

Chapter 12

How Can We
Reconcile the Love
and the Transcendent
Sovereignty of God?

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1. Introduction

Toward the beginning of his influential book *God at War*,¹ Gregory Boyd introduces us to Zosia. Zosia was a young Jewess in the Warsaw ghetto. With gory cruelty, the Nazis blinded her. Boyd spares us none of the ghastly details and keeps pressing the question of God's morality—assuming, of course, that God knew in advance that this was going to happen. The narration becomes a powerful reason to want to believe that God did *not* know what was going to happen, *could* not know what was going to happen. The book ends by returning to Zosia and arguing in effect that our confidence in God is restored if we fully see that God was *not* morally delinquent, because he did *not* know what those Nazis would choose to do in advance. Because of his ignorance of what would take place, God must not be held accountable for preventing it from happening. This, Boyd argues, is pastorally superior to the moral anguish that wonders where God is or concludes that God himself must be a devil, if he knows in advance about the torture of a Zosia and chooses to do nothing about it.

Thus Boyd's concern is partly pastoral and partly theological—but his pastoral objectives will be attained, he believes, if he can revise the theology of classical theism. To phrase the challenge in this way means that Boyd is inviting us to think not only about the fairly narrow (though clearly important) subject of the nature and extent of God's (fore)knowledge but also about the relation of that knowledge to God's goodness. In fact, Boyd's attention is not on God's goodness in some general and comprehensive sense but in particular on God's love. How can the God of classical Christian theism be considered to be a God of love if he knows in advance what the Nazis will do to Zosia's eyes and does not intervene to prevent it, when preventing it is clearly within his power?

Before we think through some elements of the relationship between God's love and God's transcendent sovereignty, it may be helpful to offer four preliminary reflections.

First, the emotive appeal to an individual story is both a help and a hindrance. It is a help in that it will not allow us to escape by appealing to vague generalities; it will not allow us to retreat to cold philosophical abstractions without clearly perceiving what this means on the street. It has the same appeal as an image on television that attempts to convey, say, the horrors of a particularly severe drought by focusing on one child who is starving to death, one child out of hundreds of thousands.

¹Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 33–34.

But the same individual image may become manipulative. Because we identify with the one starving child or with Zosia, we may be driven by tender emotions rather than by clear thought, by images rather than by even-handed and thoughtful evaluation. In the same way, a television image of the plight of, say, one hard-pressed and unfairly treated family in an urban slum may distort what is the best fiscal policy for the most people in the most slums. In fact, the one emotive image may even blind us to the scale of the problem. Why focus on Zosia? Why not on the rape of Nanking, or on the Holocaust, or on the slaughter of the Armenians, or on the butchery of Genghis Khan, or on the Death March of Bataan, or on the fire-bombing of Tokyo, or on Stalin's slaughter of millions in the Ukraine?

Not for a moment am I suggesting that Boyd has not thought about such matters. But the focus on Zosia's eyes, as emotive as it is, actually obscures the countless instances of barbaric violence in the twentieth century, and in every preceding century. Boyd's scale is too small, and too big. I doubt that we will be able to think clearly about what the Bible would have us think of Zosia's eyes unless we can also think clearly about Job, about Habakkuk, about the rape of Nanking, about the Holocaust.

Second, even at the most superficial level, I am not persuaded that this theodicy is an adequate defense of God. After all, the "openness of God" theists deny that God has knowledge of *future* contingent events; they do not deny that God has exhaustive knowledge of all events in the present and the past, in our present and our past. So when God saw that the Nazis were about to take out Zosia's eyes, why did he not intervene? Or if he still wasn't sure what they were going to do, why didn't he intervene after they took out the first eye? If God's goodness and love can only be preserved in the first instance by ascribing ignorance to God, what will protect his goodness and love now? Slow reaction times?

But that is also why the large-scale examples that I mentioned a few lines ago are so important. Doubtless many Allies were a bit slow coming to terms with the evidence for the Holocaust, but what about God? Why didn't he intervene when the first deaths occurred at Dachau, Auschwitz, Birkenau, Theresienstadt, and the rest? Even if he did not know the outcome of future free contingent decisions, once the Nazis had been burning corpses in their smaller ovens at Auschwitz, wasn't it pretty obvious what the new and bigger ovens at Birkenau were for? Why did he not intervene? Perhaps the first plane to crash into the World Trade Center caught God by surprise, but why didn't he stop the second? In fact, did he not listen into all the plans constructed in secret that brought about this devastation? So why didn't he stop it, since this was clearly in his power?

In short, the ugly reality is that the worst atrocities take time, and after the first few seconds—let alone the first few years—God cannot claim ignorance. So it is difficult to see how an appeal to his alleged ignorance of future outcomes constitutes a substantial theodicy. And if at that point Boyd or some other openness theologian were to appeal (as they do not, so far as I have been able to observe) to other factors—compatibilism, free will, the inscrutable mystery of providence, whatever—

then, of course, they are appealing to the sorts of arguments that many Christians have appealed to for two millennia, arguments that the openness theologians claim are both inadequate and now surpassed by their own revisionist views of God.²

Third, even at the level of pastoral comfort, although Boyd's approach to theodicy may comfort some, it clearly does not comfort others. Openness theologians tell us of people they have known who are helped by coming to the conclusion that God did *not* know in advance of the rape of their daughter. They were thereby enabled to stop thinking troubling, negative thoughts about God. Nevertheless, pastors in the classical tradition are currently finding more and more people who, influenced by the openness theologians, are even more troubled. The rape of their daughter was not only an instance of evil in an evil and fallen world, but an instance where God was not in control in any significant sense—and there are countless numbers of such instances. So precisely how can such a God be trusted? In the varied approaches of classical theism, the rape is a horrible evil, but God can still be trusted. Moreover, many people want to know if there was *any* element of providential care even in the midst of this barbarity—or was it simply an instance where Satan won one, and God was absent?

Fourth, although I have begun this discussion with reference to the work of Gregory Boyd, that was merely for convenience. There is, of course, a larger body of work that embraces openness theology (whether or not it always chooses that particular label).³ That body of work is in certain respects largely congruent with some broader currents of philosophical theology,⁴ and especially with process theology,⁵ even if there are differences between openness theologians and process theologians.⁶ On the scale of history, these developments, with rare exceptions, are

²Some of the more technical dimensions of this problem I briefly deal with below, under section 3.7.

³See, among others, Clark H. Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Richard Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1980); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998); Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

⁴See, e.g., J. R. Lucas, *The Future* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), passim (e.g., see p. 176); see discussion in William Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge* (CSPR; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989). See further, among others, Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992); Keith Ward, *Relational Theology and the Creativity of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982); Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

⁵For instance, Gregory A. Boyd acknowledges his indebtedness to process thought in the published form of his dissertation, *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992). See, e.g., the preface of this book: "It is our conviction that the fundamental vision of the process world view, especially as espoused by Charles Hartshorne, is correct." Similarly, Richard Rice acknowledges his fundamental indebtedness to Hartshorne in "Process Theism and the Open View of God: The Crucial Difference," in *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists*, ed. John B. Cobb Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids:

fairly recent: that is, although Christian thinkers have adopted a wide diversity of positions on the nature of the human will and on how the human will comports with God's transcendence (that he is above the created order and thus above space and time) and God's sovereignty, the overwhelming majority of them have held that God does enjoy exhaustive (fore)knowledge.⁷

The previous chapters of this book have addressed many of the theological and philosophical issues that such an account of God's relative ignorance entails. The issues are sufficiently complex that no one imagines that this book will be the last word.⁸ Certain exegetical matters stand in particularly urgent need of further discussion.⁹ But in this paper my aim is modest. Because among the relatively recent alternative Christian theologies openness theologians have presented their views as, in part, a more believable account of the goodness of God, and in particular of the love of God, I propose to offer some reflections on biblical presentations of the love of God and their bearing on openness theology.

A further reason for approaching the subject from this angle turns on the fact that many scholars in the openness tradition insist that love is the supreme divine attribute, trumping holiness or any of the traditional "omni-" attributes.¹⁰ In other words, a certain conceptual and methodological priority is given to God's relational attributes as opposed to his transcendent attributes—and love is said to be the supreme relational attribute of God.

Eerdmans, 2000), 166. In the same essay, Rice affirms, "It is clear, then, that process and open theists hold views of God that are similar in a number of important ways. For both, love is the supreme divine attribute, the essential nature of God. For both, God's experience exhibits relationality, temporality, and contingency. And for both, the world has significance for the inner life of God" (184). Clark Pinnock prefers to think of his approach as a "via media" between classical theism and process theism ("Between Classical and Process Theism," in *Process Theology*, ed. Ronald Nash [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987], 321).

⁶These differences are articulated in slightly different (though not mutually incompatible) ways. In line with classical theism, Richard Rice affirms "God's ontological independence of the world," insisting that the relationship between God and the world is "asymmetrical," since the latter is dependent on him while the reverse is not true (*God's Foreknowledge*, 32–33). Not dissimilarly, Clark Pinnock affirms that God created the world *ex nihilo*, which brings with it the assumption of God's ontological independence from his creation ("Between Classical and Process Theism," 317–20). Pinnock ultimately ties this stance to the doctrine of the Trinity (which, of course, he shares with classical theism). William Hasker asserts that process theism goes too far when it insists that God's power is always persuasive and never coercive; that may be the regular way of things, but it leaves God with too little control ("A Philosophical Perspective," in *The Openness of God*, 139).

⁷There is a useful historical summary of the question in the unpublished doctoral dissertation of Steven C. Roy, "How Much Does God Foreknow? An Evangelical Assessment of the Doctrine of the Extent of the Foreknowledge of God in Light of the Teaching of Open Theism" (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2001), esp. 19–128.

⁸For other useful treatments from the perspective of historic confessionalism, see especially Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000).

⁹Some of these are nicely treated in Stephen C. Roy, "How Much Does God Foreknow?" I hope to address some others in a forthcoming publication.

¹⁰The statement of Richard Rice in n. 5, above, is typical.

2. A Summary of Biblical Ways of Thinking About the Love of God

Before thinking through some of the issues that bear on the relations between God's love and God's transcendent sovereignty, I must beg the indulgence of summarizing an argument I have made before.¹¹ The Bible talks about God's love in at least five distinguishable ways.

2.1 The Peculiar Love of the Father for the Son, and of the Son for the Father

The theme is most explicit in the Gospel of John. Twice we are told that the Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20); once we are told that the Son loves the Father (14:31). This sort of language marks Christian monotheism off from all other monotheisms and lies, finally, at the heart of Trinitarianism. Clearly this is not the love of redemption, for neither the Son nor the Father needs redeeming. Moreover, the ways in which the respective loves of Father for Son and Son for Father are manifested differ slightly: The Son displays his love by perfectly obeying his Father (e.g., 8:29; 14:31); the Father displays his love for the Son by placing everything in his hands, by "showing" him all things—such that whatever the Father does the Son also does, to the end that all should honor the Son even as they honor the Father (3:35; 5:16–30).

2.2 God's Providential Love over All That He Has Made

The creation account includes God's pronouncement that what he has made is "good" (Gen. 1–2); this is the conclusion of a loving, provident Creator. Jesus teaches that God clothes the grass with the glorious color of wild flowers, even where no human eye can see them; he says that the birds of the air find food because of God's oversight, and not a sparrow falls from the heaven apart from his sanction. When Jesus says these things, he is teaching that God's providence is *loving*, for otherwise the moral lesson that Jesus is driving home, namely, that such a God can be trusted to provide for his own people, would be incoherent (Matt. 6:26; 10:29).

2.3 God's Salvific Stance Toward the Fallen World

To rebels under the old covenant, the sovereign Lord calls out, "As surely as I live . . . I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek. 33:11). Under the new covenant, the Lord Jesus commands that the gospel be preached to all human beings; the good news is to be issued to everyone, and all are commanded to repent. God so loved "the world" that he gave his Son (John 3:16); even if the primary focus of "world" in John's Gospel is on the badness of the fallen moral order rather than on its bigness, this is still a sweeping statement, for "the world" cannot be identified with the elect, for the disciples themselves were drawn out of the world (e.g., 15:19).

¹¹D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000).

2.4 God's Particular, Effective, Selecting Love Toward His Elect

The referent of “elect” may be the entire nation of Israel, or the church, or particular individuals, depending on the passage; the purpose of the election also varies. Nevertheless, in some passages God unambiguously sets his love on some and not on others. The people of Israel are told:

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut. 7:7–8; cf. 4:37)



To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today. (Deut. 10:14–15)

In other words, what distinguishes Israel from the entire universe (“the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it”) is not merit, Israel’s choice, greatness, or anything else intrinsic to Israel. What distinguishes her is the choosing love of God. God directs his love toward Israel; he sets his affection on Israel in a way in which he does *not* set it on others. The prophet Malachi rightly summarizes God’s election of Israel by reporting God as saying: “I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated” (Mal. 1:2–3). Similarly in the New Testament: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25).

2.5 God's Provisional or Conditional Love Toward His Own People

God’s love is sometimes said to be directed toward his own people in a provisional or conditional way—conditional, that is, on their obedience. Already in the Decalogue, God declares himself to be the one who shows his love “to a thousand generations of *those who love me and keep my commandments*” (Ex. 20:6). “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love *for those who fear him*. . . . As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on *those who fear him*. . . . But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is *with those who fear him . . . with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts*” (Ps. 103:11, 13, 17–18, italics added). In the New Testament, Jesus declares, “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love” (John 15:10). Similarly, Jude exhorts his readers, “Keep yourselves in God’s love” (Jude 21), making it clear that it is possible *not* to remain in God’s love.

These sorts of passages presuppose that there is already a relationship between God and his people. Such passages do not depict how we become Christians or the like; they insist, rather, that the believer’s relationship with God must be maintained by obedience, and there is threat of falling out of God’s love and into his judgment

if we disobey—in exactly the same way that my children may fall out of my love (in one sense) and under my discipline if without good cause they do not return with the car when they have promised to do so. Of course, that is not the only way in which I will speak of loving my children. In some contexts, I am able to speak of loving my children regardless of what they do. Nevertheless, there is this familial structure of obligation, this covenantal structure, that makes it possible to speak of my love for them being conditioned on their obedience. Similarly for God’s love.

3. Reflections on the Relations Between God’s Love and God’s Transcendent Sovereignty

The following points are not meant to be an exhaustive probe into the nexus between God’s love and God’s transcendent sovereignty. They are nothing more than a few preliminary reflections aimed at clarifying some of the issues.

3.1 On God As a Person

Biblical depictions of God’s love constitute abundant evidence that the God of the Bible is not an impersonal force. It is wrong to think of the God of the Bible as nothing more than raw power, whether that power is totally sovereign or not. The God of the Bible is a person who interacts with other persons.¹² He is not the God of deists—very powerful, perhaps, but so far removed from the microscopic organisms that we call human beings that he cannot be thought to enter into personal relationships with them. Nor is he the God of pantheists—the life force of the universe, the one into whom or into whose essence we should be absorbed, but not an “Other” who can address us from outside the order that he himself has created and choose to love us, to enter into personal relationships with us who have been created in his image.

In fact, the diversity of these depictions of the love of God—at least five, according to the last section—argue for the importance of thinking of God as a person. For finite human persons enter into numerous kinds of love relationships. “I love playing the tenor sax”; “I love solitude”; “I love my wife”; “They made love”; “She loved her children regardless of their conduct”; “The brothers loved each other with bonds that would never be broken”; “The Lord gave him a love for the whole world, which became his parish”—these and countless more expressions hint at the diversity of subtle shadings that “love” as a noun and as a verb can have in the English language, depending on the context. This diversity of usage is not merely a linguistic matter;¹³ more importantly, it reflects the diverse relationships into which persons may enter.

¹²The literature on what it means to be a “person” is substantial and complex, but most of it is irrelevant to this essay, since on most fronts the meaning of “person” is not disputed between classical and “openness” theists. The only place where there is substantive dispute between them over the meaning of “person” lies in the implicit attempt of “openness” theologians to make “person” a category that *cannot* be applied to a sovereign God with exhaustive foreknowledge.

¹³I have dealt with this in several places, in particular in *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

Somewhat analogously, God as Person enters into a diversity of love relationships as well. Of course, God's diversity of love relationships cannot be mapped *exactly* onto the diversity of love relationships into which his image-bearers may enter. For instance, the love of the Father for the Son, and the love of the Son for the Father, is the love of one perfect Person for another perfect Person. This side of the consummation, human beings cannot experience exactly that, even though this intra-Trinitarian love can be used, in certain respects, as the archetypal love, the archetypal oneness, that Christians must display (John 15:9–17).

Similarly, God's providential love over the entire creation, at least in its scope, cannot be duplicated by creatures as small as we are. Nevertheless it is precisely this aspect of God's love that Christ can use as a normative model for followers of Christ; their love must embrace enemies as well as friends, just as God's (providential) love embraces all without distinction (Matt. 5:45). But although God's diversity of love relationships cannot be mapped exactly onto the diversity of love relationships into which his image-bearers may enter, the diversity of the patterns nicely attests God's personhood. His love is not the impersonal beneficence of the good side of "the Force," but a panoply of loving relationships that reflect the diversity of relationships he has with the created order, and not least with his image-bearers.

Perhaps it should be made clear that nothing I have said warrants talking about discrete "*loves*" of God, as if God, as it were, selects one of the possible "*loves*" that he might display. That would be altogether too mechanical. By analogy, I might speak of loving my children regardless of what they do and thereby speak of love that is unconditioned, or, in another context, I might tell my children to finish a certain task or face sanctions, thus implicitly telling them to remain in my love by obedience (or face my wrath!). But it would be altogether too mechanical to think that in this distinction I have opted for one "kind" of love over against another "kind" of love. In a complex world, personal beings with a capacity to love enter into a diversity of love relationships.

As a result, there are different ways of talking about love, different dimensions to love. It does not follow that there are several hermetically sealed kinds of love, mutually exclusive "*loves*." By the same token, for analytical reasons it is helpful to recognize the different ways in which the Bible can talk about the love of God; it is not particularly helpful to think of these as mutually exclusive "*loves*" of God.

All of this is to say nothing more than that the ways in which the Bible depicts the love of God fully support the view that God is a Person, a relational Being.

3.2 On Classical Theism's View of God As a Person

It is vitally important to acknowledge that *all* sides of this debate insist on this first point. No classical theist, any more than an openness theologian, disputes the truth that God is a Person or that God enters into a variety of loving relationships. When I was still a young man, I recall reading passages from Francis Schaeffer that insisted that God is, on the one hand, transcendent and sovereign,

and, on the other, personal.¹⁴ I was impressed by the way in which he insisted that both truths are crucial for the maintenance of Christian orthodoxy, for I was discovering how the Christian understanding of “God” differs from alternatives in the marketplace of ideas. Later on, of course, I discovered that what Schaeffer was emphasizing was a mere truism of the Christian faith; none of the great Christian theologians of the past two millennia would have disputed the point. Some, doubtless, laid more emphasis on God’s transcendence and sovereignty than on his personal attributes. But Christian theology, with but rare exceptions, did not, until the twentieth century, follow the option of the process theologians and the open theists.

The reason why it is important to reiterate this point now, however, is that in reading most of the literature produced by openness theologians, one would not likely guess it to be the case. Openness theologians regularly depict theologians who hold to a sweeping view of God’s sovereignty, or to exhaustive divine foreknowledge, as if they did *not* equally insist on human accountability or on God’s goodness and love. Because openness theologians judge inadequate the way classical theologians put together God’s unconditioned sovereignty and exhaustive foreknowledge with his love and personal interaction, they tend to depict their opponents in terms that those opponents would not recognize. The result is that, intentionally or otherwise, their depiction of the stance of their opponents often has the flavor of ugly caricature.

I quote some examples of just one author, though it must be said that these are all too typical of the literature.

Such distorted images of omnipotence end up with a *loveless power*. God is the powerful, domineering Lord who always gets precisely what he wants.¹⁵



One simply cannot have it both ways: either God controls everything and the divine-human relationship is impersonal, or God does not control everything and so it is possible for the divine-human relationship to be personal. I have argued that God is wise, competent and resourceful in dealing with us instead of manipulating all that happens. This may seem to diminish sovereignty, but “the sovereignty that reigns unchallenged is not as absolute as the sovereignty that accepts risks.” It requires tremendous wisdom, patience, love, faithfulness and resourcefulness to work with a world of independent beings. A God of sheer omnipotence can run a world of exhaustively controlled beings. But what is magnificent about that?¹⁶

According to this writer, when the compatibilist’s God saves people, he engages in

¹⁴E.g., *The God Who Is There* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 87–91.

¹⁵Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 190.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 215.

How Can We Reconcile the Love and the Transcendent Sovereignty of God?

divine rape because it involves nonconsensual control; the will of one is forced on the will of the other. Of course, the desire God forces on the elect is a beneficent one—for their own good—but it is rape nonetheless.¹⁷

Nor will this writer permit distinctions between proximate causes and remote causes:

If a child is raped and dismembered, there is a human agent who is the proximate cause, but God is the remote cause. The rapist is doing specifically what God ordained him to do. Hence the human agent is the immediate rapist and God is the mediate rapist.¹⁸

Certainly it is easy enough to find passages in Augustine or Calvin or (to cite contemporaries) J. I. Packer or R. C. Sproul where God's exhaustive foreknowledge and utter sovereignty are both affirmed. But that is not all that these authors say on these subjects. If one refers exclusively to such affirmations, it is possible to develop a dismissive caricature of this "providential blueprint"¹⁹ model that charges God with evil, that destroys human responsibility, and that makes God appear to be a power and not a person. But the truth is that all of these writers include passages that show they draw no such inferences. Far from it; rather, they persistently and emphatically disown them.

For instance, a Calvin may affirm in strong language God's utter sovereignty, but he can also write the following:

Moreover, though their perdition depends on the predestination of God, the cause and matter of it is [*sic*] in themselves. . . . Whence then the depravity of man, which made him revolt from God? Lest it should be supposed that it was from his creation, God expressly approved what proceeded from himself. Therefore, man's own wickedness corrupted the pure nature which he had received from God, and his ruin brought with it the destruction of all his posterity. . . . I think I have said enough, not only to remove the ground, but also the pretext of throwing blame on God. The reprobate would excuse their sins by alleging that they are unable to escape the necessity of sinning, especially because a necessity of this nature is laid upon them by the ordination of God. We deny they can thus be validly excused.²⁰

Or again, speaking of Satan in various biblical texts:

This much, therefore, he has of himself, and his own iniquity, that he eagerly, and of set purpose, opposed God, aiming at those things which he deems most contrary to the will of God. But as God holds him bound and fettered

¹⁷Ibid., 240.

¹⁸Ibid., 255–56.

¹⁹This and related expressions are found as the depiction of classical theism by many of the "openness" theologians.

²⁰John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (LCC; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.23.8–9.

by the curb of his power, he executes those things only for which permission has been given him, and thus, however unwilling, obeys his Creator, being forced, whenever he is required, to do Him service.²¹

Again, Calvin can say such things as the following about the love of God:

Hence he both calls himself our Father, and is pleased to be so called by us, by this delightful name relieving us of all distrust, since nowhere can a stronger affection be found than in a father. Hence, too, he could not have given us a stronger testimony of his boundless love than in calling us his sons. But his love towards us is so much the greater and more excellent than that of earthly parents, the farther he surpasses all men in goodness and mercy (Isaiah lxiii.18). Earthly parents, laying aside all paternal affection, might abandon their offspring; he will never abandon us (Ps. xxvii.10), seeing he cannot deny himself. For we have his promise, “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” (Matth. vii.111.) [*sic*] In like manner in the prophet, “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee” (Isaiah xlix.15). But if we are his sons, then as a son cannot betake himself to the protection of a stranger and a foreigner without at the same time complaining of his father’s cruelty or poverty, so we cannot ask assistance from any other quarter than from him, unless we would upbraid him with poverty, or want of means, or cruelty and excessive austerity.²²

The open theists may, if they like, argue that this position is inconsistent. In that case, they must engage it on its own terms. It will not do, for instance, to assume a libertarian definition of the will and thereby prove that the Calvinist synthesis is self-contradictory. Of course it is, on the assumption of a libertarian view of freedom—but Calvinists do not think that the Bible embraces a libertarian definition of the will. It is simply unfair, not to say uncharitable, to charge Calvinism, or virtually any form of classical theism, with an impersonal fatalism.

3.3 On Synthesizing God’s Love and God’s Transcendent Sovereignty

All who wrestle with what Scripture says about God’s transcendent sovereignty, on the one hand, and about God’s personal interaction with his morally accountable image-bearers, on the other, find themselves in the position where they must adopt one of several possible syntheses. Putting to one side the skepticism of those who say that any synthesis is impossible (the sort of stance made popular by David Hume), classical theism has resorted to several approaches. In one of his books, Paul Helm, for example, lists three:²³

²¹Ibid., 1.14.17.

²²Ibid., 3.20.36.

²³Helm, *The Providence of God*, 55–68. Although I differ from Helm at one or two points (as will become clear), I am indebted to him for the brief discussion that follows.

(1) An appeal to middle knowledge. Developed by the Jesuit Luís de Molina (1535–1600), it has recently been given new life and vigor by Alvin Plantinga²⁴ and William Lane Craig.²⁵ There are several ways of getting at middle knowledge. One way is to distinguish between “necessary truths” and “free knowledge.” God knows all “necessary truths,” for example, the truths of logic, or the fact that in base 10 arithmetic two plus two equals four. God does not have to will these things for them to be true; they simply are true, and he knows all such truths because he is omniscient. But he also knows that the President of the United States, as I write these lines, is George W. Bush, and that the capital city of Canada is Ottawa.

But such truths are not true by virtue of some intrinsic necessity. Ask Al Gore, for instance, or recall that the capital of Canada has not always been Ottawa. These truths are true because God has willed them; God knows them to be true, but his knowledge of them is in function of his will having brought them about. In addition, however, apart from these two kinds of knowledge is “middle knowledge,” that is, a knowledge of all the possibilities that God in fact did not will. He might have willed that Al Gore become president; he might have willed that Toronto be the capital of Canada. Thus, lying somewhere between God’s knowledge of necessary truths and his knowledge of things he has willed to bring about (sometimes called his “free knowledge”) lies his middle knowledge—that is, his exhaustive knowledge of all the things that might have been true had he willed them, but are not because he did not will them.

But Molina and his followers develop middle knowledge in a distinctive way. They think that among the conditional propositions that God knows (i.e., among the propositions belonging to middle knowledge) are those that state what would happen if under certain conditions a person freely (i.e., in a nondetermined way) performed an action. Because God knows all the results of all the possible choices that an individual would freely make if such-and-such conditions prevailed, he is able so to rule through the establishment of precisely the right conditions to bring about the free decision that he himself wants and determines should take place. In this way, the Molinist argues, God’s sovereignty and human freedom are simultaneously preserved.

(2) An appeal to antinomy. J. I. Packer is perhaps the best-known exponent of the view that the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility is, for human beings in our current state, fundamentally incomprehensible. Packer applies the word “antinomy” to the pairing of divine sovereignty and human responsibility:

²⁴His first and most important foray into this discussion is his *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), esp. ch. 9.

²⁵Craig has written extensively on this subject, but for easiest access see his *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987). From his most recent work, see his unpublished paper, “Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the ‘Grounding Objection,’” from the 47th Annual Wheaton Philosophy Conference. See also his article in this volume, “What Does God Know?” (ch. 6).

The whole point of an antinomy—in theology, at any rate—is that it is not a real contradiction, though it looks like one. It is an *apparent* incompatibility between two apparent truths. An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together.²⁶

Packer is not saying that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are mutually contradictory. Nor is he saying that God cannot reconcile them. He is claiming, rather, that human beings, at least in our current existence (Who knows what will prevail in the new heaven and the new earth?) simply do not have access to enough information to sort things out. For instance, we do not know exactly how the eternal God interacts with human beings in (our) time. Packer's stance usually brings with it a view of will that is not libertarian, for a libertarian understanding of the will is harder to align with divine sovereignty (unless one adopts a Molinist position). The great advantage of Packer's approach to antinomy, however, is that it enables the Christian to read the Bible straightforwardly without trimming either side of the biblical evidence: God is sovereign, and God is exhaustively omniscient; human beings are morally responsible creatures, and the decisions they make are significant.

(3) An appeal to compatibilism. This is the stance that Helm himself adopts.²⁷ Compatibilism is the view that God's positive, providential control is compatible with human freedom (though not with libertarian human freedom). Usually this position is tied not to a libertarian understanding of human freedom but to some other understanding—commonly a “voluntaristic” understanding of human freedom: Human beings are morally responsible for what they do, because they do what they want to do. In other words, regardless of necessity, we are morally accountable because we do what we want to do.

(4) One might usefully add another stance often adopted by classical theists: an appeal to God's timelessness. This argument has many forms. A common one is the view that the Bible's talk of *foreordination* and *predestination* and *foreknowledge* is simply the language of accommodation. God himself is timeless; he sees all things timelessly. In some accounts of timelessness, it is argued that all of God's perception of everything that to us occurs in chronological sequence is to him eternally present. When such matters are taken into account, it is argued, it is possible to preserve divine sovereignty and some version or other of human freedom.²⁸

²⁶J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1961), 18–19.

²⁷See especially his book *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), esp. ch. 9. His views are nicely and more simply set forth in his unpublished paper, “Providence and Compatibilism,” from the 47th Annual Wheaton College Philosophy Conference. See also Robert Young, *Freedom, Responsibility and God* (London: Macmillan, 1975).

²⁸See ch. 5 in this volume, “Is God Bound by Time?” by Paul Helm.

How Can We Reconcile the Love and the Transcendent Sovereignty of God?

These four views are not mutually exclusive, as we will see. What all of them have in common, however, is the acknowledgment that God's foreknowledge is exhaustive (a confession that is a "given" in classical theism). The openness theologians, however, not to mention process theologians and some contemporary philosophers of religion, reject all of these syntheses. It may be simplest at this juncture to cull some representative statements:

It is evident that the view of God's governance of the world here proposed differs from others that are commonly held. But wherein precisely does the difference lie? I believe it can be formulated in a simple, yet crucial question: *Does God take risks?* Or, to put the matter more precisely, we may ask: *Does God make decisions that depend for their outcomes on the responses of free creatures in which the decisions themselves are not informed by knowledge of the outcomes?* If he does, then creating and governing a world is for God a risky business. That this is so is evidently an implication of the views here adopted, and it is equally evident that it would be rejected by some Christian thinkers—those, for example, who hold to a theory of predestination according to which everything that occurs is determined solely by God's sovereign decree.²⁹



God must take real risks if He makes free creatures (thousands, millions, or trillions of risks, if each creature makes thousands of morally significant free choices). No matter how shrewdly God acted in running so many risks, His winning on *every* risk would not be antecedently probable.³⁰



God does not have a specific divine purpose for each and every occurrence of evil. . . . When a two-month-old child contracts a painful, incurable bone cancer that means suffering and death, it is pointless evil. The Holocaust is pointless evil. The rape and dismemberment of a young girl is pointless evil. The accident that caused the death of my brother was a tragedy. God does not have a specific purpose in mind for these occurrences.³¹

With respect to what takes place in Gethsemane:

Jesus wrestles with God's will because he does not believe that everything must happen according to a predetermined plan. . . . Together they determine what the will of God is for this historical situation. Although Scripture attests that the incarnation was planned from the creation of the world, this is not so with the cross. The path of the cross comes about only through God's interaction with humans in history. Until this moment in history other routes were, perhaps, open. . . . Jesus is in the canoe heading for the falls. There is

²⁹Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 197.

³⁰Robert Merrihew Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Robert Merrihew Adams and Marilyn McCord Adams (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 125.

³¹Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 262.

yet time to get over to shore and portage around the falls. Jesus seeks to determine if that option meets with his Father's favor. But the canyon narrows even for God.³²

As for Acts 2:23 ("This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge"), one author writes:

It was God's definite purpose . . . to deliver the Son into the hands of those who had a long track record of resisting God's work. Their rejection did not catch God off guard, however, for he anticipated their response and so walked onto the scene with an excellent prognosis (foreknowledge, *prognōsei*) of what would happen.³³

In some ways, open theism aligns itself well with the some strands of the classical theism that espouse libertarian freedom. There are two crucial differences: (a) Open theists insist that God is everlasting through time, that is, that he is not timeless, above time, transcendent in that sense. This reflects, of course, indebtedness to *process* theology. (b) Open theists affirm that God has exhaustive knowledge of all necessary truths, but they deny that God has exhaustive definite knowledge of future contingent events. God must await (in time) the outcome of free human decisions before he can know it himself. He may make shrewd guesses, but he cannot *know*, and sometimes his guesses are mistaken.³⁴

Out of this matrix, then, openness theologians preserve the integrity and significance of human free decisions, but in the process (no pun intended) they deny God's exhaustive foreknowledge and lose his sovereign control. Although they like to think of their position as a modification of traditional free-will theism,³⁵ this assessment is misleading. Openness theologians share with Arminians and Molinists a commitment to libertarian freedom, but Arminians and Molinists properly align themselves with classical theism in that they insist God enjoys exhaustive knowledge of all future events (indeed, the Molinists insist he enjoys middle knowledge as well), and they insist that God finally (if somewhat mysteriously) remains in control. It is not clear how many Arminians and Molinists would be happy with an approach to time and eternity that posits a God who lives everlastingly through time. Indeed, it is not uncommon for Arminians of various stripes to dissociate themselves from the openness movement.³⁶

The point to be drawn from this discussion is modest. Christian theologians have long been aware of the challenges raised by the openness theologians and

³²Ibid., 100–101.

³³Ibid., 103.

³⁴These distinguishing points of openness theology are nicely acknowledged by John Sanders in his unpublished paper, "Mapping the Terrain of Divine Providence," 47th Annual Wheaton College Philosophy Conference.

³⁵It is merely a "family squabble," Sanders says; *ibid.*, 5.

³⁶E.g., Robert E. Picirilli, "Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future," *JETS* 43 (2000): 259–71; esp. *idem*, "An Arminian Response to John Sanders's *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*," *JETS* 44 (2001): 467–91.

have created a variety of syntheses to address them. At root, these syntheses depend on finding ways to link the biblical evidence that God is, on the one hand, sovereign and transcendent, and, on the other, that he is personal and interacts with his image-bearers in personal ways—not least in love. So it does not help the discussion if those who hold these diverse syntheses are portrayed as fixating on the control side of the equation and teaching that God is a divine rapist. That may be a fair analysis *given the premises and structures of open theism*, but it is a caricature of the positions as they are in themselves. It is demeaning and manipulative rhetoric, not fair debate.

3.4 On Choosing a Synthesis Model

How, then, shall we choose among these five syntheses, the four that I have outlined from classic theism and the fifth as put forth by the open theists? There are two primary avenues. One may probe, and probe hard, for internal weakness; put positively, one looks for coherence and consistency. That is one of the reasons why I began this chapter with some brief reflections on whether open theism provides a superior theodicy. I offered only one of several reasons why I don't think it does; I am not aware of any open theist who has attempted to rebut this particular point. The previous chapters of this book have raised substantial questions about many aspects of open theism (as well as other theisms), and those arguments need not be repeated here. At the risk of traversing well-trodden ground and offering comments that are simplifications of complex debates, I might venture some comments about the consistency and coherence of the other syntheses.

(1) Although the Bible supports the view that God enjoys middle knowledge (e.g., 1 Sam. 23:7–13; Matt. 20:20–24, both of which passages assert that God has knowledge of contra-factuals and that this knowledge is significant for divine/human intercourse), I remain unpersuaded that the Molinist use of this datum is justified. For if God knows that under certain conditions (which he has the sovereignty to bring about), drawn from a vast array of possible conditions, a human being will freely choose a certain course of action, and if God chooses to bring about those conditions, such that the human being makes the perfectly predicted choice, it is difficult to see how appeal to middle knowledge assigns genuinely libertarian freedom to the human individual.³⁷

(2) The antinomic approach of J. I. Packer has one minor problem and is commonly charged with a much greater problem. The minor problem is the terminology.³⁸ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an antinomy is: (a) “a contradiction in a law, or between two equally binding laws”; (b) “a contradictory law, statute, or principle; an authoritative contradiction”—and here an illustration is drawn from Jeremy Taylor, who in 1649 wrote that certain signs of grace “are

³⁷This criticism of Molinism is deployed, with various degrees of sophistication, by both compatibilists (e.g., Helm, *The Providence of God*, 58–61) and open theists (e.g., Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge*, 52).

³⁸I discussed these matters briefly in *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 268 n. 13.

direct antinomies to the lusts of the flesh”; (c) “a contradiction between conclusions which seem equally logical, reasonable, or necessary; a paradox; intellectual contrariness”—and this last meaning *OED* attributes to Kant.

Packer, however, means none of these things. He does not think these paired truths embrace genuine contradiction (meanings a and c), nor is the opposition between them like the opposition between signs of grace and the lusts of the flesh. He means something like “an apparent contradiction that is not in fact real.” But Packer is borrowing the term, as he uses it, from certain philosophical traditions. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant was occupied with exposing the fallacies that arise when one applies space and time and some other categories to things that are not experienced. He argued that if these categories are *not* appealed to, we necessarily find four antinomies (which we need not detail here). Thus, superficially Kant uses the term in the *OED* sense of real contradictions: that is, the antinomies arise only when the categories of space and time are adopted. But precisely because he says these categories should *not* be adopted, the antinomies turn out *not* to be real contradictions but only apparent ones—which of course is in line with the usage Packer adopts. Because of this ambiguity between the normal use of “antinomy” and its use in a restricted philosophical tradition, however, some of Packer’s critics think he is saying something that he is not.

Assuming we let the term *antinomy* stand, however (in the sense carefully defined by Packer), we find that the position is commonly assaulted on another ground. This assault assumes that what Packer is saying is that this antinomy appears to us to be a logical contradiction but that we simply accept, on faith, that in the mind of God there is some sort of reconciliation to which we do not have access.³⁹ If that were the case, it is argued, the appeal to “mystery” does not and cannot absolve a contradiction: “If logical contradiction does not constitute a sufficient reason for rejecting a position, then I will turn in my philosopher’s union card; I no longer know any way of practicing my trade.”⁴⁰ Surely we would be better (it is argued) seeking out alternative syntheses than those that embrace contradictions and label them antinomies or mysteries.

I can understand how someone might read Packer that way. It seems to me, however, that there is a more charitable interpretation. To cite Packer’s own words:

The whole point of an antinomy—in theology, at any rate—is that it is not a real contradiction, though it looks like one. It is an *apparent* incompatibility between two apparent truths. An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other.

³⁹So, e.g., William Hasker, “The Antinomies of Divine Providence,” unpublished paper from the 47th Annual Wheaton College Philosophy Conference.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 2.

How Can We Reconcile the Love and the Transcendent Sovereignty of God?

You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together.⁴¹



Man is a responsible moral agent, though he is *also* divinely controlled; man is divinely controlled, though he is *also* a responsible moral agent. God's sovereignty is a reality, and man's responsibility is a reality too.⁴²



The antinomy we face now is only one of a number that the Bible contains. We may be sure that they all find their reconciliation in the mind and counsel of God, and we may hope that in heaven we shall understand them ourselves. But meanwhile, our wisdom is to maintain with equal emphasis both the apparently conflicting truths in each case, to hold them together in the relation in which the Bible itself sets them, and to recognize that here is a mystery which we cannot expect to solve in this world.⁴³

The point to observe is that Packer does not say that this pair of realities constitutes a strict, logical contradiction but that we trust God to overcome it anyway. The pair of principles are “*seemingly* irreconcilable”; there is “an *apparent* incomparability” between the two. Nevertheless “it is not a real contradiction”; our duty is to maintain “the apparently conflicting truths.” Moreover, Packer insists these truths are not in conflict in the mind of God, and certainly he is not suggesting that God mysteriously reconciles truths that are in fact logically contradictory. He even hopes that in heaven we ourselves will understand them.

In short, Packer's understanding of antinomy turns on human ignorance—ignorance that may be necessary at the moment but is not to be confused with belief in logical contradiction.⁴⁴ Hasker, of course, may think that Packer's “antinomy” is an “antinomy” in the dictionary sense, that is, a real contradiction. He may think this because he espouses a libertarian definition of freedom. But if Packer avoids that trap, it is difficult to see that he is advocating logical contradiction, even if he does not see exactly how ultimate reconciliation can be effected.⁴⁵

(3) In my view and against Helm, it is not helpful to list Packer's antinomic approach and traditional compatibilism as separate categories. If Packer's antinomy is not a logical contradiction, then Packer holds that the two truths are mutually compatible. On that score, he is a compatibilist. And the compatibilist usually does not attempt to show exactly how the two truths *must* be compatible; rather,

⁴¹Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 18–19.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 23.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 24. Helm, *The Providence of God*, 62–63, cites these same three passages from Packer.

⁴⁴R. Douglas Geivett makes an analogous argument regarding the problem of evil in ch. 7 of this volume, “How Do We Reconcile the Existence of God and Suffering?”

⁴⁵For more on the concepts of contradictions, antinomies, and paradoxes, see Eric L. Johnson's remarks in ch. 3, “Can God Be Grasped by Our Reason?”

the compatibilist argues that we have enough evidence to show there is insufficient reason for thinking them *incompatible* and indicates the kinds of things that must prevail for them to be compatible. Although the respective foci of Packer's antinomy and traditional compatibilism are slightly different, it is difficult not to see in them two sides of the same coin.

(4) The appeal to God's timelessness may be part of the defense of compatibilism (as it is in the work of Helm). The best exponents are alert to abandon any view of timelessness that makes everything "eternally present" to God or the like. That is surreptitiously to slip a time-based category through the back door, as it were. Careful appeal to God's timelessness⁴⁶ means that one of the dimensions of unknownness is explored, with the result that although we may not have enough pieces to put the polarities of the antinomy together, we can see enough to recognize that there is no necessary logical contradiction. In other words, on some readings of timelessness and on the most obvious reading of Packer's antinomy, the three distinct approaches—antinomy, compatibilism, appeal to God's timelessness—become part of the same synthesis.

The second (and more important) avenue to help us choose among the five syntheses described earlier (four belonging to classical theism, and the fifth open theism) is to examine how closely the various syntheses correspond to Scripture. Clearly, that exploration could take a book or two on its own, not merely a sub-point of a single chapter. Mercifully, more resources are becoming available.⁴⁷ Here I must restrict myself to a few observations.

(1) There is a tendency among the openness theologians, when talking of the love of God, to focus on a short list of biblical texts thought to support the third way the Bible speaks of God's love (above), namely, God's yearning, salvific love. These texts are then absolutized and read into every discussion about the love of God.⁴⁸ This, I think, actually has the slight effect of *depersonalizing* God. As we have already seen, it is precisely because of the different personal relationships into which God enters that the Bible can speak of the love of God in a variety of ways, with a variety of emphases.

⁴⁶See especially Helm, *Eternal God*. The issues, inevitably, are complicated. I suspect that some of them will be clarified, for the general reader, in Gregory E. Gaannslé, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001). See also Helm's article in this volume, "Is God Bound by Time?" (ch. 5).

⁴⁷In addition to the book by Bruce A. Ware and the dissertation by Steven C. Roy, to which references have already been made, see the important book by John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001). I hope shortly to finish my own book on the subject, devoting a substantial part of it to questions of exegesis and hermeneutics.

⁴⁸E.g., Boyd, *God of the Possible*, repeatedly lists passages that, he says, teach a universal saving will of God and uses them to dismiss or domesticate passages that teach individual predestination (e.g., pp. 11, 40, 46–47, 58, 71, 100, 138, 140, 171). He never wonders whether these themes might be mutually complementary or what it does for the doctrine of God to have an astronomical number of instances where human intransigence means that God's will, in the only sense in which Boyd is willing to talk about the will of God, is necessarily defeated.

(2) There are many texts that deal with the theme of God's knowledge or control, texts that cannot easily be skirted. For example, twelve times between chapters 40 and 49, Isaiah emphasizes God's knowledge of the future (Isa. 41:4, 22–23, 26; 42:9; 43:9; 44:7–8, 25–28; 45:19–21; 46:9–11; 48:4–5, 14). In his book *God of the Possible*, Boyd mentions only two of them and understands them to mean no more than that God declares his own intentions, not that he foreknows or declares the future.⁴⁹ But this will not do. Taken as a whole, the theme that Isaiah develops is that pagan idols are ignorant of the future while God declares it in advance; God himself insists that this is the test of true deity (41:23). In fact, God goes so far as to name Cyrus in advance (45:1–7), and something similar can be said for the naming of Josiah (1 Kings 13:2), forcing Boyd to concede that in these cases God “set strict parameters around the freedom of the parents in naming these individuals.”⁵⁰

But if the parents “freely” chose the name Cyrus, yet God determined that that would be the name, even in advance, then somehow God not only foreknew but arranged to bring to pass what he predicted. The expression “set strict parameters around the freedom of the parents in naming these individuals” is a spectacular circumlocution. If the strict parameters that constrained the parents meant that at the end of the day they could choose only the name that God had predicted, then it is difficult to see how this differs from compatibilist theory.⁵¹

It is easy to mount similar evidence from the New Testament.⁵² It is hard not to see that Christian suffering in 1 Peter 3:17; 4:19 is providentially ordered, even though not in itself good. Paul's imaginary interlocutor asks how anyone can be held responsible when no one can resist God's will, and the context shows that Paul does not question the premise, even though he vehemently denies the conclusion (Rom. 9:19). Second Corinthians 12:7–10 assumes that Paul's thorn in the flesh, though a messenger from Satan, was given (almost certainly a divine passive) for a good purpose that Satan himself never had in mind; behind the first agent, with all his malign intent, is God himself, with only good intent. Neither the blindness of the man born blind nor the death of Lazarus were to be considered defeats for God or instances where Satan won while God was blindsided (John 9:3; 11:4).

(3) Apart from such themes, which surface in scores of passages, there are texts where some of these themes come together in very tight array. One of these is Genesis 50:19–20, where Joseph says to his brothers, “Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” Sanders interprets

⁴⁹Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 29–31.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 34.

⁵¹Cf. the review article by Roger Nicole, in *Reformation and Revival* 10.1 (2001): 167–94, esp. 172, who reaches much the same conclusion.

⁵²See the useful essay by Simon Gathercole, “The New Testament and Openness Theism,” in *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*, ed. Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson (Carlisle, Eng.: Paternoster, 2000), 49–80.

this to mean, “It is the glory of God to be able to bring good out of evil human actions. But nothing in the text demands the interpretation that God actually desired the sinful acts.”⁵³ Sanders’s view is curiously right and wrong. Certainly he is right to say that there is nothing in the text to suggest that God desired the sinful acts, if by that is meant that somehow God stands symmetrically behind good and evil, righteousness and sin, and brings both about in some amoral fashion. But no classic Christian thinks that. Sanders is constructing a straw man in order to leave his own interpretation in place.

But that interpretation is certainly wrong. This text does not provide an instance where God brings good out of evil. There are, of course, some biblical narratives where that is what takes place, but in this case both God and Joseph’s brothers have intentions when Joseph is sold into slavery—the one good, the other bad. The text does not conjure up a scene in which the brothers plan the nasty deed and then God brings good out of it anyway. (Incidentally, if God did not know in advance what the brothers were going to do, then the good he eventually did to counteract their evil would also have to be unknown, which would mean that the entire sojourn in Egypt, the rescue, and the Exodus were unforeseen.) Still less does the text picture God planning to bring Joseph down to Egypt in comfort and honor, but unfortunately the brothers made a mess of this plan by getting in there first and, in a quick action God had not foreseen, sold Joseph into slavery. Let the text speak: In the one action the brothers’ intentions were evil, and God’s intentions were good. That may not be neat, but it is what the text says, and it preserves both God’s goodness and God’s knowledge and sovereignty.⁵⁴

Or consider Isaiah 10:5–23. God pronounces his woe on the Assyrian invader. Why? Because although God himself is the one who sent the Assyrian against a godless nation (i.e., Judah) with the express purpose of seizing loot and trampling them down like mud in the streets, that is not what the Assyrians themselves intend. Their intention is to destroy many nations out of the sheer arrogance of their strength. That is why God says that when he has finished “all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem” (10:12)—that is, the work of punishing them with the savage weaponry of war—he will turn around and punish the king of Assyria “for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes” (10:12).

The following verses flesh out the charge: The Assyrians think they have managed all their victories by themselves. But God’s charge against them is that they do not recognize his sovereignty, his use of them as a carpenter uses tools; therefore, their arrogance must be punished. “Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it?” (10:15). Therefore the Lord God will cut them down (10:16–17).

The passage is remarkable. God uses the Assyrians, known for their ferocious violence in war, against his covenant people, and then he holds the Assyrians responsible, in turn, for their vaunted self-autonomy in these attacks and pun-

⁵³Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 55.

⁵⁴Similarly, cf. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 199–200.

ishes them. This is *not* the language of God *permitting* something awful, which he has foreseen as likely, in order to punish his people. Scores of Old Testament passages make it clear that God himself is the one punishing them, and this passage goes so far as to picture God using the Assyrian the way an axeman brandishes his tool. Even so, the Assyrians are held accountable and are punished in turn. This sort of passage is precisely in line with classic theism; it is difficult to see how it can be reconciled with any form of open theism, if we remain faithful to the actual exegesis. I have not yet seen this passage treated by the openness theologians (nor, e.g., Deut. 32:23–27; 2 Kings 19:25–28; Jer. 51).

The treatment of Acts 4:27–28 by John Sanders is (I don't know how I can use a weaker expression) frankly shocking. This text says: "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." On the face of it, the political leaders were involved in a wicked conspiracy, but in some sense God himself was behind it all (without weakening their responsibility)—for otherwise the inevitable conclusion is that the cross was not foreseen and planned by God. But Sanders, as we have seen, after arguing that in Gethsemane the Father and the Son worked out together what should be done under these circumstances, holds that in this text we are told that it was God's purpose (*boulē*, as he points out, i.e., "a boundary-setting will") "to deliver the Son into the hands of those who had a long track record of resisting God's work. Their rejection did not catch God off guard, however, for he anticipated their response and so walked onto the scene with an excellent prognosis (foreknowledge, *prognōsei*) of what would happen."⁵⁵

This is, as I say, shocking. First, it betrays an abysmal grasp of Greek. Whatever the Greek word *prognōsei* means when God is the subject, it does not mean something as weak as "prognosis," a kind of statistically likely foretelling. Second, Sanders goes on to argue that the Jewish leaders could have rejected God's plan here, since elsewhere Luke says that certain leaders "rejected God's purpose [*boulēn*] for themselves" (Luke 7:30). But that argument presupposes, without warrant, that *boulē* always means the same thing, regardless of context, whereas on the face of it the fuller construction here, God's *tē hōrismenē boulē*, his determinate will or his definite will (cf. Acts 2:23), leaves little room for such maneuvering. But third, this sort of analysis means that for Sanders, the cross itself is nothing more than something that enjoyed an excellent prognosis. If Pilate, say, had released Jesus, then God's plan would have been thwarted, but doubtless he would have thought up something else.⁵⁶

(4) Although it might be profitable to examine many more such passages, no less telling are certain biblical books in which how we are to think of God becomes the central issue. We may begin with Job. Surprisingly, Job receives only one brief

⁵⁵Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 103.

⁵⁶See the treatments in A. B. Caneday, "Putting God at Risk: A Critique of John Sanders's View of Providence," *TrinJ* 20 (1999): 131–63; and in Roy, "How Much Does God Foreknow?" 250–57.

reference in Sanders.⁵⁷ I assume that Greg Boyd will deal with Job in a more substantive way in his forthcoming book on theodicy, which has not yet reached me.⁵⁸ Judging by his website, however, he is moving toward some creative exegesis. The book of Job, Boyd says,

shows that Job's view of God was essentially *unbiblical*. One of the central points of this incredible book, I believe, is to *refute* just this theology. (The other is to refute the theology of Job's friends). [*sic*] How interesting, and sad, that this slogan "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away" is so often quoted as the stance Christians are *supposed to take*. I read in the paper last week the man whose wife killed his five kids quote this verse. *As though God was working through his insane wife to kill his five kids*. [emphasis Boyd's]⁵⁹

The book of Job offers its own comment on Job's words, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21–22). The very next words are, "In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing." This does not sound like pagan superstition.

Above all, however, it is the flow of the drama in Job that is so convincing. Chapter 1 makes it clear that Satan can go after Job only by God's sanction. Since God knows that Satan wants to go down a certain path, he knows that by giving his sanction, Job will suffer unjustly. In that sense, Job's suffering is determined by God. Job knows nothing of this "behind-the-scenes" exchange between God and Satan. Although he begins with extraordinary patience and trust, precisely because he knows he is suffering unjustly, he cannot follow the advice of his friends and repent of some imaginary evil he has committed in order to get on God's good side again. That would be to deny his own faithfulness and integrity and demean God. But the more desperate he becomes, the more he comes within a whisker of charging God with injustice. The very least he demands of God is an opportunity to plead his case.

When God does speak, he does not reply directly to Job's questions. He responds with several chapters of rhetoric designed to prove to Job how small his understanding really is. In other words, God is teaching Job to appeal to mystery, to admit what he does not know. At the end, Job does not say, "Now I understand," but "I repent" (Job 42:6)—not, of course, of ostensible sins that have brought on this suffering but of his drift toward accusing God. In the fundamental issues, however, Job has it right, and the three miserable comforters have it wrong (42:7).⁶⁰ Job's final vindication and restored blessings are a way of saying that at the end, justice will be done, and will be seen to be done.

⁵⁷Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 103.

⁵⁸Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

⁵⁹This quote comes from an informal conversation as reported on Boyd's website: www.gregboyd.org/gbfront/forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=331

⁶⁰I have laid out this drama and its theology, in much greater detail, in *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, 153–78.

If the God of the book of Job had been an openness theologian, surely he would have had to say something rather different from what he did say—something like this, perhaps: “Come on, Job, stop blaming me. I’ve done the best I can. I can’t foresee everything. Satan got by me on this one. Otherwise there is no way I would have permitted him to kill your ten kids. You can’t believe that I would ever sanction anything like that!” But that is not what God says, nor does this square with chapter 1. What God does is appeal to mystery, to the vastness of his own understanding and purpose; what he teaches is humility.⁶¹

Or consider Habakkuk. The prophet is terribly exercised because he cannot fathom why God would use a more wicked nation to chasten his own covenant people, who on any reading constitute the less wicked nation. Although God promises ultimate justice—there is an eschatological dimension to the answers that will come—Habakkuk ends, not by unambiguous responses to all his questions, but by expressions of trust (e.g., “I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us,” Hab. 3:16) and by expressions of enduring confidence in God even in the midst of crushing suffering (e.g., “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior,” 3:17–18).

Certainly Habakkuk does not end with a meditation along these lines: “Well, I have to face the fact that this suffering isn’t fair and is nothing more than the result of the fact that God didn’t foresee this one in time. But it’s all right, because God’s justice will guarantee that the invaders will get theirs in due course.” The last part—assurance that justice will ultimately be served—*is* part of Habakkuk’s confidence. But the book repeatedly insists that the punishment God’s people face at the hands of the invaders is *also* his work and is merited. In short, this book is entirely in line with passages such as Isaiah 10:5–23 (see above).

These observations must be placed in a broad framework. The reason why a Job or a Habakkuk can agonize over these matters, the reason why there are various complementary theodicies in the Bible, is precisely because God is known to be all powerful and all good. He is sovereign, but he is the God of love and grace. That is what engenders the need for theodicy. Under openness theology, there is no need for theodicy, because there is nothing to be explained.⁶²

⁶¹Perhaps I should mention that in recent years there have been numerous innovative readings of Job. See, for example, the essay by D. J. A. Clines, “Why Is There a Book of Job, and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?” in *The Book of Job*, ed. W. A. M. Beuten (Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press, 1994), 1–20, and the same author’s more recent commentary.

⁶²Compare, for instance, the literature of ancient Egypt: Theodicy is not a preoccupation, because the “gods are not held responsible for human suffering in Egypt; therefore there is no need to defend divine justice. All human suffering, whether innocent or deserved, is seen as a result of the failure on the part of humans to observe *ma’at*, the standard of fairness or veracity” (Daniel P. Bricker, “Innocent Suffering in Egypt,” *TynBul* 52 (2001): 83–100, esp. 100. See D. Geivett’s critique of open theism’s handling of theodicy in ch. 7 of this volume.

3.5 On the “Obvious” Reading of a Text

The openness theologians reply, of course, that in many passages their reading is the straightforward reading, the obvious reading. If texts say that God “repents” or “relents” or “changes his mind,” that should be taken at face value. When God says he does not know something, why not simply accept this confession of ignorance? Surely, they say, the future is partly settled in God’s mind and partly unsettled. Pinnock gives the example of the Lord’s interaction with Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:1–7): The Lord announces that the king will soon die, but in response to Hezekiah’s prayer the Lord gives him fifteen more years.⁶³

These matters have been extensively discussed in earlier chapters in this volume (e.g., Mark R. Talbot’s article on God’s revelation and James S. Spiegel’s article on God’s providence—chs. 2 and 8) and elsewhere.⁶⁴ Some aspects of this question I hope to pursue in a later volume. It would be tedious to survey again here the evidence that virtually all God-talk embraces an element of analogy. That is, for all sides of this debate, it is insufficient to say what is “obvious” about a text, for the much harder question is how certain texts are to be reconciled with others that, equally “obviously,” appear to say something contradictory (e.g., that God does not repent, Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4; Hos. 11:8–9). Close exegesis requires us to look at text after text and to make, within the context of specific corpora, many kinds of qualifications. For the immediate purposes of this chapter, one observation will suffice.

All sides recognize that in certain passages, what may superficially *appear* to betray ignorance in God does not in fact do so. In the account of the Fall, for instance, God calls out to Adam, “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9). If this figure called “God” were merely a human being, it would be hard to resist the conclusion that he is here asking the question because he does not know the answer. He wants Adam to disclose himself. But no openness theologian draws that inference. The reason, of course, is that openness theologians confess (or insist) that God knows everything about the past and the present; his ignorance concerns the future, where contingent decisions are at stake. In this case, Adam is hiding, so God cannot possibly be thought to be ignorant of his whereabouts. Therefore his question “Where are you?” must be understood in some sort of rhetorical way. In other words, openness theologians are prepared to shunt aside what might be judged the obvious reading if there are larger textual issues that call such a reading into question.

Classic theologians claim they are merely doing the same thing in passages where open theists insist that the “obvious” reading of the text supports the postulate that God is ignorant of future contingent decisions. Classic theists find rhetorical, contextual, logical, and other reasons for what God says apparently betraying ignorance of future events; the works already mentioned discuss many of the texts in great detail. Let me observe here that, quite apart from factors that

⁶³Clark Pinnock, “Response to Part 1,” in *Reconstructing Theology*, 85.

⁶⁴See in particular the works of Steven C. Roy, Bruce A. Ware, and John M. Frame.

stem from God's uniqueness (e.g., that human-sounding questions must not necessarily be thought to reflect human limitations) and the accommodating nature of revelation, there are instances *even in human relationships* where ostensible admissions of ignorance really should not be "read" that way. One recently sent me by a young medical doctor in Scotland is too good to pass up:⁶⁵

As a very newly qualified doctor (aged 23) in my first months in a job in a Glasgow teaching hospital, I stood at the side of a patient during the process known then as the Grand Round. This involved the Senior Consultant, known as The Chief, and a retinue of three other Consultants, two trainee consultants, the Ward Sister, a nurse, and often students and paramedics of various kinds. This parade went from bed to bed in an eighteen-bed Ward, each morning, especially reviewing new admissions, for whom I was responsible, and whom I alone had so far examined.

The Chief stood on the opposite side of the bed, and I gave a short account of the case. "Is the spleen palpable?" he asked. "Yes," I answered. He bent down and examined the area of the patient's spleen. "I can't feel it," he said. I paused for a second or two, took a deep breath, and then spoke quietly. "Sir, you taught me to examine a patient's spleen from *this* side of the bed." (The technique enabled an enlarged spleen to be more easily detected.)

Dr X was a "character" and had a range of facial expressions that are etched on my memory. He turned to the assembled multitude with a pseudo-startled expression, as if to say, "The insolence of the boy!"—but with a twinkle in his eye. The crowd parted to allow him to come round to my side of the bed, and he bent over and examined the patient again. As he stood up, he exclaimed, "The boy is right!" and another of his expressions appeared. It was one of a kind of triumph, and pleasure.

He might have been angry with me for appealing to him in this way to think again, but in fact he was pleased with me that I had learned well, and pleased to have his own technique vindicated through me in this public way. This was not simply a meaningless joust, since the welfare of the patient hung on whether the spleen could be felt, for a palpable spleen was considered to be an abnormal spleen, and an abnormal spleen could be a serious sign and an aid to diagnosis.

As an illustration of prayer the incident has major flaws, but as I recalled it, I felt it helped me understand Moses' action and God's response. In fact, although God might have been angry with Moses for a presumptuous intervention, we read that in fact he was pleased with Moses. "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you, and I know you by name" [Ex. 33:17]. He was pleased with Moses, I think, because what Moses was putting to him was what God had already put in Moses' heart—a concern for his people, but more than that, a concern for God's reputation in the world.

⁶⁵This is in private correspondence dated June 20, 2001. The doctor in question prefers not to be identified. I have very lightly edited his letter, primarily to preserve anonymity.

In fact there was already a senior–junior, old man–young man relationship between Dr X and myself. I had been a student in his Unit for nearly three years before qualifying. I had learned a great deal from him, and I think he was quite fond of me. I also had the highest respect for him, and in intervening as I did there was not the slightest intention of criticising or disputing with him. I did it to establish a fact I was sure of, in defence of something that he had taught me, and for the welfare of the patient. He was pleased that something which he had put in me was working with him for his purpose—the cure of his patient.

3.6 On “Literal” Descriptions of God

We are ready, then, to reflect a little further on God’s love, not least in connection with other things the Bible says about God. Consider Hosea 11:1, 3, 4, 8 (NRSV):⁶⁶

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son. . . .
It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms. . . .
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love. . . .
I bent down to them and fed them. . . .
How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . .
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.

The first thing to observe is not the metaphorical language used of God, but the metaphorical language used of Israel. Israel is a child; Israel is God’s son; Israel was taken up in God’s arms. If metaphorical language is used of Israel, why should we be reluctant to think it is used of God? Does God have arms? When God says, “I led them with cords of human kindness,” were the cords literal cords? Is there any reason to think, then, that the kindness was merely or narrowly “human”? Does God have to bend down to feed his people? Does God have a heart, recoiling or otherwise? Do God’s emotions exist at various temperatures, growing “warm” on occasion?

On the face of it, then, the Bible is prepared to use anthropomorphic language to talk about God, not least in the domain of his emotions (technically, we are dealing with anthropopathisms).⁶⁷ Eventually, however, such reflections force

⁶⁶Here I am following part of the argument of Patrick Richmond, “A Traditional Response to Pinnock’s Understanding of God,” in *Reconstructing Theology*, esp. 102–7.

⁶⁷The discussion of Richard Rice, “Biblical Support and Free-Will Theism,” in *The Openness of God*, 11–58, esp. 34–36, mounts a case to argue that biblical descriptions of God’s deciding, acting, and feeling should be taken at face value. Unfortunately, he really does not

one to ask further, “If God does not have a literal heart, why must we conclude that he has literal emotions?” Or, to approach the same problem from another angle, “If God has literal emotions, why should we not infer that he has a literal heart?” After all, human emotions are inseparable from our bodily existence, and

we have little idea of what feelings and sensations would be like without an apparent bodily aspect. Emotions activate the involuntary, autonomic nervous system. For example, anger unconsciously raises the heart rate and blood pressure, reduces blood flow to the gut, increases it to the brain and muscles, affects glandular secretions and releases hormones such as adrenaline.⁶⁸

So why should we think that God has “literal” emotions? What would “literal” emotions look like in an incorporeal God?

Moreover, in human beings a substantial part of our emotional life is involuntary, almost reflexive. That is why we speak of “losing” our temper or “falling” in love; it is why we think of fits of jealousy and crimes of passion. Our emotions, in other words, not infrequently interfere with our reason, control our will, and distort our rational judgment. Is this also true for God? If not, can what he experiences rightly be called “emotion”?⁶⁹

For much of the history of the church, theologians have spoken of the “impassibility” of God. Exactly what they have meant has varied somewhat. If this expression is interpreted to mean that God is without “passions,” such that he is indistinguishable from Aristotle’s “unmoved mover,” or that all of the biblical expressions of, say, God’s love and God’s wrath are merely anthropopathisms that express his strong, willed preferences or the like, the term is inadmissible. At this juncture, the criticisms offered by the openness theologians of some parts of the Western theological heritage are very much to the point. Unfortunately, however, they swing too far and fail to recognize the elements of metaphor in almost all language of God, the elements of anthropopathism where God’s emotions are concerned.

If we do justice to the biblical language, we will simultaneously insist that God is love (and has other “passions” too, though they do not so directly concern us here), while recognizing that God’s love is not exactly like ours. All of God’s perfections operate all the time; he is never less than all he is. So the perfection of his love operates along with the perfection of his wisdom, the perfection of his knowledge, the perfection of his holiness, the perfection of his omnipotence, and so forth. If that is true, then God cannot “fall” in love in the way that we do, nor is his “love” suddenly elicited by something he had not foreseen. *In that sense*, we may usefully affirm God’s impassibility even while we affirm, with the greatest

probe very deeply into the nature of metaphor in the texts he discusses. For a preliminary response, cf. Richmond, “A Traditional Response to Pinnock’s Understanding of God,” in *Reconstructing Theology*.

⁶⁸Richmond, “A Traditional Response to Pinnock’s Understanding of God,” 103.

⁶⁹For further discussion, see ch. 9 in this volume, “Does God Have Emotions?” by Patrick Lee.

delight, God's passionate love—indeed, so great a love that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8).⁷⁰

What must be avoided is a certain nasty swing of the pendulum. Having observed, rightly, that some parts of the Western tradition adopt a form of impassibility that makes the biblical picture of God incoherent, openness theologians swing too far the other way. They treat biblical descriptions of God's love not only with a flatness that fails to distinguish different ways the Bible has of speaking of God's love (discussed above), but also with an insensitivity to the metaphors that lie on the surface of the text. Consequently, other things the Bible says about God are either implicitly or explicitly denied.⁷¹ The result, of course, is a new incoherence.

3.7 On the Reductionism of Openness Theology

Let me put this another way: It is becoming apparent that openness theologians are mired in several reductionisms. They have sometimes done some useful work by exposing other reductionisms (e.g., formulations of impassibility that leave God emotionless and with little more than raw will). But their treatment of God's love is singularly lacking in nuance. Similarly, it has repeatedly been shown

⁷⁰In brief compass, see the chapter "Does God Suffer?" in Frame, *No Other God*, 179–90. See also ch. 10 in this volume, "Does God Change?" by Chuck Gutenson. One might fairly suggest, too, that the insistence by many open theists that God's relational attributes, and love in particular, must occupy the supreme place in our understanding of God, is difficult to justify and becomes dangerous when the texts that deal with God's love are handled with such a lack of sophistication.

⁷¹The problems implicit in theological terminology are endemic to these discussions and sometimes pass unnoticed. In a spirited response (*Modern Reformation* 10.5 [Sept./Oct. 2001]: 4), John Sanders, Clark Pinnock, Gregory Boyd, William Hasker, and Richard Rice object that an earlier essay by Michael Horton treated them unfairly in two respects. First, Horton charged them with attributing change to God's essence. This they never do: "God can change in his will, thoughts, and emotions," they write, but not his essence. This response to Horton is entirely fair. Second, they write:

Horton begins by stating that proponents of openness theology reject the 'biblical' doctrines of divine omnipotence, omniscience, aseity, and simplicity. It is true that some (not all) open theists reject simplicity. However, we certainly do not reject omnipotence, omniscience, and aseity. The only way Horton can get away with this spurious charge is to claim that everyone has to accept his own peculiarly Calvinistic categories. As such, God never takes risks, is unaffected by creatures in all respects, and does not allow for human autonomy. But if this is the case, then huge numbers of Christians in various traditions (including Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Wesleyans, and others) are guilty of rejecting these terms as well.

This is at best disingenuous. Certainly the openness theologians do not deny, say, God's omniscience; indeed, they repeatedly affirm it. But their redefinition is most emphatically *not* in line with Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Wesleyan traditions. It is in line with some process and Socinian traditions. Horton's understanding of what divine omniscience refers to is indistinguishable from that of, say, Wesleyanism; how he configures divine omniscience within larger constructions of theology will, of course, distinguish him from Wesleyans. But as to omniscience itself, it is the openness theologians who are cut off from the "great tradition," as it is now often called, and they should be brave enough and candid enough to admit it instead of trying to marginalize Calvinists.

How Can We Reconcile the Love and the Transcendent Sovereignty of God?

that one cannot make sense of biblical texts without recognizing that the Bible speaks of the “will” of God in more than one way.⁷²

A recent article by Paul K. Helseth argues, convincingly, that there is another element in openness theology that approaches incoherence.⁷³ The openness approach requires two classes of future events—“a future that is partly open (because God cannot know the future free decisions of his creatures) and partly closed (because God in fact knows what he is going to do in the future”⁷⁴—and this distinction cannot be consistently maintained. Openness theologians think that (libertarian) freedom can be preserved only on the assumption that God cannot know in advance the results of free, contingent decisions. But this leads to massive ignorance on God’s part. In the words of Ronald Nash:

How can God know what he is going to do in the future, when God’s own future acts are a response to future human free actions that he cannot know? In all of the open theist rhetoric, the fact that there is nothing about the future for God to know has been lost or obscured. The fact that propositions about future contingents have no truth value has been forgotten. The open theist closes the door to divine foreknowledge but then proceeds to act as though God can know things about the future after all. . . .

The facts are these: According to open theists, God can have no knowledge about future human contingents. Why? Because any alleged proposition about such human choices possesses no truth value; it can be neither true nor false. God cannot know these things because there is nothing to know. There is something seriously wrong, then, when an open theist begins to suggest that his constraints upon divine knowledge are not as severe as one might think. Either God knows future contingents or he doesn’t. If he doesn’t, then any part of the future resulting from human free choices is also closed to God. . . . If he knows as few as one future contingent, then the door is open for him to know more; perhaps it is open wide enough for God to know all future contingents. My advice to open theists is please don’t cheat and talk in ways that suggest God can know some future contingents.⁷⁵

It is not an adequate response to appeal to middle knowledge, namely, to say that God does know all possible responses and therefore has planned out what he would do under every conceivable circumstance. For that still leaves the shape of the future undetermined. It means God knows only the range of possibilities. That is why various openness theologians insist that God intervenes from time to time to ensure that his own plan for the future does not go too far astray.

⁷²See, e.g., John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God*, rev. and exp. ed. (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2000), esp. the Appendix, 313–40. On the distinction that John Sanders does make, see especially Frame, *No Other God*, 105–18.

⁷³Paul Kjos Helseth, “On Divine Ambivalence: Open Theism and the Problem of Particular Evils,” *JETS* 44 (2001): 493–511.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 499.

⁷⁵Ronald Nash, *Life’s Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 320–21; quoted in Helseth, “On Divine Ambivalence,” 499.

Boyd, for instance, in the matter of Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial,⁷⁶ admits that God not only arranged parameters that "squeezed" Peter, but he also reckons with God's exhaustive knowledge of Peter's moral character. When a particular individual is "squeezed" by external parameters and his or her character is thoroughly known, that individual's future behavior may well be "certain."⁷⁷ Yet how is this so very different from what a compatibilist would say? Boyd gives no hint that Peter could have done anything else, so where is the (libertarian) freedom? More importantly yet, how do even these constraints explain the fact that Jesus predicted that Peter would betray him *three times*? How does knowledge of a person's character guarantee that the particular perversity in question will show up three times, as opposed to two or four? And if the answer is in terms of the number of times that Peter was challenged by someone in the courtyard, were not those individuals "free" to challenge or not? How could Jesus have known, in advance, that there would be *three* challenges to Peter, at a time when the challengers had not yet decided to act?

Helseth's conclusion about the openness theologians is not too strong:

If nothing else, their willingness to allow for God to work in a coercive fashion jettisons the coherence of the openness program, for it establishes that God cannot accomplish his ultimate purpose without violating a significant component of that purpose. Since God can accomplish his goals only by revoking the autonomy of the will, it follows that not only is Open Theism's distinction between two classes of future events hopelessly conflicted, but at an even more foundational level the God of Open Theism is as well.⁷⁸

3.8 On Theology's Outside Influences

Finally, it is a commonplace among openness theologians to argue that classic theology is on these matters so compromised by Greek thought that it has taken two millennia to overturn the darkness. They are right, of course, to point out that all theological reflection—indeed, all reflection of any kind—is necessarily dependent on some antecedent thought. They are also right, as I have already noted, to point out that some strands of the Western tradition have been so influenced by the line of thought from Aristotle through Plato and neo-Platonic thought to the Stoics, that God became less personal, less "emotional" (that tricky word again), than the Bible seems to demand. One particular understanding of impassibility is one of the results.

But I remain unpersuaded that the best of the classic tradition was unaware of the dangers and often raised some powerful grids to screen out the worst influ-

⁷⁶Cf. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 35–37.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Helseth, "On Divine Ambivalence," 503. I should add that this criticism is particularly germane to Greg Boyd. It appears that John Sanders's God is somewhat less conflicted. But the price is high: It will be recalled that for him, even statements alleging God's control over events that led to the cross turn out to have not more than an excellent prognosis.

ences.⁷⁹ Moreover, some of the charges betray a considerable ignorance of Greek thought. In a typical disjunction, Pinnock writes:

We may think of God primarily as an aloof monarch, removed from the contingencies of the world, unchangeable in every aspect of being, as an all-determining and irresistible power, aware of everything that will ever happen and never taking risks. Or we may understand God as a caring parent with qualities of love and responsiveness, generosity and sensitivity, openness and vulnerability, a person (rather than a metaphysical principle) who experiences the world, responds to what happens, relates to us and interacts dynamically with humans.⁸⁰

Frame astutely replies:

Here Pinnock contrasts what he considers to be the Greek philosophical view of God with his open view. He seems to think that classical theology is closer to the Greek view. But I wonder which Greek philosophers he has in mind here. No Greek philosopher, to my knowledge, thought of God as a monarch. In most Greek philosophical systems, God was impersonal, and monarchs are, of course, personal. Greek religion included personal gods, one of which, Zeus, was monarchical in a sense, but these gods were certainly not “aloof,” “unchangeable,” “irresistible,” etc. Plato’s Demiurge was not “all-determining,” and his divine Good caused only good things, not evil. Aristotle’s impersonal Prime Mover was not aware of anything that took place in the finite world—not “aware of everything.” The Stoic deity approached Pinnock’s characterization, but was pantheistic or panentheistic.⁸¹

In short, one begins to sense another straw man.

Further, most contemporary critics are better at pointing out the ostensible antecedents of the thought they wish to criticize than the antecedents of their own thought. In the case of openness theology, there are, it appears, at least three principal streams: process theology (Hartshorne’s influence, at least, is admitted by Boyd); a deep commitment to a libertarian understanding of freedom, such that it can control the exegesis of text after text without ever being scrutinized by biblical texts to see if it is a presupposition that should be jettisoned; and Socinianism.⁸²

There are, of course, some distinctions between openness theology and process thought, and between openness theology and Socinianism. Moreover, not a few scholars adopt libertarianism without espousing openness theology. But it is worth pointing out links and antecedents in order to insist, on all sides, that

⁷⁹On this, see ch. 4 in this volume, “Has the Christian Doctrine of God Been Corrupted by Greek Philosophy?” by Gerald L. Bray.

⁸⁰Clark H. Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God*, 103.

⁸¹Frame, *No Other God*, 32.

⁸²See especially the detailed work of Roy, “How Much Does God Foreknow?” and, on this last point, Frame, *No Other God*, 25–40.

one does not have the right to “paradigm out” another’s views on the grounds of alleged historical antecedents.

4. Concluding Reflections

What we need, then, are theologians who listen well to biblical texts in their context, eschew reductionism, and are willing not only to perceive the biases they bring to the text but to test them, as much as possible, by the text.

In this instance, the result will be an understanding of God who is, on the one hand, sovereign and transcendent and, on the other, personal and loving. One set of attributes or characteristics will not be used to domesticate another set. The biblical writers can speak of God’s will and of God’s love in quite different ways; local context is determinative. If the resulting portrait drives us to recognize God’s uniqueness as well as his connections with his image-bearers, so be it; if we listen carefully and confess there are some things we simply do not understand, we will be content. For this is far better than a picture of God who has been tamed by doctrinaire presuppositions that cannot themselves be tested or corrected by Scripture.