency, they went beyond what God intended.<sup>1</sup>

But this does not seem like an adequate account for divine action in relation to natural processes. So I am wondering if we should embrace a version of concurrentism (without the medieval focus on substance and accidents) when we think of God’s activity in the natural world. Or is a “mere” conservationist account sufficient? Or something else? And why? I am assuming, given Billy’s comments about the causal joint, that he would not affirm a purely occasionalist account of God’s agency vis-à-vis the natural world. Some clarification here would be helpful.

## **2. Is God *Only* an Agent? Reciprocity in the God-Creature Relationship**

I notice that Billy is quite resolute in this essay in speaking of God solely in terms of *agency*, the tone for which is set by his opening epigraph from Bishop Berkley, “And is not God an agent, a being purely active?” Thus, for example, he limits himself to God as agent when he discusses the “cataphatic dimension of our discourse about God” [p. 8]. Similarly, in his discussion of God’s transcendence of creation, he says that the world “is ontologically distinct [from] yet causally dependent on divine creation *ex nihilo* and on providential activity.” [p. 6] I don’t disagree, but as Michael Welker has noted, this assumption of a one-way causality from God to the world is much thinner than the biblical description of the God creation relationship.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This example, and many others, are discussed in Terence E. Fretheim, “‘I Was Only a Little Angry’: Divine Violence in the Prophets,” *Interpretation* 58/4 (2004): 365–375.

<sup>2</sup> Welker, “What Is Creation? Rereading Genesis 1–2,” *Theology Today* 48/1 (April 1991): 56–71. See also Welker, *Creation and Reality* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

Billy likewise affirms God’s immanence in creation in terms of “the exercise of universal providential action even as God also transcends it [creation]. Beyond that, we can readily conceive of God acting in a special way within the world to redeem it . . .” [p. 6] Note again the emphasis on God *acting*.

Now, I have no problem with what these statements actually say, but rather with what they leave out. My point is that this way of articulating God’s transcendence and immanence strikes me as quite impoverished when compared with a biblical theology of God’s relationship to creation. Yes, God freely creates and upholds the cosmos; but having created, God is now faithfully and covenantally bound to the cosmos, like a parent who does not *have* to have children, but once the children are born is now constrained by them; the relationship is real and it affects *both* parties. The cosmos, in other words, impacts God. God is not, *pace* the quote from Berkley, purely active—that smacks way too much of Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, who is Pure Act, continual *energeia*.

Rather, the biblical God is impacted by the creation he has brought into being. This is the basis for intercessory prayer, as when Moses gets God to *niham* (repent, relent, change his mind) about destroying the Israelites after the golden calf (Exod 32:11-14); Or when God has to tell Jeremiah to *stop* interceding for Judah (Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11; cf. 15:1), because it is time for the Babylonians to come in judgment. Indeed, in Jeremiah, God—like the prophet—weeps for the sin and the judgment of his people; God is clearly affected by human sin (the theme of the pathos of God in the prophets has been profoundly examined by Abraham Heschel).

This theme of God’s pathos is first seen in the early chapters of Genesis. The consequences of human sin involve “sorrow” or “pain” (*‘iṣābôn*) for humanity, both male and female (Gen 3:16-17); but because the human heart has become evil (Gen 6:5) God is also “grieved” or “pained” in *his* heart (Gen 6:6); the verb here is *yāṣab*, from which the noun *‘iṣābôn* is derived.

Yet God does not give up on humanity. After the flood, which did not change the recalcitrant human heart, God pledges never to bring another such destruction; from then on, God is committed to working with the sinful human race in such a way as to open the path of redemption. Already in the Old Testament, therefore, God is committed to suffering love for the sake of our salvation (much as a parent, who keeps in relationship with a rebellious adult child, will inevitably suffer).

This trajectory of God being impacted by humanity culminates in the passion of Christ; the cross is testimony not just to God's action/agency on our behalf (it surely is that), but it is also testimony to how creation (especially human sin) impacts God. Even the risen Jesus bears the prints of the nails. In Os Guinness's memorable words from his early book *The Dust of Death*, the God of the Bible is unique: "No other God has wounds."<sup>3</sup>

Here I am suggesting something that should not be controversial to readers of Scripture, namely that language of God as agent (important as it is) needs to be supplemented by language of God as recipient, and ultimately sufferer; I'm not sure of the best terminology here, but the reciprocity of God and creation needs to be taken seriously in our theological reflections.<sup>4</sup>

### **3. Is God *Strictly* an Agent? Conceptual Analysis ≠ the Language of Faith**

My third question has to do with the status of our talk about God. I note that Billy pretty consistently speaks about the "concept" of God as agent; and he mentions "metaphysical categories" necessary for developing a rich conception of God [p. 7]. My question here is whether philosophical analysis of concepts is adequate for speaking of God. This is not just a theoretical

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<sup>3</sup> Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death: A Critique of the Counter Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 387.

<sup>4</sup> I fully agree that abstract terms for God (like Being) should not be "*substituted* for God as an Agent" [p. 8]; I also agree that: "*Nothing less* that construing God as an Agent is sufficiently felicitous" [p. 9]. The issue is whether this is all there is to be said. What if we do not *replace* speaking of God as agent with something else, but rather *supplement* this way of speaking.

issue, since it has implications for what we think is the appropriate *content* of God language. My question derives from two sources: my understanding of the ontological distinction between Creator and creation (which Billy himself affirms) and the way in which God is actually spoken of in Scripture.

Let us take the Creator-creature distinction. Billy is suspicious of those who take this distinction to mean that our discourse about God must be totally apophatic, with no cognitive content whatsoever; he thinks not, and I certainly agree with him here. He does admit there is validity to the apophatic tradition, since there are, indeed, limitations to our God language. He thus affirms "an apophatic dimension to all our talk about God" and he does this, he says, "without reservation." [p. 8]

Yet when he discusses how the apophatic dimension has been overplayed, he proposes to discuss the Creator-creature distinction by considering "a scale of differences at this point." [p. 8] But the problem is that God is *not* on any scale of differences with creatures; this would be to fall back into the Thomistic *analogia entis*, which Karl Barth once referred to as the Antichrist (though I wouldn't go that far; like Billy, I want to be deflationary about disagreements). My point is that it is too tame to say (which Billy attributes to proponents of apophatic theology) that: "the difference between the Creator and the creature is greater than any difference between a creature and creature." Rather, we should say that the difference between Creator and creature is of *an entirely different kind* than that between creatures.

Maybe Kierkegaard got it right when he spoke of the infinite gulf between the finite and the infinite; but even that is too abstract. Instead of trying to formulate some conceptually adequate statement of the difference between Creator and creatures (which thus abrogates what it claims), perhaps we should listen to the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel. This is how Heschel describes an experience of God in his book *Man is Not Alone*: "A tremor seizes our limbs; our nerves are

struck, quiver like strings; our whole being bursts into shudders. But then a cry, wrested from our very core, fills the world around us, as if a mountain were suddenly about to place itself in front of us. It is one word: GOD.”<sup>5</sup>

This is at a great distance from God as “Being Itself,” even though Heschel had actually just spoken of God in this way, prior to the quote. He clearly did *not* mean an abstraction about which nothing could be said. But Heschel’s quote is also very far from being a careful philosophical definition of God as agent. Heschel isn’t interested in pinning down the concept of God too precisely. Nor am I.

Rather than treat conceptual analysis of the cataphatic content of God language as the only alternative to the apophatic tradition, I would suggest we move towards a symbolic or metaphorical approach to speaking of God. Although I agree with the apophatic tradition that the Creator-creature distinction is radical, I became deeply aware of how the Bible differs from a strictly apophatic approach during my graduate studies in philosophy (I was at the time also a campus minister, so I was constantly involved in interpreting the Bible for the life of faith in the context of Christian community).

I had been plowing through Plotinus’s *Enneads* (in Greek) for almost a year, while writing a research paper on Plotinus’s mystical ascent to the One (*to hen*), which for Plotinus involves prescinding from all sense perception and then from discrete rational concepts and language until one attained to pure consciousness of that which is beyond all being. For Plotinus this meant attaining unity with *Nous*, (identified with Aristotle’s Pure Act), the unified divine mind behind *Psyche*, the divine mind that contained the Platonic Forms; and beyond that, he hoped to feel the feather touch of the One. Here in Plotinus (later known as the founder of NeoPlatonism) is the

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<sup>5</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951), 78.

fountain of the western apophatic tradition, the notion that our concepts cannot adequately describe the Source of all being, so we must ultimately put them all aside.

While immersed in Plotinus, I happened to read (out loud, as I often did) Psalm 18 (specifically the initial theophany described in the first section of the psalm, verses 1-19). The psalmist has called upon God in a time of distress, a distress vividly described in terms of "the cords of death," "the torrents of perdition," "the cords of Sheol" which assailed and entangled him (vv. 4-5). And God heard his voice from his temple in the heavens (v. 6) and came down to rescue him—much as YHWH came down to deliver the Israelites from bondage (Exodus 3) or as he came down to see the tower that the people of Babel had build (Genesis 11).

Here I quote verses 7-10, and verse 15:

- <sup>7</sup> Then the earth reeled and rocked;  
the foundations also of the mountains trembled  
and quaked, because he was angry.
- <sup>8</sup> Smoke went up from his nostrils,  
and devouring fire from his mouth;  
glowing coals flamed forth from him.
- <sup>9</sup> He bowed the heavens, and came down;  
thick darkness was under his feet.
- <sup>10</sup> He rode on a cherub, and flew;  
he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.
- <sup>15</sup> Then the channels of the sea were seen,  
and the foundations of the world were laid bare  
at your rebuke, O LORD,  
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.

Now granted that verse 8 ("smoke went up from his nostrils") is the key verse Rastafarians use to prove that JAH smokes weed, and I won't be going that direction! But the vivid anthropomorphic language for God's action in salvation jarred profoundly with the apophatic world of the *Enneads* I had been immersed in.

I came to the realization that while biblical language is also apohpatic in that none of it fully "grasps" who God is, its solution to the limitations of language is not to prescind from description

of God, or to try to be conceptually precise in our “concepts,” but to pile up description upon description. I might call this a *symbolic* approach to religious language (so long as we don’t read into it Tillich’s definition of symbol). Or it could be called a *metaphorical* approach to religious language, so long as we don’t contrast the merely metaphorical, as Aquinas did, with the analogical, which *really and truly* (literally?) tells us what God is like.

The apophatic tradition (on some readings) wants us to refrain from speaking about God. A symbolic/metaphorical approach agrees that none of our God language precisely describes God. But the consequence is a *multiplication* of images and ways of speaking (including outright anthropomorphisms, which most theologians doubt are “literally” true).

The multiplication of images in a symbolic or metaphorical approach to God language is based on the logical oddity of such language. We *need* to use multiple symbolic descriptions for God, each of which has limited validity and which mutually reinforce and even critique (?) each other. Thus even God as Agent needs to be supplemented, for example, by God as Rock. Or let us take God as *ruach /pneuma* (Spirit/spirit/wind/breath)—that is a particularly powerful multivalent symbol. It is almost impossible to track each case of God’s *ruach /pneuma* in the Bible as either Spirit or spirit or wind or breath.

So my third question to Billy is whether we need to go beyond strictly philosophical analysis to a more “open” [p. 7] description of the “mystery” of God,, who is an agent, but also so much more.

I look forward to his responses.