

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Is divine simplicity biblical? A fresh argument on behalf of a traditional doctrine

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Abstract

Divine simplicity is plausibly seen as a biblical doctrine, given a standard account of the way doctrine is derived from Scripture. The polemic of Jeremiah 10 against ancient Near Eastern *mis pi* or 'mouth opening' rituals involves a commitment to a radical account of divine aseity. In dialogue with Thomas Aquinas and a number of contemporary figures, I suggest this view of divine aseity might plausibly be thought to lead to the inference to divine simplicity.

Keywords: aseity; classical theism; divine simplicity; Jeremiah; theological interpretation of Scripture; Thomas Aquinas

Critics proclaim the doctrine of divine simplicity is 'unbiblical', the product of parochial (often 'Hellenistic') philosophical assumptions. I suggest, in contrast, that divine simplicity might plausibly be seen as a fitting biblical inference in view of the vision of divine aseity and incomparability I infer from Jeremiah 10. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate the biblical and dogmatic rationale for divine simplicity rather than address debates about the doctrine's coherence. Likewise, I do not address various biblical texts allegedly undermining divine simplicity. This would require an essay (or monograph) unto itself. However, the variety of earthy, bodily, and all-too 'creaturely' depictions of God alongside proclamations of divine mysteriousness and transcendence might be thought, for one interpreting Scripture canonically, not to contradict but support divine simplicity by pointing to the inadequacy of creaturely concepts for denoting the incomparable God.¹ While a number of recent treatments defend the scriptural basis of divine simplicity,² my argument uniquely dialogues with a recent discussion of ancient

¹See the argument of Brian Davies, 'A Modern Defence of Divine Simplicity', in Brian Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 563.

²For example Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 57-74; Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017), pp. 132-61; Christopher Holmes,

Near Eastern ‘mouth-opening’ rituals which, so far as I am aware, has not been evaluated in view of divine simplicity.³

Most Christian accounts of divine simplicity are compatible with certain forms of distinctions in God. Christian divine simplicity is not ‘absolute’. Like Thomas in the *Summa Theologica*, rather than defining in advance the sorts of distinctions compatible with divine simplicity, it is better to identify the dogmatic function of divine simplicity and then ask what sort of distinctions are incompatible with this function.⁴ If divine simplicity is to secure the account of divine aseity and incomparability that I suggest is required, then it must deny the following: that God possesses separable (i.e. ‘really distinct’ in the medieval sense) intrinsic properties, that God exemplifies universals existing outside God, that God depends upon a nature distinct from Godself, that God is composed out of anything more fundamental, that God possesses passive potency, and that God gains real relations (in the medieval sense) by virtue of relating to things outside God. The way in which each item in this list is connected to divine aseity will become clear. My primary dialogue partner is Thomas Aquinas, who unambiguously secures these denials.⁵ Nonetheless, my argument is not that only Thomas’ account of divine simplicity is adequate, but merely that his account succeeds in securing divine aseity.⁶ Some weakened accounts of divine simplicity that do not include these denials are, in my view, inadequate for securing divine aseity (for example, a *merely* parsimonious account⁷ or interpretation of divine simplicity as a ‘rule of speech’⁸).

The essay proceeds as follows: I argue Jeremiah 10 asserts that Yahweh’s ‘incomparable’ existence is not enhanced or augmented by God’s relation to creatures. I then describe how some doctrines are derived from and authorised by Scripture and, in the following section, suggest this licenses an inference to divine simplicity on the basis of Jeremiah 10. I place this exegetical section prior to the methodological section to accent that my ‘biblical’ defence of divine simplicity does not contravene Scripture’s historical context, even if it funds theological judgements that go beyond the results of Hebrew Bible scholarship. I briefly note the plausibility, according to both important critics and defenders of divine simplicity, of linking divine simplicity with the view of aseity I derive from Jeremiah 10. I conclude that divine simplicity is a suitable inference from Jeremiah 10, and that there are therefore preliminary grounds for viewing it as a biblically authorised doctrine, even if further analysis is required.

The Lord Is Good (London: Apollos, 2018), pp.11-30; Michel René Barnes, ‘Shining in the Light of Your Glory’, *Modern Theology* 35/3 (2019), pp. 418–27; Jonathan Platter, ‘Divine Simplicity and Scripture: A Theological Reading of Exodus 3:14’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73/4 (2020), pp. 295-306.

³Duby helpfully addresses Jeremiah 10 without sustained attention to the historical context of the passage. Steven Duby, *Divine Simplicity* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), pp. 116, 121. For the standard link between divine simplicity and aseity, see, e.g., James Dolezal, *God without Parts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), pp. 143-57; Katherin Rogers, ‘The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity’, *Religious Studies*, 2 (1996), p. 167.

⁴Thomas Aquinas, *The ‘Summa Theologica’ of St Thomas Aquinas* [hereafter *ST*], trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: R. & T. Washbourne, 1911), 1.3.1-8.

⁵For the broader contours of Thomas’ account, see D. Stephen Long, *The Perfectly Simple Triune God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016); Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 65-94.

⁶Mark Spencer, for example, argues that Scotus’ and Palamas’ accounts of divine simplicity likewise secure divine aseity, amongst other things. Mark Spencer, ‘The Flexibility of Divine Simplicity: Aquinas, Scotus, Palamas’, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57/2 (2017), pp. 123–39.

⁷Oliver Crisp, ‘A Parsimonious Model of Divine Simplicity’, *Modern Theology* 35/3 (2019), pp. 558–73. Crisp’s account is compatible with stronger versions of divine simplicity.

⁸Paul Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), pp. xix-xx.

Distinguishing God from the gods: Jeremiah 10

'There is none like thee, O Lord' (Jeremiah 10:6, RSV).⁹ Walter Brueggemann suggests 'all that unfolds in the book of Jeremiah is an exposition of this claim of incomparability'.¹⁰ Jeremiah 10:1-16 roots Yahweh's incomparability in the fact that Yahweh, unlike the gods of the nations, cannot come to exist in an idol, because Yahweh, unlike the gods, is a maker and Creator and not included amongst 'all things', since 'all things' are made.

Along with Isaiah 40:19–20; 41:5–14; 44:6–22, Jeremiah 10 is identified as a polemic against Mesopotamian and Egyptian *mis pi* or 'mouth opening' rituals.¹¹ Through these rituals, a deity is 'brought to birth in', 'associates with', or even – according to some – 'incarnates in' an idol via the joint action of the human craftsman, human worshippers and the god. Gods are not 'born' in an absolute sense through this ritual, as if they did not exist prior to it. Rather, *mis pi* or 'mouth opening' rituals assume 'divine fluidity', which designates a set of ancient beliefs that gods can be associated with multiple artefacts. The deity's existence is not confined to even the totality of their idolatrous associations.¹² A god party to this ritual therefore only depends upon this 'synergy' of divine and human agency for one thing, i.e., this particular instance of association or embodiment.¹³

Michael Dick suggests that Jeremiah 10:1-16 is a step-by-step polemical caricature of this ritual. As he states:

This passage documents the various stages in the preparation of a . . . cult image: (1) first the wooden core of the statue is prepared (v. 3); (2) next, the cores are plated with gold and silver (vv. 4a, 9a, 14); (3) then the image is fastened to its base (v. 4b); (4) finally, the statue is clothed (v. 9b).¹⁴

Jeremiah 10 suggests that because other gods are party to these rituals, they are incomparable with Yahweh. The primary contrast in this polemic against idolatry is not between a depictable or physical deity and one that is beyond representation or incorporeal. Rather, it is between a deity who is in one, tightly delineated sense

⁹On the differences between the text of Jeremiah 10 in the MT and LXX, see: J. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 577-82. For a summary of the reception history of Jeremiah 10 in early Christian theology, see Martin Meiser, 'Reception of Jeremiah 10:1-16 in Early Christian Literature', in K Finsterbusch and A Lange (eds.), *Texts and Contexts of Jeremiah* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2016), pp. 89-106.

¹⁰Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: CUP, 2007), p. 56.

¹¹Mark Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), pp. 182-8. Figures like Petrus van Mastricht argue that one of the key biblical rationales for divine simplicity is God's identity as the 'absolutely first being', i.e., God's metaphysical ultimacy or priority. He appeals to passages like Jeremiah 10 in support of this claim. Peter van Mastricht, *Faith in the Triune God*, vol. 2 of *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 1.2.6.xxiv.

¹²See, e.g., Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011); Tyson L. Putthoff, *Gods and Humans in the Ancient Near East* (Cambridge: CUP, 2020); Christoph Marksches, *God's Body*, trans. Alexander Johannes Edmonds (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019). Against certain theological interpretations of the foregoing which reject any focus on divine incorporeality in the Hebrew Bible, see Mark Hamilton, 'Divine (In)Corporeality in Psalms and Job', *The Journal of Theological Studies* 71/1 (2020), pp. 11–35.

¹³Michael Dick (ed.), *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth* (Winona Lake, IL: Eisenbrauns, 2018), p. 38.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 17-8.

‘produced’ or ‘augmented’ via joint agency and one who is *only* a maker or producer and thus falls outside the class of made things. Jeremiah 10 objects to any aspect of Yahweh (in this case, Yahweh’s identification with a particular idol) being synergistically produced in concert with the ‘work’ or ‘labour’ (*ma’āsê*, v. 9) of a craftsman. By contrast, Yahweh is the one who ‘made the earth’ (v.12) and who formed ‘all things’ or ‘the whole’ (*kōl*, v. 16). This is likewise the key contrast in Isaiah’s parallel polemic: ‘I am Yahweh who is making all (*kōl*)’ (Isa. 44:24). Yahweh is distinguished from ‘all things’, including other deities, because Yahweh makes *everything* and is in no sense a product. As Marilyn Lundberg notes, Jeremiah 10 is an apology for a distinctive form of Israelite monotheism. What distinguishes Yahweh from lesser deities is that they are in some sense ‘depend[ent] on human support’ and thus ‘can be put in the same category’ as other things, unlike Yahweh.¹⁵ Lundberg’s claim involves a not uncontroversial but nonetheless widely influential understanding of ‘Israelite monotheism’.

As Benjamin Sommer’s seminal treatment suggests, Israelite monotheism – associated in particular with the post-exilic period – affirms not that there is only one heavenly or divine being, but that God is absolutely distinguished in terms of power and mode of being from everything else. Defined in these terms, the Hebrew Bible includes a number of monotheistic claims alongside references to other divine beings.¹⁶ In describing the ‘ontological difference’ between God and ‘all things’ constitutive of Israelite monotheism, Sommer suggests the gods of the pagans are ‘born from something prior to them’ and thus ‘are part of creation’.¹⁷ Or, as Jacob Milgrom similarly states, the basic premise of ancient polytheism is ‘that its deities are themselves dependent’.¹⁸ The distinctive claim of Israelite monotheism for these Hebrew Bible scholars (and others from a prior generation like Kaufmann¹⁹) is that

¹⁵Marilyn Lundberg, ‘The “Mis-Pi” Rituals and Incantations and Jeremiah 10:1-16’, in John Goldingay (ed.), *Uprooting and Planting* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 222-6. Lundberg largely affirms Dick’s reading of Jeremiah 10, but pushes back on his contention that the author(s) of Jeremiah 10 deals unfairly with the *mis pi* ritual.

¹⁶Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, pp. 146-74.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 166-7, 169. Paula Frederiksen, amongst others, criticises Sommer’s use of the term ‘monotheism’, because the language of deity for ‘ancient Jews’ refers to a graded continuum of power with Yahweh at the summit. Paula Fredriksen, ‘Philo, Herod, Paul, and the Many Gods of Ancient Jewish “Monotheism”’, *Harvard Theological Review* 115/1 (2022), pp. 26-7. Yet advocates of Sommer’s account could assimilate this claim within his account of monotheism. There might be a hierarchy of power or being with the language of divinity applying, in different ways, to various parts of the hierarchy. Theologically speaking, this is standard for theologies of metaphysical participation and theosis. However, Yahweh is likewise ‘off the scale’ of created power by virtue of Yahweh’s ontological distinction and ‘incomparability’. Barry Miller contrasts a ‘limit *simpliciter*’ (the foremost member of a series) with a ‘limit case’ (that towards which a series points but which is not a member of the series). A circle is the limit case of a series of polygons in which each member of the series has an additional side, even though the circle is not a part of the series (Barry Miller, *A Most Unlikely God: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Nature of God* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996], pp. 7-9). Just so, Yahweh might be the limit case of a series of increasingly powerful created beings even if ‘off the scale’ of power. The entire hierarchy is ‘divine’, but in different ways, making sense canonically of the fact that the Hebrew Bible affirms the existence of other gods (e.g., Psalm 82) while likewise including assertions, like those of Isaiah 40-66, that God is so exalted that there are *no* other gods. See Joel Kaminsky and Anne Stewart, ‘God of All the World: Universalism and Developing Monotheism in Isaiah 40-66’, *Harvard Theological Review* 99/2 (2006), pp.139–63.

¹⁸Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 42.

¹⁹Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p.21.

Yahweh's independence is the ground of Yahweh's ontological difference from all else, including the gods.²⁰

With this – admittedly contested – understanding of post-exilic Israelite monotheism in view, we can understand why Lundberg says Jeremiah 10's polemic against idolatry amounts to a forceful affirmation of Israelite monotheism. Jeremiah 10 contends that Yahweh, as the unique Creator, is not included in the class of 'all things', because all things are made and depend upon something else, whereas Yahweh is *solely* a maker and does not depend upon other things.²¹ Jeremiah 10's polemic does not merely imply God is uncreated; it implies a more all-embracing denial of the possibility of Yahweh's augmentation, because, again, the 'mouth opening' ritual does not fundamentally transform the deity's mode of being or even offer association with an idol for the first time. The ritual merely involves cooperation with a creaturely agent to associate with an additional object. Even this is to include this deity amongst the 'made' in contrast to Yahweh's incomparable status. It is from this radical account of divine aseity that I infer divine simplicity.

Inferring doctrine from Scripture

In this section, I summarise one way of understanding how doctrines are inferred from and authorised by Scripture. This methodology undergirds my subsequent claim that divine simplicity should be inferred from Jeremiah 10. There is no consensus regarding how the Bible authorises doctrines and thus any proposal is not uncontroversial, but neither is it idiosyncratic.

A biblically authorised doctrine is inferred by 'good and necessary consequence'²² from the canon as a whole.²³ This implies, as Jon Levenson suggests, a doctrine can be biblically authorised even if never in the mind of any human author, authorial community, or redactor.²⁴ This is, in part, rooted in Scripture's 'consequent sense'.²⁵ This sense suggests a text's meaning cannot be reduced to the implications applying most directly in its 'original' context(s).²⁶ Given some account of divine inspiration,

²⁰Levenson criticises aspects of Kaufmann's account of Israelite monotheism (which bears some similarity to Sommer's), worrying that elements of the pagan alternatives to Yahweh's independent existence appear in the Hebrew Bible (Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994], pp. 3-11). Yet Kaufmann recognises this, and it need not conflict with his account (e.g., Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, p. 60). As per this essay's remit as outlined in the introduction, I only offer a positive account of the biblical basis of divine simplicity without explicating how it is to be 'harmonised' with theogonic texts like Psalm 74 and 82. Nonetheless, along these lines, see Markus Bockmuehl, 'Creatio ex nihilo in Palestinian Judaism and Early Christianity', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65/3 (August 2012), p. 261.

²¹Lundberg, 'The "Mis-Pi" Rituals', pp. 226-7.

²²See the Westminster Confession of Faith I.vi.

²³Cf. Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 1.14.2, who notes that many doctrines are not found 'by express literal mention, [but are] deduced out of a Scripture by collection'.

²⁴Jon Levenson, 'The Eighth Principle of Judaism and the Literary Simultaneity of Scripture', *The Journal of Religion* 68/2 (1988), p. 221. There are important discussions, often in dialogue with Gadamer, contrasting 'text/reader' and 'author/reader' modes of interpretation that cannot detain us here.

²⁵Charles DeVine, 'The Consequent Sense', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 2/2 (1 April 1940), pp. 145-55.

²⁶Jenson objects to claims that a theological reading is an imposition upon a stable 'original' meaning. Robert Jenson, 'A Second Thought about Inspiration', *Pro Ecclesia* 13/4 (September 2004), p. 395.

divine and human authors/redactors are jointly involved in Scripture's production,²⁷ and the divine author uniquely foresees whatever consequent implications are implied by a given affirmation.²⁸ These consequent implications often come to the surface in dialogue with philosophical questions that were not in view at the time of a text's composition and initial reception. Colin Gunton calls philosophy theology's 'indispensable opponent' for this reason.²⁹ Philosophical questions about the nature of reality as a whole help theologians discover consequent biblical inferences as they ascertain the implications of biblical affirmations in view of questions beyond the purview of Scripture's human authors.³⁰

Creation *ex nihilo* is an oft-cited example. Creation *ex nihilo* is not explicitly affirmed in any single biblical text,³¹ but nonetheless, Janet Soskice argues, while it 'attains clear formulation only in response to "pagan" philosophy, it does not reflect [the] absorption of Hellenistic ideas but is rather a critical response'.³² Even if *creatio ex nihilo* was not in the mind of a human biblical author, when confronted with rival ideas about the relationship between Creator and creation from sources like neo-Platonism, theologians inferred *creatio ex nihilo* from biblical texts contrasting God and all other things.³³ Creation *ex nihilo* is, in part, then 'philosophically derived', but only insofar as questions raised by rival interpretations of reality caused theologians to draw out consequent implications of biblical claims when interpreted in light of the canon.³⁴ This account of the way doctrines are inferred from Scripture rejects a strict separation between 'biblical' and 'philosophical' reasoning. Interpreting the Bible involves bringing, as Scott Shalkowski suggests, 'philosophically-loaded beliefs about the structure of the cosmos' to the text, which guide one's inferences.³⁵ Or again, as Brevard Childs suggests, theological 'biblical exegesis moves dialogically between text and reality' since it aims not merely at historical reconstruction but the truth about the way things are more broadly.³⁶ Finally,

²⁷For Thomas, the literal sense includes the intentions of human and divine authors. Aquinas, *ST*, I.1.10.

²⁸Some claims authorised by Scripture were 'not understood by the author, [but] without doubt the Holy Spirit understood them'. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia* [hereafter *De Pot.*], trans. English Dominican Fathers (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1952), IV.1.

²⁹Colin Gunton, 'Indispensable Opponent: The Relations of Systematic Theology and the Philosophy of Religion', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 38/3 (1996), pp. 298–306.

³⁰See Sellar's widely cited definition: 'The aim of philosophy... is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.' Wilfrid Sellars, *In the Space of Reasons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 369. In this context, note Richard Hays' observation that both rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament authors often 'extend' the Hebrew Bible in 'new directions'. Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 5.

³¹This is contested but is a widely accepted account of the biblical origins of the doctrine.

³²Janet M. Soskice, 'Creatio ex nihilo: its Jewish and Christian foundations', in David B. Burrell, Carlo Cogliati, Janet M. Soskice and William R. Stoeger (eds.), *Creation and the God of Abraham* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 31. This implies no naive contrast between Judaism and Hellenism.

³³See the similar argument of Frances Young, "'Creatio Ex Nihilo": A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44/2 (May 1991), pp. 139–52.

³⁴Markus Bockmuehl offers a slight variation on these accounts, agreeing that creation out of nothing was a theological response to Hellenistic philosophy and 'Gnosticism', but suggesting the substance of the doctrine is 'rooted in scripture and pre-Christian Jewish literature' insofar as they emphasise God's role as absolute Creator of all things. Bockmuehl, 'Creatio ex nihilo', pp. 253–70.

³⁵Scott Shalkowski, 'Theoretical Virtues and Theological Construction', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 41/2 (1997), p. 78.

³⁶Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), p. 85.

this likewise implies, as Sommer suggests, that ‘it is both religiously fitting and academically expedient’ to deploy both technical theological discussions from later centuries and historical research into Iron Age sources in the course of a single act of interpretation.³⁷

An adequate account of how doctrines are authorised by Scripture would include a number of other features, such as interpretation’s ecclesial setting, the question of the ‘harmonisation’ of potentially conflicting biblical claims, the way in which tradition guides and even blocks possible consequent inferences, and the spiritual dispositions of the interpreter. Nonetheless, to summarise this all too brief account, many doctrines are inferences made on the basis of biblical texts, interpreted canonically, when one asks consequent questions not explicitly addressed by the Bible’s human authors.

Inferring divine simplicity from Scripture

I apply this methodology in the present case by placing Jeremiah 10’s contrast between God and ‘all things’ in dialogue with contemporary debates regarding divine aseity, the divine attributes, and the God-world relation. In dialogue with matters not directly in the purview of the human authors of Jeremiah 10, I outline why the sort of divine aseity inferred from Jeremiah 10 leads to the inference to divine simplicity.

In the course of rejecting the applicability of mouth-opening rituals to Yahweh, Jeremiah 10 asserts that God depends upon nothing. This belief, applied more generally as per the account of theological interpretation outlined above, is referred to as divine aseity or ultimacy.³⁸ At times, opponents of divine simplicity appeal to weakened accounts of aseity to block the traditional inference from aseity to divine simplicity. For example, for Ryan Mullins, ‘real relations’ in God to creatures while contradicting divine simplicity, do not undermine divine aseity because

nothing about this real relation implies any deeper kind of co-dependency. For example, I am really related to the chair that I am currently sitting on. I can most certainly exist without the chair, and the chair can exist without me. Nothing about my existence or my essence depends upon this chair. The same is true of God if God is really related to creatures.³⁹

Mullins thinks he is independent of a given relation if his existence (in terms of existential quantification, one supposes) and essential definition are unaffected by this relation. God’s aseity for Mullins then consists in not being caused to exist and not having God’s essential definition depend upon other things.⁴⁰ Thus, Mullins thinks divine aseity implies God’s essential but not accidental attributes are possessed independently.

³⁷Benjamin Sommer, *Revelation and Authority* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 5.

³⁸For definitions of divine ultimacy and/or aseity, see: Brian Leftow, ‘Is God an Abstract Object?’, *Noûs* 24/4 (1990), p. 586; William Wood, *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion* (Oxford: OUP, 2021), p. 125. The foregoing descriptions are largely ‘negative’ and should be paired positively with a description of divine self-sufficiency and repletion, e.g., Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, p. 120.

³⁹R. T. Mullins, ‘The Creator/Creature Distinction in Debates over Models of God’, *Religions* 13/12 (December 2022), p. 10.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 3.

If this were all divine aseity amounted to, the caricature of the ‘mouth-opening’ rituals in Jeremiah 10 would make little sense. The deities of the caricatured idolators could exist apart from association with a particular idol and did not change essential definition via the mouth-opening ritual. Mullins’s description of aseity is not fine-grained enough to account for the radical aseity of Yahweh implied by Jeremiah 10.

Sarah Adams and Jon Robson object to many contemporary definitions of divine aseity. As they note, many contemporary definitions appeal to David Lewis’s influential and yet ambiguous distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties. As Lewis says in one place: ‘We distinguish *intrinsic* properties, which things have in virtue of the way they themselves are, from *extrinsic* properties, which they have in virtue of their relations or lack of relations to other things.’⁴¹ Adams and Robson worry that if God is thought to be independent only with respect to God’s intrinsic properties, whereas God’s extrinsic properties are dependent, then aseity is reduced to a ‘mere truism: God doesn’t depend on anything else for the properties he has independently of anything else’.⁴²

There is no agreed-upon distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties.⁴³ On some accounts, if a property could be possessed even if the subject was unaccompanied (i.e., if there was nothing in the world apart from the subject), then the property is intrinsic.⁴⁴ On such an account, a deity’s relation to an idol is extrinsic and thus would potentially be compatible with divine aseity if aseity only applied to intrinsic properties – unlike the claims of Jeremiah 10. However, there is wide agreement that the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties, amongst other things, distinguishes duplicates and helps account for real changes in a subject.⁴⁵ Duplicates are qualitatively but not numerically identical, and thus duplicates possess identical intrinsic but not extrinsic properties.⁴⁶ Likewise, something is the subject of a real change, not *merely* a change of descriptions, only if its intrinsic properties change.⁴⁷

Consider a sunburn. A sunburn requires the sun; thus, one might initially assume being sunburned is an extrinsic property. However, in discussions of extrinsic and intrinsic properties, colour is a paradigmatic instance of a qualitative, intrinsic property. Even if one only gains this property by virtue of something external, the sun has produced a real, qualitative change *in* the subject. A sunburn is intrinsic according to two of the key criteria we have identified. It makes one qualitatively different from a putative duplicate and is a real change, not merely a change of descriptions.

Jeremiah 10 views a deity’s relation to an idol along these lines. The deity, after the ritual, is associated with the idol by virtue of a synergy of agency between the deity and

⁴¹David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), p. 61.

⁴²Sarah Adams and Jon Robson, ‘Analyzing Aseity’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 50/2 (2020), p. 263.

⁴³Dan Marshall and Brian Weatherson, ‘Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Properties’, in Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/intrinsic-extrinsic/>.

⁴⁴For discussion of and modifications to views of the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties broadly along these lines, see, e.g., David Lewis, ‘Extrinsic Properties’, *Philosophical Studies*, 4/2 (1983), pp. 333–45; Peter Vallentyne, ‘Intrinsic Properties Defined’, *Philosophical Studies* 88/2 (1997), pp. 209–19.

⁴⁵Even those rejecting duplication as the means of demarcating intrinsic from extrinsic properties still suggest not differing amongst duplicates is a necessary condition for intrinsicity. See, e.g., Ralf M. Bader, ‘Towards a Hyperintensional Theory of Intrinsicity’, *Journal of Philosophy* 110/10 (2013), p. 536.

⁴⁶David Lewis, ‘Extrinsic Properties’, *Philosophical Studies*, 4/2 (1983), pp. 197–200.

⁴⁷This is referred to as a ‘Cambridge change’. See Peter Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge, 1969), pp. 70–2.

worshipper. Thus, even though the transformation wrought by the ritual is produced in concert with something *external* to the deity (viz., the worshipper), the result is a qualitative change *in* the deity that could distinguish this deity from a supposed duplicate.

This sort of distinction is clarified by reference to the medieval distinction between two different sorts of accidental relations: a 'real' accident and an accidental relation of reason. As Mark Henninger explains, despite other disagreements, medievals largely agreed that a real relation inheres *in* its subject. A real relation is intrinsic, in the sense I am using the term, in that it actualises a potency in the subject. In contrast, an example of a non-real relation is being of equal size to another object (this is likewise a paradigmatic example of an extrinsic property in contemporary discussions). While the subject's volume explains this relation, gaining the relation need make no intrinsic difference to the subject, in that there need be no actualisation of potency or qualitative change.⁴⁸ The medieval distinction between real and non-real accidental relations fulfils the two functions we have noted that the modern distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties achieves (amongst other things). To gain a real and/or intrinsic accident counts as a real change in that a potency is actualised and signifies two things are not duplicates, whereas to gain a relation of reason does not imply such actualisation and would not rule out duplication.⁴⁹

This offers one way of distinguishing intrinsic and extrinsic properties that clarifies divine aseity and moves beyond mere truism.⁵⁰ Thomas (along with other medieval thinkers like Scotus⁵¹) denies that God gains real, intrinsic accidents by virtue of relating to creatures because this implies dependence in God. This is broadly similar to the way Jeremiah 10 denies that God gains association with an idol by acting in concert with creatures.⁵² Yet Thomas nonetheless affirms it is compatible with divine aseity and divine simplicity to predicate many things of God 'accidentally'.⁵³ These are relations of reason; gaining such relations signifies only changes of description.⁵⁴ They describe a relation to something outside of God, changing the patient of God's act, without requiring a change in or actualisation of a potency in God. Therefore, for Thomas, divine aseity is compatible with changes of description, but incompatible with new accidents inhering in God wrought in concert with things outside God. In this sense, divine aseity is compatible with God's extrinsic properties depending upon creatures, but not God's intrinsic properties (i.e., it is only the latter which contradicts Thomas's account of divine simplicity).

In conclusion, contra Mullins, the radical account of aseity we inferred from Jeremiah 10's consequent sense denies not only that God's essential definition or fundamental existence is independent but goes further. There is no sense in which God is intrinsically or substantially augmented by external things.

At this point, however, we turn from this question of God's possession of real accidents to the broader question of whether God's essential character and attributes are possessed independently. One of the key issues motivating divine simplicity historically

⁴⁸Mark Gerald Henninger, *Relations: Medieval Theories, 1250-1325* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), pp. 4-5, 17.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 19-21.

⁵⁰This is not the only way of distinguishing intrinsic and extrinsic properties.

⁵¹Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus on God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 103.

⁵²Gaining a real relation of any sort 'enriches and perfects' the subject. Henninger, *Relations*, p. 22.

⁵³See, e.g., Aquinas, *De Pot.*, 7.8. See also Alexander Pruss, 'On Two Problems of Divine Simplicity', *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 1 (2008), pp. 151-67; Peter Weigel, *Aquinas on Simplicity* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 54.

⁵⁴Miller, *A Most Unlikely God*, pp. 106-12; Feser, 'The Neo-Classical Challenge to Classical Theism', *Philosophy Compass* 17/8 (August 2022), pp. 4-6.

is the question of God's relation to abstract objects. If God possesses distinct intrinsic properties, then what are these properties? On one realist way of understanding properties, perhaps God exemplifies and thus in some sense depends upon uncreated abstracta.⁵⁵ What if we seek to apply, again thinking in terms of the consequent sense, the view of divine aseity inferred from Jeremiah 10 to this question of whether there are abstract objects God exemplifies and thus depends upon?

When scripture (see Col. 1:16 or John 1:3) or the Nicene Creed speaks of God as the Creator of all things visible and invisible, or when Jeremiah 10 suggests God is the Creator of all things who depends upon nothing else, the key question is not – as Wolterstorff and Yandell suggest – whether the human authors of Scripture had 'in mind' abstract objects.⁵⁶ The question is whether, when *we* are confronted with the question of 'abstract objects', the belief that everything save God is created by God should *really* extend to 'all things.' Should we make a consequent inference from biblical claims about God's unique aseity and deny that God depends upon abstract objects?⁵⁷ Leftow argues that if one affirms God is 'the creator and sustainer of all that is distinct from Himself, then either God's attributes are somehow created by God, or God's attributes are not exemplifications of something distinct from Godself upon which God depends.'⁵⁸

In contrast, Peter van Inwagen thinks scriptural and creedal claims contain 'a tacitly restricted quantifier' excluding abstract objects from 'all things' God creates.⁵⁹ Yet as Soskice suggests, 'the heart of the doctrine [of creation] is the dependence of "all that is" . . . on God.'⁶⁰ Similarly, Jonathan Kvanvig says that at its broadest, the 'sourcehood or ontological dependence' of all things on God is the heart of 'creation theology'.⁶¹ If to be 'created' signals a relation in which a thing depends upon something else in a fundamental way – as Jeremiah 10 seems likewise to suggest – then to assume a 'tacitly restricted quantifier' and assert that God depends upon certain objects, even uncreated ones, would mean the affirmation that God is the 'uncreated Creator of all things' could be more accurately restated as follows: 'Created things are dependent upon and thus created by God. God is uncreated with respect to *that class of things* (i.e. created things), but God is dependent upon and thus created by another class of things.'⁶² This undermines the absolute distinction between independent Creator and dependent

⁵⁵There are of course other accounts of properties possession. See the brief discussion in the next section and in particular in footnote 77.

⁵⁶Nicholas Wolterstorff, *On Universals* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 293; Keith Yandell, 'God and Propositions', in Paul Gould (ed.), *Beyond the Control of God?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 23-4. Craig goes further, arguing John's Gospel rejects the independent existence of abstract objects. William Lane Craig, *God over All* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), pp. 13-40.

⁵⁷Leftow claims our account of divine perfection should outstrip the explicit claims of the biblical authors, because regardless of what was in their minds, they would agree 'whatever it *really* is to have understanding [or any other perfection] with no limits is true of God'. Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), p. 10.

⁵⁸Leftow, 'Is God an Abstract Object?', pp. 582-3. See also footnote 77 below.

⁵⁹Peter van Inwagen, 'God and Other Uncreated Things', in Kevin Timpe (ed.), *Metaphysics and God* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 3–20.

⁶⁰Soskice, 'Creatio ex nihilo', p. 24.

⁶¹Jonathan Kvanvig, *Depicting Deity* (Oxford: OUP, 2021), p. 9.

⁶²See Timothy Mawson on the merely relative ability of creatures to create and be independent in contrast with God's absolute independence of 'existence and character'. Tim Mawson, *Belief in God* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 72.

creature texts like Jeremiah 10 aim to secure.⁶³ This is not because a biblical author had abstract objects in mind, but because the vision of divine aseity outlined in texts like Jeremiah 10 applies to them analogously to the way it applies immediately to ancient ‘mouth opening’ rituals.

Thomas’s account of simplicity and analogy – which for him are intertwined – is referred to the Old Testament’s incomparability statements and is likewise rooted, in part, in his attempt to reckon with God’s relation to abstract objects.⁶⁴ It is because ‘none shall be like thee’ that Thomas denies univocal predications purporting to describe what God is like intrinsically and affirms divine simplicity.⁶⁵ An aspect of Thomas’s denial of God’s dependence upon abstract objects is a corresponding denial of a universal account of predication applying to creatures and God.⁶⁶ Positive, perfective attributes are not possessed by God and creatures in the same way. There is no real distinction between God and God’s nature, and God has no distinct intrinsic properties.⁶⁷ Thomas aims to reject – to take the example he uses – that there is an independent universal termed ‘goodness’ which, by exemplifying, allows God and creatures to be termed ‘good’; rather, ‘a creature’s likeness to God is as that of a hot thing to heat, not of a hot thing to one that is hotter’.⁶⁸ God is incomparable because God is independent and possesses attributes in a manner distinct from creatures who depend upon God for their essential features. Rather than possessing properties by virtue of a relation of exemplification, God is named with certain attributes because God’s simple being is the formal exemplar that creatures diversely participate in or exemplify. Creatures are like ‘hot’ things made hot by heat, thus bearing a derivative and imperfect likeness to perfect heat. We ‘name’ God not in view of the simple but infinite mode in which God exists in Godself, but on the basis of the finite, diverse modes of creaturely exemplification.⁶⁹ Creaturely natures are finite exemplifications of aspects of God’s simple, infinite perfection, and thus by virtue of the relation of creatures to their Creator, creaturely intellects gain some purchase on the divine nature, but not a vision of the simple but infinite way in which God exists in Godself. In sum, Thomas’ distinction between the nature of divine attribution and creaturely property possession is not ad hoc, but is rooted in the doctrine of creation. It is, for him, informed by the way he understands God to possess attributes in a simple, ‘original’ and independent way, while creatures possess attributes in not only a causally but also a formally dependent manner.⁷⁰ This explains the prediction of

⁶³See the similar argument in Leftow, *God and Necessity*, pp. 60–4.

⁶⁴I have focused on Jeremiah, but one could identify similar claims regarding divine aseity and incomparability in Isaiah 40; Isaiah 46:5–7; 1 Samuel 2:2; Exodus 15:11; Job 26, 40; Psalms 50:7–13, 89:6, 145:3; and Acts 17:24–29.

⁶⁵Aquinas, *De Pot.* 8.7. Many extrinsic predications of God are univocal. Likewise, some extrinsic claims are subject to self-applicability paradoxes (e.g., the claim that ‘God can only be described analogically’ is not analogical). See the discussion in Simon Hewitt, *Negative Theology and Philosophical Analysis: Only the Splendour of Light* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 20–8; pp. 100–4.

⁶⁶Aquinas, *ST* 1.84.5.

⁶⁷As Panchuk suggests, to ‘exemplify a property is to be delimited and finite’ since it is to exist in one particular way rather than another. Michelle Panchuk, ‘The Simplicity of Divine Ideas: Theistic Conceptual Realism and the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity’, *Religious Studies* 57/3 (2021), p. 391.

⁶⁸Aquinas, *De Pot.* 7.7.

⁶⁹See Gregory Rocca, ‘The Distinction between Res Significata and Modus Significandi in Aquinas’s Theological Epistemology’, *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 55/2 (1991), pp. 173–97.

⁷⁰Thomas’s account of the divine ideas, which bears commonalities with versions of divine conceptualism, is central here; see Aquinas, *ST* 1.84.5; Gregory Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

positive perfective attributes, with respect both to creatures and God, without appeal to uncreated abstracta existing ‘outside’ God, potentially threatening divine ultimacy.

We can begin to see then why Thomas infers divine simplicity from biblical claims like Jeremiah’s regarding divine incomparability and aseity. First, divine perfection is ‘incomparable’ with creaturely properties (note the resonance with Jeremiah 10). God does not possess attributes in the way creatures possess properties, which would imply an unacceptable form of comparability. Second, all that is not God (i.e., ‘all things’) asymmetrically depend upon God both causally and ontologically/formally, while God does not depend upon them. ‘All things’ is not restricted to whatever was in the mind of the biblical authors, but includes whatever consequent, canonical inferences should be made on the basis of Scripture’s claims. Third, not only are God’s essential attributes independent but also God possesses no real accidents, for this too would imply an unacceptable form of dependence. In short, if one thinks Jeremiah 10 asserts a radical view of divine ultimacy/aseity, then it will be plausible to think it implies divine simplicity.

Aseity and divine simplicity

Some neo-classical theists, who outline some of the most well-known criticisms of divine simplicity, recognise the plausibility of a connection between divine simplicity and robust divine aseity. Many who hold to relational ontologies think a substance depends upon the universals it instantiates, whereas constituent ontologists often think a substance depends upon its constituents (the kind of dependence in both cases is not causal but metaphysical, related to what contemporary notions of ‘grounding’ aim to capture).⁷¹ Therefore, even some critics of divine simplicity agree that a denial of divine simplicity requires a weakening of divine aseity. For example, Nicholas Wolterstorff says ‘aseity implies simplicity’ and goes on to reconstruct a weakened account of aseity, denying God’s independence from abstract objects.⁷² Similarly, in modern systematic theology, the most vociferous critics of divine simplicity reject its traditional form not in spite of but because of its link with robust divine aseity. For example, Paul Hinlicky’s forceful critique of traditional accounts of divine simplicity rejects ‘protological aseity’, affirming there is an ‘amplification of [God’s] being’ and an ‘add[ition] to His actuality’.⁷³ Robert Jenson likewise objects to accounts of divine simplicity that do not

⁷¹On this distinction between constituent and relational ontologies, see Peter Van Inwagen, *Existence: Essays in Ontology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), pp. 202–20. There is debate about whether grounding is equivalent to ontological dependence, or whether cases of grounding involve ontological dependence but the latter is a broader notion than the former. See Tuomas E. Tahko, ‘Grounding and Ontological Dependence’, in Tuomas E. Tahko (ed.), *An Introduction to Metametaphysics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2015), pp.93–119; cf. 105, where Tahko suggests that for a tighter link between grounding and ontological dependence the notion of ‘priority’ should be added.

⁷²Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), p. 246. Alvin Plantinga similarly weakens the ‘sovereignty aseity intuition’ to explicate God’s dependence upon abstract objects (Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* [Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980]). Neo-classical theism is often defined by the rejection of God’s possession of the traditional great-making attributes to the highest degree; see Kevin Timpe, ‘Neo-Classical Theism’, in Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (eds.), *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), p. 202.

⁷³Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*, p. 56.

allow the human history of Jesus to be ‘constitutive’ of God’s being.⁷⁴ Jürgen Moltmann objects to the ‘philosophical postulate of absolute unity’ because it makes God’s relation to the world ‘one-way’ rather than ‘mutual’ (i.e., it disallows God from being ontologically constituted by relating to creation).⁷⁵ And, finally, according to Bruce McCormack, divine simplicity unhelpfully eliminates the possibility that God’s nature could be constituted through its ontological receptivity to the human history of Jesus of Nazareth.⁷⁶ Given this widespread affirmation of the connexion between robust aseity and divine simplicity, the interpretation of Jeremiah 10 I have offered raises pressing questions for those confident divine simplicity is ‘unbiblical’.

Nonetheless, despite this agreement between important defenders and critics of divine simplicity that aseity is connected to divine simplicity, there are some ways of seeking to secure the radical vision of divine aseity I have inferred from Jeremiah 10 without divine simplicity.⁷⁷ Addressing these contested proposals is beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, if my argument has succeeded, I have demonstrated something by no means trivial: if one thinks, as do many critics and defenders of divine simplicity, that radical aseity requires divine simplicity, then Jeremiah 10 implies divine simplicity. Further, even those who deny that aseity implies divine simplicity should admit their objection to divine simplicity is largely a ‘philosophical’ rather than strictly biblical one, insofar as they agree that a doctrine rightly ‘inferred’ from scripture is biblically authorised and Jeremiah 10 affirms a radical view of aseity.⁷⁸ If my argument succeeds, then, at a minimum, the disagreement between critics and proponents of divine simplicity does not concern exegesis strictly speaking, but the conceptual and dogmatic question of whether divine simplicity is a fitting inference from divine aseity.

⁷⁴Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 107, 118–9, 124.

⁷⁵Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981), pp. 149, 159–61.

⁷⁶Bruce McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son* (Cambridge: CUP, 2021), pp. 15, 32, 42, 58, 257–8.

⁷⁷For example, some defend a radical version of theistic activism, in which God creates not only abstract objects but God’s own nature (e.g., Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel, ‘Absolute Creation’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23/4 (1986), pp. 358–9). A key objection is ‘the bootstrapping problem’, on which see, e.g., Paul Gould and Richard Davis, ‘Where the Bootstrapping Really Lies: A Neo-Aristotelian Reply to Panchuk’, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57/4 (2017), p. 415. Others suggest God’s dependence upon a nature which also depends upon God is harmless (e.g., Thomas Morris, ‘Dependence and Divine Simplicity’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 23/3 [1988], pp. 161–74; and Crisp, ‘A Parsimonious Model of Divine Simplicity’, pp. 571–2). For initial objections to this sort of view, see Hewitt’s argument that for Thomas, such a view fails to make God ‘the terminus of explanation’ (Hewitt, *Negative Theology and Philosophical Analysis*, p. 91; Aquinas, ST 1.3.7; see also, Stephen R. Holmes, ‘“Something Much Too Plain to Say”: Towards a Defence of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43/1 (2001), p. 153. Finally, Gregory Fowler suggests divine priority, without simplicity, is sufficient for divine aseity (Gregory Fowler, ‘Simplicity or Priority?’, in Jonathan Kvanvig [ed.], *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* [Oxford: OUP, 2015], pp. 114–38; see also Stephen T. Davis, ‘Why Divine Simplicity Is Unnecessary’, in Mirosław Szatkowski (ed.), *Ontology of Divinity* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024], pp. 347–56). For some important objections, see Caleb Cohoe, ‘Accounting for the Whole: Why Pantheism Is on a Metaphysical Par with Complex Theism’, *Faith and Philosophy* 37/2 (2020), pp. 202–19; James Dominic Rooney, ‘Grounding Relations Are Not Unified: Aquinas and Heil versus Schaffer’, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 59/1 (2019), pp. 57–64.

⁷⁸If we accept, merely heuristically, this distinction.

Conclusion

In dialogue with Hebrew Bible scholarship and via a theological interpretation, I inferred a vision of divine aseity from Jeremiah 10, suggesting God neither depends upon nor is substantially augmented by external things. I then argued that it is at least plausible that divine simplicity is required to secure this account of divine aseity. In so doing, I have not hesitated to employ different concepts from those employed in Jeremiah 10, nor, in view of Scripture's consequent sense, to ask questions different from those in the purview of the text's human authors. Yet Scripture was not merely mined for raw material and then shunted aside as in overly rationalistic forms of perfect being theology. Jeremiah 10's vision of divine aseity, interpreted in dialogue with historical scholarship, was a continuing dialogue partner, ruling out insufficiently radical views of divine aseity and funding an inference to divine simplicity.⁷⁹

⁷⁹My thanks to Ian McFarland and the anonymous reviewers from *SJT*. Thanks also to comments from the Logos Seminar at the University of St Andrews and Oliver Crisp, Aaron Cotnoir, J. J. Snodgrass, Alden McCray, and Andrew Torrance.

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