

GOD'S THREE OMNI'S

By Raymond White

The Bible insists that God is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and omnipresent (everywhere present). For all powerful and all knowing, there is this —

Job 42:2 I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee.

For the third, everywhere present, there is this —

Jeremiah 23:24 ...Do not I fill heaven and earth?

[1] PARADOXES

But it's time to take a serious look at what "all" really means. Anyone who has spent serious time with college math, particularly set theory, knows that when you start talking about *all* of anything you can get tangled up with paradoxes. For example, there's Russell's paradox: Imagine the set of all sets that do not contain itself. Then ask: does that set contain itself? If the answer is yes, then the answer must be no. But if the answer is no, then the answer must be yes. That is a paradox.

For another example, this one more whimsical, there's the barber paradox: Imagine a village that has one barber. And this barber shaves all the men in the village who do not shave themselves. The question is: Does this barber shave himself? What is the answer? Well, if he shaves himself, then he must not shave himself. But if he does not shave himself, then he must shave himself. So again, a paradox.

One more. This one is particularly fun because it's in the Bible. *Titus 1:12 One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cretians are always liars ...* Here's my question: Is *this* Cretian always a liar? If he's telling the truth, and prophets do, than he's lying because he's a Cretian and Cretians *always* lie. But if he's lying, than Cretians do not always lie and, because he's a prophet, he must be telling the truth. Cute, huh?

Does this have any relevance to God? Well, let's explore and you be the judge.

Please note though, it is not my intention to *disprove* God. Heaven's no. I am a true believer. If one wished to deny God simply because of paradoxes, then one would have to deny mathematics. Why? Because of Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem which proves that every mathematical system can be shown to have paradoxes. So don't reject God because of paradoxes unless you're also willing to reject math as well.

[2] OMNIPOTENCE

Revelation 19:6 ...Alleluia for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth.

This is good. We really do want to believe that the all powerful God, who has our best interest at heart, is in charge and is in charge absolutely. But what exactly does "omnipotent" mean? It's not a difficult word to dissect, *omni* does mean "all" and we use that today as for instance an omni-directional microphone which picks up sound from all

directions, as opposed to a uni-direction microphone which you have to speak directly into. And potent means power. We talk about potentates and we talk about potential energy. So omnipotent does simply mean all powerful.

But what exactly did John mean when he choose that word? Or, more to the point, how powerful is all powerful? What exactly does “all” mean?

I remember as a boy my father launching into a philosophical discourse with me (I think I was 10) about God who can “do anything.” And my father really did believe, I never had any doubt about his faith. But he bounced this question off me: “Can God, who can do anything, make a rock that is so heavy that he can’t lift it?” He was not being smug, he was just sharing his own concerns about the meaning of “anything.”

Mathematicians, I later learned (I have my bachelor’s degree in math), have great misgivings about infinities, eternities, and “all” of anything because when you start talking about “everything,” it’s easy to articulate contradictions such as Russell’s famous paradox above or my father’s rather simple paradox.

But I don’t want to dwell any further on the notion of paradox, I simply want to understand: What does the Bible say about what God can and cannot do? Are we to believe that his power has no limits at all, absolutely unbounded? And if so, are we to do with the inescapable contradictions?

Seeking answers to those questions, I looked in my Young’s Concordance for two simple words to see if they occur together anywhere in the Bible. The words are “God cannot...” If those words appear anywhere in the Bible in any context, then I reasoned that God does indeed have some kind of limits.

Here is what I found —

1. **Isaiah 1:13** *Bring no more vain oblations...I cannot away with it...* meaning that God cannot stand phonies and cannot stand hypocritical ordinances that have no sincerity.
2. **Habakkuk 1:13** *Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look upon iniquity.* This is no trivial thing, not just hyperbole or some other manner of speech. This is God disclosing to us a limitation in himself that prevents him from dealing with us in a direct way because of our sin so that something drastic is required. That something drastic is the atonement of Christ.
3. **2 Timothy 2:13** *If we believe not, yet he remaineth faithful: he cannot deny himself.* Paul goes out of his way to assert that God’s promise *cannot* be broken because God is incapable of breaking them. To do so would be to “deny himself” and that he cannot do.
4. **Titus 1:2** *In hope of eternal life which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began.* Again, Paul asserts that God cannot break his promise because he is simply incapable of doing so.

So we clearly see that there are things that God cannot do because the Bible says so. But we don’t necessarily need the words “God cannot” to find something that God cannot do. In this verse it’s just obvious —

5. *1 Timothy 2:4 Who will have all men to be saved...*

Clearly, not everyone is going to be saved, as Jesus said: **Matthew 7:13** *Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat.* So, God wants something he cannot have; namely, all of us. God will not get all of what he wants. So, what are we to make of God who is all powerful yet cannot manipulate the universe to get from it exactly what he wants when he wants it?

Now, for Mormon readers, there are also these verses. Non-Mormons will, I expect, ignore them. But, be that as it may, here they are.

6. **Mosiah 15:27** *...he cannot deny himself for he cannot deny justice when it has its claim.*
7. **Alma 11:37** *...he cannot save them in their sins...*
8. **Alma 45:16** *...the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance.*

These verses make the point quite well. There are things that God simply cannot do and the word “omnipotent” has its own limits. “All” doesn’t really mean absolutely “ALL”. It certainly doesn’t mean that God can create a rock too heavy for him to lift.

If you are willing to indulge Mormon thinking for just a moment, Joseph Smith said it this way: “All things are possible with God that are possible.” I think that would satisfy most theologians, and mathematicians. It certainly satisfies me. When we restrict the domain of “all” things to “possible” things, or the universal set to something more well behaved than just “all,” we can pretty much eliminate paradoxes and other nonsensical stuff that make God look, well, ludicrous.

If you still doubt me, consider this question: If God can do absolutely anything, then why did he even bother with time? Why didn’t he make the universe in its final state, exactly what he wanted it to be and be done with it? Answer: Because he can’t. Clearly God is growing the universe to be what he wants it to be, and just as clearly, he’s growing it because he can’t shape it to what he wants without time and effort. This helps explain why evil exists when our loving, omnipotent God would love to be rid of it.

And, by the way, why does God have angels? Angels do a lot of the heavy lifting for God — they get stuff done. That they exist at all proves that the time-sequenced dynamic is not dispensable. God has to work at it, he has no magic wand to wave.

George Burns may have said it best in the movie “O God, Book II”. The little girl asked God (George Burns): “Why is there evil in the world?” And God said: “Because I’ve never figured out how to make something with only one side to it.”

Here’s a verse that leads directly to a contradiction.

Ecclesiastes 3:14 *I know that, whatever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.*

You can’t argue with God. When he does something, it’s done and you can’t change it. But notice that “nor any thing taken from it” implies that not even God can change it. And that is certainly paradoxical.

So, can God do absolutely anything he wants? Answer: of course not.

Now let's consider the opposite problem.

A liberal theologian might argue, "So, if there are some things that God cannot do, then how can we be confident that he can do any of the things he claims he will do, any of the things that he needs to do? Like, for instance, keep his promises to save us and defeat evil."

The answer to that is simple. Just list the things that God has done and let it impress you. Here's my short list, God's resume:

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.

Genesis 2:7 And the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground.

Joshua 10:13 And the sun stood still and the moon stayed...

2 Kings 20:11 ...and he brought the shadow ten degrees backwards...

Isaiah 46:10 ...declaring the end from the beginning and...things that are not yet done.

Matthew 3:9 God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

Matthew 14:19 And he...took the five loaves and the two fishes and...[fed 5,000].

Mark 4:39 And he...said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And...there was a great calm.

John 11:43 ...he cried...Lazarus, come forth. :44 And he that was dead came forth...

1 Peter 2:24 Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree...

Revelation 6:14 And the heaven departed as a scroll...and every mountain...moved...

Revelation 21:1 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

Maybe the most impressive thing on that list is God knowing the future. Sir Isaac Newton (the inventor of Calculus) once said after losing a lot of money in the stock market, "I can chart the planets in their orbits, but I cannot discern the heart of man." Well, God can, and apparently without Calculus.

We do need to understand, for our theological sanity, that there are things God cannot do. But we must also understand that what God can do is immense; specifically, he can do anything that needs to be done, and that's really all that matters.

We shouldn't be trying to corner God (as some do) with: "God can't do this, and God wouldn't do that." That's a dangerous game to play. Beyond what God has specifically said, I don't know what God can and can't, would and wouldn't do. God is his own man and he does what he darn well feels like. Now, you can argue with God (Abraham did and lost, Jacob did and won) and no harm done. Jesus even says we should (*Luke 11:5, 18:2*). Just don't "tempt" him. Don't try to corner him, "Surely God will do this, so I can do that." It is a mistake to jump off a pinnacle because you think God *must* catch you. He might not.

Let's take our final thought from

Matthew 19:24 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. :26 with God all things are possible.

What did he mean by "all things are possible"? In the context, the disciples were thinking: well, since you can't push a camel through the eye of a needle then it's impossible for a rich man to be saved. Jesus responded, "with God, all things are

possible,” meaning, “No, you missed my point. I’m saying that God *can* save even a rich man and therefore God *can* push a camel through the eye of a needle.”

Now, just how God might do that, I have no idea. But if he can make the sun travel backwards in our sky, I have no doubt that he could, if he chose, push a camel through the eye of a needle.

Now that’s a god you can have confidence in.

[3] OMNISCIENCE

Job 24:1 ...times are not hidden from the Almighty...

God sees the future as well as the past and present.

Job 42:2 ... and that no thought can be withholden from thee.

Every thought that there is to think, God thinks it. Yes, he reads your mind (shudder).

Psalms 147:4 He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names. **:5** ...his understanding is infinite.

That God has a name for every star. That’s impressive, especially now that we have a better idea of how big the universe really is. Infinite understanding is also impressive. Does he know all the digits of irrational numbers — for example π ? We can ask when we get there.

Proverbs 15:3 The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.

Don’t think you can sneak past God. He sees the evil you do.

Isaiah 14:24 The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand.

The notion that God sees the future and therefore his prophecies are true, is problematic in that seeing the future implies that the future is set (predestination) so that there is something to see — if God knows the future then there is a future to be known. And that brings the notion of freewill in direct conflict with God’s foreknowledge.

But God’s foreknowledge of a preset future is not the only way to understand God’s foreknowledge. In this verse, Isaiah argues that God *controls* the future. If he controls it, he doesn’t need to see it in advance. This more modest view eliminates paradoxes that arise from predestination and a pre-fixed future which makes free will.

Isaiah 42:9 Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare: before they spring forth I tell you of them.

Isaiah 45:21 Tell ye, and bring them near; yea, let them take counsel together: who hath declared this from ancient time? Who hath told it from that time? Have not I the LORD? And there is not God else beside me; a just God and Saviour; there is none beside me.

Isaiah 46:10 Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

The point of God's omniscience, and in particular his foreknowledge, is that God did not place us at risk by putting us in a grand cosmic game whose ending could surprise God and that he could therefore lose and turn out very bad for us. On the contrary, God assures us that he really is in control and that it all really will turn out alright. He just asks us to trust him.

[4] OMNIPRESENCE

Just how literal God intends us to take this is unclear, at least to me. This leads us to the pantheistic argument; namely, if God occupies the entire universe and the universe is by definition everything, then what's the difference between God and the universe? They would in fact be the same thing — God is the universe and the universe is God.

In any case, here are some verses that insist that God is everywhere, whatever that means.

1 Kings 8:27 But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?

Psalms 139:7 Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? :8 If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

Jeremiah 23:24 ...Do not I fill heaven and earth?

The problem is, there are verses that insist on that opposite, that God is in *a* place, not *every* place. Here are some of those verses.

2 Samuel 6:2 And David arose, and went with all the people that were with him from Baale of Judah, to bring up from thence the ark of God, whose name is called by the name of the LORD of hosts that dwelleth between the cherubims.

After all the centuries since Moses, God was still there occupying his seat, the mercy seat that covered the ark of judgment, between the two cherubims.

1 Kings 8:10 And it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the LORD. :11 So that the priests could not

stand to minister because of the cloud: for the glory of the LORD had filled the house of the LORD. :12 Then spake Solomon, The LORD said that he would dwell in the thick darkness. :13 I have surely built thee an house to dwell in, a settled place for thee to abide in fore ever.

God really was there, physically present in the temple.

Psalms 80:1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that ledest Joseph like a flock; thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth.

In the view of that Bible author, God was literally there, between the cherubims in the temple.

Isaiah 37:16 O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims...

Isaiah has the same opinion, that God was not a mystical, pantheistic being, but an actual being who resided in the temple.

To remove all doubt about that, there came a day when God moved out of the temple.

Ezekiel 8:6 ...seeseth thou what they do? Even the great abominations that the house of Israel committeth here [in the temple] that I should go far off from my sanctuary? 9:3 And the glory of the God of Israel was gone up from the cherub, whereupon he was, to the threshold of the house. 10:3 ...and the cloud filled the inner court. :4 ...and the court was full of the brightness of the LORD's glory. 10:18 Then the glory of the LORD departed from off the threshold of the house. 11:23 And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city, and stood upon the mountain which is east of the city.

And that was that. God was gone. He left the holy of holies, the temple, and finally the city. He moved to the mountains east of Jerusalem towards the Dead Sea, and was, well, gone.

So when the Bible talks about God being there, or not being there, it's literal. What makes God's presence even more literal is that fact that when he's not there, his spirit is — exactly where is not clear, but somewhere with them.

Haggai 2:5 ...my spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not.

At the second temple, while God is not there in any physical sense as he was during the first temple, his spirit is there.

But then, to flip the argument again, there is this —

Acts 7:48 Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saithe the prophet, :49 Heaven in my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? Saithe the Lord: or what is the place of my rest?

This argues the other way contradicting *Isaiah 37:16*. Was God actually in the temple or not? Either way, this final verse does present the pantheistic, everywhere, omnipresent God. So you needn't think you can escape him as Jonah once tried to by sailing to Spain.

So, can we have it both ways? Can God be in a place and at the same time everywhere? Here is my opinion:

Matter, as far as we understand it, always exists in a place. You are always someplace and not someplace else. Planets too. However, there is gravity. And gravity, as Isaac Newton discovered, exerts its influence across the entire universe. Every star and planet in every far galaxy has some force — although weakened by distance — on us and the planet we stand on. So every object in the universe although local is also universally global in its reach. Every object in the universe touches every other object in the universe.

People too may have a reach like that, beyond the reach of our limbs. People have around them an aura which is invisible to the eye but visible to kirlian photography. That means there may be more of me than just the head-to-toe me, that there is something of me beyond the visible perimeter of me. And what is in that aura is something, some information that I have no idea because I'm no expert. But what if our measurable thoughts are in that aura? And how far does it reach? And do our auras overlap and interact with other people's auras so that, without seeing, we sense each other's presences and thoughts?

Now to the big question: Does God have an aura, and how far does it reach? The Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit, and also of God's Shekhinah glory, and also of God being "in us" and "in Christ" (*John 17:23, 1 Corinthians 5:19*). That means that God has a general presence that reaches beyond his local presence. Maybe God's Shekhinah or spirit is like that. Which also implies that God must also exist as a local being. If not, there would be no point to the Bible discussing the far reaching God if that were in fact his essence. But the Bible talks about God's Shekhinah as a part of him that is different than his essence — you would not, for example, speak about a man's foot if a foot is what he is. Therefore there must be a core, local God — a man — who has a far reaching Shekhinah.

Thus God really does have it both ways: he is local (a man) and he is everywhere (omnipresent). And maybe we do too which would make us, quite literally, one.