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Book Review: Crossing The Threshold Of Divine Revelation

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BOOK REVIEWS

Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation, by William J. Abraham. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006. xiv + 198 pp. \$20.00 (paper).

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My good friend “Billy” Abraham introduces this recent book of his by observing that most of those who have written about the epistemology of religious belief in recent years have had some sort of generic theism in mind, and were inquiring into the epistemic status of commitment to such theism. (He acknowledges that Alvin Plantinga’s discussion in *Warranted Christian Belief* is an exception to this generalization.) His own project is instead to inquire into the epistemic status of commitment to what he calls “canonical theism.” By this he means “that rich vision of God, creation, and redemption developed over time in the scriptures, articulated in the Nicene Creed, celebrated in the liturgy of the church, enacted in the lives of the saints, handed over and received in the sacraments, depicted in iconography, articulated by canonical teachers, mulled over in the Fathers, and treasured, preserved, and guarded by the episcopate” (p. 43). To this he adds the explanatory qualification that it is “the theism officially developed in the church *prior to the great schism*” (p. 14; italics mine).

Abraham observes that the “standard procedure” for developing an account of the epistemic status of commitment to generic theism has been first to work out a general account of rationality, justification, knowledge, warrant, or whatever, and then to apply this general account to the specific case of commitment to generic theism (p. 8). In this procedure, most of the work goes into developing the general account; the application to generic theism passes by swiftly. Abraham proposes reversing the order. Start with a person’s commitment to canonical theism, and then articulate an epistemology for such commitment that satisfies the “principle of appropriate epistemic fit” (p. 11). Abraham’s central claim, the claim around which the entire book is organized, is that when we follow this procedure, we will find that we must give central place to divine revelation. “An appeal to divine revelation [is] central to the warrants for canonical theism” (p. 79); “divine revelation is a critical component of



any adequate epistemology relevant to the truth or falsehood of canonical theism" (p. 43).

Abraham is aware of the fact that there is a long tradition of giving central position to divine revelation in the epistemology of Christian belief (p. 5). In that respect, he sees himself as engaged in a retrieval project; Plantinga is typical of recent writers in that revelation plays no structural role in his epistemology of religious belief (p. 97). As we shall see, however, Abraham strongly disagrees with the tradition on just how the idea of divine revelation is to be employed.

In the course of his discussion, Abraham has fine things to say on a number of particular topics; his discussion of conversion, for example, is superb. But I find his overall argument baffling. Let me explain why.

One understanding of divine revelation in the Christian tradition is that revelation occurs when a person comes to believe something by a special act of God rather than by the employment of his or her innate faculties; this is how such different thinkers as Thomas Aquinas and John Locke understood revelation. On this understanding, the traditional distinction between general and special revelation makes no sense; all revelation is special. Anybody who employs that distinction, as does Abraham, is working with a different concept.

Revelation, for Abraham, is manifesting what was previously hidden, disclosing it (p. 84). Divine revelation "can be general, that is, in creation and conscience; it can be special, that is, in the history of Israel; and it can be extraspecial, that is, in Jesus Christ." The content of divine revelation can be "the hidden depths of the human condition," or it can be "the nature and purposes of God" (p. 84). Abraham focuses entirely on the latter. The idea is not that, in addition to God's other actions, God *also* performs the action of revealing himself. Rather, in and through God's other actions, God reveals himself. It is in and through the actions of salvation, healing, and restoration "that God is truly revealed and made known. To develop a vision of revelation independently of them is profoundly misleading and distorting" (p. 65). Not all of God's acts are equally revelatory, however. God's acts of speaking are especially revelatory (p. 60).

Let it be noted that this idea of divine revelation plays an altogether minor role in canonical theism. Abraham appears to regard the Nicene Creed as stating the heart of canonical theism. The Creed says nothing about revelation. In canonical theism, says Abraham, "God is primarily identified as the creator and redeemer of the world" (p. 79). Exactly so; God is identified as creator and redeemer, not as one who reveals things about himself. In Christian scripture we do, now and then, find the idea of God making known something about himself that was previously hidden; but the idea, though present, is far from dominant.

The Creed does say that the Holy Spirit "spake by the prophets"; and some will take this to be a passing reference to revelation. Perhaps Abraham takes it that way; it's not clear to me whether he does or doesn't. In my *Divine Discourse* I argued that speaking is neither to be identified with

revealing nor understood as a special case of revealing. I don't know what Abraham thinks of my argument; he nowhere mentions *Divine Discourse*. He says that "claims to divine revelation . . . show up informally in the canonical heritage of the church" (p. 77) and that "the canonical heritage informally claims that God has revealed himself uniquely in Christ" (p. 63). I take the word "informally" to be an indication of the fact that Abraham recognizes that the doctrine of divine revelation is, at most, a minor part of canonical theism.

Abraham's claim, then, is not that the doctrine of divine revelation has a significant place in the *content* of canonical theism; his claim is rather that this doctrine is indispensable for articulating the epistemic status of *commitment* to canonical theism. He calls revelation an "epistemological concept" (p. 85). And he says that "at the core of the faith, as seen from an epistemic point of view, there is a special divine revelation that comes to us from without and brings the truth about God and ourselves to a burning focus" (p. 56). So let us now turn to Abraham's epistemology.

Abraham prepares for his account of the epistemic status of commitment to canonical theism by positing a sizeable number of what he calls "epistemic platitudes," eleven, to be exact. So as to give the reader a sense of what these come to, let me quote two of them. "We can and should accept the general reliability of our senses, together with the belief-forming mechanisms and practices that accompany them" (p. 36). And "we can and should accept testimony. We rightly accept what others tell us without having first established that they are worthy of trust" (p. 37). Abraham's strategy is to "move from the epistemic platitudes to theism" (p. 39); he will appeal to these platitudes in articulating the epistemic status of commitment to canonical theism.

About this introduction to the topic, let me say just two things. Though I myself accept all of the so-called platitudes, these eleven theses by no means function as platitudes in the field of epistemology. On the contrary, they are highly controversial epistemological positions. And the fact that Abraham will help himself to these general epistemological theses in the course of articulating an epistemology that fits canonical theism makes his procedure suspiciously like the standard procedure that he criticized.

For the purpose of developing his epistemology, Abraham invites us to think of canonical theism as having two levels. The first, or lower, level consists of claims concerning God's actions of creation and redemption, and claims as to what God reveals about himself by so acting. No doubt acceptance of claims concerning God's creative activity gets formed in different people in different ways. The mode of formation that Abraham highlights is clear from the following:

We simply find ourselves aware of the reality of God in our inner experience and in our encountering the world. Thus we are aware of God in creation and in his speaking to us in our conscience. We experience God, as it were, straight off, as we perceive the world around us. We have a sense, however vague, of God and his presence in the world and in our lives. We have, in

the language of Hugh of St. Victor, an *oculus contemplationis*, a contemplative or spiritually discerning eye. In this case our ability to perceive God's active presence in creation is basic and bedrock. (p. 67)

"We come equipped with an original, native capacity to perceive God's general and special revelation in the world" (p. 80).

This is purely descriptive. As to the epistemic appraisal of such beliefs so formed, Abraham says that the Reformed epistemologists are right to insist that "we are entitled to believe in the general revelation of God in creation without first having to hand good arguments for the reality of God. . . . We do not need first to establish that we have spiritual senses, check out how reliable they are, and then decide to trust them. As with our other senses, we work from an initial position of trust" (p. 67).

Abraham's description of the formation of beliefs about God's redemptive activity goes along the same lines.

In perceiving this or that prophet as a bearer of a message from God, the believer is not forming and testing a religious hypothesis. In seeing, say, Jeremiah or Paul as a recipient of divine revelation, the believer finds herself drawn to believe that God has called and commissioned Jeremiah and Paul to be bearers of special revelation. In seeing in Jesus Christ the incarnation of God, the believer in listening to the gospel about Jesus finds herself drawn to believe that he is the Son of God. In these instances of special and extraspecial revelation, the believer sees God speaking and acting in very particular ways. To deploy once more the language of the senses, one senses that God is here, in Jeremiah or in Jesus, speaking and revealing himself in the world. (p. 72)

As one would expect, Abraham's epistemic appraisal of such beliefs so formed is the same as for beliefs about God's creative activity: one is entitled to such beliefs.

As a Reformed epistemologist I am, of course, sympathetic to what Abraham says here. I think that entitlement to hold the beliefs in question is rather more complicated than Abraham indicates in these passages. But these complications are epicycles on the basic picture that Abraham draws here; and in other passages, he indicates that he also thinks the full picture is more complicated. (In my *Belief Practices: Essays in Epistemology* [Cambridge, 2010] I develop a general theory of entitlement.)

What I want to call attention to, however, is the fact that the idea of divine revelation plays no role whatsoever in Abraham's epistemology of a person's commitment to the lower level of canonical theism. The epistemology is entirely about being entitled to accept the deliverances of one's innate faculty for the formation of immediate beliefs about God's activity. Abraham uses the distinction between general and special revelation to identify two types of divine action; but one can use other concepts than those to identify those same two types, as I did. And he uses the concept of revelation to say that Jeremiah and Paul were recipients of divine revelation; but that is, of course, a different matter from whether you and I are entitled to believe that they were recipients of divine revelation. In

Abraham's account of such entitlement, the idea of divine revelation plays no role.

But is it not perhaps an accident of the examples Abraham offers that divine revelation plays no role in his epistemology here? St. Paul speaks in Romans 1 about the eternal power and divine nature of God being seen through the things God has made. This is an example of God revealing something of himself in his actions. So might Abraham not have offered, as one of his examples, a person's coming to believe that the cosmos is a manifestation of God's eternal power and divine nature?

He might indeed. But the concept of revelation would in that case have entered into the content of the belief; and that, once again, is different from playing a role in determining or assessing the epistemic status of the belief.

May it be that it is when we get to the epistemic status of a person's acceptance of the second level of canonical theism that we need to employ the idea of divine revelation? The second level of canonical theism consists of claims about God that are neither claims about God's creative and redemptive actions nor claims that can plausibly be viewed as claims about what God reveals of himself in those actions. The full-blown doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are Abraham's examples. He observes that there is a strand within Protestantism that is extremely reluctant to concede that these doctrines cannot be arrived at by interpretation of what Scripture teaches; I agree with Abraham that they were not so arrived at and cannot be so arrived at. (I should speak up in defense of my own tradition at this point. Abraham describes the Scots Confession of 1560 as declaring that all doctrine is to be *grounded* in scripture; what the Confession in fact says is that no doctrine may be "contrary" to scripture.)

How then did the church arrive at the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation?

If we must work with convenient slogans and summary statements, we might say that the doctrine of the Trinity arose over time out of the deep interaction of the special revelation of God in Israel, the extraspecial revelation of God in Jesus Christ, experience of God in the Holy Spirit, and sanctified creative imagination and reason. It is radically incomplete and inadequate to trace the kind of revolutionary change in the doctrine of God represented by the Nicene Creed merely to the divine revelation enshrined in scripture. We must also take into account the place of religious experience, imagination, and reason. We must also provide ample space for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in leading the church into the truth about God. . . . We might capture this move in terms of a vision of divine inspiration working in, with, and through the life of the church as a whole. (pp. 106–107)

This is a description of the emergence of the doctrines; what is Abraham's assessment of the epistemic status of accepting them? I find him less than fully lucid on this point. But I think his thought runs along the following lines. One of the first-level beliefs that we hold is that "there really was a unique and special revelation given to the world through Israel in Jesus of Nazareth." We then reason that since "the understand-

ing of this divine revelation is not immediately apparent, . . . it would be extremely odd for God to go to these lengths to make known his name and not provide critical assistance to the church as a whole in unpacking what this means" (p. 106). Having reasoned along those lines, we find ourselves trusting that the Spirit has inspired the church in arriving at these doctrines. If we wish, we can support that trust by rehearsing what it was that led the church to arrive at these doctrines in the first place.

Much could be said about all this. But on this occasion, the point I want to make is that, also at this second level, the idea of divine revelation plays no role in Abraham's epistemic assessment of a person's commitment to canonical theism. The epistemology is entirely about being entitled to trust, on the basis of an inference from certain immediate beliefs about God's activity that one is entitled to hold, that the Spirit led the church to arrive at the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation.

Let me add that not only does the idea of divine revelation not play a role in Abraham's epistemology at this point; to one's surprise it does not even play a role in his description of how the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation emerged. If the Spirit inspired the church to formulate and adopt these doctrines, is that inspiration not a revelatory activity of God? And if it is, then presumably the epistemology that Abraham employed for the first level is applicable for this level as well.

Abraham rejects the hyper-Protestant practice of identifying divine revelation with scripture and of holding that a doctrine is acceptable only if it can be arrived at by biblical interpretation. He proposes that instead of thinking of revelation as having this grounding function for doctrine we think of the acceptance of revelation as "perspective constituting" (p. 114) or "world-constituting" (p. 143). What he means is that, once one comes to believe that God has acted creatively and redemptively, then lots of things look different, including one's epistemological situation; for example, accepting the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation no longer looks like a bizarre *sacrificium intellectus*. Accepting divine revelation, he says, is like crossing a threshold. And surely he is right about that. But what leads to the reorientation is not just beliefs about what God reveals of himself in his actions; what leads to the reorientation is beliefs about God's actions in general—not just the belief that God's eternal power and divine nature are manifested in creation, but the belief that the cosmos as a whole, and human beings within it, have been created by God.

The source of my bafflement will now be clear. Abraham says that what he has done is "drop the idea of divine revelation into the debate." He has indeed done this. But I fail to see that the idea does any epistemological work for him. Worse, it sometimes leads him into distorting canonical theism—as it has led many of his and my predecessors into distortion.

In canonical theism, and in the scriptures out of which canonical theism emerged, there is a delicate balance of focus between, on the one hand, God's actions of creation, providence, redemption, and consummation, and, on the other hand, what these actions reveal about God. In those who

give a dominant role to the doctrine of divine revelation, there is a discernible tendency for this balanced focus to be upset. The theologian's focus is displaced, for example, from the fact that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, to what this action reveals about God. Abraham speaks of "the gracious unveiling of God in the covenant acts and deliverance of Israel from Egypt" (p. 96). To the best of my knowledge, no biblical writer locates God's grace in the unveiling that occurs in God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt; they all locate it in God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

In our relationship to our fellow human beings, such displacement of focus would often be insulting. I insult you if, instead of responding to your request for aid, I focus my attention on what your making of this request reveals about you. Are things different in our relationship to God?

The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism, by Lynne Rudder Baker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xv + 253 pp.

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Practical realism, the name given to her position by Lynne Rudder Baker, is analytic metaphysics with a difference. The difference is stated emphatically by Baker in her concluding summary:

It is time to get on the table an alternative to the dominant metaphysical theories that accord no ontological significance to things that everyone cares about—not only concrete objects like one's car keys, or the *Mona Lisa*, but also commonplace states of affairs like being employed next year, or having enough money for retirement. I believe that such ordinary phenomena are the stuff of reality, and I have tried to offer a metaphysics that has room in its ontology for the ordinary things that people value. (p. 240)

Baker's first chapter is entitled "Beginning in the middle," a phrase which carries three distinct though related meanings. We begin with our actual language, with its embedded picture of the world. We also begin in the middle epistemologically, aware of our presuppositions but not attempting to eliminate them as Descartes did. And we begin with the medium-sized objects—people, nonhuman organisms, natural objects, artifacts, and artworks—that are of primary concern to us in our lives. Of particular importance are "ID phenomena"—objects, properties, and events that are "intention-dependent," in that their existence depends on the existence of persons with propositional attitudes. Unlike a number of other metaphysical views, Baker's approach takes ID phenomena with utmost seriousness and refuses to relegate them to second-class ontological status.

The agenda thus established is pursued in part I, "Everyday Things." Chapter 2 argues for the reality and non-reducibility of ordinary things, a theme which continues in chapter 3 on artifacts, to which Baker (unlike many others from Aristotle on down) accords full ontological status. Any