

THE PRESENCE OF THE SPIRIT IN CERTAIN KINDS OF PAINFUL EXPERIENCES

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Andrew Gabriel's book *The Lord is the Spirit* presents a well-written, innovative and effective critique of classical theism. The primary approaches to this in recent decades have been by way of Christology, an analysis of the nature of love or through feminist analysis of women's experience. *The Lord is the Spirit* shows how pneumatology clashes with classical theism's understanding of God as unaffected by the world so well, that reading it made me wonder why no one had thought of doing this before. It is a significant contribution to pneumatology and the doctrine of God.

In her critique of classical theism, Elizabeth Johnson retains aspects of its emphasis on the radical transcendence of God, but insists that the world does make a difference to God—that God has a real relation to it.¹ Gabriel does much the same. He argues that as “a divine person, the Holy Spirit is omnipotent.”² However, he also argues that the Spirit characteristically acts in history in a kenotic way, humbling itself, giving up omnipotence in its relations with humanity so that it does not tend to act unilaterally in relation to people, but rather engages our freedom, working with and empowering us. What happens in creation and redemption affects the Spirit, and so affects God.

Gabriel insists that the Holy Spirit acts to build up the church and move creation towards the coming reign of God. In addition to being powerful, the Spirit is holy. Gabriel describes the holiness of the Spirit as its character of love and purity. The Spirit always works good. It overcomes sin and never commits it. According to Gabriel the “Spirit's power aims in one direction,”³—“to renew all things, not destroy them.”⁴

This insistence brings Gabriel into debate with Mark Wallace. Wallace argues that at times the Spirit does inspire actions or acts in

¹ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 226.

² Andrew Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Divine Attributes* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 183.

³ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

ways that are violent, destructive and vengeful.⁵ According to Wallace the Holy Spirit has a “double identity as friend and foe,”⁶ and “evil is a mystery within the divine life itself.”⁷ Gabriel disagrees. “Even if one did concede that the Spirit had a ... [sinister] side, one must also realize that this ... is clearly not characteristic of the overall activity of the power of the Spirit.”⁸ I want to focus on this exchange, which is only one of many in Gabriel’s book. I think Gabriel is right to argue that there is no sinister side to God. But he overlooks how in working to sustain and redeem creation, the Holy Spirit may work to destroy some relationships, institutions and even living things, that are good, for the sake of a greater good. In so doing the Holy Spirit acts creatively and redemptively by cutting into itself,⁹ sacrificing its own work and presence in parts of creation for the sake of something more.

Versions of this debate between Gabriel and Wallace about the nature of God can be found in Scripture, particularly in the book of Job. It recently occurred between Biblical theologians Walter Bruggemann and Paul Hanson. In his *Theology of the Old Testament*¹⁰ Bruggemann argued that there is a tension, a contradiction “within the very character”¹¹ of God, between God’s love, mercy and justice, and the freedom of God to act at times with violence that cannot be justified.¹² In response Hanson argued that viewed canonically, Scripture portrays God as having a consistent moral character.¹³ Hanson notes, for instance, that in the Babylonian conquest God did bring destruction on Judah, but for the purpose of correction. Such judgment is an expression of God’s holiness, made to prevent the universe from lapsing into amorality.¹⁴

⁵ Mark Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 201-204.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁸ Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit*, 203.

⁹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 28.

¹⁰ Walter Bruggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹² *Ibid.*, 249-250.

¹³ Paul Hanson, “A New Challenge to Biblical Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67/2 (1999): 458.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 457.

This debate also surfaced in a discussion about the presence of the Holy Spirit in nature between Elizabeth Johnson and Jay McDaniel. According to Johnson “the Spirit is the creative origin of all life.”¹⁵ McDaniel described orcas battering a gray whale to death and asked, how is the Holy Spirit present in this “fury and violence of nature.”¹⁶ For McDaniel, God is present in both predator and prey. As the possibility of life for the orcas is actualized through killing the gray whale, the possibility of life for the gray whale is cut off.¹⁷ “This suggests that there is tension and perhaps agony in the Spirit itself.”¹⁸ Here we are close to Brueggemann’s characterization of God. Johnson answered that the violent and wasteful predatory behavior of orcas “shapes the ecosystem occupied by thousands of other creatures who have evolved in tandem with it and depend on it for their survival.”¹⁹ The Spirit’s action in giving life to the orcas causes the destruction of other Spirit-created creatures, but is characterized by a moral purpose.

We can see in both the conquest of Judah and the predatory practices of the orca instances of a particular dynamic of the Holy Spirit, that of the Holy Spirit cutting into itself. This dynamic transpires in many different dimensions of life. It can involve horrifying violence as Brueggemann and McDaniel point out. When the Spirit cuts into itself, one Spirit-created form of life, relationship, institution or culture is destroyed for the sake of another. Thus as McDaniel argues, there is tension and agony in the Spirit in the course of its creative, sustaining and redeeming work. However, it is important to note that even in nature, not every act of violence is the Spirit cutting into itself. There is a difference between the Spirit cutting into itself and gratuitous violence.

At a fundamental level, the Spirit is the source and hope of life against violence and death. Some biblical traditions even hold out visions of an end to predator/prey relationships in the eschaton (Isaiah 65:25). Evil is not “a mystery within the divine life itself,” but a mystery that the divine

¹⁵ Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 42.

¹⁶ Jay McDaniel, “The Holy Spirit and the Cosmos in the work of Elizabeth Johnson,” in *Things New and Old: Essays on the Theology of Elizabeth Johnson*, edited by Phyllis Zagano and Terrence Tilley (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 64.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Johnson, “Forging Theology: A Conversation with Colleagues,” in Zagano and Tilley, *Things New and Old*, 116.

life confronts, suffers from, and works against in history, sometimes by sacrificing itself and what it has created. In nature, in the development of persons, institutions and societies, the Spirit at times cuts into itself is for the sake of a more diverse creation and to move creation closer to the reign of God.

We can see this in the debate between Brueggemann and Hanson. According to the prophets, the violent conquest of Judah by Babylon was the Holy Spirit was cutting into itself, working under the conditions of creaturely finitude to move creation closer to its divine destiny, as Hanson argues. But Brueggemann points to violence that cannot be justified in that particular event. When the Spirit cuts into itself, not all that happens is necessarily Spirit-inspired. People doing the Spirit's work can sin too. Gabriel acknowledges all this in debate with Wallace. But what he does not acknowledge is that in nature and history, the Spirit cuts into itself not only to punish wrong or destroy evil, but at times to destroy one good for the sake of a greater good.

This is a dangerous idea. It could lead to blessing violence and destruction. Yet it is necessary, as it enables us to see how the Spirit is present in certain types of painful experiences. I do not know where the limits of this dynamic lie. The paradigmatic moment of it is the death of Jesus. Here a Spirit inspired person died for the sake of moving creation closer to the reign of God. Paul Tillich described Jesus' death as a holy waste. The Spirit in Jesus was willing to waste itself so that Jesus might become the Christ.²⁰ The killing of Jesus was a great sin, but in Jesus' commitment to his calling and acceptance of death for its sake, it was also a moment in which the Spirit cut into itself to move the world closer to its eschatological destiny. The latter aim is an important safeguard against blessing all acts of negation and violence as the work of the Spirit. When the Spirit cuts into itself, it is for the sake of a greater good. There is also sinful or demonic destruction that is simply opposed to the Spirit.

As Gabriel notes, the work of the Spirit is directed towards "the overall aim of redemption and the kingdom of God."²¹ But what Gabriel doesn't acknowledge is that at times this involves the Spirit in the destruction of living beings, forms of life, institutions, relationships, that were good in and of themselves. When the Spirit cuts into itself, some-

²⁰ Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 49.

²¹ Gabriel, *The Lord is the Spirit*, 202.

thing of the Spirit dies, for the sake of something greater being born or sustained. The renewal of all things comes by way of the cross. This dangerous idea can be distorted into the notion that suffering is a good in and of itself. To prevent this, one must always ask, who and what does this suffering serve?²²

²² Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 133-135.