

Phenomenal Cosmic Power, Itty-bitty Living Space? Reflections on the Incarnation in an Einsteinian Universe

Andrew Sloane

Lecturer in Old Testament and Christian Thought, Morling Theological College, Sydney, AUSTRALIA

Abstract

How can the infinite Creator inhabit a finite body? What does this mean for God's action in the universe? Theoretical viewpoints in both physics and theology impact on the answer to these questions. This paper explores these issues from a theological point of view, with particular reference to the work of Thomas Torrance and his understanding of the interaction of science and theology and the theology of divine agency and the Incarnation. It notes the way that theories of space and time have influenced the theology of the Incarnation and divine agency. On the basis of a particular understanding of space and time and theological method, it concludes with theological reflections on the Incarnation and divine agency.

Key words

Creation, Incarnation, Divine Agency, Space and Time, Christology, Trinity, Theological Method, Newton, Einstein, Torrance.

Introduction—A theological genie?

The title of this paper is drawn from Walt Disney's movie *Aladdin* which, in my view, nicely sums up an important view of the dilemma facing Christian theology in a Newtonian universe. There the genie, speaking of the drawbacks of being a genie, in particular being stuck in a lamp until called for, speaks of his 'phenomenal cosmic power', but 'itty-bitty living space'. That, according to Torrance, is precisely the problem for Christian theology. For, in a Newtonian universe, space and time are viewed as being an absolute 'receptacle', independent of and containing the beings and events that take place within it. Therefore any physical body, which itself exists in space and time, must be conceived of as a finite receptacle. However, God is usually seen as being the infinite creator of all. How, then, if the Incarnation is the 'enfleshment' of the Son of God, God the Son, can the infinite Son 'inhabit' a finite body? How can all that

'phenomenal cosmic power' fit into such an 'itty-bitty living space'? This is the issue that I will address in this paper, drawing on the seminal work of Thomas Torrance. Let me note at the outset, however, that I speak as a *theologian* not as a scientist and certainly not a physicist; hence, my primary focus will be on the *theology*, especially the theology of the Incarnation, and the relationship between physical theories of space and time and theological accounts of God's action in the world and the Incarnation of the Son of God. I will, then, outline Torrance's account of Trinitarian orthodoxy, before illustrating the problems of 'liberal' theologies with reference to Schleiermacher and Macquarrie, leading exponents of early and late liberal theology, respectively. I will then proceed to Torrance's discussion of the Incarnation and divine agency in light of Einsteinian relativistic physics and look at Pannenberg and Bauckham in light of Torrance. I will close with some reflections on the value and limitation of Torrance's work, and suggest some areas for further reflection.

Thomas Torrance—*Space, Time and Incarnation*

I begin by outlining Torrance's argument in *Space, time and incarnation*, paying attention as I do so to key goals and assumptions of his work. Torrance's thought is thoroughly Trinitarian in shape and deeply rooted in Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy. He is a thoroughgoing theological (critical) realist and so begins by noting that Nicene theology is cognitive, not symbolic in nature—it makes claims about God himself, his character and action in the world (Torrance 1969 pp. 1–2). At the heart of Nicene theology, of course, is the claim that in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ God himself was incarnate, enfleshed if you will, in space and time (Torrance 1969 pp. 3–4). But this idea required a radically new concept of space and time itself, one driven by and in conformity with the gospel, resulting in the Patristic rejection of Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic theories of space and time (Torrance 1969 pp. 4–11). Here, in fact, we see one of the key ideas of Torrance—that our notions of space and time should be conformed to the biblical (and Trinitarianly orthodox) portrayal of the gospel rather than vice versa, as is frequently the case both in classical heresies such as Arianism and modernist liberal theologies (Torrance 1969 pp. viii–ix; 55–56, Torrance 1976 pp. 20–24). This, in turn, requires that both theology and science be 'critically realist' endeavours which, in their different ways, explore the one world in which we live (Torrance 1969 pp. v–ix, Torrance 1976 pp. 20–24). This claim is fairly familiar in evangelical discussions of the relation between faith and science—almost a motherhood statement—but an important and controversial one in the late 1960s when he wrote the book (and becoming somewhat more controversial in these 'postmodern' times).

Crucial to this early orthodoxy was the notion of *creatio-ex-nihilo* and its implications for our notions of space and time. For it clearly entails that God exists absolutely 'prior' to and independently of space and time—space and time are, in fact, relations within the created order. In Augustine's famous statement, the cosmos was created *with* (space and) time, not *in* time (Torrance 1969 p. 11). This, in turn, means that space

and time are concepts relative to entities and events, they do not comprise a container or receptacle in which entities exist and events happen. Furthermore, God's relationship with the cosmos is not bound by space and time which are, in turn, dynamic not static or absolute in relation to God. God 'contains' all in his *power*, not spatially (or even quasi-spatially—contra recent works on the world as 'God's body') (for example, McFague 1987). God's is a transcendent-creative relationship with the cosmos; God both transcends space and time and creates and maintains it, but he himself is independent of space and time and is not bound by it (Torrance 1969 p. 3).

Another central reality is, of course, the Incarnation. Here it is vital to remember the Nicene Creed's clear affirmation that the Son is *homoousios* with both the Father and us. Jesus Christ is, in the classical language, truly God and truly human. There is not just the *likeness* of deity or humanity in the Lord Jesus, but the full reality of both. In the Chalcedonian formula, in Jesus Christ there is united in one concrete person the fullness of the deity and true and perfect humanity. Maintaining his perfect, eternal relationship with his Father, God the Son entered space and time as one of us (Torrance 1969 pp. 14–17). Thus, in Jesus two 'worlds' are united; Jesus becomes the unique 'place' where the Father is known (see, for instance, John 1:18; 2:13–22; 4:20–24). This has significant implications for our understanding of space and time. Space and time cannot be understood as a *receptacle*—for how could the infinite-personal God come to inhabit a finite container? While space and time might be closed to us (we are unable to transcend space and time, for that would be to abrogate our creaturely existence) it is open to God (Torrance 1969 p. 18). Indeed, space and time are *determined* by God's action in creation (and redemption) and the Incarnation: space and time are the vehicle for God's action and God's revelation, but are not abrogated by it. Space and time are open to the Transcendent One's entrance into history. These ideas, especially those of the dynamic, relative nature of space and time and their openness to God's activity and the conformity of our notions of space and time to the reality of the gospel, Torrance argues, are common threads running through Patristic and Reformation (especially Calvinist) writings. While there were, in Torrance's view, problems with Luther's notion of space and time, it is not until we get to the modern period that major problems arise (Torrance 1969 pp. 22–51).

The main culprit in this shift, according to Torrance, was Isaac Newton. Newtonian physics rejected the relational view of space and time in favour of the receptacle model. Space was seen as independent of matter, the (infinite) container of all that exists and all that happens. Furthermore, space and time are static and independent of each other (Torrance 1969 pp. 37–40). This, according to Torrance, created crucial problems for understanding the relationship between God and space and time. Newton saw God as the infinite container of all space and time which view, while preserving divine transcendence, created insuperable problems for God's action in the world and, most especially, for the Incarnation (Torrance 1969 pp. 39–40). After all, if God is the infinite container of all, how can

he also be acting *in* the container, hence contained in it, let alone enfolded in a particular (small) portion of it? Torrance states:

...if God Himself is the infinite container of all being He can no more be one of the particular beings He contains than a vessel can at the same time be one of the things contained within it.

(Torrance 1969 p. 63)

Torrance argues that this prompted Newton's own Arian construal of the Incarnation and paved the way for Deism (Torrance 1969 p. 40). A contrasting view tends to identify God with the universe, which, by a seeming paradox, results in God being unable to act in a special way in the world, for all that happens is the result of God's agency. This latter view informs modernist (liberal) theology, to which I now turn.

Getting the genie in the bottle (or turning the genie into the bottle)? Schleiermacher and Macquarrie

Friedrich Schleiermacher is one of the most influential thinkers in 'modern' theology—indeed, he has frequently been called the father of liberal theology. It seems to me that his thinking on God's action in the world and on the Incarnation shows evidence of this receptacle theory of space and time, with its attendant dualism between God and the world. But the way he does this differs from Torrance's description. For Schleiermacher religious sentiment or experience (strictly, 'Christian religious emotions of a Protestant kind' (Schleiermacher 1928 p. 120)) is a primary datum of theology. Central to the Christian faith is the experience of absolute dependence on God—which, in turn, makes articulating that experience and its implications the central task of theology (Schleiermacher 1928 p. 123). This resulted, however, in a view of God that, in one sense contrary to Deism, locks God into the cosmos and its processes, rather than God being locked *out* of it. For Schleiermacher, God's action in the world is absolutely identified with natural cause and effect; otherwise our God-consciousness is diminished (Schleiermacher 1928 p. 178). For central to that is the sense that we are dependent on God in all things. Therefore all that happens is God's action in the world: creation and preservation are, respectively, the negative and positive articulations of that sense (Schleiermacher 1928 pp. 142–156, 170–178). But if that is the case, there is no room for special acts of God, such as miracles, for such acts, in his view, are an abrogation of the laws of nature and therefore break that chain of cause and effect by which all things absolutely depend on God, negating our sense of absolute dependence on God. We should, therefore, abandon the idea of the 'supernatural' and recognise that natural cause and effect can account for all that happens in the cosmos (Schleiermacher 1928 pp. 178–184, Schleiermacher 1988 pp. 119–120).

This, of course, has clear implications for his understanding of the Incarnation. Schleiermacher is unequivocal in his rejection of Chalcedonian orthodoxy—the *hypostatic union* of true humanity and true deity in the person of Jesus Christ (Schleiermacher 1928 pp. 385–424). Jesus' 'divinity' is seen in his perfect God-consciousness, which is

unsurpassable in human development (Schleiermacher 1928 pp. 378–379). This God-consciousness was not, however, fully formed in Christ from the beginning, but must be seen as having developed gradually in him, otherwise his humanity is vitiated and turned into a mere appearance (docetism) (Schleiermacher 1928 pp. 381–382). This unique God-consciousness is, in one sense, the natural development of a human capacity for God-consciousness which is evident, though in limited not perfect form, in all founders of religions (Schleiermacher 1928 pp. 63–64). Jesus is, however, unique both in the perfection of his God-consciousness and its being the result of divine agency (working through human history); his divinity is in that (very) limited sense, the result of a 'miraculous' act of God's (Schleiermacher 1928 pp. 64, 380–381). He states, as one of his key Christological theses (#94):

The Redeemer, then, is like all men in virtue of the identity of human nature, but distinguished from them all by the constant potency of his God-consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in Him.

(Schleiermacher 1928 p. 385)

Whilst he uses language other than Schleiermacher's 'God-consciousness', Macquarrie also clearly reflects the problems of the dualistic, receptacle model of the universe and develops his understanding both of God's action in the world and of the Incarnation in a manner remarkably similar to Schleiermacher's. For Macquarrie theology has to be governed by the nature of reality as we now 'know' it, 'knowledge' that excludes all 'mythological' thinking. Such mythological thinking includes such notions as God as an ultimate Being (or community of Beings) who acts in the universe in discrete and personal ways, let alone who was Incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. Rather, God is understood as Being-Itself not an individual being, lest God be reduced to the order of beings as we know them in the world. Furthermore, as Being rather than *a being*, God is active in all events (Macquarrie 1966 pp. 111–133). Creation and providence are ways of articulating the relationship of all that exists and all that happens to Being (Macquarrie 1966 pp. 194–205, 219–225). Miracles understood as specific actions of God in the world which do not correspond to its normal ways of operating (his misleading language speaks of God 'intervening' in the world in a way that 'breaks' natural laws) must be relegated to a false and outmoded mythological way of thinking (Macquarrie 1966 pp. 225–232). And this applies equally to the Incarnation understood in orthodox Chalcedonian form.

For Macquarrie the Incarnation is best understood in terms of the expression of *expressive Being* (his term for the second 'person' of the Trinity, as opposed to the *primordial Being* of the first person and the *unitive Being* of the third person) in the form of a human life (Macquarrie 1966 pp. 179–185, 272). This is in contrast to Chalcedonian Christology with its clear affirmation of the metaphysical reality of perfect Godhood and perfect humanity being united in the one concrete entity Jesus of Nazareth—or is at least a radical reinterpretation of it. He states:

It seems we must assert that at the limit of human existence (in the sense, that is to say, of the goal of human fulfilment) Christ manifests

divine Being, so that in him humanity and deity come together... in this particular being of Jesus Christ, expressive Being had perfectly expressed itself. If indeed Jesus Christ is true God and true man, we seem driven to posit a kind of open place, as it were, where divine Being and human existence come together; or again, where creaturely being, which seeks to be like God, has actually attained to the level of deity.

(Macquarrie 1966 p. 272)

This is not an automatic evolutionary process, but is the result of divine initiative (Macquarrie 1966 p. 275). However:

We cannot think (this would indeed be mythological!) of the divine Logos being "implanted" in Jesus at his conception, or, for that matter, at his birth, or his baptism... the incarnation is to be understood not as an instantaneous happening but as a process of coming together, and that Jesus progressively realized his Christhood.

(Macquarrie 1966 p. 276)

This 'progressive realisation of Christhood' and the coming together of man and God reaches its climax and fulfilment in the death of Jesus as the ultimate self-giving of Being (Macquarrie 1966 p. 278). This is not to be understood in an adoptionist sense, for:

From first to last, this is the work of Being in its great threefold action of creation, reconciliation and consummation.

(Macquarrie 1966 p. 279)

Jesus is both the focus of Being, the one who is 'taken up into Being itself' and the one who demonstrates:

the destiny that God has set before humanity... that "in Christ" God will bring all men to God-manhood.

(Macquarrie 1966).

What are we to make of this? First, it seems to me that both Schleiermacher and Macquarrie are classical instances of what Helmut Thielicke calls 'Cartesian theology', a theology that conforms the word of the gospel to predetermined conceptual categories derived from human subjectivity or 'knowledge'. Second, and for my purposes more importantly, they demonstrate the character of those conceptual categories and, to a degree, show the validity of Torrance's critique of modern theology. Schleiermacher and Macquarrie use the language of traditional Christian faith when they speak of God's action in the world and of the Incarnation of the Son of God, but what they mean by that language is quite different, indeed, contrary to the tradition. To use Torrance's categories, the receptacle has been defined as infinite such that God is the 'container' of all things (for Schleiermacher in terms of God-consciousness, for Macquarrie in terms of Being Itself) (Torrance 1969 pp. 62-63). This, in turn, means that the Incarnation understood as the enfleshment of God the Son is impossible. It seems to me that, in the language of *Aladdin*, it's not so much a case of phenomenal cosmic power,

itty-bitty living space as much as a case of 'the genie *is* the bottle'—and everyone who's in the bottle can aspire to genie-hood.

But interestingly, it also suggests to me that, theologically, the theory of space and time is not primary: rather, what is primary is the question of whether Scripture and the gospel are the primary authority. For, if they are primary, then a model of space and time will either be rejected or 'stretched' to fit the given-ness of the Christ-event rather than vice versa. Further, if God is understood to be infinite-personal and transcending space and time, and as having a non-spatial-temporal relationship to the cosmos, then there is no difficulty in holding that the cosmos is open to God's action. Indeed, the Incarnation can still be construed, in my view, in classically orthodox terms. For after all, the Incarnation of the Son of God is not a matter of trying to squeeze a being of infinite *size* or eternal *duration* into a finite container in space and time; in classical orthodoxy size and duration (in the normal sense, at least) are concepts strictly irrelevant to the being of God.

Getting the genie out of the bottle—Einstein, the Incarnation and space-time

The alternative to the receptacle view of space and time is a relational view of space-time—one which comports well with the biblical view of the Incarnation. I have already discussed this with reference to the Chalcedonian definition and Reformation theology; now I would like to turn to Torrance's discussion of it in light of Einstein's relativistic physics. The first point is clear: space and time cannot be understood as distinct and absolute phenomena that comprise the 'receptacle' for entities and events (Torrance 1969 pp. 56–57). The second point arises out of the first: space and time are relative, and space-time must be understood as a way in which beings and events relate with respect to place and succession, respectively (Torrance 1969 pp. 58–59). That, in turn, means that space-time is consequent upon creation, leaving 'room', so to speak, for God being the transcendent creator and sustainer of all things, giving God absolute priority over space and time, as well as grounding the absolute dependence of cosmos as creation on God. This, however, does not 'lock' God out of the cosmos, or limit God to working solely in natural causes, effectively excluding God's special agency from the workings of the cosmos. God is neither 'shut out' of the bottle, nor locked in. The one who transcends space and time is also sovereign over space-time; and, as we see in the Old Testament, is free to act in history to demonstrate his character and purposes (Torrance 1969 pp. 59–62). There is, then, in both creation and divine action in history, a voluntary 'binding' of God to the creation (and of the creation to God), which does not limit God to space-time and natural causation. Natural laws are not *a priori*, 'rules' that God is forced to break in order to act in ways that don't line up with the normal course of events. They are *a posteriori* conclusions drawn from the way that the universe normally operates; they are, so to speak, ways of ordering and understanding God's normal operations in the world as creator and sustainer (Torrance 1969 p. 67). Miracles, then, are not abrogations of the laws of nature (*pace* Schleiermacher, Macquarrie,

Hume, et al.), but the freely chosen path of God's action in variance from his normal ways of operating. This, in my view, does not mean that they are irrational or arbitrary; rather, just as 'natural law' may be described as an articulation of the 'creational rationality' of God, so miracles may be described as articulations of the 'redemptive' or 'new creational' rationality of God (Torrance 1969 p. 67, Polkinghorne 1989 pp. 45–48).

The Incarnation helps us understand this, and gives particular shape to a Christian notion of space-time after Einstein. Theologically, space and time are not independent concepts to which we must relate (or even conform) God's actions in creation, providence, salvation and the Incarnation (Torrance 1969 pp. 68–70). Rather, God's actions, especially the Incarnation of God the Son in the person of the Lord Jesus must *determine our concepts of space and time*. In light of the Incarnation, there can be no absolute disjunction between God and the world; nor can God be identified with or limited to it. God acts *in* the world but is distinct from it: God remains transcendent, even while his reality intersects space-time. Indeed, in the Incarnation, God enters history and becomes the organising principle of space-time in such a way that while space-time retains its creaturely integrity, it is open to God (Torrance 1969 p. 73). For Torrance, given that the Incarnation is a real event for God, one in which God is bound to space-time in and for relationship, God is also open to the world. He states:

Thus while the Incarnation does not mean that God is limited by space and time, it asserts the reality of space and time for God in the actuality of His relations with us, and at the same time binds us to space and time in all our relations with Him.

(Torrance 1969 p. 67)

This must not be understood in the sense of process thought, but does require that we radically revise or jettison some traditional theological categories—God is not immutable or impassable in the traditional sense of classical theism, but is characterised by constant love and absolute fidelity. God is:

invariant in love, but not impassable, constant in faithfulness, but not immutable.

(Torrance 1969 p. 75)

Furthermore, space and time find their meaning in God, even as, in Christ, the transcendent intersects space and time so that in him we encounter God's transcendence (Torrance 1969). This, in my view, opens up fruitful lines of inquiry in relation to both the deity of Christ and how we should construe such notions as divine omnipotence in light of the Incarnation.

Pannenberg and Bauckham

While Pannenberg is clearly critical of Torrance at some points (Pannenberg 1991 p. 86, footnote 224, p. 88, footnote 22), he rightly sees him as a crucial figure in the discussion of the nature of space and time in relation to God's action in the world and the Incarnation. Indeed,

Pannenberg's discussion of God's freedom and transcendence in creation and preservation is developed along very similar lines to Torrance (Pannenberg 1991 pp. 1–46). Furthermore, his articulation of a theology of the Spirit of God and God's action in the world draws heavily on field theory, a line of inquiry he recognises as being initiated by Torrance (Pannenberg 1991 p. 82, footnote 212, 79–102, Torrance 1969 p. 71, Torrance 1976 pp. 184–185). However, while Pannenberg is clearly seeking to do theology in light of non-Newtonian physics, he sees the notion of fields of force in contradistinction to the primacy of bodies or mass as being crucial for, in the latter view:

theological talk about God's working in worldly events becomes totally nonsensical.

(Pannenberg 1991 p. 80)

The shift to 'increasingly comprehensive field theories of natural occurrence' which 'see a close link between force and space-time' is important for theology, making the notion of God's (Spirit's) working in worldly events once more conceivable (Pannenberg 1991 pp. 81–82). He rightly notes that, while science and theology both speak of the one world, neither discipline is to be collapsed into the other (Pannenberg 1991 p. 83). He states:

If we allow, however, that scientific descriptions are not an exhaustive explanation of events and that the causal relation of events does not rule out but presupposes the contingency of individual events, and if we view the nexus of nature itself as a system that is open to contingency and not closed, then there need be no rivalry between scientific and theological statements. Both may well relate to the same events.

(Pannenberg 1991 p. 106)

Furthermore, he argues that there need to be *theological* reasons for working with the notion of fields of force, or, in his memorable phrase, 'we would simply have bad apologetics' (Pannenberg 1991 p. 83). He believes that, in light of the central biblical claim that God is Spirit, Trinitarian theology is best understood in terms of:

a dynamic field that is structured in Trinitarian fashion, so that the person of the Holy Spirit is one of the personal concretions of the essence of God as Spirit in distinction from the Father and the Son.

(Pannenberg 1991)

I'm not convinced that this is right, nor that it has advantages over straightforwardly personalist accounts of God's being and action as seen, for instance, in the work of Colin Gunton (Gunton 1991). However, it does show that, like Torrance, Pannenberg is concerned to do theology in conversation with contemporary science, but in such a way as to ensure that theology's starting point and ultimate warrant is the gospel.

When he moves on to discuss God's action in the world, especially in light of the Incarnation, once again Pannenberg's views are directly related to

Torrance's. He notes, with approval, Torrance's notion of the Incarnation as entailing the reality of space and time for God, but does not limit this to God's relationship to creatures, as does Torrance, but extends it to the very life of God (Torrance 1969 pp. 23–24). Such a restriction, in Pannenberg's view, illegitimately divorces God's relations with the world from his essence and fails to account for the reality of space and time for God (Pannenberg 1991 pp. 85, 88, footnote 228). He states:

In creating, God gives creatures space alongside himself and over against himself. But his presence still comprehends them.

(Pannenberg 1991 p. 86)

This needs to be understood in relation to his understanding of the connection between space and time and the primacy of time over space (Pannenberg 1991 pp. 90–102). He states:

The concept of time proves to be basic in this regard, for it is constitutive for that of space. The simultaneity of what is different constitutes space.

(Pannenberg 1991 p. 90)

He notes that, despite (superable) problems with the notion of simultaneity, this:

gives philosophical plausibility to the linking of space and time in an idea of space-time as a multidimensional continuum.

(Pannenberg 1991 p. 91)

While the details need not concern us, simultaneity is also important for understanding God's eternity, understood as the being-present for God of all entities and events which both helps explicate the notion of divine omnipresence and grounds the existence of time itself (Pannenberg 1991 pp. 91–97). That notion of eternity, in turn, is important for understanding the *eschaton*, a crucial step for Pannenberg's understanding of space-time and God's action in it. He believes that the *eschaton* entails the taking up of time (and hence space) into God's own eternity (Pannenberg 1991 pp. 95–96). The importance of the *eschaton*, and its relation to the Spirit as a field of force at work in the world, is connected to the openness of entities and events to the future such that the future is 'the field of the possible' (Pannenberg 1991 p. 98). This, he believes, finds cogency in the notions of the Spirit as the agent of the consummation (especially in relation to the resurrection) and of the priority of the future in the determination of quantum events (Pannenberg 1991 pp. 98–101). He argues:

These considerations help to show that the theologically based idea of a dynamic of the divine Spirit working creatively in all events as the power of the future is by no means alien to a philosophy of nature.

(Pannenberg 1991 p. 101)

He continues:

We are thus to think of the dynamic of the divine Spirit as a working field linked to time and space—to time by the power of the future that gives creatures their own present and duration, and to space by the simultaneity of creatures in their duration.

(Pannenberg 1991 p. 102)

Such a notion of space-time and of God's working in it, while not without its difficulties both theologically and philosophically (and perhaps scientifically?) certainly allows room for both divine agency and the Incarnation in space and time of the divine Son—and in a manner much more consistent with classical Chalcedonian Christology than his earlier work (Pannenberg 1991 pp. 325–296, Pannenberg 1968). Clearly, in Pannenberg, 'the genie is out of the bottle'—but still able to act in it.

Quite a different line of inquiry is taken by Richard Bauckham (Bauckham 1998). Here, while briefly outlining his argument, I want to focus on his understanding of Jesus and divine sovereignty. Bauckham anchors his discussion in an understanding of the picture of God found in the Old Testament, as well as in first century Jewish thought. Primary to the Old Testament portrayal of God as seen, for instance, in Deuteronomy 6 and Isaiah 40–55, is the claim that Yahweh alone is to be worshipped, for he alone is sovereign creator and saviour. He alone is worthy of worship, for he has a unique and unsurpassable identity (Bauckham 1998 pp. 1–22). What we find in even the earliest confessions of the New Testament, however, is that this unique worship is directed to Jesus, who is also seen as having the unique divine identity. That is clearly apparent when Phil. 2:11 is read in light of Isaiah 45:23, or 1 Cor. 8:6 in light of Deut. 6:4, statements which can be taken as nothing other than claims that Jesus is included in the divine identity (Bauckham 1998 pp. 25–42, 45–79). Bauckham states:

the intention of New Testament Christology, throughout the texts, is to include Jesus in the unique divine identity as Jewish monotheism understood it. The writers do this deliberately and comprehensively by using precisely those characteristics of the divine identity on which Jewish monotheism focused in characterizing God as unique. They include Jesus in the unique divine sovereignty over all things, they include him in the unique divine creation of all things, they identify him by the divine name which names the unique divine identity, and they portray him as accorded the worship which, for Jewish monotheists, is recognition of the unique divine identity.

(Bauckham 1998 pp. 26)

But, equally, these statements are made of *Jesus*, the one whom all knew to have been *crucified*. So, for instance, the statements we find in John's gospel about Jesus' death and the glory and revelation of God show that God is a 'cruciform God'. The New Testament, then, contrary to much recent New Testament scholarship, demonstrates the presence of the highest Christology from the first. But this God-man is the one who reveals the *suffering* saving God.

The history of Jesus, his humiliation and his exaltation, is the unique act of God's self-giving, in which he demonstrates his deity to the world by accomplishing salvation for the world.

(Bauckham 1998 p. 69)

Failure to accept that, and attempts to conform the picture of God found in Scripture to that regnant in the late Greco-Roman Empire, created significant problems for later theology, as evidenced in the Arian controversy (Bauckham 1998 p. 79). While this discussion does not relate directly to issues of science and theology, it does pick up on themes found in Torrance and also Pannenberg, relating to the character of God and of God's action in the world, ideas I want to take up in my conclusion.

Concluding reflections

Now, by way of conclusion, I must say that I'm not persuaded that the 'receptacle' notion of space and time and the dualism that this generates between space and bodies is as crucial as Torrance seems to think. For, after all, it is entirely possible to articulate a view of the Incarnation and of God's action in the world with such a view of space and time, so long as God is seen as non-material and the 'container' of creation is allowed to be open to God's agency. Torrance himself recognises this in relation to Aquinas.

The coming of the Son of God into space and time may be regarded as His entry into a finite receptacle... St. Thomas [Aquinas] brought into play at this point the Patristic teaching that the Son of God became man without leaving the throne of the universe and so modified the receptacle idea by taking the lid off, as it were...

(Torrance 1969 p. 62)

Furthermore, I'm sure it is possible to articulate relativity theory and quantum mechanics in a way that excludes divine agency and makes impossible the Incarnation. It seems to me that more significant than which physical theory is adopted is the question of whether concepts of space and time derived from, say, contemporary philosophy or science, are brought into conformity with the gospel, or vice versa. And here Torrance and Pannenberg show us fruitful ways forward. But equally, the notion of the Incarnation, understood robustly, suggests that we might need to rethink elements of the theology of God—especially, as Torrance notes, notions of divine immutability and impassibility and, I would argue, how God might be at work as the omnipotent one precisely in the weakness, suffering and death of the Son. The Incarnation forces us to reconsider, not just our notions of 'itty-bitty living space', but also of 'phenomenal cosmic power'.

Might it not be the case that the man Jesus, the Incarnate Son, may be finite in power yet omnipotent? Here is how it might go. God's omnipotence is to be understood not (just) as a static concept of potency, but as a dynamic (narrative, if you will) reality of actual work in the world. Scripture tends to highlight the power of God to achieve those purposes he has announced more than 'attributes' in the abstract. This should not

be taken as a disparagement of a theology of the attributes of God; it should be taken as a statement of the primacy of the purposes of God and Scripture's account of the *story* of God over our theological categories. Apply this, now, to the Incarnation. According to Scripture, the coming of the Son in the flesh is the climax of saving (and creating) history. It is, in the language of Ephesians, the revelation of the (previously) secret plan of God for the reconciliation and consummation of all things in him. In that plan the life of Jesus the man, his rejection, suffering and death and his resurrection from the dead in the power of the Spirit is the climactic event. It is, indeed, the event that constitutes the *fulfilment* of God's purposes.

Now, let's say that the pictures we have in the gospels of the limitations of Jesus (both of knowledge and of power) are true descriptions not just of the 'humanity' of Jesus, but of Jesus himself. Such limitations are not to be seen as obstacles in the path of his achievement of God's saving plan; they are constitutive of it. These limitations, even, perhaps especially, the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of Man and Son of God, just are the omnipotent God personally at work in weakness and suffering to actualise his saving purposes. This death is God's 'triumph over the principalities and powers' in the Cross; it is the humiliating exaltation of the Son. It is the passible power of God at work, a work that has implications for all time, for all events, for all beings. Truly, then, in the words of Ramsey:

God is Christlike and in him there is no un-Christlikeness at all.

(Ramsey 1969 p. 68)

Let me continue to quote him by way of conclusion.

The Christlikeness of God means that his passion and resurrection are the key to the very meaning of God's own deity... the New Testament doctrine [of sovereignty] is that in the death and resurrection of Jesus... there is this sovereignty... The self-giving, the becoming-man, the suffering love were not additions of the divine experience or mere incidents in the divine history. In becoming man, God revealed the meaning of what it is to be God.

(Ramsey 1969 pp. 99–100)

And, there too, is where we find what it means to be human (Ramsey 1969 p. 101).

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