

**William J. Abraham. *Divine Agency and Divine Action, Volume III: Systematic Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. viii+255 pp. £75.00 (hbk).**

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William J. Abraham's third instalment in his *Divine Agency and Divine Action* is best understood as the heart of his tetralogy, although it can be read as a standalone monograph. The Introduction of this book brings readers up to speed: after tilling the worn-out soil of divine action discourse (volume 1) and sowing seeds of insight from the tradition (volume 2), Abraham's single-volume systematic theology (volume 3) presents, with an unflinching nerve and intellectual rigour, what God has done in creation and redemption. This systematic theology is boldly evangelical in the best and proper use of that term.

This book is organised into 18 short and imminently readable chapters, which make this volume easy to pick up, put down, and return to at the reader's leisure. Most of these chapters come in thematic pairs and so could be studied in a 9-week reading group or similar. These pairs cover all the major doctrinal loci: prolegomena, the doctrine of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, creation/providence, humanity, church, salvation, and eschatology. Every chapter is opened with a passage of Scripture, and it is Scriptural references that readers will find dominate the (otherwise sparse) footnotes.

Single-volume systematic theologies may be one of the hardest and most important undertakings of contemporary theology. Abraham refers to his approach as "deflationary," in that he refuses to be distracted by ancillary issues that properly belong to other disciplines and that crowd out the theologian before she has uttered a word. In chapters 1 and 2, Abraham reflects on the fraught nature of the task ahead and argues that systematic theology is a "university-level, post-baptismal Christian instruction" or catechesis (9). Frequently throughout these pages, therefore, arguments turn not only on matters of logic, exegesis, or historical authority, but also on spiritual formation. Systematic theology should enrich our spiritual lives.

In chapters 3 and 4 Abraham discusses the doctrines of the Trinity and divine attributes. Systematic theology, as post-baptismal catechesis, starts with the Trinity because it is in the name of the Trinity that we are baptised. Abraham clearly articulates why and how the doctrine of Trinity arose in the early centuries, without getting lost in historical or philosophical rabbit-holes. Here we read one of the most central claims of Abraham's tetralogy, that the "fundamental, ultimate category for understanding God is that of an Agent" (42). Agents reveal who they are by what they do and Abraham argues that, rather than a "laundry list of abstractions" (55), the primary attributes of God are love and power revealed by the thick description of God's actions in Scripture and the life of faith. Abraham gathers the numerous attributes used to describe God in Scripture (faithfulness, loving-kindness, holiness, etc.) and organises them in connection with traditional philosophical attributes (impassibility, immutability, eternality, omniscience, etc.) to link all these to God's identity as tripersonal Agent and present the doctrine of divine attributes in a way that is spiritually nourishing.

This demonstrates an important methodological point in Abraham's work; philosophical concepts and language always follow after theology and are introduced with caution and careful consideration. Those who know Abraham's other works will realise that this is no anti-intellectualism that cuts theology off at the knees. Throughout this volume, Abraham employs the tools of analytic philosophy with ease, but he remains committed to the claim that theology has its own content and means of inquiry.

In considering the person of Christ, chapter 5 provides a sweeping aerial view of the seven ecumenical councils, where Jesus' question to Pontus Pilot ("Who do you say that I am?") was rearticulated into questions about Jesus' relationship to both the Father and the rest of humanity. Abraham emphasises the offense of Jesus, which got him killed in the first century and remains an offence as our living contemporary today. That this Jesus is God through and through is "a scandal to end all scandals" (72). Interestingly, Abraham seems to think that this offence of the Incarnation relativizes rather than heightens the problem of a male saviour.

Chapter 6, on the work of Christ, recovers the ordinary meaning of atonement as the repairing of an estranged relationship. This leads Abraham to the provocative claim that Christ came to earth, not to die, but to baptise us in the Holy Spirit. Abraham argues against narrow discussions of mechanism or the quest for a formal theory of atonement. The images of ransom, sacrifice, debt, warfare etc., all have some limited use, but even when combined together, these images reduce the "dense network of divine actions" that God performed in the incarnation and death of the Son (94). Instead, Abraham argues for a "expressivist-cognitivist account of the language of atonement" (94), which is grounded in God's loving-kindness (i.e. the Father is not killing or punishing the innocent Son), does not trivialise evil, fosters spiritual and psychological healing for the soul, and so cannot be used to condone violence or abuse.

In pneumatology, Abraham warns us not to stray too far from the doctrine of the Trinity, nor to rush this difficult and central area of theology. In chapter 7, on the person of the Spirit, we are guided through a discussion on conciliar pneumatology, the *filioque* debates, the question of pronouns, and the various images used to speak of the Spirit: life, water, fire, a dove, force-field, love and light, etc. The only depiction of the Spirit that is rejected is as the relation between the Father and the Son, which Abraham (to my mind, rightly) argues subordinates the Spirit. Identifying the work of the Holy Spirit (chapter 8) can leave theologians standing in epistemic quicksand with cognitive overload. Abraham prescribes a distinction between the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, and an emphasis on the themes of baptism, Pentecost (as the turning point of human history equal to Easter), and the Spirit's action in the church.

In comparison with pneumatology, creation and providence are a relatively simple matter for Abraham: "The Triune God created the universe out of nothing. This is where we begin and end our deliberations. The doctrine can be put on a postcard" (129). Abraham, does however, still give readers a very fine defence and articulation of this compact statement, including the history of its doctrinal development and some reflection on the relationship between theology and natural science. The bigger challenge is the problem of evil. This comes to the fore in chapter 10 on Divine Providence where Abraham elides the issues of scientific determinism, predestination, open theism, and oppressive uses of this doctrine to focus instead on God's action "to bring good out of evil" (145).

The doctrine of humanity is an area of systematics, perhaps more than any other, where interdisciplinary insights and concerns can drown out the voice of theology. Abraham argues that the systematic theologian must first find her own voice by sticking

to the topics of creation and sin, which are necessary to mediate salvation. On the theme of creation, Abraham focuses on human beings as agents made in the image of God, such that what we say about humanity mirrors what we say about God. This material similarity between humanity and God is played out in Abraham's unpacking of the notion, 'person' (a concept otherwise conspicuously absent from this work). The desecration of persons brings Abraham to the second aspect of the doctrine of humanity: sin. Abraham argues for a serious, deep (going all the way into demonic possession), and thick concept of sin, as the theological articulation of what is wrong with the world.

Chapters 13 and 14 articulate the identity and work of the church. Abraham explores the "essentially contested concept" (190) of the church through an evaluation of images; everything from country club and a department of the state to the Body of Christ and the Light of the World. The use of images to distil doctrine down to its core message is a tactic deployed in many chapters. One of the most constructive arguments made in this chapter regards the fundamental link between the identity of the church and Israel, such that Abraham identifies the beginning of the church with the calling of Abraham (Gen 12) and the reappearance of "Messianic Judaism" as "the most significant event in the history of the church since the Reformation" (192). Chapter 14 focuses on the work of the church, as a constitutive work of the Holy Spirit, to inaugurate the Kingdom of God through worship, word, and (sometimes miraculous) deed. The emphasis is on the activity of the Holy Spirit in the orders of ministry, charismatic gifting, sacramental realism, and the commitment of God to heal this sinful and wayward people.

Chapters 15 and 16 cover salvation; that is, the reordering of human existence in the kingdom of God. Again, Abraham argues that we need to employ as many images and conceptions of salvation as we can (i.e. deliverance, reconciliation, redemption, justification, new birth, regeneration, adoption, baptism, sanctification, divinisation, conversion and liberation) so that our faith does not become emaciated. The rather marvellous impression that the reader continually receives from this approach is that the reality of divine action is far bigger than even the total sum of systematic theology throughout the ages is able to express.

For Abraham, it is the heart of the Gospel that God has decided to establish the kingdom now and in the life to come (the doctrine of predestination) and has decided to do so by including human agency and action (doctrine of freedom and grace). The matter of divine and genuine human agency in salvation features prominently in all three volumes. Anticipating charges of Pelagianism, Abraham employs causal language to try and unpick this theological knot. Chapter 16 extends this argument into the possibility of conspicuous sanctity and the veneration of the saints, expressing the conviction that the depth of sin in human life has to be more than matched by our account of grace.

Eschatology follows all that has gone before, not only as a vision of the future, but a statement of the purpose and goal of all God's actions, past and present, outlined in this systematic theology. Matters of the immortality of the soul, heaven and hell, purgatory, limbo, the beatific vision, rapture, millennialism, the conversion of the Jews, the Antichrist, and the battle of Armageddon, either fade into the background or are interpreted as poetic expressions of the urgency and ultimacy of God's action in a present situation.

For readers of the first two volumes, this third volume contains many of the same often underappreciated voices: John and Charles Wesley, Austin Farrer, Symeon the New Theologian (who, it seems at numerous points, Abraham would very much like to usurp Augustine's place in the tradition), Ephrem the Syrian, and a small group of Irish theologians otherwise lost to history.

The question of audience is not entirely straightforward; this is a university-level book written for the church. As such, one might say that this book deserves a wide-range of audiences, although I suspect no one group will feel that this volume was written for them. Abraham's lively writing style and frequent use of stories, examples, and images means that I can commend this volume to an educated Christian readership, and particularly to church leaders (from any tradition), who want an intellectual challenge to deepen their faith. I imagine that the most appreciative audience will be students (undergraduate and post-graduate) who may enjoy debating Abraham's idiosyncratic articulation of traditional doctrine and having their minds sharpen against Abraham's wit and clarity. Finally, academic theologians and Christian philosophers should read this, and read it carefully, for it contains much wisdom on nature of the theological task as well as illuminating provocations on major doctrines.