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## ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND ANSELM: IN DEFENSE OF GREATEST BEING THEOLOGY

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### SYNOPSIS

The exalted conception of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent has come to be known as the Anselmian picture of God, the classical theistic notion of God as the greatest possible Being. Understood in this way, God has all the great-making properties to the highest degree possible that's mutually consistent. Such an understanding of God is a powerful idea philosophically and apologetically, contrasting sharply with, for example, the finite, fallible gods of the Greek pantheon who are susceptible to various arbitrariness objections. An Anselmian God is the God of classical theism, neither finite nor fallible, but rather the one on whom the entirety of the cosmos depends for its existence, and in whom there's no shadow of turning, no susceptibility to darkness or weakness, either metaphysically or morally.

Is such a conception, however, consistent with biblical teaching? We argue yes, contrary to the recent claims of Yoram Hazony, who thinks such an understanding of God is more shaped by Greek philosophy than by biblical revelation. Saint Anselm himself was a Christian who took the deliverances of the Bible with the utmost seriousness, but argued for the consistency of such specific revelation with what general revelation teaches. Hazony's reservations about an Anselmian portrait of God find their impetus in the problem of evil and allegations of incoherence, but the fine-grained analysis of various Anselmian theologians has rigorously demonstrated the coherence of greatest being theology. And in the face of the problem of evil, we argue, nothing less than a perfectly good and loving God is sufficient to ground our hope for any ultimate resolution.

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When I (David) began to work in philosophical theology, the work of my coauthor, Tom Morris, wielded a great influence on me. I remember reading his analysis of the Euthyphro Dilemma that opened my eyes to a whole new approach to solving the Dilemma. Much of his work focused on a philosophically powerful conception of God associated with the eleventh-century philosopher and theologian Saint Anselm of Canterbury. Such a notion of God often gets cast as constitutive of the very idea of classical theism itself—God understood as possessing the various “omni” qualities: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and the like.

Specifically, an Anselmian conception is the idea of the greatest possible, or maximally perfect, Being. God is thought of as exemplifying necessarily a maximally perfect set of great-making properties—properties understood to be intrinsically better to have than to lack. So, if it is better to be omniscient than to be deficient in knowledge, God will be thought of as omniscient, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore a sort of absolute ideal for a philosopher. And any attempt to understand and apply it seems bound to lead to all sorts of discoveries. Morris found such a notion intriguing and wanted to give it a new level of rigorous and creative attention as a unifying idea of great importance for philosophical theology, and then perhaps for other specialties as well. He intuited that if we understood the core idea of perfect Being theology deeply enough, we would get answers to problems that would otherwise be unavailable. And he was right.

Take the aforementioned Euthyphro Dilemma concerning God and ethics. Confronted with the dilemma of making morality depend on God and be rendered arbitrary, or making it independent of God and thus autonomous, a theistic ethicist in the Anselmian tradition can point to God’s unchanging and perfect nature as the locus of value, thus reconciling objectivity with divine person dependence. Since the Anselmian God is both unchanging and the one who determines what is possible and what isn’t, necessary truths can depend on His stable character without losing objectivity.

## **THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND ANSELM**

An important question is whether or not Anselmian and Christian approaches are consistent. Some argue they are not. The Anselmian tradition is thought to be an *a priorist* (“prior to experience”) tradition built on the deliverances of reason and rationality. By contrast, the more specifically Christian points of theology derive from either explicit biblical teachings or further inferences made on the basis of such

teachings and other pieces of human knowledge. So the biblical tradition is the more experiential, or *a posteriori* (“posterior to experience”). Such tenets of classical Christian teachings about God include Trinity, atonement, incarnation, and resurrection. Is a synthesis possible between the *a priorist* tradition of Anselm and the experiential tradition of Christian Scripture?

On the biblical view, God is intimately connected with the history of the world, interacting with it and accomplishing His purposes, whereas, on the Anselmian construal, He is sometimes perceived as arid and sterile. In Tertullian we find a religious believer favoring the biblical idea and selectively dismissing the God of the philosophers, for “what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem, or darkness with light?” he famously queried.<sup>2</sup> Athens for him represented the philosophical ideas of men, whereas Jerusalem represented nothing less than God’s revelation.

With equal vigor, proponents of the more philosophical conception of God might find the God of the Old and New Testaments to be, frankly, an embarrassment—with His bloody sacrifices and warnings of brimstone. Here is how J. L. Tomkinson, a philosopher who is squarely in the *a priorist* camp, analyzed the problem that arises when there is a perceived conflict between the two traditions: “The problem...of reconciling the results of philosophical theology with the claims of some revelation must always, insofar as philosophical theology is concerned, lie with the advocates of the revelation in question.” He argues it is hardly incumbent on the philosopher to demonstrate the compatibility of his findings with whatever may be advanced as the fruit of some revelation, and he thinks this is an important methodological point. “If an analysis of the received concept of God, i.e. as supreme being, leads to a conclusion which seems at odds with those of revelation, the former may claim the credentials of reason, the analysis being open to inspection by all concerned. If and insofar as the supporting reasoning seems cogent, it has a claim on us logically prior to that of the interpretation of some special experience.”<sup>3</sup>

There is a major irony, however, in contrasting Anselmianism with a Christian conception of God, because Anselm himself was deeply Christian. To be fully Anselmian is to allow not just the dictates of perfect being theology to function centrally but no less so the deliverances of Scripture. In this connection, as a Christian theologian, Anselm accepted the documents of the Bible and the traditions of the church as providing vitally important and inviolable sources for theological reflection. This is the other side of greatest being theology, not quite so widely appreciated in modern times.

A narrowly Anselmian conception of God, isolated, underdetermines for the devout Christian the proper content of religious belief. It may well be true that the Anselmian picture of God can’t be fully derived from scriptural teachings alone (e.g., God’s relation to time), but it’s equally true that important and specific content of

Christian revelation is not contained in narrow Anselmianism (e.g., the triunity of God). As long as the traditions don't conflict and aren't mutually exclusive, there is no need for the content of the one to entail the other before coming together.

The differences between them might be precisely what enable one to augment the other in important ways. Tomkinson's challenge is not in the spirit of Anselmianism rightly understood but of a distorted caricature of just the *a priorist* half of it. Anselm, like so many other medieval theologians, brought a concern for both rational cogency and biblical integrity to his theological work. Proper Anselmianism includes both specific and general revelation, integrating and synthesizing insights from both the experiential and *a priorist* traditions, offering us a philosophically and theologically powerful way to defend theism against various objections.

### AN IMPERFECT GOD

Yoram Hazony, author of, most recently, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scriptures* (Cambridge, 2012), wrote an interesting and provocative opinion article for the *New York Times* a few years ago, in which he summarized in no uncertain terms his skepticism about the idea of a God who is perfect.<sup>4</sup> We want to look at Hazony's points here not because they're original or particularly challenging but rather because they're quite typical of the arguments given by those who reject perfect being theology. Hazony suggests that there are two compelling reasons why the God of classical theism and perfect being theology should be rejected: first, the problem of evil, and its resulting coherence challenge with trying to fit the perfections (omniscience, omnipotence, etc.) together, and secondly, the failure of such a picture to match up to the Old Testament portrayal of God.

Regarding God's alleged perfections, Hazony insists that the problem of evil shows that God is not either plausibly or possibly both all-good and all-powerful, for if He were, we would not find the injustices in the world we do. He chalks up affirmation of such perfections more to the influence of Greek philosophy than to biblical thought. Regarding the God of the Old Testament, he writes,

*It's hard to find any evidence that the prophets and scholars who wrote the Hebrew Bible (or "Old Testament") thought of God in this way at all. The God of Hebrew Scripture is not depicted as immutable, but repeatedly changes his mind about things (for example, he regrets having made man). He is not all-knowing, since he's repeatedly surprised by things (like the Israelites abandoning him for a statue of a cow). He is not perfectly powerful, either, in that he famously cannot control Israel and get its people to do what he wants. And so on.<sup>5</sup>*

Consider the standard perfections of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Hazony says forthrightly that the problem of evil renders reconciliation of omnipotence and omnibenevolence either highly unlikely or flat impossible. The “impossibility” claim is the logical problem of evil, which has been answered, some would suggest, by Alvin Plantinga’s much discussed free will defense.<sup>6</sup> The “unlikelihood” claim reflects Hazony’s view that the evidential argument from evil is decisive. This is a huge claim, one rather at odds with the state of the present discussion of the problem of evil among philosophers. In his estimation, at any rate, the God of the Old Testament doesn’t encounter such a problem because such a God is not the extreme ideal of classical theism; the problem of evil thus does not arise in the same insuperable way. The Hebrew God, he insists, is not the God of the “omni”-qualities, that is, of perfection.

Hazony goes on to suggest that to speak of perfections in God is problematic because talk of perfection makes sense only in terms of achieving the right balance of properties—not by maximizing a thing’s constituent qualities simultaneously. He uses the example of a bottle whose body and neck are in the right balance to achieve optimal function. In fact, though, contrary to what Hazony is saying here, the procedure of attributing to God the greatest possible set of perfections works exactly because the involved attributes lend themselves to intrinsic maxima and a natural stopping point where God is concerned. In contrast, to speak of a perfect bottle is colloquial at best, confused at worst—the size or number of drops of liquid contained in the “perfect bottle” admits of no objective answer. But God has as much power, knowledge, and goodness as such qualities *can* be mutually compatible (compossible). Hazony once more points to failed philosophical efforts to make sense of this, when in fact the work of contemporary Anselmian philosophical theologians has articulated all of this quite nicely.<sup>7</sup> Understanding requires a bit more sophistication than Hazony is showing, though; for example, if God sovereignly chooses to confer on human beings libertarian freedom, that means that some logically possible worlds are not feasible ones, true enough, but it does not show that there is a flaw in God’s power. Hazony’s claim to the contrary is predicated on an unrefined conception of omnipotence.

Hazony wishes to emphasize the need for tentativeness and provisionality in theology because our knowledge of God remains fragmentary and partial. He even pushes an ambitious and dubious interpretation of the great “I am” declaration of God (Exod. 3:14) to be, in virtue of its imperfect tense, an indication of God’s incompleteness and changeability, rather than, as seems the more straightforward meaning, a declaration of God’s uncreatedness and ontological independence. In Hazony’s view, “The belief that any human mind can grasp enough of God to begin recognizing

perfections in him would have struck the biblical authors as a pagan conceit.”<sup>8</sup> But as Old Testament scholar Gary Yates put it (in personal correspondence):

*It seems a little odd that this would be the idea stressed if Yahweh is attempting to assure Moses when Moses is already fearful of the circumstances and the people’s response to him. The imperfect conjugation does not actually have tense, so it can also be used to simply state something that is a present or even characteristic reality. Beyond that, there is debate as to what the term means, and if, for example, this were a hiphil imperfect, it would stress that the Lord is the one who “causes to be.”*

According to the Hebrew Bible, Hazony insists, God represents the embodiment of life’s experiences and vicissitudes, from hardship to joy; and although God is ultimately faithful and just, these aren’t perfections or qualities that obtain necessarily. “On the contrary, it is the *hope* that God is faithful and just that is the subject of ancient Israel’s faith: We hope that despite the frequently harsh reality of our daily experience, there is nonetheless a faithfulness and justice that rules in our world in the end” (emphasis in original).<sup>9</sup>

Hazony concludes his piece:

*The ancient Israelites, in other words, discovered a more realistic God than that descended from the tradition of Greek thought. But philosophers have tended to steer clear of such a view, no doubt out of fear that an imperfect God would not attract mankind’s allegiance. Instead, they have preferred to speak to us of a God consisting of a series of sweeping idealizations — idealizations whose relation to the world in which we actually live is scarcely imaginable. Today, with theism rapidly losing ground across Europe and among Americans as well, we could stand to reconsider this point. Surely a more plausible conception of God couldn’t hurt.<sup>10</sup> (emphasis in original)*

## ANSELM ANSWERS

Is it indeed primarily theism that is “losing ground” in the specified parts of the world, or rather a certain cluster of religious institutions? The recent phenomenon of “the New Atheists” as the current spokesmen for disbelief is of interest, but is meeting them halfway a sensible, or even possible tack for the religious to take? It’s certainly undesirable, since in any close reading of their rhetorically engaging works, it becomes clear to any serious student of theism that their conception of God is vastly less

sophisticated and philosophically resilient than the concept of a perfect Being that was so well captured by a man steeped in biblical thought, the medieval Christian theist, Saint Anselm.

What indeed does it mean to speak of the Hebraic depiction of God as *more realistic* than the idea of God as altogether perfect? It is certainly more anthropomorphic, or to put it more precisely, anthropopathic—portraying God as if having a range of human passions. But that’s just the natural outflow of the literary forms in the original biblical documents. The fact that they don’t explicitly present us with the precisely articulated conception of God that philosophers have seen suggested by the cumulative impact of their most exalted passages does not at all compromise the philosophical work of clarifying such a conception, nor does it render the effort artificial or invalid.

Hazoni thinks it best to abandon the classical conception of God as perfect, thinking it a philosophical indulgence at odds with Hebrew scripture. He explicitly rejects the idea that God is all-powerful and all-knowing, but he is a bit more hesitant to reject God’s omnibenevolence. He affirms that God is faithful and just, but denies that these are perfections. What, though, does this denial even mean? That God is *somewhat* faithful and *rather* just, faithful to some but not others, intermittently just, but occasionally unjust? If God is less than perfectly loving, does He on occasion hate, or at least fail to love? If Hazoni wishes to be sanguine in giving up the perfections, perhaps he should be willing to bite the bullet and realistically think about what less-than-perfect-goodness could involve when it comes to God. He retains, by his own admission, the hope that “in the end” God will show Himself to be faithful and just. *Perfectly* faithful and just? Isn’t this the real hope worth holding on to? This is the conception of God sufficient to answer the problem of evil and that can fill us with the only hope that won’t ultimately disappoint.

The claim that a perfect God is a Greek convention incorporated into theology is an allegation that typically overlooks the important role of what theologians refer to as general revelation. The Greeks had no corner on the market of reason. Why is it merely a Greek notion that God possesses all the perfections? Plenty of Greeks—Euthyphro for example—believed in all sorts of rather morally deficient gods; we could return the favor and suggest that Hazoni’s conception of God is more influenced by such Greek ideas in this regard than by Scripture. The fact remains, though, that the writers of the New Testament were deeply steeped in Old Testament teachings and theology and saw Jesus as the fulfillment of all of that, and in the New Testament itself we find ample indications of a morally perfect and perfectly loving God. In fact, in Matthew 5:48, when He gives us the ultimate challenge to show that we can never satisfy the demands of divinity, Jesus does not say, “Therefore you be imperfect as your Father in heaven is

imperfect.” The word He uses is well translated as “perfect,” thus anticipating Anselm. This happy convergence of the *a priori* deliverances of reason and the *a posteriori* deliverances of Scripture should come as no surprise, since one would expect harmonious resonance between the outcomes of general and special revelation. Nothing less than this view of God can answer our deepest hopes.

**Tom Morris** taught philosophy at Notre Dame for fifteen years before becoming a public philosopher. He writes regularly for the Huffington Post, and he’s the author of around twenty books, including *If Aristotle Ran General Motors* (Holt, 1998) and *Anselmian Explorations* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1987). His website is TomVMorris.com.

**David Baggett** is a professor of philosophy in the graduate division of the Divinity School at Liberty University, and his book with Jerry Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (Oxford University Press, 2011), won the 2012 Christianity Today Book of the Year award in apologetics. Its sequel, *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning*, will be published in 2016 by Oxford University Press. David is executive editor at MoralApologetics.com.

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## NOTES

- 1 Thomas V. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 12.
- 2 “The Prescriptions against the Heretics,” trans. S. L. Greenslade, in *Early Latin Theology*, vol. V in The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 31–32.
- 3 J. L. Tomkinson, “Divine Sempiternity and A-temporality,” *Religious Studies* 18 (1982): 186–87.
- 4 Yoram Hazony, “An Imperfect God,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2012, [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/25/an-imperfectgod/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/25/an-imperfectgod/?_r=0).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Marilyn Adams would dispute this, suggesting that Plantinga’s analysis, successful so far as it goes, leaves unanswered the most important and most horrific of sufferings, those whose experience can rob people of the meaning of their lives. She attempts to address such sufferings and offer less “cold comfort” to those experiencing them in her *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). See Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, 1977).
- 7 See, e.g., Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*. For even more on how the attributes of perfection are understood, individually and together, see Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1991).
- 8 Hazony, “An Imperfect God.”



9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.