

# God is Where God Acts: Reconceiving Divine Omnipresence

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**Abstract** In classical theism, God is typically conceived of as having the attribute of omnipresence. However, this attribute often falls prey to two puzzles, the immateriality puzzle and the intensity puzzle. A recent explication of omnipresence by Hud Hudson falls short of solving these puzzles. By attending to key narratives in the Hebrew Scriptures, I argue that one ought to conceive of God's presence at a location as God's acting at that location. Thus, God's omnipresence is God's acting at all locations.

**Keywords** Divine attributes · Omnipresence · Narrative · Biblical philosophy

Classical theists have tended to hold that among the various “omni-” attributes, God possesses the attribute of being omnipresent. On an Anselmian perfect being conception of God, where God is said to possess those qualities or attributes that it would be better to have than not and God possesses them to a maximal degree, one can easily come to a rational appreciation of God's omnipresence. Would it be better for God to be here or there? Would it be better for God to be both here and there? If it would be better for God to be both here and there, it would seem it would be best for God to be every “where.” Yet the conception of God being present at all locations runs into potential conflict with another standard, classical conception of God, that of God being immaterial. If, “location” denotes a specific region of space (or spacetime), and space is a material entity, then it might seem impossible for God to be in any

real sense related to a, or any, location. We might call this the “immateriality puzzle” and this has been the main worry that has troubled philosophers in the tradition and in the recent literature.

However, it seems as though there is another puzzle in the neighborhood, one based upon the experience of the faithful practitioners of the religions associated with classical theism. For the faithful occasionally report God as being *more* in certain places and at certain times in a manner of greater intensity than his presence at other places and at other times. For instance, the shrines of saints are popular sites of devotion for Christians, the Temple Mount is a significant location of prayer for Jews, the Kaaba is the quintessential pilgrimage location for Muslims. These places are locations where for the faithful God “shows up,” so to speak, where God's presence is felt more intensely, where God is. But if God is everywhere, how can it be that God could be more any “where”? Let us call this the “intensity puzzle.”

I will argue that Hud Hudson's recent work on the divine attribute of omnipresence, while commendable and sophisticated, fails to give a satisfactory response to either the immateriality puzzle or the intensity puzzle. Rather, I argue that in order to address these twin presence puzzles we ought to conceive of God's presence in the cosmos not as occupancy, as on Hudson's theory, but as action. That is, God is where God acts. This argument will proceed as follows. First, I will discuss the biblical–philosophical methodology employed in making this case. Second, I will offer some biblical data for God's presence that classical theists ought to take account of. Next, I will present Hudson's view with some critical commentary. This will then lead to a constructive examination of paradigmatic divine presence passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, the exposition of which will show Scripture as training our

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minds to conceive of God's presence as God's action. Finally, I offer some reflections on how this view of God's presence engages with debates about Special Divine Action and the notion of God as *actus purus*.

## 1 Biblical–Philosophical Methodology

I propose that in addition to working out the rational implications of the Anselmian conception of God, another data source from which classical theists draw are the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures. Certainly there are some theists that stand outside the stream of the world's three main monotheistic religions. But most classical theists of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim affiliation of the past few millennia have taken the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures as a central source for training one's mind to contemplate God.<sup>1</sup>

Let me expand on the latter phrase. I wish in this paper to view the biblical narratives not as stories from which one distills a list of premises to be employed in a syllogism, but rather as training grounds on which to exercise the mind. Perhaps we might call this an intellectual virtue-oriented interpretive scheme. The question is not so much, "what is X?" as it is "how ought we think about X?" Narratives with God as a key character invite us to conceive of God as God is portrayed in the narrative. They invite us to stand face-to-face with God in a manner as the human characters in the narratives do, learning about God what they learn, shaping our ability to interact with God by attending to their interactions with God. While we are interested downstream in the question "what is divine omnipresence?" the narratives and poems here explored help to train our minds to approach this question, and thus they function preliminarily as an answer to the question, "how are we to think about God's presence?" In this effort, I will look at some paradigmatic examples of God's presence in the Hebrew Scriptures. The move is to extrapolate a general theory of God's presence in the entire cosmos as we learn principles elucidated from narratives about God's presence at specific locations.

## 2 Biblical Data for Omnipresence

The Hebrew Scriptures offer a rich and varied presentation of the nature of God. Rarely is this done in simple propositional terms, rather we are asked to enter into narrative and poetic contexts to intuit God's attributes. A few

<sup>1</sup> I think that the interpretive scheme sketched in the following paragraph and utilized in this paper is akin to the narrative approach to philosophical reasoning that Stump employs in her *Wandering in darkness* (2010). A similar approach is taken in Hazony (2012). See also Gericke (2012).

such passages offer specific support to the notion that God enjoys the attribute of being everywhere present. For instance, in Psalm 139, the psalmist seems to praise God for being in all places when he writes:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!  
If I take the wings of the morning/  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me (Psalm 139:7–10).

That God is in all places is of great comfort to the psalmist for there is no place where he can flee from God's watchful presence and guidance. If we were to ask a question of the poem like, "what state of affairs would evoke in the psalmist the feeling that he cannot flee from God's presence?" God's possessing the attribute of omnipresence would fit that bill. Of course, that is not the only possible state of affairs. The Spirit of God could be attached to the psalmist's shoulder, and thus go wherever the poet goes. But this does not fit the entirety of the poem. The psalmist is clearly in awe of God's immensity and ability to be anywhere the psalmist can conceive. Thus, the pedagogical impact of taking an attitudinal stance like that of the psalmist is to likewise think that there is no place in the cosmos that one could go where God is not.

Similarly, in the context of God telling Jeremiah that God knows all about various false prophets who have been operating in the name of the God of Israel, Jeremiah records this conversation with God:

"Am I a God who is near," declares the LORD, "And not a God far off? Can a man hide himself in hiding places, so I do not see him?" declares the LORD. "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares the LORD (Jeremiah 23:23–24).

In this narrative, God seems to be encouraging Jeremiah to conceive of God as being both here and everywhere. This of course is in the context of Jeremiah having developed some unhelpful epistemic practices, such as doubting God's presence in certain locations, like the location Jeremiah found himself. God here attempts to change Jeremiah's habits so that he might take comfort in the God who was present to him.

Finally, for this section, Solomon offers this reflection in his prayer at the dedication of the Temple, "heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house which I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). This view is interestingly echoed in Isaiah, when God utters, "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me?" (Isaiah 66:1). These

utterances occur in the context of narratives that have God's presence as an underlying theme. A temple or a house of worship might have the unintended effect of encouraging the participants in that religion to conceive of God as *only* located in that temple. Indeed some of Israel's neighbors in the Ancient Near East had just these epistemic habits; their gods were only located in the idol or temple of the god. Thus, in relation to the God of Israel, the people might likewise have been tempted to form the beliefs and habits associated with God being only located at a certain place. In the stories, where a house dedicated to the worship of God is discussed, it becomes incumbent upon Solomon and God to attempt to stave off ideas that God is only located there and not everywhere. These passages and others have trained the minds of their audiences to conceive of God as possessing the attribute of omnipresence, and this conception has passed quite readily into the traditional classical theist conception of God.

### 3 Occupancy Account of Omnipresence

The narratives and poems of the Hebrew Scriptures commend the practice of conceiving of God as being present everywhere. Yet, given the immateriality puzzle and the intensity puzzle, we might still wonder how we are to think about God's presence. Hudson (2008) has provided one of the, I think, more sophisticated treatments of divine omnipresence in recent philosophical theology. There is much to commend in his article. Let me offer a brief summary before I probe with my critique.

#### 3.1 Hudson on Location and God's Location

Hudson sets up omnipresence as a standard feature of traditional western theism wherein "God is said to enjoy the attribute of being everywhere present" (199).<sup>2</sup> This he takes to entail that God possess the relation "being present at" to every place (199). Hudson asserts his position as a "literal occupation account of omnipresence" (205, henceforth "OAO"), which entails that God is wholly and entirely located in the cosmos as a whole and in all possible subregions of the cosmos. He then describes some "occupation relations" drawing on his monograph *The Metaphysics of Hyperspace* (2005) in which is also interacts with the work of Parsons (2003, 2007) on location. Hudson offers these definitions and distinctions<sup>3</sup>:

<sup>2</sup> For a similar line of inquiry see Pruss (2013). Further recent discussion with a survey of historical material in the Christian philosophical tradition can be found in Inman (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Let me note that early in the article Hudson commits himself to four-dimensionalism, thus the term "spacetime".

' $x$  is entirely located at  $r$ ' =  $df$   $x$  is located at  $r$  and there is no region of spacetime disjoint from  $r$  at which  $x$  is located.

' $x$  is wholly located at  $r$ ' =  $df$   $x$  is located at  $r$  and there is no proper part of  $x$  not located at  $r$ .

' $x$  extends' =  $df$   $x$  is an object that is wholly and entirely located at a non-point-sized region,  $r$ , and for each proper subregion of  $r$ ,  $r^*$ ,  $x$  is wholly located at  $r^*$  (206).

The term "extends" will sound strangely familiar for those up to speed on philosophy of time discussions. Here, "extending" in spatial discussions is akin to "enduring" in temporal discussions. Of course, these terms are plays on the word "extend" which means being located in multiple places, either wholly or partly (Parsons 2003, 1). I currently am an object that is located in multiple places; I thus bear the relation "being present at" to multiple locations. Part of me is down there near the floor, part of me is about five and a half feet above the floor, part of me is tapping away at keys on a keyboard. Extension is such that the same object is wholly and entirely multiply located.

After working through these location definitions, Hudson makes the move to apply this reasoning to God. Thus, regarding the divine nature, we can characterize Hudson's OAO as "ubiquitous extension" (209). Hudson writes, "to extend is to be wholly and entirely located at some non-point-sized region (in the case of omnipresence, at the maximally inclusive region) and to be wholly located at each of that region's proper subregions (in the case of omnipresence, at every other region there is)" (210). Implicit in this account is another traditional position of classical theism, that God is a mereological simple. God has no parts, so all of God is wherever any of God is. God literally occupies the cosmos by being wholly and entirely located at every region and every subregion via extension.

#### 3.2 OAO and the Twin Presence Puzzles

Recall that I observed that practitioners of the religions associated with classical theism have two puzzles with respect to divine omnipresence, the immateriality puzzle and the intensity puzzle. It seems that OAO is not able to solve either puzzle, and thus is not a helpful way for conceiving of the nature of God's presence according to classical theism.

On the immateriality puzzle, OAO cannot find a solution. Hudson himself hints at the fact that his account of divine omnipresence may not square with the classical theist intuitions that motivate the immateriality puzzle. Hudson offers a statement of this worry and his response:

How can something occupy a region and fail to have a body? My own view of the matter is that anything that occupies a region is a material object, and that

the occupier inherits the shape, size, dimensionality, topology, and boundaries of the region in which it is entirely located. Anyone similarly attracted to the simple occupancy analysis of ‘material object’ and these related theses has a bullet to bite if he wants to endorse an extension-based reading of omnipresence, for God will then exemplify the shape, size, dimensionality, topology, and boundaries of whatever is the most inclusive shape...it will seem that some kind of embodiment will turn out to be an unavoidable cost of the present hypothesis (210–211).

The unavoidable cost of Hudson’s view is to conceive of God as a material object. It should be noted that Hudson here does not suggest a limited form of embodiment as some classical theists or some pantheists have suggested.<sup>4</sup> Rather, Hudson is explicit that his view of presence, and thus omnipresence, entails that God is a material object. The view in question here does not even posit some sort of God-world embodiment relation akin to the mind–body relation so familiar in discussions of philosophy of mind.<sup>5</sup> Rather, because a material object is that which occupies some region, and on Hudson’s view God occupies the region of the entire cosmos (and each subregion), then God is material.

Clearly, then, the immateriality puzzle collapses. There is no puzzle to solve for how an immaterial God could be located at material places, since on this conception God is not immaterial. Yet, this seems to me akin to solving a puzzle by sweeping all the pieces off the table onto the floor. Surely there is no longer an incomplete puzzle on the table, but we would hardly say the puzzle has been solved. Further, classical theists of traditional Christian, Jewish, and Muslim adherence would hardly countenance a view of God that entailed God was a material object.

The Hebrew Scriptures continually describe God as spirit. For instance, we have the already mentioned passage from Psalm 139, which links God’s presence to God being spirit:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?

Likewise, Psalm 51 includes this connection between God as spirit and God’s presence:

Cast me now away from your presence/  
And take not your holy Spirit from me.

One could also point to the prohibition against making images as evidence against God’s materiality, God cannot be materially depicted because God is not material.<sup>6</sup> This, in fact, is what the escapees from Egypt attempted to do whilst Moses was atop the mountain, to physically portray the god who had taken them out of captivity.<sup>7</sup> In this vein, Jewish philosopher Lenn Goodman comments on the charge of atheism leveled against Jews from the ancient Romans, “The Jews were atheists not just in their God’s exclusivity but in his incorporeality” (Goodman 1996, 31). Thus, a theory of God’s omnipresence that entailed God being a material object would not seem to be tenable from a Hebrew biblical–philosophical perspective.

Likewise, a brief excursus will show this certainly to be the case in the Christian tradition. I offer just a few selections from this tradition to show the nervousness of classical theism with respect to conceiving of God as a material object.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the second-century Christian theologian Theophilus writes that God is, “by no means to be confined in a place; for it he were, then the place confining him would be greater than he; for that which contains is greater than that which is contained. For God is not contained, but is himself the place of all” (*To Autolycus, Ante-Nicene Fathers* 2:95, in Allison 2011, 212). Now, Hudson might be able to nuance his position a tad to get out of Theophilus’ accusation. For Hudson might say that if the “most inclusive region” is co-extensive with God, then God is not properly *contained* by that region, rather they share their boundary. Further, he might argue suggest that because God is infinite and the most inclusive region is infinite it is not conceptually possible for containment to obtain.<sup>9</sup> Still, I think another second-century Father, Clement of Alexandria, captures the sense of the tradition when he writes, “God is not in darkness or in place, but above both space and time, and qualities of objects. Therefore neither is he at any time in a [particular] place, either as containing it or as being contained, either by limitation or by section” (*Stromata* 2.2, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 2:348, in Allison 2011, 212). For Clement, God’s non-bodiliness is due to his being beyond space. The understanding of God’s presence that I sketch below will account for God’s ability to be at a

<sup>4</sup> For a classical theist embrace of limited embodiment, see Swinburne (1977, 102–104). For a thorough studies of pantheism see the work of Clayton especially *Pantheism: the other god of the philosophers* (2006).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Lowe (2004, 37), where he conceives of embodiment as “a unique kind of relationship in its own right, one which can be reduced neither to a mere causal relationship, nor to identity, nor to composition”.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 20:4.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 32:4; see also Deuteronomy 4:15–19.

<sup>8</sup> I offer these as just some from one current in the classical theist stream. Similar sentiments can be found expressed in literature from the Jewish and Muslim currents in that stream.

<sup>9</sup> He gestures toward this move on pg. 210.



location, while still being beyond location in the sense the Father's think.<sup>10</sup>

Like the immateriality puzzle stumps OAO, it also does not seem as though OAO is able to solve the intensity puzzle. For if God ubiquitously extends all locations in the cosmos, then there is not a coherent way to explicate greater concentrations of God's presence, as the experience of the faithful indicates. If God is all at some location, *l*, he cannot be more at location, *m*. Yet if this is the case, then it makes no sense for the faithful to utter anything like, "God is there" in any sense other than a truism.<sup>11</sup> And the ability to utter this seems to be an important part of the classical theist tradition.

For instance, the narrative of Elijah's experience of God's presence from the book of 1 Kings seems to capture this sentiment. After Elijah had routed the prophets of Baal, fled the threats of Jezebel, and retreated to a wilderness cave, verses 9–13 capture a vignette of Elijah's encounter with the presence of God. We pick up the narrative of 1 Kings 19 in verse 9:

[Elijah] came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said,

<sup>10</sup> My supposition is that a passage looming in the minds of the Fathers is John 4:24a, "God is Spirit." Further, one might see similar sentiments from an even narrower quarter of the Christian classical theism current, in the Reformation creeds and confessions. Article 1 of the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles states God is "without body, parts, or passions"; so too the Augsburg Confession asserts that God is "without body." Also, the Westminster Catechism affirms the immateriality of God when it teaches that "God is a Spirit." Further reflections and arguments against divine materiality can be found in Taliaferro (2010) and Wainwright (1974).

<sup>11</sup> It might "make sense" for the faithful to say this because they are in a different psychological state to be sensitive to the divine presence that ubiquitously extends, but the thrust of the narratives seem to push against a purely psychological explication of the intensity of God's presence.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9–13).

First, I might note that this pericope is bookended by questions pertaining to location and presence ("What are you doing *here* [*poh*]?"). This flags the reader to attend to issues related to presence. Although it is Elijah's location that God calls the reader's attention to, God's location becomes the leitmotif throughout the vignette. Secondly in the episode, once Elijah follows God's command to go onto a mountain, the passage describes the Lord as "passing by (*ober*)."<sup>12</sup> A specific location is delineated for where the Lord was. Then what follows is a series of physical phenomena that is expressly declared as not the location of God: "the Lord was not in the wind...the Lord was not in the earthquake...the Lord was not in the fire." If God is omnipresent, as classical theists hold, these statements are patently false. Or perhaps if these statements are apt descriptions of God's relation to those locales, then God is not omnipresent. Or perhaps, this narrative and others in the Hebrew Scriptures train us to think of God's presence as a degreed attribute. God can be *more* in certain locales than others. But if this latter is the case, OAO cannot account for this and the intensity puzzle is not solved.

Now, perhaps Hudson is not concerned with staying within the mainstream of classical theism; that may be all well and good. I am not arguing that Hudson's God is logically impossible or incoherent. Rather, I am simply arguing that the picture of God that one develops when being tutored by the Hebrew Scriptures is not one where God turns out to be a material object or ubiquitously extends. Attention to the manner in which God is described in the narratives as being at specific locations, will help us to conceive of how to think about God's presence at all locations.

#### 4 Omnipresence as Action in Instances of Special Presence

As I indicated, I think the way forward in a constructive manner is to notice how the narratives attune our minds to conceive of God's presence at a location as an instance of divine action at that location. In order to construct this, I want to look at a few key instances in the Hebrew Scriptures where God is said to be more present than usual. Often instances of the appearance of God are called "theophanies."<sup>12</sup> But in order to satisfy the intensity puzzle, it seems that the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures commend us to think of theophanies as occurring in a

<sup>12</sup> On theophanies and their covenantal structure, see Niehaus (1995).

degreed manner, there can be more or less intense theophanies; thus, *strong theophanies* and *weak theophanies*. I hope to show that the presence-as-action motif accounts for a whole spectrum of types of divine presence: from weak theophany to strong theophany to omnipresence. I think this distinction between strong and weak theophanies can be quite readily seen in one of the most important theophanies in the narratives of the Hebrew Scripture, that of the appearance of God to Moses in the Burning Bush.

In Exodus 3 Moses is tending some flocks in the desert of Horeb when he sees a bush that is on fire but is not burning up; naturally, he investigates the phenomenon. At this point, verse 4, “God called to him out of the midst of the bush and said, ‘Moses, Moses!’” (Exodus 3:4). This location, the middle of the Burning Bush, seems to be a particular theophanic concentration of the divine presence, a strong theophany. Yet, God then says, in verse 5, “Do not come near here; take off your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). It seems that the ground around the bush is weakly theophanic, there is a greater concentration of divine presence at that region than there is at, say, a rock or bush a few meters away, but less of a concentration than is enjoyed by the region of “the midst of the bush.”

This concentration of divine presence is simply a concentration of divine activity. God is at the location of the middle of the bush because God is acting at the location of the middle of the bush: speaking to Moses, causing fire to appear, preventing the bush from being consumed by the flame, etc. Moreover, the ground around the bush becomes holy because of its close proximity to a particular location of divine action. The divine activity causes the ground around the bush to change, to become “holy” (*qodesh*); that is a weaker action than occurs at the strong theophanic location, but is nonetheless an action. We might even say that the divine presence radiates out from the center of action to the surrounding physical plane. Further, the adjective used to describe the ground as “holy,” *qodesh*, is often used to describe instances of radiating, or weakly theophanic, presence-as-action.

These themes of divine presence as divine action and the reverberating nature of the action seem also to occur at another important theophanic location: the Mercy Seat above the Ark of the Covenant. Exodus 25 conveys a number of God’s instructions to the ancient Israelites for the construction of their worship space. Included in this are instructions for making the Ark of the Covenant, including this description:

You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two

ends of the mercy seat [...] And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark [...] *there I will meet with you*, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel (Exodus 25:17–18, 21a, 22, emphasis added).

God seems to be saying, colloquially, “I’ll be *there*.” Right between the gold cherubim, just above the Ark, God says that he will be present in a special way. God’s description of his presence here just seems like God will be acting at that particular location. That point will be the locus for meeting with God, God will speak from there, he will command from there, he will be there as he acts there.

As with the Burning Bush and the ground around it, God’s presence-as-activity radiates out from the Mercy Seat. Uzzah’s death in 2 Samuel 6 is an indication that the very Ark itself became a locus for divine activity.<sup>13</sup> Typically, the Ark rested in the “Holy of Holies,” which was more holy than the “Holy Place.” Moreover, the radiating holiness continues to the Court and then the perimeter of the Tabernacle itself. In sum, I think this meditation on these theophanic passages shows that (a) divine special presence is a particular concentration of divine action and (b) that concentration of divine activity can be greater or lesser and can radiate from a center of action.

As noted, the meaning of *qodesh* is “holy” and holy objects, such as the ground around the Burning Bush and the locations around the Mercy Seat, become holy due to the concentration of divine presence at a location of divine action. Moreover, in verb form *qodesh* receives the translation of “to consecrate” or “to sanctify,” that is, basically, “to make holy.” I think if we attend to the practice of making holy, we will also see the notion of divine presence-as-action in play as well. This theme seems to emerge by focusing on a couple other passages in Exodus.

For instance, the end of Exodus 29 records God’s instructions for establishing the practice of daily offerings at the tabernacle. After stating the details of the components of the offering, God says:

It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD, *where I will meet with you, to speak to you there*. There I will meet with the people of Israel, and *it shall be sanctified by my glory. I will*

<sup>13</sup> 2 Samuel 6:6–7: “And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God.” See the prohibition of touching the Ark in Numbers 4:15.

*consecrate (qadash) the tent of meeting and the altar* (Exodus 29:42–44, emphasis added).

We see here some familiar themes. First, God indicates a particular location where his presence will be, and his presence will be for the purpose of specific actions: meeting with and speaking to the people. Secondly, God's presence will be holy-making such that the region where his presence will be will be consecrated.<sup>14</sup> The process is such that God will act at a location, *l*, entails God will be present at *l*, and this presence consecrates *l*, such that, ultimately, *l* becomes holy.

The notion of radiating holiness also emerges from attention to consecration. Recall that holiness is not just at the location, *l*, of divine activity, but there is some sort of ripple effect extending to the regions that encompass *l*. For instance, in God's instructions to Moses regarding some of the tabernacle accoutrements (the burnt offering altar, the utensils, the basin, etc.) includes this description, "You shall consecrate them, that they may be most holy. Whatever touches them will become holy" (Exodus 30:29).<sup>15</sup> These items become holy themselves and they are somehow able to transmit their holiness to other items. On my construal, it must be the case that God indicates that as these holy objects will be locations of his activity, so too will locations these items come in contact with be locations of divine activity.

## 5 Divine Action: Special and Pure

It might strike the reader that this account of divine presence as divine action might weigh into discussions of divine action as it relates to the study of Special Divine Action (SDA).<sup>16</sup> The literature on divine action in the world has tended to divide God's action into, what has been termed, "general" divine action and "special" divine action.<sup>17</sup> However it is not entirely clear that the categorizing of particular examples of purported divine action can have been uniformly distributed into either category. Colloquially speaking the division between general and special might more be a relativistic distinction between what one takes to be God's "normal" or "regular" or "common" activities and what one takes to be "unique" or "irregular" or "out of the ordinary." Sometimes theories of the latter,

special, kind of divine activity are divided into "interventionist" and "non-interventionist" models. When "non-interventionist" models of divine activity are employed, the specialness of a particular instance of divine activity is wholly dependent upon the perspective of a human perceiver and interpreter of this activity.

It may be that the distinction between "intervention" and "non-intervention" is not entirely helpful. Thomas Tracy (2008) divides SDA into three categories. (1) "*subjectively*" special wherein "an event may be distinguished from other events because it particularly discloses to an individual or a community God's presence and purposes in the world" (603). (2) "*Materially*" special wherein "an event realizes or advances God's purposes in an especially significant way" (603). (3) "*Objectively*" special wherein an event is special "because God acts directly at a particular time and place within the world's history to create the conditions for its occurrence" (603). The latter might be conceived of as holding that there was nothing about the natural history of the world up to the point of this event that would have entailed the occurrence of this event. Suppose there are a bush growing in the wilderness, there is nothing about the natural history of the world that would indicate that it would suddenly catch fire, and yet not burn. Yet this is just what the Burning Bush narrative invites us to conceive, and this was due to a particular instance of divine activity that was God's presence. What is important from the point of view of my theory of omnipresence, and perhaps the contribution this view makes to the SDA conversation, is that one conceives of the diversity of actions as differences in *degrees* not *kinds*. So, this view would hold that there is not one kind of action, general divine action (or conservation), and a second kind of action, SDA. Rather the distinction between the two is only a matter of intensity. This tenet would aim to allow for material and objective SDA in those instances (and places) where God chose to intensify God's activity for a particular purpose.

This view of divine omnipresence as activity might also seem to be harmonious with a conception of God as pure act, the *actus purus* notion of a theologian like Thomas Aquinas.<sup>18</sup> While I do not think the account of omnipresence I offer here entails or requires a conception of God as *actus purus*, there are interesting dovetails between this view and the view of omnipresence that the Angelic Doctor himself proffers. For Thomas writes, "God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it works" (1920, *Summa Theologiae* [ST] Ia.8.1 r). In Thomas' theology, God is both pure act and the very ground of being. Thus, an object, say the wood of the Ark of the Covenant, exists because God acts on that object in such a way as to maintain its being. This, then, is how God is fundamentally

<sup>14</sup> On God's glory (*kabod*) as his identity/presence/self, cf. Deut. 5:24; Ex. 33:13, 16:10, *inter alia*.

<sup>15</sup> Note also the degreed holiness that the divine action theory of presence accounts for more easily than the occupancy account. On the touching of holy items see also Leviticus 6:18, 27.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, the series of articles on the subject in the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7.3 (Autumn 2015) and 7.4 (Winter 2015).

<sup>17</sup> See here Göcke (2015).

<sup>18</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this theme.

at the location of the wood of the Ark of the Covenant, because he is exercising causal power at that location; minimally (though this is no minimal feat), sustaining that object in existence.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas also gives this dictum, “Incorporeal things are in place not by contact of dimensive quantity, as bodies are, but by contact of power” (ST Ia.8.2 ad 1). Now, frankly, if this is true, then I think all one needs for omnipresence is the conjunction of this premise and the premise of God’s sustaining all things in existence. Thomas goes on to describe God as being present at all locations due to his “essence, presence, and power.” That may be true, but it seems to me superfluous with respect to the requirements of the doctrine of omnipresence. All that is needed for omnipresence is that God possess the “being present at” relation to all locations. But if God is sustaining all locations in existence by his power, it seems to me that is enough to secure his presence at those locations. I think the argument can be stated as such:

1. God is present at some region  $r$  at time  $t$  just in the case that God acts at  $r$  at  $t$ .<sup>20</sup>
2. No  $r$  exists at any  $t$  without God’s acting at that  $r$  at  $t$ .
3. Thus, at every  $t$  at which  $r$  exists, God is present at that  $r$ .

(1) Seems just to be a restatement of Thomas’ dictum that incorporeal things are in a place by contact of power. It seems logical enough that if an incorporeal thing acts at a corporeal location, that incorporeal thing is there. (2) Is an extension of the conception of God as first cause, the ground of all being, and the sustainer in existence of all things that exist. Add this to the idea that, as Thomas says, “place is a thing” (ST Ia.8.2 r) and all places are sustained in existence by God’s power, then God is everywhere, God is omnipresent. The theme here, for our purposes, is that God is present at a location because he is acting at that location. Locations of divine activity are locations of the divine presence. Thus, it may be that this view derived from the Hebrew Scriptures is conveniently harmonious with a traditional classical theistic view of God as *actus purus*.

## 6 Conclusion

The narratives surveyed teach that God is present at a location because God is acting at that location. According to these vignettes, we are to attune our minds to God being located because of God’s activity at that location. But since

<sup>19</sup> See also ST Ia.8.2 r: “He is in every place as giving it existence and locative power.”

<sup>20</sup> I add “at  $t$ ” even though Hudson, my main interlocutor, does not. I think adding this specification makes this argument generic enough that it would work on A- and B-theories of time and for 3D or 4D theorists on the relation between space and time.

the narratives and poems discussed at the outset teach that God is located everywhere, we ought to combine these observations to come to hold that God is located at all locations because God acts at all locations. With respect to the immateriality puzzle, the narratives surveyed might not actually have a very satisfying answer. They do not give clear indication *how* God who is immaterial interacts with material locations, they only take it for granted *that* God does so. If it were in fact impossible for an immaterial God to interact at material locations, then none of the narratives or poems presented would make any sense. This indicates that those who attuned their minds to the manner of thinking implicit in the narratives will indeed conceive of God as acting on and interacting with the material world. Any pursuit of how God does this must keep this conception as necessary. On the intensity puzzle, these narratives clearly imply that God is able to act more or less in certain locations. This will allow the statements of the faithful (“God is there”) to be expressions of the recognition of a particular concentration of divine activity, rather than the expression of a psychological state. The theorist who take seriously the tutoring of the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures will conceive of God’s omnipresence as God’s action, thus avoiding the pitfalls of OAO.

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